Student Perspectives on Meaningful Adult Relationships in a Transfer School

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STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON MEANINGFUL ADULT RELATIONSHIPS
IN A TRANSFER SCHOOL

by

SUSAN E. COLLINS

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Social Welfare in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Social Welfare in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

Student Perspectives on Meaningful Adult Relationships in a Transfer High School

by

Susan E. Collins

Advisor: Deborah L. Tolman, MA, EdD

High school models that provide alternative ways for students who are overage and under-credited and have dropped out or disengaged from school to re-engage and graduate with a high school diploma have grown in New York City in the past ten years. The school model in this study conceives “Building Healthy Relationships” as one of five essential elements of the model and central to the re-engagement and success of students in school. Students in this model are paired with an advocate counselor who supports them while in school and towards graduation from high school. In this study, I interview thirteen former students who graduated from Brooklyn High School, a transfer school based on the Good Shepherd Services transfer school model, to understand the meaning of the relationship between a student and an advocate counselor from the perspective of the student. Using a grounded theory approach informed by a youth development framework (Benson, 2002; Benson & Saito, 2001; Damon, 2004), care in schools (Noddings, 2005), and relational theory (Brown & Gilligan, 1993; Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1976; Ragins & Fletcher, 2007), I analyzed interviews to develop a theory about what
was happening in the relationship (Charmaz, 2006). Findings suggest that there are three elements in the relationship between an advocate counselor and student—being known, feeling cared for, and caring about myself—that are essential to a meaningful relationship. Those three elements and possible relationships between them as they contribute to a meaningful relationship between an advocate counselor and student are discussed. Implications for practice in schools, the field of social work, and further research are presented.
Acknowledgements

This work is the result of my very fortunate opportunity to open a transfer school year in New York City, which opened my eyes to the incredible young people who, through persistence and determination, choose to change the path that was set for them early on in high school. Their stories inspired this dissertation. I also want to thank the staff at North Queens Community High School who, each in their own way, work tirelessly each day to support the young people in school to be their best possible selves.

I would also like to thank the staff from Good Shepherd Services who were instrumental in helping this study happen. They provided space for interviews, support with data, and encouragement along the way. Their commitment to developing better schools for overage, under-credited students in New York City is inspiring to many of us who have followed their model.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The high school dropout rate has been a focus of educators, social workers, policy makers, and city, state, and federal governments for several decades because of social and economic issues linked to not completing high school (DePaoli et al., 2015; Martin, Tobin, & Sugai, 2002; Vinovskis, 2003). As a group, students who do not complete high school earn less income over time, are at higher risk of being incarcerated, and more often utilize public assistance and struggle with substance abuse (Dorn, 1996; Kantor & Brenzel, 1992; Petrick, 2014; Rumberger, 1983). Students who drop out are also more susceptible to drug use, early pregnancy, low self-esteem, and low employment rates once they leave school (Rumberger, 1987; B. J. Smith, 2000). Although students have dropped out of school since schools began in this country, legislation in the past 35 years has focused not only on fixing schools, but also on decreasing dropout rates. A recent example of the push to decrease the dropout rate in the United States is the Every Student Success Act of 2015 (ESSA), introduced by President Barack Obama, to replace the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and address a number of identified problems in the current educational system. The ESSA put control of standards and accountability back in the control of the states and set a nationwide goal of achieving a 90% graduation rate nationwide by the year 2020. In the most recent available nationwide graduation rates from the U.S. Department of Education for the 2012-2013 school year, 81.4% of all students graduated. However, rates were lower for Black students (70.7%), Hispanic students (75.2%), and students from low income households (73.3%) (DePaoli et al., 2015).

Decreasing the dropout rate is a major focus of the current administration under President Barack Obama who committed to addressing the problem early in his presidency. In a September 8, 2009, nationally televised Back to School Event in Arlington, Virginia, he
emphasized the importance of going to school and graduating. President Obama said about completing high school, “If you don’t do that—if you quit on school—you’re not just quitting on yourself, you’re quitting on your country.” Since then, his major commitment to lowering the dropout rate has consisted of monetary grants such as Race to the Top and incentives for states to revamp the worst performing schools in the country, often referred to as “dropout factories” (Colvin, 2010).

The commitment to addressing the high school dropout problem remains important today; the absence of a high school diploma has implications that did not exist twenty years ago when there were jobs for low-skilled laborers who did not complete high school. This is particularly true for students from disadvantaged communities (Fine, 1991; McNeal, 2011; Tiggermann & Winefield, 1989). Presently, having a high school diploma immediately raises the earning potential of a young person and opens up different opportunities than those available to someone without a high school diploma. According to the Bureau of Labor and Statistics, in 2015, high schools graduates earned almost $200 more per week on average ($678) than high school dropouts ($493). High school graduates earn over $10,000 more per year, or over $400,000 more in a lifetime than students who dropout of school. The unemployment rate for a high school graduate was 5.4% and the unemployment rate for a dropout was 8% (U.S. Department of Labor and Statistics, 2015).

Dropout rates are magnified in larger cities. Every year, nearly one-third of the students that started high school fail to graduate within four years in New York City public schools. Although there have been gains in graduation rates in recent years, New York City has only reached a peak graduation rate of 70.5% (2011 Cohort August Graduation Rates), according to the New York City Department of Education. The graduation rates for the 2011 cohort were
lower for Black (65.4%) and Hispanic (64%) students. The graduation rate, which measures the number of students that completed high school in the traditional four years, means that there are approximately 30% of students each year who are not counted. Students who do not count as a graduate from a New York City high school either drop out of high school prior to the year they would graduate or remain in school as overage, under-credited students. Schools are accountable for a four-year graduation rate and students who do not make it out in that time frame often are lost in the system.

Overage, under-credited high school students are defined as two years or more behind where they should be when compared to their peers (Cahill, Lynch, & Hamilton, 2006). They face unique challenges because they are behind their peers and have usually had sporadic attendance to school. They often become truant and are more likely to become dropouts. A study in 2005 by the Parthenon Group found that over 140,000 students fall into this category in New York City alone, half of whom are still enrolled in school (Cahill et al., 2006). That number represents 20% of all high school enrollments in New York City and is a population that does not traditionally finish high school. Following that report, several initiatives by the New York City Department of Education to address overage, under-credited students were developed, one of which is the focus of this study. Since 2005, the overage, under-credited high school population in New York City has dropped each year, perhaps due to interventions by the Department of Education. In the 2009 - 2010 school year, there were 106,350 students considered overage, under-credited (NYC Office of Postsecondary Readiness and Multiple Pathways to Graduation presentation, 2012).

Since the early 1960’s, research on dropouts has centered on a set of demographic categories and family and community characteristics that are predictors of high school
disengagement and dropping out. These predictors focus on the individual circumstances of the student and their family and community. Traditionally, schools take little blame for students who drop out and, as a result, often do little to solve the problem (Fine, 1991; Stevenson & Ellsworth, 1993). Influences within the school system, such as school culture and community, contribute to the dropout problem, but have been given less attention until recently (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Dryfoos, 2005; Gillen-O’Neal & Fuligni, 2013; Rodriguez, 2008; Van Dorn, Bowen, & Blau, 2006). There are currently high school models in place that involve social service agencies as partners and seek to create different learning communities than are often found in large, comprehensive high schools (Dryfoos, 2000, 2005).

Addressing the needs of overage, under-credited youth is one way to increase the graduation rate in New York City. The group of overage, under-credited students identified by the Parthenon Group in the 2003 cohort who were expected to graduate in 2007 eventually dropped out at a rate of 93%. Only 7% of overage, under-credited students who were still in school actually went on to receive a high school diploma (Cahill et al., 2006). Remaining in the high school where they may have started their high school education will give students who are overage and under-credited a less than one in ten chance to graduate. Even doubling or tripling the current graduation rate of this group of students through the development of schools that support this population would have a big impact. This study will look at one particular aspect of one such school model, developed at Good Shepherd Services (GSS), that is attempting to specifically address the overage, under-credited population in New York City by re-engaging that population in a different school model and moving them toward graduation. Students at GSS transfer schools graduate at higher rates, 63% in comparison to 51% at other transfer schools in a comparison group, earn credits at faster rates, 20.6 earned after enrollment in
comparison to 16.3, and attend school at higher rates, 65.4% in comparison to 60.0% (Tapper, Zhu, & Scuello, 2015). One of the core principles of the GSS model is “Building Healthy Relationships” in the school community (Good Shepherd Services, 2006). That principle will be the focus of the study discussed in following chapters.

**New York City Department of Education**

The New York City Department of Education is the largest school district in the country, serving nearly 1.1 million students in over 1,800 schools with 80,000 teachers. It stretches throughout the five boroughs in New York City and serves a population that is incredibly diverse and one that is traditionally challenging, given the varied needs of students in the school system. The New York City Department of Education has been through a number of changes, beginning in 2002 with a shift in control from the Board of Education to the Department of Education under the control of New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg (T. M. Brown & Rodriguez, 2009). His control over the Department of Education brought about a number of changes, including the implementation of a citywide high school curriculum and a large-scale reorganization of large, failing high schools into small schools (Citizens’ Committee for Children of New York, Inc., 2007). His focus on high schools and the low graduation rate and, specifically, the overage and under-credited population in New York City led to the creation in 2005 of the Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation, a department specifically geared towards assessing and creating strategies to address this population (Cahill et al., 2006). That office is currently under the jurisdiction of a recently created second office, the Office of Post-Secondary Readiness, further confirming the commitment of the mayor and the Department of Education to not only graduate students, but to prepare them for post-secondary education and training. Since
Mayor Bloomberg left office in 2014, many of these structures for overage and under-credited students, though not expanded, remain in place.

In 2005, the Office of Multiple Pathways developed a comprehensive plan to address the needs of overage, under-credited youth. The in-depth study of this population in New York City by the Parthenon Group helped to create a specific plan for serving this population, including the implementation of new high school models and innovative programs for youth to take the Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC), formerly the General Equivalency Diploma (GED). The plan calls for “multiple pathways” to graduation outside of the traditional large comprehensive high schools that have mostly operated in New York City. Currently, pathways towards a high school diploma include transfer high schools and Young Adult Borough Centers (YABC). Each offers students who have fallen behind in traditional high schools the opportunity to complete high school and get their high school diploma. They each include specific elements and types of support not traditionally available in large high schools and each serve different sectors of the overage, under-credited population. While YABC’s serve older students in evening hours in programs located within large, comprehensive high schools, transfer schools are freestanding and work with the lowest credited students.

**Transfer High Schools**

Transfer High Schools in New York City are small school communities that operate in partnership with a social service agency to address the needs of overage, under-credited students who would like to finish high school and receive a high school diploma. The transfer school model presented in this study operates in a unique way because of the equal partnership between the Department of Education and the social service organization. Unlike traditional schools, this model emphasizes five core principles and five essential components that guide how work is
organized in the school (Good Shepherd Services, 2006). By offering smaller classes, more supports for academic and social needs, and a chance to earn credits at an accelerated rate, a transfer High School is a viable option for much of that overage, under-credited population, especially those who still desire and are young enough to complete the requirements of graduation before the age of 21.

In New York City, there are approximately 30 transfer high schools, many of which have opened in the past ten years since the establishment of the Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation. Transfer school models vary, but all seek to graduate a population of students who otherwise would be unable to do so. Principles of positive youth development are the foundation for all transfer school models (Good Shepherd Services, 2006). Transfer schools incorporate staff from social service agencies to support students in re-engaging in school, navigating school, and successfully progressing towards graduation. The social service agency component, which is unique to these schools, is essential to ensuring that the social and emotional needs of students are met so that they can be successful academically. There is evidence that transfer schools help overage, under-credited students graduate at rates higher than they would in a traditional high school, and the assumption is that some of the practices that are different contribute to that success (Tapper et al., 2015).

**Positive Youth Development**

Recently created transfer school programs that focus on overage, under-credited students in New York City are based on principles of positive youth development. With roots in after-school centers and youth-serving community-based organizations, positive youth development represents a movement of practitioners and scholars who look at youth in a positive way and identify them as resources to be developed instead of troubled and in need of fixing (Catalano,
The positive youth development movement represents an important shift in how youth are viewed and how to work with them to become positive, contributing members of their communities. This is done through a focus on developing positive attributes in youth and surrounding them with positive communities and experiences. That shift in working with youth has only recently been transferred into the school day, as will be described in the particular model in this study.

Positive Adults

Students who look to transfer schools as a way to finish high school and earn their diploma often mention to staff upon intake that they felt “lost” in their previous high school and that teachers “didn’t care” whether they were actually in school and making progress (personal conversations with incoming students, 2007 - 2014). This feeling that students describe of nobody caring is repeated in the few qualitative studies that exist on high school dropouts and push-outs (Cameron, 2012; Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007; McNeal, 1997a).

Central to the school model developed at Good Shepherd Services (GSS), that is the focus of this study, is the role of the advocate counselor. Advocate counselors work with students and their families to help students re-engage in school and successfully graduate from high school. Advocate counselors are employed by the social service agency in the school and are often trained social workers. Each student upon enrollment in school is assigned an advocate counselor as their “primary person” who works with them throughout their time in school. As described in the GSS model, “The role of the advocate counselor as a student’s primary person is essential to implementing a personalized learning environment in which every student has the opportunity to develop a relationship with a caring adult,” (Good Shepherd Services, 2006, p.
The advocate counselor accomplishes that by providing the following for students: (1) Enrollment of new students, (2) Attendance outreach, (3) Facilitation of a bi-weekly Community scholars group for students on an advocate counselor’s caseload, (4) Daily student support in the form of scheduled and as-needed meetings with students, (5) Student leadership group consisting of a select group of students to promote student voice and leadership, and (6) Working in partnership with the Department of Education teaching staff to address academic needs of students. According to the transfer school model, each one of these elements is an essential part of the role of the advocate counselor.

Research

There has been little research on the transfer schools as a program to address the overage, under-credited population in New York City. The school presented in this study is one transfer school operating in New York City and based on the codification of a model that was completed in 2006 by GSS, a large social service agency in New York City. As discussed earlier, studies show that students perform better at GSS model transfer schools than they did at their previous high schools; they have better attendance and graduate at higher rates than in their traditional schools. In the most recent New York City Department of Education School Climate Survey from the 2014 - 2015 school year, transfer school students were overwhelmingly positive about certain aspects of the school, especially feeling safer, feeling like there is an adult that they can talk to in the building, and feeling like they can talk to someone when they have a problem.

There is little research on the specific transfer school model discussed in this study, especially on the specific principles of positive youth development that are operating within schools and the impact of those principles. One recent study of the GSS transfer school model did show that, when compared to other transfer schools operating in the same geographic area,
the GSS model students had higher credit accumulation, higher attendance, and graduated at higher rates (Tapper et al., 2015). Identifying principles of positive youth development that are having a beneficial impact on transfer school students could provide evidence that can be applied in other schools and programs. Currently, specific characteristics in schools are now starting to be identified as possible causes of the dropout problem, but also as potential places to change in order to impact graduation rates. It is important to begin to uncover what works for young people in school. This is especially important for young people whose individual, family, and community characteristics indicated that they are likely to dropout of high school (Delgado, 2002; Greenberg et al., 2003).

**Statement of the Problem**

The dropout prevention question has been asked for many years—What can be done to ensure students get a good high school education and graduate in a timely way? As mentioned earlier, the percentage of students completing high school in the United States is 81.4%; it is lower for young people living in urban areas and even lower for young people from certain minority groups. There are some promising initiatives that seek to address the dropout issue by doing school differently for those youth most at risk of dropping out. Graduation rates and attendance rates for the particular model in this study show that students are doing better, or at least are attending school more often, and graduating at higher rates than expected for the overage, under-credited population.

This study focused on the unique relationship that is developed between a student and an advocate counselor in a GSS model transfer high school. The research questions guiding this study were: (1) What does the relationship between an advocate counselor and a student consist
of? (2) What do advocate counselors do to build that relationship, from the prospective of successful students?

What follows in Chapter II is a critical review of the literature on high school dropouts, the consequences of dropping out of high school, ways that the dropout problem has been addressed, and the role of social workers in schools. I place special emphasis on the overage, under-credited population in New York City and the transfer school as one way of addressing that population and raising the graduation rates. I present the literature on youth development, which is at the heart of the transfer school model, as an alternative way to define and address the dropout problem. I also present literature on mentoring, school belonging, and care to help frame the role of adults in schools. Guiding theories that help frame this study are presented at the end of the review of the literature. Those guiding theories include developmental systems theory, which forms a foundation for positive youth development, relational theory, and the theory of care in schools.

Following the review of the literature, methodology is presented in Chapter III. Chapters IV, V, and VI contain the findings from this study. Findings are presented in three chapters, each chapter representing one element of the relationship between an advocate counselor and student found in this study. Chapter VII consists of conclusions and implications for practice.
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Historical Context/Social Workers in Schools

The transfer school in this study is based on a partnership between social workers in a social service agency and educators in a New York City Department of Education school who work together towards the mission and goals of a school for overage, under-credited students. Partnerships like this do not traditionally exist in schools and social workers in schools most often play a different role. However, the convergence of social work and education in improving the outcomes of young people in schools has been shown to have positive results in models such as transfer schools (Cahill, Dupree, Pitts, & Thomases, 2002; Dryfoos, 2000; S. M. Smith & Thomases, 2001; Tapper et al., 2015). A historical look at the changing roles of social workers in schools and how these roles are impacted by education policy as well as the changing social work profession help frame the school social worker’s role today.

The fields of education and social work historically had different missions, one to educate children and create good citizens (Hunt, 2002), and the other to work for social justice and to address the needs of people living in poverty (Knupfer, 1999). The convergence of social work and education came about in the early 1900’s when compulsory education laws were bringing large numbers of students into schools, many from poor, immigrant families in large cities (Allen-Meares, 1996b; Knupfer, 1999). Schools became responsible for the education of masses of young people, particularly those from new immigrant populations and for their “assimilation” to this country (Dewey, 1938; Graham, 2005). In 1906, Settlement Houses in New York City and Boston identified a need for social workers to work as home/school/community liaisons for children in school. The first social workers in schools, called “visiting teachers,” were predominantly White women who had training and experience as teachers and as social workers.
According to Culbert, the role of the visiting teacher had two purposes: “[F]irst, the school must comprehend the whole child, the child mental, physical, and social; and second, the home and school must be brought into mutual understanding and cooperation,” (Culbert, 1929, p. 17). Visiting teachers, because they had an understanding of the child in their community, helped schools better understand the child and the community outside of the school so that schools could adjust to the needs of students (Culbert, 1929; Oppenheimer, 1925). This merging of education and social work placed schools at the center of child welfare work; social workers in schools had access to principals and were often seen as essential to decision making in schools (Allen-Meares, 2007; Oppenheimer, 1925; Shaffer, 2006).

The Cardinal Principles Report of 1918, commissioned by the United States Bureau of Education, identified seven objectives for secondary education. Those seven principles included a focus on instruction in health; the development of a “command of fundamental processes” in reading, writing, and arithmetic; the development of “worthy house membership” and becoming a positive member of a family; a commitment to the development of a vocation for each student; a focus on citizenship; exposure to art, music, literature, and drama; and, the development of “ethical character” (Department of the Interior Bureau of Education, 1918). Those objectives further solidified the comprehensive high school model, a model for a school that would meet all of the needs of all students. It also confirmed the dual role of the high school in providing programs to serve all students and to create a common understanding of citizenship and responsibility in a diverse student population (Wraga, 1998). The role of the comprehensive high school followed directly in line with Horace Mann’s purposes behind the creation of Common Schools in the 1800’s. He designed the common school as a vehicle to, in part, create good citizens in a society that was becoming increasingly diverse (Hunt, 2002).
At the time of the Cardinal Principle Report, only one in three elementary school children went from primary school to high school, and only one in nine children actually graduated from high school (Department of the Interior Bureau of Education, 1918). When the focus of secondary schools shifted to developing productive adults, high schools expanded course offerings and created environments where access to school was provided for everyone (Dorn, 1996; Wraga, 1998). In response, students flocked to high schools and enrollment in high school increased 711% from slightly less than 203,000 students in 1890 to nearly 1,700,000 in 1918 (Hunt, 2002).

During this time of growth in schools, visiting teachers worked to engage large numbers of immigrant children by working in communities where children lived in order to better understand the challenges that students faced so that the school could respond to those challenges. Visiting teachers were present in school districts across the country and had organized into a national association by the year 1919 (Culbert, 1921; Oppenheimer, 1925; Shaffer, 2006). Visiting teachers were trained in teaching and in social work and were key in helping schools understand and adjust to the needs of their students (Allen-Meares, 1994, 1996b; Anderson-Butcher, Stetler, & Midle, 2006; Kelly, Frey, & Anderson-Butcher, 2010).

The role of the social worker in schools began to change as the field of social work became challenged by a lack of professionalism (Allen-Meares, 1996b, 2007; Costin, 1969). A paper presented by Abraham Flexner in 1915 at the National Conference of Charities and Corrections identified the lack of knowledge and theory underlying social work practices and questioned its identity as a profession (Specht & Courtney, 1994). This emerging concern, along with the mental hygiene movement in the 1920’s, the end of World War I, a sharp decrease in the number of immigrants entering the U.S., and the introduction of the comprehensive high school,
brought about a changing role for social workers in schools to a focus on individual students (Hunt, 2002; Knupfer, 1999; Wraga, 1998). The changing focus towards individual students, although important, pulled school social workers away from working for system-wide change to working predominantly with individuals (Allen-Meares, 1994; Altshuler & Webb, 2009; C. Franklin, Kim, & Tripodi, 2009; Kelly et al., 2010; McKay & Johnson, 2010). The role of the social worker was brought into the school building and expanded to include a focus on the therapeutic development of individual students and improving the individual behavior of students (Allen-Meares, 1996b; Knupfer, 1999). This focus on the individual child and casework in schools as the primary responsibility for school social workers was well established by the 1940’s (Allen-Meares, 1996b; Germain, 1996). The shift to individual casework by school social workers corresponded with a shift in the field of social work from an emphasis on social action to a focus on the maladjusted individual (Shaffer, 2006). School social workers during this time continued to focus on the individual “maladjusted” student by helping them “adjust” to school (Costin, 1969; Shaffer, 2006). A survey of 238 school social workers across 40 states conducted in the late 1960’s found that major tasks included individual casework and helping students develop skills, such as controlling their feelings and expressing themselves appropriately to fit into the school, while the focus with parents and teachers was on discussing the problems of the individual child (Costin, 1969). One of the least important tasks, as identified by school social workers at that time, was work in the school that improved the overall community and experience of students (Costin, 1969). A model to move away from this type of individual work and modifying of student behavior to one that focused on creating stronger school/community/student partnerships was also introduced during this era (Costin, 1975), although there is little evidence in the literature that school social workers practiced in that way.
School social workers remained attached to the mandates for serving special needs students in schools, driven by federal legislation and the need for accountability (Allen-Meares, 1996a; Costin, 1969; Joseph, Slovack, & Broussard, 2010). This focus on individual casework continues to the present day, while the historical role of school social workers in helping schools adjust to meet the needs of children has faded (Allen-Meares, 1996a; Joseph et al., 2010; Kelly et al., 2010; Lucio, 2015; Minnard, 2002; Shaffer, 2006). The school model presented in this study provides one way in which social workers can work differently in schools that is a return to some of the historical roots of social work in schools.

**High School Dropouts**

In the early 1960’s, when the term “dropout” became popular, the need to fix the American high school and address the issue of students leaving school grew (Dorn, 1996; Kantor & Brenzel, 1992). As high schools began graduating students in larger numbers, the expectation was that every student should have the opportunity to graduate, a sentiment that was repeated not only among educators and policy makers, but also throughout the popular media (Dorn, 1996). This was also a time in American history when juvenile crime was on the rise and there were increases in the poverty rate, divorce rate, number of children born out-of-wedlock, and number of single parents (Catalano et al., 2002). This focus on dropouts came out in federal policy when the Eisenhower Commission of National Goals in 1960 set a goal for higher graduation rates (Wraga, 1998). This federal focus on dropouts was followed by a commitment to spend significant federal dollars on education reform under President Johnson and increased attention to the quality of education in the U.S. and the rise in dropouts (Vinovskis, 2003). Through federal, state, and local governments, a series of programs were introduced not only to address
the problems in urban schools, but also other issues particularly related to youth unemployment and racial segregation (Kantor & Brenzel, 1992).

The focus on dropouts, as it related to individual and family circumstances, originally directed how the dropout issue was addressed. Solving the dropout problem focused on fixing the circumstances of the individual. By focusing on characteristics, such as socio-economic status, race and ethnicity, single parent households, and deviant behaviors that “make” a dropout, the prevailing thinking on dropouts was that they were a product of their environment and an inevitable part of public education (Barrington & Hendricks, 1989; Bond, 1962; Chapman, Laird, Ilfill, & KewalRamani, 2011; Crane, 1991; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Deschenes, Cuban, & Tyack, 2001; Natriello, 1995; Rumberger, 1983, 1987; Suh, Suh, & Houston, 2007). Morris (1992), in the following definition of what he called the “classic dropout,” identified many of the characteristics that were assigned to students who did not finish school:

The individual will likely be a member of racial, ethnic, or language minority group and from a family where education is not a high priority; the individual will have academic difficulties, including the possibility of being behind in grade level; the individual will be bored or frustrated with school. The process of dropping out will often include a growing number of tardies and absences, disruptive classroom behavior, and a decline in academic performance. One day, the classic dropout simply stops coming to school (Morris, 1992, p. 157).

This depiction of a dropout captures typical characteristics seen throughout the literature on dropouts (Crane, 1991; Dorn, 1996; Eckstein & Wolpin, 1999; Natriello, 1995; Richman, Bowen, & Woolley, 2004; Rumberger, 1983, 1987; Stearns & Glennie, 2006; Suh & Suh, 2007; Zahs, Pedlow, Morrissey, Marnell, & Nichols, 1995). Morris describes personal and family characteristics as the starting point from which a student becomes disengaged and drops out of school. This is typical of early depictions of dropouts, where the characteristics of the person
define who drops out with little to no blame placed on the school. Dropouts were seen as existing outside the school’s responsibility (Dorn, 1996; Fine, 1991).

At about the same time as the term dropout became popular, an era of “access” in public education began in 1954 with *Brown v. Board of Education* and ended in 1983 with *A Nation at Risk* (Graham, 2005). This era, according to Graham, was full of proposals for programs to provide equal access for all students, whether gifted or disenfranchised. Legislation was passed, including the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, that provided Title I funding to schools serving children living in poverty, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 that provided equal access to school regardless of ability, and the Title IX Education Amendments of 1972 that provided equality for girls in school and gave pregnant teenagers the right to stay in school. The commitment of the federal government to improve education was further established with the creation of a Federal Department of Education in 1979 under President Carter (Vinovskis, 2003).

**A Nation at Risk**

The 1983 landmark report, *A Nation at Risk*, commissioned by Secretary of Education T.H. Bell and written by the National Committee on Excellence in Education, criticized the system of education in the United States. The report alarmed the American public by proposing that, “[o]ur once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being taken over by competitors throughout the world,” (*A Nation at Risk*, 1983, p. 469). The American educational system was partially responsible for this loss of status, according to the report, citing the lack of high expectations and discipline in schools. Although there is no direct mention of the high school dropout rate in *A Nation at Risk*, the authors do make clear the fact that more students were graduating from high school and college than in the
1950’s and 1960’s, although they were graduating less educated. Underlying that statement was the question of whether the system of education in this country has the capacity both to graduate more students and maintain high standards.

*A Nation at Risk* reinvigorated a return to standards and accountability. The era spanning 1983 to the present has been named an era of “achievement” (Graham, 2005), bringing in standards for what should be taught and, presently, a focus on testing and accountability in schools. The report, although unexpected by the authors who wrote it at a time when President Reagan was threatening to do away with the newly created Federal Department of Education, began a school reform effort that has placed education at the top of the nation’s concerns since 1983 and spurred policy efforts to increase excellence and reverse the “rising tide of mediocrity,” (Fuhrman, 2003). Dropouts and school reform continued to be the focus of federal policy into the 1990’s with the creation of the Goals 2000: Educate America Act of 1994 under the administration of George Bush. The Educate America Act sought to, among other things, improve school readiness in children, increase student achievement, raise graduation rates, and ensure safe schools (Hare & Allen, 1996). A more recent example of policy that focuses on standards and accountability and increasing graduation rates is the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The NCLB Act was recently replaced with the Every Student Success Act (ESSA), signed by President Barack Obama in December 2015. As discussed earlier, ESSA gives accountability back to the states and removes many of the national standards created in NCLB. This new legislation also focuses on fully preparing students for success in college and careers after graduating from high school and identifying the most struggling students and providing targeted interventions to assure their success in school (“FACT SHEET,” 2015).
Characteristics of Dropouts

Following *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, the term “at-risk student” emerged to define students who are at-risk of dropping out of school. The scientific community responded by focusing on specific risk factors associated with youth failure, thus creating a “risk orientation” to the adolescent population and a focus on the deficits in youth (J. H. Brown, 2004). The individual and family characteristics of students, called “risks,” identify student likely to drop out of school (J. H. Brown, 2004; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Dorn, 1996; Hartnett, 2007). The focus on the individual characteristics of students was the result of studies associating negative youth behavior to negative youth outcomes (McNeal, 1997a; Rumberger, 1987; Stevenson & Ellsworth, 1993). Social risk factors often linked to the school dropout rate include low socioeconomic status (Cataldi, Laird, KewalRamani, & Chapman, 2009; Rumberger, 1987; Suh et al., 2007), living in a single parent household (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Suh & Suh, 2007), having a history of violence (Staff & Kreager, 2008), drug use (Mensch & Kandel, 1988), early pregnancy (Crane, 1991; Rumberger, 1983), lack of parental involvement (Strom & Boster, 2007), gender (Rumberger, 1983), race and ethnicity (Rumberger, 1983), court involvement (Sweeten, 2006) and deviant behavior during the school day (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Davis & Ajzen, 2002; Mensch & Kandel, 1988; Newcomb et al., 2002; Rumberger, 1987; Suh & Suh, 2006; Zvoch, 2006). Students with one or more of these characteristics are more at risk of dropping out of school than students who do not have these characteristics (Suh & Suh, 2007; Suh et al., 2007).

Other strong predictors of dropping out include a student’s grade point average (Van Dorn et al., 2006), the number of times they are suspended (Lan & Lanthier, 2003; Newcomb et al., 2002), and being held back (Natriello, 1995; Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2008;
Newcomb et al., 2002). Other academic risk factors include student performance and motivation during school and preparedness to participate in class and study after school (Davis & Ajzen, 2002; Eckstein & Wolpin, 1999; Epstein, 1992; Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Suh & Suh, 2006; Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997), special education status and learning problems (Beekhoven & Dekkers, 2005; Wehlage, 2001), becoming overage in school, and high absenteeism (Barrington & Hendricks, 1989; DeSocio et al., 2007; Hartnett, 2007; Henry, 2007). Students who have struggled with academics in elementary and middle school are also more likely to drop out before completing high school (Alexander et al., 1997; Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Barrington & Hendricks, 1989; Croninger & Lee, 2001).

While there is some value in looking at risk factors and predictors for dropping out of high school, a reframing from “at risk” to “placed at risk” calls for a more comprehensive look at schools systems and comprehensive school reform that focuses on all students (W. Franklin, 2012; Mintrop, 2012). By using the term “placed at risk,” the possibility of external influences such as organization of schools, curriculum, and school policies become part of the solution in addressing those students. This way at looking at the dropout problem focuses on the school and the larger educational system instead of only seeing the problem rooted in the characteristics of the individual student, (Balfanz & Legters, 2004; Deschenes et al., 2001; Dorn, 1996; Fine, 1991; Kantor & Brenzel, 1992). Two theories explain the reasons that students leave school, the “pull-out” theory and the “push-out” theory (Stearns & Glennie, 2006). Pull-out theory focuses on the factors that are external to high school students, such as family responsibilities and potential earning power, in relation to leaving school (McNeal, 1997b, 2011). In contrast, push-out theory focuses on the school factors, such as policies for behavior and suspension policies, which push students out of school (Fine, 1986, 1991). In this construction, the dropout comes to
represent a “mismatch” between the structures that exist in the schools and the background of the individual student. This mismatch is a result of a system that works for middle class mainstream students and will continue to create schools that do not serve the most vulnerable students (Deschenes et al., 2001).

“Dropout factories” are schools that graduate students at very low rates. Those schools also continue to be attended by mostly minority populations. In a report about the dropout crisis generated by the John Hopkins University Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk, authors located 2,000 high schools nationwide, which they referred to as “dropout factories,” where 40% or more of the freshman class disappeared by the time they were seniors (Balfanz & Legters, 2004), representing one in five high schools of 300 or more students nationwide. Although specific school characteristics were not identified, the report did show that schools with graduation rates of 50% or less were five times more likely to have a majority of minority students.

The school system is also, in its own organization, not set up to create fairness for all students. For example, schools located in wealthier districts have lower student to teacher ratios in smaller schools with 16% minority students. In the poorest communities, students attend schools that are larger, have a larger teacher to student ratio and are, and are on average 90% minority (Balfanz, 2009). However, much of the risk factor research has been criticized for being based on correlations only, resulting in unclear causal connections between different risk behaviors (J. H. Brown, 2004). Thus, dropping out of high school, associated with the individual and family deficiencies that they come to school with, is described as a “tragedy” and schools remain virtually void of any blame (Fine & Rosenberg, 1983). Holding only the student
accountable for dropping out, although accepted as a part of the risk factor research, is now being challenged (Englund, Egeland, & Collins, 2008; Natriello, 1995).

**Student Perspective: High School Dropouts**

Dropping out is not often discussed in the literature from the perspective of the student. However, several qualitative studies of dropouts provide an alternative to the singular focus on individual and family characteristics that have been shown to predict dropping out. Student perspectives on dropping out also provide an alternative to understanding why students drop out that may differ from the institution-focused perspective of a “dropout” presented earlier. More often, individual accounts of the everyday experiences in school are what students identified as their reasons for dropping out (Bickerstaff, 2009; T. M. Brown & Rodriguez, 2009; Cameron, 2012; Fine, 1991). This research suggests that the decision to leave school is really one that is “co-produced” by the student and the school together. Dropping out is a result of how the student perceives her/himself in relation to the bureaucratic structures of the school, the relationships they have with adults in school, the policies that exist in school and how power is arranged. Students identified uncaring staff, a boring curriculum, fear of the school community, a feeling of being unwanted, and being judged as central to their experience in school and their decision to drop out (Bickerstaff, 2009).

In 2006, a report called *The Silent Epidemic* was published to present the perspectives of high school dropouts from 25 communities in the United States, including large cities, small towns, and rural areas. Focus groups and interviews were conducted with 467 young people, age 16 – 25 who had dropped out of high school to better understand the reasons why students drop out, from the student’s perspective. The sample was ethnically and racially diverse (36% White, 35% Black, and 27% Hispanic). Almost half (47%) said that school was not interesting and over
two-thirds (67%) said they were not inspired by their teachers or encouraged to work hard. While 29% said that they were not confident that they would have graduated because of academic struggles, 70% said they were confident that they would have graduated. While the reasons for dropping out included needing a job or starting a family, many did not give a reason for leaving school (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006). These themes are echoed in a second qualitative study of a similar population of students who had left high school. Students left school because they felt fear and discomfort within the school environment, they had difficulty forming meaningful relationships with adults, and they felt unwanted and devalued because of the way that the school was structured (Bickerstaff, 2009). The perspective of students provides a window into what schools can do to impact the dropout problem. It also offers an alternative to what has been traditionally thought of as why students leave school before they earn their high school diploma.

**Consequences of Dropping Out**

The consequences of dropping out are clear. Dropouts are underemployed, earn less money over their lifetime, and are more at risk to participate in behaviors that are not productive (Abbott, Hill, Catalano, & Hawkins, 2000; Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Barrington & Hendricks, 1989; Barton, 2005; Crane, 1991). More dropouts are in prisons and on welfare rolls, which is a burden to public assistance programs (Swanson, 2009). Dropouts not only face consequences as individuals that will impact them the rest of their lives, but the community where they live is also impacted when students do not complete high school (Crane, 1991; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Drewry, Burge, & Driscoll, 2010; Eckstein & Wolpin, 1999). The impact that dropping out has on communities can be devastating, especially in areas where the graduation rate of high school students hovers around 50%. Communities with high rates of
non-graduates also have a concentrated population of individuals who face more challenges in obtaining employment and going on to post-secondary schools (Balfanz, 2009; Fernandes & Gabe, 2009; Fine, 1986; Lee, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2011; Natriello, 1995). High school dropouts often cut short their education, which removes them from certain sectors of the labor market, especially because the labor market relies increasingly on certain credentials (Pennington, 2003; Rumberger, 1983; Schulz & Rubel, 2011; Somers & Piliawsky, 2004). The educational requirements for work are much higher now than previously, and students without a high school diploma have less and less options to find work; they are unemployed at higher rates than high school graduates (Center for Urban Future, 2006, United States Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012; Rumberger, 1987). Findings published by the U.S. Department of Labor show, as recently as 2015, found the amount of education achieved by adults 25 and older significantly impacted whether they had a job or not. Adults with no high school diploma were unemployed at a rate of 8%, those with a high school diploma were unemployed at a rate of 5.4%, those with some college were unemployed at a rate of 5%, and those with a Bachelor’s degree and higher were unemployed at a rate of 2.8% (U.S. Department of Labor and Statistics, 2015). This last point represents a significant change from as recently as 1960, when graduates and non-graduates would often end up doing the same kind of work (S. M. Miller, 1964).

The economic consequences of dropping out of high school are more devastating today than they have been at any other time, given the economic and demographic changes in the U.S. over the past 30 years (Pennington, 2003). Since the 1970’s, the educational attainment of individuals in this country has steadily risen, while the need for unskilled workers has rapidly declined. For example, workers without a high school diploma outnumbered skilled workers by three to one in 1970, while today that trend has reversed, with college educated workers far
outnumbering workers without high school diplomas (W. Franklin, 2012; Swanson, 2009). The increase in an educated workforce has also decreased the earning power for workers without a high school diploma. In 1971, the average income for males, age 25 - 34, working full time without a high school diploma was a little over $35,000 in 2002 dollars. In 2002, that salary dropped to just under $23,000 (Barton, 2005). In 2007, the median income of all people, age 24 - 65, who were in the workforce without a high school diploma was around $24,000 (Cataldi et al., 2009). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics most recent Current Population Survey (2015), the differences in weekly wages between a high school graduate and a non-graduate is almost $200. On the other hand, the cost of a “high-risk youth” who is a high school dropout, engaged in crime, and a heavy drug user is estimated in 1997 dollars at $1.7 to $2.3 million over a lifetime (Cohen, 1998). In an era that calls for more education in order to be successful in the workforce (Cohen, Piquero, & Jenings, 2010), low graduation rates are especially alarming. The alternative for dropouts is often public assistance or the reliance on other means to support themselves and their families.

Dropping out of high school can bring social consequences that inhibit a person from participating fully in their community and in the larger society. Findings from *High School & Beyond*, a fourteen year data collection project by the National Center for Education Statistics to follow students as they graduated from high school and entered adult life, was used to compare the experiences of those students who had received their high school diploma, but had not gone on to college, and those students who dropped out. Two things stood out significantly for graduates and dropouts that impacted their well-being: Dropouts consumed alcohol at much higher rates and voted and participated in civic experiences at much lower rates (McCaul, Donaldson, Coladarci, & Davis, 1992).
**Dropout Prevention**

A single program aimed at one particular risk factor ignores the multitude of causes and overwhelming needs of the diverse potential dropout population (J. Baker & Sansone, 1990; Hudley, 1997). There is also some question as to whether intervention programs work at all and if the answer to reducing the number of dropouts is more than just a single program. Neild, et al. (2008) ask questions about addressing high school dropouts in the following way:

A dropout prevention class here, a mentor there, a new math curriculum, rewards for attendance or good grades, a new discipline policy—none of these piecemeal solutions are likely to have an appreciable impact on educational outcomes for urban students who are vulnerable to academic failure. The issue is too complex, the problems of traditional high school organization too interlinked. Instead, we will need to think of quite radical solutions. (Neild et al., 2008)

Because the dropout is most often identified by the demographic and social factors that have been identified as predictors of dropping out (Strom & Boster, 2007), strategies to address the dropout problem are often difficult both to design and implement, because the needs of the potential dropout can be vast, and the stories of potential dropouts can be so different (Springston, 2002; Toby & Armor, 1992). It is clear that there is no one answer to the question of what will prevent students from leaving school in the numbers that they do today, especially in large cities. However, there are findings from the literature that can help inform what may work to keep potential dropouts in school. The idea of a “one-size-fits-all” answer will not meet the varied needs of the diverse youth attending high school today (Pennington, 2003). By looking at how pieces of the dropout problem have been addressed and the extent to which they have been successful, a broader picture of the possibilities of dropout prevention programs begin to come into view. Literature in educational resilience, positive youth development, and youth mentoring will be explored to begin to understand how to address the dropout issue. The theories and interventions that accompany these three areas are important to consider because they have been
shown to have an impact on at-risk youth (Dubois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011; Marshall, 2004; K. Pittman, Irby, & Ferber, 2001; Rhodes & Lowe, 2008; Scales, Benson, & Mannes, 2006).

**School Belonging**

In the literature, school belonging and connection is a broad construct that is influenced by many factors (see Baker, 1998; Osterman, 2000; Ozer, Wolf, & Kong, 2008; Tillery et al., 2013; Wallace et al., 2012). Goodenow (1993) defines a student’s sense of belonging as, “The extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school environment,” (p. 80). Belonging in school has implications for school and mental health outcomes. Students who have a stronger sense of school belonging have better school-related outcomes, whereas students who have a weaker sense of school belonging have weaker school-related outcomes (Osterman, 2000; Tillery et al., 2013).

Feeling connected and having a sense of belonging to school is even more important for students who are considered at-risk (Rodriguez, 2008; Tillery et al., 2013). A student’s sense of belonging in school, or what has been termed “belongingness” (Finn, 1989), is crucial to student success and achievement in school (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014; Demanet & Van Houtte, 2012; Finn, 1989; Gillen-O’Neal & Fuligni, 2013; Goodenow, 1993; Wallace et al., 2012). School belonging is related to how a student perceives themselves in relation to the adults, other students, and the social context of the school (J. A. Baker, 1998; Wallace et al., 2012). Students who identify with school and conceive that they belong in the school community will more often actively participate in classroom activities and value being successful in school (Finn, 1989). Conversely, students who do not have a sense of belonging in school will more often not perform in school, have a history of low grades, and may eventually leave school (Finn, 1989).
School belonging is influenced by how teachers act in the classroom and how students feel perceived and responded to by their teacher. Generally, students feel connected to school when the teacher goes beyond what students perceive as “just teaching” so that they feel heard in class, are taken seriously by the teacher, and feel known and supported (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014; Wallace & Chhuon, 2014). Connection to school and school belonging has also been linked to adults knowing students’ names, supporting them in academic and non-academic ways, and to the ability of teachers to teach and manage their classrooms (Ozer et al., 2008).

**Relationships with Adults**

In relation to school belonging, one reason cited for students dropping out of school is the lack of positive relationships a student has with adults in school (Englund et al., 2008; Rubie-Davies, 2006; Schussler & Collins, 2006; Scott, 2005). Relationships with teachers and other students in school can have a positive impact on a student’s decision to stay in school, because a positive relationship provides encouragement and motivation, especially for those who may be struggling (Harris, Duncan, & Boisjoly, 2002; Hudley, 1997). While the role of the teacher and other adults in the school in supporting and guiding students is important for all students, it has been found to be especially important to students at risk of dropping out (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Demanet & Van Houtte, 2012; Rubie-Davies, 2006). Relationships with adults in school have been shown to improve attendance (DeSocio et al., 2007), to raise self – esteem, reduce dropout rates (Wells, Miller, Tobacyk, & Clanton, 2002), and to combat negative messages about school that students receive at home (Strom & Boster, 2007). On-track students report having more connections to school and to specific adults within the school (Dillon, Liem, & Gore, 2003).
The development of close relationships between teachers and students is often impossible in large high schools. The size of the school, the number of students in a classroom, and the workload of teachers can make it impossible for teachers and students to have time outside of class to form relationships. High school students often move from a smaller environment in middle school to a larger environment, which can be lonely, isolating, and overwhelming for students (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). For a student who is at risk of dropping out, that lack of opportunity to have positive relationships can be more detrimental. High school students at risk of dropping out, in comparison to students who are doing well, report less opportunity to make decisions for themselves at school, are disciplined much more, and are told to do better in school more often (Hardre & Reeve, 2003; Vallerand et al., 1997). Similarly, classrooms that were found to be unsupportive of the needs of students and their self-determination and “voice” were ones where students were more apt to think about dropping out (Hardre & Reeve, 2003; Vallerand et al., 1997).

Students who do not have positive adult relationships in school are likely to not realize their full potential in school and eventually drop out (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014; Englund et al., 2008; Nowicki, 2004). Similarly, teacher expectations impact the motivation and ultimate success of students. Teachers who have high expectations of students have an impact on the self-perception of students and their ultimate ability to achieve (Demanet & Van Houtte, 2012; Gillen-O’Neal & Fuligni, 2013; Rubie-Davies, 2006). This body of research suggests that there may be some connection between the way that adults interact with and form relationships with students and the motivation of a student to stay in school until graduation (Gillen-O’Neal & Fuligni, 2013; Goodenow, 1993; Hazel, Vazirabadi, & Gallagher, 2013).
Partnerships with Social Service Agencies

As mentioned earlier, beginning with the settlement house movement at the turn of the century, there is a history of schools and social service organizations partnering to address the needs of individual students and communities (Allen-Meares, 1996b; Dryfoos, 2005; Joseph et al., 2010). That partnership still has value today as students face a number of individual and family challenges that can affect how they progress in school (Anderson-Butcher, 2004; Kelly et al., 2016). Those issues, if unaddressed, can lead to disengagement from school and potentially to dropping out (Brigman, Webb, & Campbell, 2007). The role of the school in addressing these issues can be controversial, especially given the current focus on accountability and high stakes testing in the school system today (Bemak, Chung, & Siroskey-Sabdo, 2005). However, because there is often no alternative, much of this responsibility falls on schools to address the dropout problem (Balfanz, 2009; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010).

School social workers remain focused on individual students in schools in the present day, despite the deep roots in social justice of the social work field (Joseph et al., 2010; Kelly et al., 2016, 2010). A few recent surveys of school social workers show that large caseloads (Johnson-Reid, Kontak, Citerman, Essma, & Fezzi, 2004), inconsistencies in practice (Altshuler & Webb, 2009), a focus on the most at-risk students (Allen-Meares, 1994; Johnson-Reid et al., 2004), and a focus on the individual (Kelly et al., 2010; Shaffer, 2006) have lead to this inconsistency between current practice and the original mission of school social workers. That inconsistency is amplified in recent school social work literature that highlights the “obligation” of school social workers to question structures and practices in schools that do not work for the least advantaged students (Altshuler & Webb, 2009; Joseph et al., 2010; Kelly et al., 2010).
Large school systems such as New York City rely on alternative schools and other programs within the mainstream school system to address students who drop out and have tried to address issues through educational programs that also treat social and emotional problems (C. Franklin, McNeil, & Wright, 1990). Collaboration between schools and social service agencies that can help address some of these issues are key in addressing the dropout issue (Anderson-Butcher, 2004; Anderson-Butcher et al., 2006; Dryfoos, 2005; Hirota, 2005). Interventions that can happen in schools to address the dropout issue could possibly have an effect on reducing the dropout rate, because students whose issues are being addressed are more likely to come to school (Martin et al., 2002). However, teachers, social workers, and guidance counselors often work in isolation when addressing the needs of students in a traditional school system (Anderson-Butcher, 2004). By recognizing the importance of collaboration between schools and social workers, the differences that educators and social workers bring to the work are highlighted (Altshuler & Webb, 2009; Anderson-Butcher & Ashton, 2004; Anderson-Butcher et al., 2006; Dryfoos, 2005).

**Positive Youth Development**

The positive youth development model and the principles that accompany that model have become central to programs in social service agencies working with at-risk youth (Catalano et al., 2002; Good Shepherd Services, 2006; McKay, Sanders, & Wroblewski, 2011; Ziegler, 2004). Positive youth development came about in the 1990’s, representing a “shift in focus” from a problem focused view of adolescents to a prevention and strengths-based focus that sought to support youth before problems occurred (Catalano et al., 2002; Damon, 2004). The term is used to describe three different concepts—(1) the natural process of growth and development that a young person goes through to become an adult, (2) a set of principles that
guides the approach taken toward youth by individuals, communities, and agencies that promote
the positive development of young people, and (3) a set of practices and activities that exists in
programs that encourage the healthy development of young people (Hamilton, Hamilton, &
Pittman, 2004). As a framework, it emerged in the 1960s and 70s, and then re-emerged in the
1990s as an alternative to only looking at the deficits youth presented (Bazemore & Terry, 1997).
Positive youth development represents a departure from working with youth in a way that
focuses on problems to a focus on the development of the whole child. This is illustrated in an
often quoted phrase, “Problem free is not fully prepared,” (K. Pittman & Irby, 1998). Positive
youth development is based on the convergence of developmental systems theory, a new interest
in adolescents in the early 1990s, and concern over improving the chances that at-risk youth and
families have in changing their lives (Silbereisen & Lerner, 2007).

Positive youth development represents not only a change in philosophy, but also in
practice. The prevention approaches that were introduced in the 1970’s and 1980’s to combat
issues such as teen drug use or teen pregnancy often focused on treating a single problem
(Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004; Larson, 2000). The elements of youth
development were treated as secondary interests when compared to the focus on the problem
and, as a result, removed the young person from the context of their environment (Lerner, 2003).
In a review of six national studies that are regularly administered and often quoted to give a
picture of adolescents in the nation, MacDonald (2001) found that all of them focused on
reporting the negative behaviors of adolescents—the pregnancy rate versus the rate of students
volunteering for community service, for example. He attributes that to the rise of the prevention
focus in the 1970’s, which led to the need for indicators and data around the problems teenagers
were dealing with (MacDonald & Valdivieso, 2001). Similarly, funding streams during this time
often targeted a few large problem areas such as teenage pregnancy, school failing, and drug use, and putting resources into those areas while creating programs to address those issues exclusively. The result of this approach is that research and funding become attached to a single problem and connections cannot be made between the things that each problem-focused group is learning about teenagers (Hamilton et al., 2004). Problem-focused problem solving disconnects the ability of researchers to focus on the whole, including the structural barriers that might exist.

There are two hypotheses that supported early youth development theory that are still important today. First, youth development reflects a change in how youth are seen, represented in a shift from youth as “problem” to youth as resources who, if given a supportive community, will reach their full potential. Second, youth development is based on a set of clear and specific principles that guide what it is that young people need to be successful, which I describe below. Programs to address the dropout problem that are based on the principles of positive youth development and a focus on developing strengths or assets in young people that will help them thrive are in direct opposition to how the dropout problem had been addressed since 1960 when the dropout was identified as the problem. The shift in thinking centers on the idea that youth problems do not have to be fixed so that youth development can occur, but implementing programs based on the principles of youth development is the most effective way to approach youth problems (K. Pittman & Cahill, 1992). The current focus in addressing the dropout problem aims to engage youth in creating a more positive future. Positive youth development does not focus on eliminating risky behavior, but encouraging the development of young people so that they become better equipped to make better choices (Benson, 2003; Benson & Saito, 2001; Lerner, 2003; Scales & Leffert, 2004).
Principles of Youth Development

The set of principles that define positive youth development emphasize the strengths of young people (Costello, Toles, Spielberger, & Wynn, 2001; Hamilton et al., 2004; Lerner, 2003; Lerner et al., 2003; Scales & Leffert, 2004). Similar to the strengths perspective in social work that focuses on solutions (McKay et al., 2011), positive youth development offers a different way of looking at adolescents. The strengths perspective avoids labeling what is wrong with an individual, family, or community so that it can be “fixed” and looks to the individual, family, or community to own their problems and change through their own strengths. Similarly, the positive youth development approach encourages youth to find their own voice and create their own changes (Batavick, 1997).

Positive youth development principles have been described in a variety of ways, such as the “Five C’s” (K. Pittman & Cahill, 1992; K. Pittman et al., 2001), the “Five Promises” (see americaspromise.org), the “Five elements” (see ydi.org), and the “40 Developmental Assets” (Leffert et al., 1998; Scales, 1997; Scales & Leffert, 2004). Although the principles are defined in different ways, central to positive youth development is maintaining a positive approach toward youth and the belief that all young people can thrive, understanding that all young people need healthy relationships and engaging activities, and the belief that all young people should be engaged as participants (Hamilton et al., 2004). The basic premise underpinning these principles is that the more youth are exposed to these experiences, the more they will thrive (Benson, 2003; Benson & Saito, 2001; Scales et al., 2001, 2008; Scales & Leffert, 2004).

Positive youth development represents a shift towards seeing young people as resources instead of problems (Damon, 2004). In the positive youth development framework, young people are seen as partners in their development and are often described as “experts” in knowing
what they need to be successful and productive. Adults view adolescents as potential leaders and resources and, in that, young people are valued as partners in their own development (Thomsen, 2004). In positive youth development, disengagement of young people from school and communities, drug use and other negative behaviors, and even boredom, are not identified as symptoms of psychopathology, but in most cases are identified as a lack of positive youth development (Larson, 2000).

A common theme throughout the positive youth development literature is importance of the relationship with a positive and caring adult (Cahill et al., 2002; Catalano et al., 2004; Damon, 2004; Milliken, 2007; Rhodes & Roffman, 2003). In definitions of youth development, the presence of a caring adult is often listed as the first element important to the healthy growth and development of a young person. However, adults are not always present. A survey conducted during the 1996 – 1997 school year by the Search Institute found that, among 100,000 6th to 12th graders, adult relationships were missing in the lives of many students. Specifically, only two-thirds of students surveyed reported having consistent “love and support” from their own families and only 40% reported having supportive relationships with adults other than their parents. In schools, only 25% expressed feeling cared for by adults at school (Scales et al., 2001). The lack of adult role models has been attributed to a number of things, including the presence of more women in the workforce, changing patterns in families more often living away from extended family, and neighborhoods, especially in urban areas, becoming less safe and promoting isolation instead of encouraging informal contact between adults and youth (Rhodes & Roffman, 2003). While the lack of adult role models in the lives of adolescents can lead to risky behavior, the consistent presence of only one adult in a young person’s life can have an enormous impact on their success (Scales et al., 2006). Although a relationship with an adult has
a positive impact on a young people and can be central to their successful development, many adults do not relate to youth outside of their own families (Scales et al., 2001). Adults that were more likely to relate to youth not in their own families were those more likely to volunteer, attend religious services, and participate in community events. However, such positive relationships with adults outside of the family are relatively rare (Scales et al., 2006).

Programs that utilize youth development principles are often community-based agencies and small after-school and recreation programs. Therefore the research on positive youth development has been limited, especially for program evaluations that are high quality and assess outcomes (Bloom, Thompson, & Ivry, 2010; Izzo, Connell, Gambone, & Bradshaw, 2004; Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray, & Foster, 1998). This lack of research in the youth development field has also been attributed to the focus on practice and lacks the ability to stand up in academic circles because most are anecdotal or only correlational (Benson & Saito, 2001; Brooks-Gunn & Roth, 2014; Izzo et al., 2004). The challenge often is that organizations that find the youth development approach to fit with the mission of their work are often smaller and community based and unable to come up with either the resources or the expertise to develop evaluation approaches that are relevant (Bloom et al., 2010; Izzo et al., 2004). Although there is a belief that programs based in youth development do well, the lack of consensus about what youth development principles are have made it difficult to measure and thus difficult to evaluate as it has been implemented in the vast array of youth programs that exist, from sports programs to neighborhood centers to summer camps to after-school centers, all using some form of positive youth development (Larson, 2000).

The Search Institute, a research and resource development centered organization for the promotion of positive youth development (see www.search-institute.org), has been conducting
surveys in communities across the United States and Canada to better understand the impact of developmental assets on youth. The Search Institute has developed a list of 40 developmental assets, identified as internal and external, that are described as essential to healthy development (Scales & Leffert, 2004). Some examples of developmental assets include family support, safety, participation in youth programs, bonding to school, and honesty (Benson, 2003). There are two themes that have been identified that exist across the surveys distributed by the Search Institute that have potential interest to the field of youth development. First, most adolescents who have taken the survey (distributed in 700 communities) have a low number of developmental assets. On a scale of a potential 40 assets, the mean is 18. This mean decreases as students get older. Second, as assets rise in adolescents, the potential to participate in high-risk behavior decreases (Benson, 2003). Further research on the developmental assets and their impact on young people make a connection between the number of assets that a young person has and the impact it has on their grade point average (GPA) in school. Students with a lower number of developmental assets had a lower GPA (as seen in the official school records) than students with a higher numbers of assets. This difference remained consistent over a three-year period. Also, during that same time, students who gained assets also increased their GPAs (Scales & Roehlkepartain, 2003).

**Positive Youth Development in Schools**

As discussed earlier, identifying dropouts and solving the dropout problem has focused on the individual behaviors of students around attendance, discipline problems, and academics (Rumberger, 1987). However, more recently, it has been suggested that schools may hold some of the possible answers to the dropout problem, above the individual characteristics of the student (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2006; J. Baker & Sansone, 1990; Dillon et al., 2003; Fine &
Burns, 2003; Harris et al., 2002; McKay et al., 2011; Natriello, 1995). Schools have been identified as ideal settings for youth development, though the principles that guide youth development are not always apparent in schools (Anderson-Butcher, 2004; Anderson-Butcher & Ashton, 2004; Anderson-Butcher et al., 2006; Dryfoos, 2005; Hirota, 2005; McKay et al., 2011). The hierarchical nature and history of schools and the size and structure of schools, especially high schools, makes it difficult to promote youth development principles (Costello et al., 2001).

In a bureaucratically organized school, staff roles are often specific and separate and decision making is done in a hierarchical way, which can create an environment that is alienating, especially to students at risk of dropping out. The impersonal nature of large urban schools has been related to “the machinery that smooths the pathway to dropping out” (Neild et al., 2008).

A number of school characteristics have been identified as important to keeping students in school. School structures in schools that are often discussed as keys to changing the school environment to one that is more positive for students include smaller schools, smaller classes, service learning and opportunities to work outside of school, and using discipline in different ways (DeSocio et al., 2007; Springston, 2002). Those school structures directly relate to what high school students in New York City describe as missing in schools in a survey conducted by the Citizens Committee for Children of New York (2007)—better quality teachers, smaller classes, school buildings that are less crowded, new equipment and appropriate books and materials, a safe environment, a stronger relationship with families, and stronger relationships between students and teachers (Citizens’ Committee for Children of New York, Inc., 2007). Those characteristics include the presence of a close, one-on-one relationship with an adult (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010; Harris et al., 2002; McNeal, 1997a; Milliken, 2007; Natriello, 1995; Roberts, 2010; Shore & Shore, 2009; Ziegler, 2004), relevant
and engaging instruction with strong teacher support (Hirota, 2005; S. M. Smith & Thomases, 2001; Ziegler, 2004), a safe community (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Hartnett, 2007; Milliken, 2007; Minnard, 2002), strong leadership (Hirota, 2005), and community involvement (Christle et al., 2007).

School size, in particular, has been identified as one reason why students are not successful when they are in large high schools (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Pennington, 2003; R. Pittman & Haughwout, 1987). Moving from a smaller middle school to a large comprehensive high school, which in New York City can consist of upwards of 4,000 students, can be overwhelming. Students who feel lost quickly become disengaged from school and may drop out even after only one year in high school.

How students feel in the school building has been shown to influence the decisions that they make about attending school and potentially dropping out (Hartnett, 2007; Lan & Lanthier, 2003). However, schools are often not often identified as caring environments, because there is the idea that a caring environment in a school may not result in the academic achievement that is so important to schools, given the focus on standards and testing (Schussler & Collins, 2006). Students who lack a caring and supportive environment in school are more likely to drop out, and schools that have a caring environment seem to be associated with positive outcomes (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010; Harris et al., 2002; Natriello, 1995; Roberts, 2010).

A final area that impacts students attending high schools and their likelihood of dropping out is the particular school and the community where it is situated. In New York City, for example, poor and working class children are more likely to live in communities and attend schools with less experienced teachers and lower graduation rates (Fine & Burns, 2003). That is changing following the 2004 report from John Hopkins University that identified New York City
as having the highest concentration of “dropout factories” in the nation (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). School closures of 29 of the worst performing schools occurred from 2002 – 2008 was one way of addressing low performing schools. The impact of those closings has brought about better options for students who would have attended those schools and seemed to have no significant impact on students during the phase-out process (Kemple, 2015). However, addressing low performing schools does not seem to solve some of the more systemic issues. In a comparison of schools with the lowest dropout rates and the highest dropout rates in a single state, a number of notable differences was found between schools. Schools that had a low dropout rate consisted of a larger percentage of white students and had a lower percentage of students living in poverty. The physical space inside the school was also cleaner and more orderly and was less in need of repair when compared to schools with the highest dropout rates. Instruction also looked quite different. In schools with low dropout rates, teachers dressed in a more professional manner, used a variety of instructional techniques, and interacted more with students. In contrast, schools with high dropout rates had teachers who interacted much less with students. School personnel in schools with high dropout rates described the school climate and the amount of family involvement in school as poor (Christle et al., 2007).

In an economically advantaged school, the economically disadvantaged student is at no higher risk to drop out than the economically advantaged students in the school (Zvoch, 2006). Similarly, data from the National Education Longitudinal Study was looked at to determine the impact of neighborhood diversity and individual characteristics of students on the likelihood of a student to drop out (Lauff & Ingels, 2014). When individual, family, school, and neighborhood characteristics were controlled for, the dropout rates among African-American, Hispanic, and White students were much different than what currently exists. There was no significant
difference between the White and Hispanic students and African-American students had a higher completion rate (Van Dorn et al., 2006). It is important to recognize that the differences between schools in advantaged communities versus schools in disadvantaged communities can have an enormous impact on how students do in school.

**Youth Mentoring**

The field of youth mentoring offers some important insights into the relationship between a young person and an unrelated adult, one of the key features of positive youth development and the school model presented in this study. Mentoring young people who were labeled as “troubled” or who were living in poverty was an idea that came about in the late 1800’s. Programs called “Friendly Visitors” paired up middle class individuals and families living in poverty to encourage support and the sharing of resources (Freedman, 1992). Although that early program did not last long because it became necessary to send out paid workers to do the work with families in poverty, the idea of middle class people volunteering with families in poverty remained. In 1904, Big Brothers and Catholic Big Sisters were both started as a way to help boys and girls in the juvenile justice system in New York City. Those two organizations, that later merged in 1977 to become Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (BBBS), have maintained a focus on mentoring young people for over 100 years.

The explosion of formal mentoring programs began in the early 1990’s as a result of several trends occurring at the same time. With the increased interest and attention around positive youth development, the growing awareness of the challenges that disadvantaged youth face, and the growing media attention that points to the importance of adult involvement with disadvantaged youth, the number of volunteer mentors increased (Rhodes, 2002). In a 2005 poll conducted by MENTOR, over 5,000 mentoring programs were identified in the United States.
working with over 3 million adult mentors matched with a mentee (Mentor, 2005). This represents an enormous increase in a relatively short amount of time and confirms that there is a strong belief among youth serving organizations and policy makers that young people need positive relationships with adults. The amount of federal dollars given to mentoring programs alone in fiscal year 2011 by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention totaled $100 million (Dubois et al., 2011).

Youth mentoring also has its own national organization (see mentoring.org) that has had the support of many politicians and celebrities over the past 20 years and boasts two “NBA legends” and Colin Powell as former and current board members. President Obama has declared January as National Mentoring Month and pledged to provide more federal resources to support programs that match at-risk children with adult mentors. This follows suit with political leaders who have previously supported mentoring as a positive way to reach vulnerable youth. In addition, there are a number of websites, handbooks, books, reports, and journal articles all focused on setting up a mentoring program, becoming a mentor, maintaining a positive relationship, and describing the benefits of mentoring for young people.

Mentoring has, in a short time, come to be recognized as a promising practice in working with at-risk youth. It is praised for connecting young people living under difficult circumstances with a supportive adult, a principle of the positive youth development literature. However, despite the individual stories that are often shared on websites and in the media about positive connections with adults, there still is little evaluative evidence available about the mentoring relationship in comparison to the amount of resources and huge growth that has occurred in the youth mentoring field (DuBois, Doolittle, Yates, Silverthorn, & Tebes, 2006; Rhodes, 2008). Most of the literature that exists in the field of mentoring consists of evaluations of programs,
reviews, and a few meta-analyses. Some of this research has also identified the potential negative effects that “bad mentoring” can have on children. Mentoring that is not well organized as a panacea for young people at risk’s problems has been challenged by some of this research (Rhodes, 2008; Spencer, 2006).

**Impact of Mentoring**

Mentoring can provide a number of benefits to young people and has been shown to help improve academic skills, social skills, and behavior (de Anda, 2001; Zand et al., 2009; Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, & Notaro, 2002). In a large study of youth participating in a mentor relationship through Big Brothers Big Sisters in 1995, participants in a mentoring relationship for an average of one year showed improvements in several areas, particularly in making decisions not to use drugs or alcohol and to attend school (Tierney, Grossman, & Resch, 2000). Young people also showed improvements in having better relationships with peers and family members, though the outcome was not as significant as drug and alcohol use and school attendance.

However, there has also been some question as to the level at which these benefits exist. In a 2002 meta-analysis measuring the effectiveness of mentoring programs, 55 reports were analyzed to determine what was beneficial about the mentoring relationship and if benefits differed across types of programs (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002). Effects of mentoring programs were found to be modest and also dependent on programs that use effective practices. In a second meta-analysis conducted in 2011, similar results were found (Dubois et al., 2011). This second analysis, which looked at reports on mentoring programs published since the 2002 meta-analysis, showed no change in the effectiveness of mentoring programs from earlier. That finding was related to two challenges that the mentoring field has faced in the past ten years, identified as a relative slowness of the field to translate evidence into policy and
practice and the great emphasis that the field has on expanding programs over improving the quality of programs that currently exist. That challenge to slow the growth of the mentoring movement in order to improve the quality of programs was identified early in the mentoring movement as a way to challenge “fervor without infrastructure,” (Freedman, 1992). This body of research suggests that slowing down the growth of mentoring programs in order to look at the quality of the mentoring relationships, as they exist in current programs, provides information about how individual mentors and programs can improve their relationships with young people.

**Mentor Relationships**

The relationship between a mentor and their mentee is ultimately what determines whether there are positive outcomes and growth in the young person, little change, or some harm (Rhodes, 2002; Spencer, 2004, 2007). Mentoring relationships that last one year or longer result in improvements in academic performance and behavioral outcomes, while those that last three to six months or six to nine months show fewer positive effects. Likewise, mentoring relationships that last less than three months show drops in the self-worth and scholastic confidence of young people (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Rhodes, 2008). The estimate is that only half of mentoring relationships actually last beyond three months, something that can be harmful to the young people in those relationships that do not persist (Deutsch & Spencer, 2009; Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Spencer, 2007). In a qualitative study of mentoring relationships that failed, Spencer found that relationships failed for a number of reasons, including some misconceived notions about the relationship, the mentor’s inability to relate or bridge cultural divides, family and life interferences, and some lack of support from the agency responsible for the match (Spencer, 2007). Because mentoring programs tend to target youth who are more vulnerable, early termination can have more of an effect on them. Early termination can also
have effects on the mentoring programs themselves, given the investment of resources made in each volunteer mentor, who often goes through a considerable amount of paperwork, interviewing, and training prior to being matched with a young person (Rhodes & Lowe, 2008).

Length of relationship, though important in the young person achieving higher levels of growth, was also found to be less important when compared to the closeness of the relationship formed and how positive young people rated their relationships with their mentors. In a second look at data from the 1995 BBBS study to determine relationship characteristics associated with positive youth outcomes, youth who had a close relationship with their mentor showed growth in global self-worth and scholastic competence, even when frequency of meetings was not accounted for (Rhodes, Reddy, Roffman, & Grossman, 2005). A model for understanding the effects of mentoring relationships between an adult and young person was developed by Rhodes and provides some direction into how the relationship between a mentor and mentee can move towards positive youth development and outcomes (Rhodes, 2002; Rhodes & DuBois, 2008).

The model begins with the assumption that the mentoring relationship can be significant for young people and proposes a set of conditions and processes that will help that relationship be successful. The model assumes a strong relationship between the mentor and the young person, that being the basis for social-emotional, cognitive, and identity development. This relationship is set within the context of the young person’s history of relationships with adults, their social abilities, their stage of development, how long the mentoring relationship takes place, the context of the mentoring agency, and family and community influences, and the demographics of the mentor and mentee. If all aspects of a young person in a mentoring relationship are taken into account, including family and community stressors, the relationship can be more supported by
the mentoring agency and the mentor can be more prepared to for a close relationship with their mentee.

There has been some work in the youth mentoring field to look at the relationship that occurs between a mentor and a young person with an emphasis on trying to assess the quality of the relationship. Because mentoring is a relationship-based intervention, similarities in what happens in the relationship between a mentor and a young person and what happens in the psychotherapy relationship have been noted (Spencer, 2004, 2006). Those relationships both involve a relationship between two people, one member in a more hierarchical role to the other. There are also scheduled meetings with the ultimate goal of forming some kind of human connection where growth and development occurs for the young person (Rhodes, 2002). In matches that lasted a year or more and were identified by caseworkers as positive and significant, processes occurred that were similar to those found in relational theories, such as authenticity and empathy (Spencer, 2004, 2006). In qualitative interviews, both mentors and young people identified interactions that included authenticity, empathy, mutuality, collaboration and a sense of shared meaning (Munson, Smalling, Spencer, Scott, & Tracy, 2010; Spencer, 2006). There is a parallel between these elements and the success of therapy relationships that can similarly be applied to mentoring relationships (Spencer, 2004). The approach that mentors take with their young person is also something that has found some relevance in the literature, though there are still gaps in what is known about what works best in the mentoring relationship (Beam, Chen, & Greenberger, 2002; Langhout, Rhodes, & Osborne, 2004; Spencer, 2004).

**School – Based Mentoring**

In response to the growing needs of schools to produce positive outcomes for students, mentoring programs that are based in schools and operate either during the school day or directly
after school have gained some interest (Herrera, 1999; Pulic/Private Ventures, 2004). Early on, benefits for school-based mentoring programs included having access to volunteers who would not normally volunteer in a community-based program, access to students who would not normally be referred to community-based programs because of lack of parent commitment, a program that is more easily supervised and less costly to run, and the creation of a relationship between the mentor and teachers (Herrera, 1999). However, though the benefits of placing a mentoring program within a school are clear, it is not clear as to whether students benefit at any significant level from meetings with their mentors (Herrera, Grossman, Kauh, & McMaken, 2011; Pulic/Private Ventures, 2004). The challenge in mentoring programs in schools is that, often, relationships last less than nine months and meetings are held less frequently for shorter periods of time. In a large impact study of school-based mentoring programs of 1,139 youth across 71 schools where students, mentors, and teachers were assessed at nine months and 15 months after the start of the school year, two benefits were identified. Teachers reported that students were doing significantly better in their overall academic performance and students reported more positive perceptions of their own academic skills. However, those benefits did not persist after a student had left the mentoring program (Herrera, Grossman, Kauh, McMaken, & Jucovy, 2007). There is still much to be learned about school-based mentoring programs. In comparison to community-based programs, the benefits appear to be not as significant. However, there is very little research available on the particular differences that exist in school-based programs.

**Overage, Under-Credited Students in New York City**

The students in this study are considered part of the overage, under-credited population of students in New York City. They represent a distinct group of students because, for the most
part, they are still enrolled in high school but have chronic histories of non-attendance and low credit accumulation. Traditionally, students who leave school each year either by aging out, being pushed out or pulled out, or having made their own decision to leave school are used to define the dropout problem in this country and in individual states. The percentage of students 16 – 24 who are not in school and did not receive a high school diploma or equivalency define the dropout percentages. However, those numbers represent only those students who have physically left school. A young person who is 16 – 24 years old and still enrolled in school, regardless of their attendance or progress towards graduation, is not counted as a dropout. This group of students has often gone uncounted because they are still enrolled in school, but on the verge of dropping out. In 1989, Barrington & Hendricks, in assessing the records of students at two large high schools who had all entered in 1981, identified this group of students as “non-graduates.” They highlighted the importance at looking at this group because they existed in equal numbers with dropouts and were on their way to becoming dropouts without intervention (Barrington & Hendricks, 1989). Some distinctions were made between the dropouts and the non-graduates in Barrington’s study, and some important speculations were offered in developing programs for non-graduates. Non-graduates had better attendance in elementary and middle school and did better academically in elementary school when compared with dropouts. For many of them, academic issues in high school were a result of their attendance. Interventions for this group of students, it was suggested, should include both an interesting academic curriculum that encourages building on skills from middle school and also the opportunity to form positive relationships with adults in the school. This recommendation, though admittedly speculative by the authors, is significant because there is a recognition that
distinctions, which are not often made among the population of dropouts, need to be made to better address the needs of this diverse population.

Recently, attention has turned not only towards dropouts, but also towards students who fall into this category and remain in school making little to no progress towards graduation. In New York City, that population is referred to as overage, under-credited students. In 2006, that population had reached close to 70,000 students, or 20% of the enrolled high school population (Cahill et al., 2006). Combined with the 68,000 overage, under-credited youth that had already left school by June 2005, the population of those students at any time in New York City is close to 140,000 students, a number larger than all other school districts in the country except for Los Angeles (Cahill et al., 2006). This number is significant because most (93%) of this population will go on to either age out or drop out from high school even though they may stay enrolled in high school long past their scheduled graduation date.

In New York City, the overage under-credited student who is still in school is defined as a student that is at least two years behind in high school, meaning they have not acquired the needed 11 credits each year to fulfill the 44 credits required for graduation. For a 16 year old student, that means having fewer than 11 credits, for a 17 year old, fewer than 22, and on up to 19 – 21 year olds, when students age out of high school, having fewer than 44. This population of students is especially concerning, because it represents a higher percentage of males (11% more than the general high school population), a higher percentage of African American and Hispanic students—14% more than the general high school population, a higher concentration of special education students—31% in the overage under-credited population versus 12% in the general high school population, and a higher concentration of English language learners—16%
in the overage, under-credited population versus 11% in the general high school population (Parthenon, 2006).

Another challenge for this group are Regents exams, the required subject area tests for all high school students to be able to graduate in New York State. Of the overage, under-credited youth still enrolled in high school in June 2005, 68% had not passed any of the five required Regents exams. With the recent changes in the Regents examination requirements, where students starting school in 2008 and beyond are required to pass a minimum of five exams with a 65 or above, this may lead to more dropouts and non-graduates. The implementation of new requirements and testing by the New York State Department of Education in the form of higher requirements on required exams for graduation, it was predicted, would affect graduation rates even more (Fine, 2003).

Transfer Schools

In New York City, one response to the dropout problem discussed earlier is the creation of transfer high schools. Transfer high schools are smaller high schools for students who have become overage and under-credited and have either dropped out or are at risk of dropping out of high school. Transfer schools operate in partnership with a social service agency and the Department of Education, and there are specific social work staff in the school who are responsible for working with students individually and in groups to support their social and emotional development while in school. Social workers do not play traditional school social worker roles in transfer schools, but operate in partnership with the principal and teachers for the benefit of students. This is perhaps a new role for social workers in schools.

The Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation defines transfer schools in the following way:
Transfer High Schools are small, academically rigorous high schools designed to re-engage students who are overage and under-credited or have dropped out of high school. Eligible students must have been enrolled in a NYC high school for at least one year and are far from promoting on grade level in their current high school. Most Transfer High School students enter at age 16 to 17 and have earned fewer than 9th grade credits. The essential elements of Transfer High Schools include a personalized learning environment, rigorous academic standards, student-centered pedagogy, support to meet instructional and developmental goals, and a focus on connections to college (Cahill et al., 2006, p. 4).

There are several models of transfer schools in New York City, though all are based on supporting students who have fallen behind to get their high school diploma in an atmosphere that is different than their previous high school. There are three agencies that hold recent transfer school models with the Department of Education, New Visions for Public Schools, Diploma Plus, and Good Shepherd Services. The study presented in this paper will focus on schools under the Good Shepherd Services (GSS) school model. As of 2006, transfer schools were graduating overage, under-credited students at a rate of 56%. This is an incredible gain from the 19% graduation rate that overage, under-credited students show in traditional high schools.

**GSS School Model to Address Overage, Under-Credited Students**

Good Shepherd Services (GSS) developed one of the transfer school models that is currently in existence in New York City and the one that will be the focus of this study. GSS is a large social service organization that has worked with overage and under-credited students for many years in New York City and has developed a model that was replicated throughout New York City. Currently, there are seven schools operating under this model in Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx. The model is firmly rooted in principles of positive youth development as outlined in the codification manual (Good Shepherd Services, 2006). The model identifies the following as essential to the approach to positive youth development in schools: strength-based
and transparent communication between students and staff; the value of a primary adult in each student’s life; structured routines that provide clear, consistent expectations and ongoing feedback that promotes accountability both in and outside the classroom; respect for student voice and a focus on youth participation and leadership development; and, a personalized learning environment (p. 10). In addition, there are five core principles and five essential components, drawn from positive youth development principles, to the GSS model school that help describe the approach taken with students. The five core principles are high expectations, an active and rigorous learning environment, building healthy relationships, student voice and responsibility, and building community. In addition to the five core principles, there are five essential components in the GSS transfer school model. Those components are partnership and shared leadership, integration of the advocate counselor (primary person, see below) within the school setting, a youth development approach to instruction, a defined target population and admissions process, and a personalized small school environment (p.12).

The GSS school model is based on a partnership between the Department of Education and a social service agency. This partnership allows for the Principal to oversee curriculum and instruction while the School Director, who is a social worker and works for the social service agency, works with staff to address the social and emotional needs of students. This is done in an environment that is infused with youth development principles. The model is built on shared leadership between the School Director and Principal and a staff that consists of teachers and Advocate counselors who work together with students to address academic as well as social and emotional needs.

There are several things that are unique about this particular model. Shared leadership between the Principal and School Director provides opportunities to address behavior, build
community, and develop curriculum in an atmosphere that is infused with positive youth
development principles. The traditional role of School Dean, for example, does not exist in a
transfer school. Instead, social workers and school staff address behavior collaboratively in a
less punitive way. Advocate counselors are also seen as central to the success of students.
Students describe the positive relationships that develop with Advocate counselors as important
to their success in school. The model presented in this study is also based on an infusion of
positive youth development principles in the classroom, where teachers have different types of
interactions with students than in other high schools.

This model has limited research, and there has been no research that has looked at the
specific relationship between an Advocate Counselor and a student from the perspective of a
student. The opportunities that exist in the relationship between an Advocate Counselor and a
student to impact the success of a student are not clear, although there appears to be a
connection.

**Theoretical Framework**

I chose to frame my inquiry around three guiding theories that together offer a framework
to understand various dimensions of a relationship between an adult and a student in school.
Each of these theories offers a particular way of understanding the relationship between an adult
and a young person that goes beyond identifying the importance of adult relationships. Although
the school model within which this study is conducted has a set of five guiding principles and
five essential components that interact together for the success of students (see literature review),
my interest is in the *relationship* that occurs between an advocate counselor and a student.
Specifically, I am interested in how the relationship between an advocate counselor and student
*works* such that successful students identify it as meaningful. Though the existence of this
relationship has been identified as a central component of the GSS school model, what occurs in that relationship between the advocate counselor and student that makes it work has not been fully explored.

The three theories that frame this study are developmental systems theory, the ethic of care in education theory, and a set of psychodynamic relational theories that emerged from feminist therapy and scholarship. Developmental systems theory provides a way to understand a growing person developing within their environment and how the people and communities that surround a person can impact the development of their individual characteristics. Care theory and relational theory are utilized to understand the both effective and problematic relationships between a student and an adult in school context in particular and what happens within that relationship that promotes growth. Care theory offers a way of understanding relationships as a caring exchange, while relational theories point to authenticity and mutuality as essential components of relationships that promote growth. I will begin with a review of developmental systems theory as an overarching theory in which positive youth development is grounded that informs a conception of young people as “assets” and “resources to be developed,” (Benson & Saito, 2001; Lerner, 2003). I will then discuss ethic of care and relational theories as they relate to the relationship between a young person and an adult.

In the early 1970’s, developmental psychologists began to expand the definition of and importance of the ecological environment in the development of a “growing organism” (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 514). Developmental systems theory, as influenced by the ecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1992), defines human development as a process that takes place through interactions between and among a person and levels of what constitute her/his environment. Those levels, which Bronfenbrenner describes as the
microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem, that surround individuals are constantly interacting with and influencing the growth and development of a person. Individuals are viewed as complex beings existing within a series of external complex system where change occurs through interactions between and among the systems at each level (Ford & Lerner, 1992). This broadening of developmental theory moved away from the former belief that an individual’s development “unfolds,” the person in essence “revealing herself” as she grows, to the notion of the individual and their environment should be viewed as two distinct and interacting bases of development, the “person-in-context” (Lerner, 2003). This view of the young person as separate from their environment created the long-standing deficit model of looking at youth as potential individualized problems to be managed and fixed, bringing about a focus on problem prevention in communities (Benson, 2003; Lerner, 2005; Lerner, Alberts, Jelicic, & Smith, 2006).

One important aspect of developmental systems theory is the “plasticity” of the developmental process, allowing for changes in the characteristics of a person and the surrounding community that can lead to positive development (Lerner, 2005; Lerner et al., 2006). Plasticity means that young people are not fixed through a genetic pre-disposition, but have the potential to change through interactions with the people, communities, institutions and societies in which they are growing (Lerner, Agans, DeSouza, & Gasca, 2013). The potential for change in the developmental process of individuals and also contexts that are “plastic” and ever-changing is thus much greater than earlier developmental theories, that saw individuals as fixed on a kind of pre-determined developmental pathway. Developmental systems theory allows for multiple routes towards growth and supports the concept that change is possible throughout a person’s life, providing multiple places for interventions to occur (Vimont, 2012).
Developmental systems theory has several implications for how to approach young people that are important to the school model in this study. By defining an individual as developing in an interactive way with their environment and identifying the potential for change in the relations between an individual and their environment, the approach towards adolescent development shifts from previous responses of acting on problems conceptualized as “in” or emanating from young people and developing programs to prevent problems, to an approach that focuses on the individual and the system surrounding that individual by promoting positive interactions between and among those systems (Benson, 2003). This view is in contrast to previously held theories that supported addressing the deficits in young people as a way of dealing with problems.

As stated earlier, the advocate counselor in the transfer school in this study is the primary person for a student in school and may often be the only positive relationship that a young person has with an adult (Good Shepherd Services, 2006). Developmental systems theory, which informs positive youth development, provides a re-framing of how we view young people, from a deficit model to one that supports the positive attributes and contributions that young people can make to their communities (Benson & Saito, 2001; Damon, 2004; Larson, 2000; Lerner et al., 2003). Advocate counselors in a transfer school use this frame when working with students, one that focuses on a young person’s strengths and contributions to the school community.

To understand and frame what is happening in the relationship between a student and an advocate counselor, I draw on Nodding’s theory of an ethic of care (Noddings, 2005) and relational theory (i.e., L. M. Brown & Gilligan, 1993; Gilligan, 1982; J. B. Miller, 1976; J. B. Miller et al., 1999) to understand that relationship in a deeper way. Both offer some insight into the processes that occur in relationships that make them meaningful. Nel Noddings, who has
written extensively on care in schools, describes the caring relations that occur between a student and teacher as essential to accomplishing the academic goals of school (Noddings, 1984, 2005). The caring connection that Noddings describes is a process that occurs between the “carer” and cared for who are both engaged in either giving or receiving care. The “carer” participates in the caring relation through “motivational displacement,” or the desire to help further another person’s idea or plan. The cared for participates in the caring relation through “engrossment,” or an openness to being cared for and receiving care (Noddings, 2005, p. 16). This process, which she terms “one-caring,” occurs when the caring is given, received, and acknowledged (Noddings, 2013). This process helps frame what occurs in a caring relationship between a student and an adult in school.

In relationships where the cared for is not immediately responsive to caring, Noddings proposes that the obligation to care is a fundamental part of the caring process. When in relation with another in a caring relation, caring still occurs when the “carer” believes that a response from the cared for will occur at some point (Noddings, 2013). The belief that, imminently, a caring response will occur brings about an obligation to care even when one-caring may not immediately exist. This willingness to enter into a caring relation when the cared for may not be immediately responsive adds to the understanding of relationships between adults and students in schools, especially when students may not be immediately ready to be cared for. Noddings moves the concept of care beyond a term used to describe an individual to identify a process that occurs between two individuals. I utilize the process of caring that she describes to provide a basis for understanding the relationship between an advocate counselor and student. Caring in schools, specifically with minority populations, is an essential element and has been shown to be particularly important when tied to academic progress (Antrop-Gonzalez & De Jesus, 2006).
Relational theory, which is in fact a group of theories that emerged from distinct intellectual traditions (i.e., Fischer, 1981; Jordan, 1991; Winnicott, 1990) further informs the process that occurs in the relationship between two people as an interactional process that involves both people, two selves, in an authentic relationship where what each person thinks and feels is expressed in the relationship (Gilligan, 1982; J. B. Miller, 1976). The basic premise for relational theory is the belief that human connection is essential to human growth and that human growth occurs in relationships with others that are reciprocal, which was the articulation of a feminist perspective on human development. Relational theory developed out of the literature on therapy, in particular feminist therapy, which challenges more traditional approaches because it is not one-directional, but the mutual engagement of two people (J. B. Miller et al., 1999). Relational theory is particularly relevant to this study in understanding the processes that occur between an advocate counselor and a student that support students towards success in high school. It is the interaction between the student and advocate counselor that is essential, not the individual actions of each. Relational theory supports the growth of individuals in relationships (Jordan, 1991).

In applying relational theory to relationships between an adult and an adolescent, Spencer (2002) posits two hypotheses which support an understanding about how that relationship provides what she terms “psychological protection” for young people (Spencer, 2002). Her first hypothesis is that those relationships are not unique, but are “growth-fostering relationships,” as described by Miller and others in relational theory. Growth fostering relationships exist when the adolescent and adult, in relation to each other, can change and grown in positive ways. Her second hypothesis is that the relational processes, not the actions of the adult, provide the basis for growth-fostering relationships (Spencer, 2002). These two hypotheses highlight the
processes that occur in relationships among adults and adolescents as a way of understanding how growth occurs.

Relational theory has also been applied as a theoretical framework in mentoring relationships with adults and young people to highlight the interactive process that occurs in a mentoring relationship (Beyene, Anglin, Sanchez, & Ballou, 2002; Ragins & Fletcher, 2007; Spencer, 2004). Applying relational theories to mentoring relationships provides a way of thinking about relationships between mentors and mentees that goes beyond the actions that occur. Relational theory provides an additional frame for looking at the interactions that occur between an advocate counselor and student in this study.

The theories I have discussed each offer different frames for looking at the relationship between a student and an advocate counselor in this study. By utilizing developmental systems theory alongside relational theories and ethics of care theory, the processes that happen in a relationship that we already know is important and meaningful for a student at BHS can be understood in a deeper way.

Conclusion

The problem of the high school dropout is complex and solutions are more complex, given the diverse needs of the population. It has been, historically, addressed through a variety of dropout prevention programs that target the deficits in youth as a way to increase graduation rates. However, there has been a recent shift in the way that students at risk of dropping are addressed. Rather than focusing on the individual characteristics of students and their deficits, programs now rely on principles of positive youth development to build strengths in youth and help them be successful. Social workers and social work agencies have helped create this shift, especially in the transfer school model described in this study.
One of the prominent interventions seen throughout the literature in positive youth development, educational resiliency, and youth mentoring is the presence of a positive relationship between an adult and a young person. That relationship has been shown to make a difference for young people to do well in school and in other aspects of their life. In the GSS transfer school model discussed earlier, the role of the advocate counselor is an essential part of the school model because they develop primary relationships with students that support students towards graduation. The feedback from students is that the relationship with an advocate counselor makes a difference, though there is little known about what makes the relationship meaningful. Literature from positive youth development, youth mentoring, and educational resiliency point to the importance of a positive adult in a student’s life and, though there is less known about what makes up that relationship.

In this study I have documented and developed a theory about what happens in the relationship between a student and an advocate counselor at Brooklyn High School (the name of the school has been changed), a GSS model transfer school, to better understand the interactions that occur that are meaningful to students. In listening to the voices of former successful students who have graduated from Brooklyn High School (BHS), I discovered elements of a relational process that occurs that is both meaningful and supportive to students. What follows is a description of my research design and methodology and findings from interviews with former students. I end with suggestions for further study and implications for work with young people in schools.
CHAPTER III: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Rationale

Many of the students at the graduation ceremony at a Good Shepherd Services (GSS) model transfer school for overage, under-credited students attribute their success in high school to the relationship that they developed with their advocate counselor. Students say that advocate counselors “cared about them” and “stuck with them” and “stayed on them” so that they could finish high school. Those sentiments are directly reflective of what the literature has shown students need to be successful in school: a strong relationship with a positive adult. The question driving this study is based on over eight years of working closely with students in a transfer school, combined with substantial anecdotal evidence that has emerged through my conversations with and among students, about the importance of the relationship they have with their Advocate Counselor.

The GSS model school in this study states “Building Healthy Relationships” as one of its essential core principles. In the GSS model, advocate counselors carry a caseload of 25 students who they meet with individually and in advisory group. The advocate counselor fills that role in the school through developing strong relationships with students and their families. However, what that relationship consists of and what advocate counselors do, from the perspective of students, to build that relationship has not yet been studied or documented. In this study, I answer the questions: (1) What does the relationship between an advocate counselor and student consist of? (2) What do advocate counselors do to build that relationship from the perspective of successful students? Although there are studies of transfer schools that are helpful in the ongoing assessment of how students in the school and how the school as a whole is making progress towards benchmarks mandated by the city and state, available studies raise other key
questions about the success of the GSS model that do not enable me to answer the question for this study. The purpose of the study was to identify, *from the perspective of students graduating from a transfer school*, what happens in the relationship between an Advocate Counselor and a student in helping a student be successful. This perspective, although captured somewhat in annual surveys and in anecdotal evidence that occurs in conversations, has not been fully explored. The purpose in getting the student perspective was to understand in a deeper way what happens in the relationship that students say is meaningful by specifically asking them about what advocate counselors did and said that helped them be successful. A second purpose of this study was to understand from the perspective of students what a relationship that is positive with an advocate counselor means to them. The literature tells us that adult relationships are important in schools, although what a “positive relationship” means from the student perspective has not been fully explored. The questions driving this study enable me to identify and document what students’ relationships with their Advocate Counselor have meant to them and what their experience has been in those relationships. What happens in this experience that students understand as contributing to or enabling their success? What do they narrate in their accounts of relational processes and other dimensions of their experience with their Advocate Counselors that can inform an understanding of how this relationship “works”?

**Qualitative Method**

I used a qualitative approach in this study to understand the experiences of students who have graduated from a transfer school in order to gain a deeper understanding of what happens in the relationship between an advocate counselor and a student that contributes to their success. A qualitative approach allowed for a more in-depth study of a particular phenomenon without the constraints of pre-determined categories of analysis (Patton, 2002). In this study, I hoped to
uncover aspects of a relationship that little is known about. Quantitative measures of this population and this particular school model do exist as described earlier, but they do not describe the qualities of the advocate counselor relationship or the important interactions that occur between a student and an advocate counselor. My interest was in understanding the relationship between an advocate counselor and student, specifically relationships that students say *worked*. I anticipated that there were a set of common qualities and actions of advocate counselors that are meaningful and supportive for students that a qualitative study would help to surface.

Quantitative studies of transfer schools have shown that students feel supported by their advocate counselor and feel safe in the school, but what adults do and what the relationship consists of that helps students feel supported has yet to be explored and is perhaps more complex than what can be gleaned from a quantitative study. Although there are many different ways to study the role of the advocate counselor in supporting students in transfer schools, a qualitative approach enabled me to gather experiences that students recall as meaningful to gain an understanding the relationship from the perspective of the student.

A qualitative approach to understanding the relationship between an advocate counselor and student was also important because most of the research on marginalized youth and education has been limited to a focus on relationships between, for example, school characteristics and student success (Becker, 2010; Grover, 2004; Schulz & Rubel, 2011; B. J. Smith, 2000). Because the students represented in this study were all marginalized at some point in their high school career, their experiences in a relationship with an adult in school that was supportive have yet to be excavated and articulated. Gaining a deeper understanding of those supportive relationships through the voices of marginalized youth, listened to in a systematic
way, who graduated from a transfer school will help further an understanding of how adults can develop more effective relationships with students in transfer schools and in schools in general.

**Grounded Theory**

In this study, I use a grounded theory approach to understand the meaning of the lived experiences of one group of students attending a transfer school. I use a grounded theory approach because it allows for the development of theory through the systematic analysis of qualitative data (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Grounded theory focuses on trying to understand “slices of social life” as part of the story of an individual that is not yet complete (Charmaz, 2010, p. 195). Grounded theory is especially relevant in this study to understanding the experience that students’ describe in the relationship with their advocate counselor. Little is known about the particular relationship between an Advocate Counselor and a student in this particular school model; a grounded theory approach allows the experiences of the student in this relationship to be heard to gain a deeper understanding of and develop a theory about what is happening in the relationship that is supportive to the student.

A grounded theory approach was important in this particular study for several reasons. First, the school model presented in this study is a fairly new model, and it was important to understand the lived experiences of the students in the school because the way they experience a relationship with an advocate counselor provides a perspective that has not been heard before, though the literature suggests the importance of a strong relationship with an adult. The relationship with an advocate counselor is an essential component of the school model and it is my experience that it contributes to a student’s success in school; a grounded theory approach deepens the understanding of that component. There is also a lack of information about marginalized youth and their experiences in school from the students’ perspective. By listening
to the experiences of students who have been marginalized, I gained an understanding of what
they say is important, which may be different from my own understanding of what happens in a
relationship between a student and an advocate counselor. A grounded theory approach allowed
me to uncover those student experiences that are not captured in surveys and in qualitative data
(Charmaz, 1996, 2006).

Sampling

I used purposive sampling to identify a group of 13 students who graduated from BHS. All of the students in the study, at the time of their interview, had graduated in the past five years and had made good progress at school in at least their final year as a student. Good progress meant that they maintained an attendance rate at or above the average attendance of other students at the transfer school and accumulated credits at or above the average credit accumulation of other students. The sample is purposefully homogenous and represents the general population of Brooklyn High School (BHS). The students interviewed made good progress in school in at least their last year and graduated with a high school diploma because my interest is in understanding the particular things that happen in the relationship with the advocate counselor that lead to student success. Although there is value in understanding the relationship between an advocate counselor and a student who did not make progress at a rate equal to or higher than the average student or did not ultimately graduate, the focus for this study is to understand the relationship with students who made good progress. The GSS transfer school model offers a second chance to students who are on the verge of or who have dropped out. Understanding the relationship that a student who made good progress as defined above experienced an advocate counselor is important in furthering the understanding of what works well for overage, under-credited students going back to school.
The choice to focus only on graduates had several rationales. Graduating from high school is the goal of students who make a decision to attend a transfer school and graduation is a strong measure of success. I also believe that graduates have a unique perspective on the relationship with their advocate counselor because they have had time away from school over a student who is still in school and still in the relationship. Their ability to be more reflective of their experience in the transfer school and the relationship with their advocate counselor brought more depth to the interviews, because they were not currently experiencing it. Graduates are also over the age of 18 and can consent to participate in interviews on their own.

The school in this study is one of the seven GSS model transfer schools operating in New York City. The school is situated in an urban setting and pulls students from nearby neighborhoods. This school was chosen because it has been open longer than the other GSS transfer schools and is where the transfer school model described earlier was developed. Initially, I worked with an administrator at the school who identified 103 students using the Powerschools database that graduated between 2009 and 2012 and made good progress in their final year. Students were identified through graduation reports and reports on student progress for students attending the transfer school from the 2009 – 2010, 2010 – 2011, and 2011 – 2012 school year. The purpose for selecting the 2009 – 2010 school year as the starting year for student selection is that, prior to that school year, there was not a comprehensive database available that captured all of this information at the school level. I chose to focus on the years 2009 – 2012 because students were away from high school for a minimum of two years, giving them some distance from the daily contact that they had with their advocate counselor while in school.
I was provided with a list of 103 students who fit the criteria along with any phone numbers that existed in the Powerschools database at the time the students were enrolled in school. From the list of 103 graduates identified, I received no contact information at all for 6 students. Home phone numbers on record from the last year a student attended the school were received for 97 of the graduates, and 29 of those students had a second phone number on record. In my initial attempts to reach students, I found only one number that was not disconnected or changed where I was able to reach a parent who promised to pass along a message. Following this initial round of attempted contacts, an administrator at the school offered to reach out to the school’s Guidance Counselor, the Internship Coordinator, and an English teacher to get updated contact information for students on the list. Each of the staff members has been employed at BHS since 2009 or earlier and is in contact with alumni on a semi-regular basis. From those staff members, I received contact information either in the form of phone numbers or email address for 32 of the original 103 students. I also received some information for three students regarding where they worked in the neighborhood as a possible way to reach out to them. Those students, after graduation, had continued to work at internship sites that they had been connected to while in school and I was provided work numbers for those students. Of those three, one was no longer working at the work site. I successfully contacted the remaining two by calling their worksites where I was able to speak to them directly.

Of those 32 students that I had contact information for, I was able to reach 17 and speak to them directly about my study. During my initial outreach to the 17 students that I was able to reach, I surveyed students to determine if the relationship with the advocate counselor was something that they identify as contributing to their success in school (see Appendix 6). All of the students that I was able to contact responded positively about their relationship with their
advocate counselor and were willing to participate, although three students did not show up for interviews. Of the 17 students that I initially spoke to, 14 students were interviewed. One student was later eliminated because he did not fit the criteria for the study. The difficulty in reaching this particular group of students dictated the students who I was able to interview, although the group represents a diverse mix of students that is reflective of the student body found at BHS. Of the 13 students interviewed, seven are female and six are male. The group also represents a diverse mix of students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds; four students are Black/African American (1 female, 3 male), seven Hispanic and Latino (5 female, 3 male), one Hispanic/White (female) and one White (female). Following is a table of student demographics:

Table 1:

*Characteristics of Participants in this Study*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andrea</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carlos</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carolina</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakesha</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hispanic/White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omar</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roberto</td>
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<td>Hispanic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sabrina</td>
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<td>Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrence</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victor</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Collection: Procedure and Protocol

Data is collected through interviews that consist of both open-ended questions and follow-up questions to understand the interactions each student has with their advocate counselor and the importance of those interactions on the student’s success (see attached instrument Appendix A). The grounded theory approach relies on the use of open-ended questions that allow participants to provide their interpretation of how they experienced a phenomenon (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Therefore, the interview guide consists of questions that ask for opinions, ask about feelings, and ask about experiences. Questions are worded to encourage participants to describe different interactions with their Advocate counselors after describing the events that lead up to them enrolling in BHS. Distinguishing between question types and timing in an interview guide are both important in establishing rapport and trust in the interview (Patton, 2002). For that reason, I begin with questions that ask the participant to fill in background prior to when they arrived at a transfer school so I can gain an understanding of their experiences in high school. Later in the interview, I ask questions based on their experiences at BHS, particularly in the relationship with the Advocate Counselor.

Interviews were all conducted at a GSS building that contains a preventive program for families in the neighborhood and Brooklyn High School. Interviews were held in a private office or conference room, scheduled at a convenient time for the participant and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes each. The conference room or private office was usually located on the first floor of the building, away from classrooms and administrative offices, which are all located on the second and third floors. Prior to signing off on a consent form (see Appendix B), I explained the purpose of the study and gave each participant the opportunity to request a copy of their
transcript emailed to them for review. Of the thirteen participants in the study, five asked for an emailed copy of their transcript, although none of them contacted me with comments after the transcript was emailed. All of the participants agreed to being recorded on a cellular phone for the purposes of transcription and data analysis.

**Data Analysis**

For the analysis of interviews conducted with graduates, I follow the coding and analysis methods of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1994). I approach data analysis from a constructivist grounded theory perspective. The constructivist grounded theory perspective is the belief that data is constructed through interactions with others and is co-constructed by my own past experiences and present beliefs and work (Charmaz, 1990, 2010). I am a white woman in my 40’s who grew up in a Southern state in a public school system that was quite different from the present day in the New York City public school system. I am also the founding Director of a transfer school in Queens that is very similar to the transfer school in Brooklyn where I conduct research. My close relationships with some of the students in my own school have both framed my interest in understanding their stories and experiences and provided a perspective that is different from someone outside of this work. For the past eight years, I have also directly supervised advocate counselors and have been privy to many of the daily successes and challenges that advocate counselors face in their relationships with students. I have seen the benefits of what a strong relationship can mean to a students and the impact of what a negative relationship can mean. These experiences have shaped my interest in wanting to understand the relationship between an advocate counselor and student from the perspective of the student in a much deeper way. To separate my own perspective, the result of over eight years working in a transfer school, from the stories that the students told in interviews,
I did several things. First, I scheduled interviews on days when I was not working in my own school so that I could give my full attention to the stories of the participants without the concern of leaving or needing to return to a situation at work. As I talked to students, I took note of themes that both resonated with me and were counter to what I experienced so that I could return to those themes later and either write or diagram my initial thoughts and reactions. I was also careful to address any correlations I made between the participants I was interviewing with students in my own school, past and present.

In grounded theory, analysis begins alongside data collection (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). I initially listened to and followed the text of interviews once to gather a picture of each individual’s story and correct for mistakes in the text. I found this particularly important given my relationship to this population in my daily work. The voices of the individuals heard alongside the text of the interview helped me to hear each individual story, away from any preconceived ideas I may have developed about the individual as a student during the interview. I found that I was better able to begin to identify the unique experiences of each individual that I interviewed by first listening through without coding.

Following the initial listening, I read through texts of interviews to develop an initial set of codes by following the initial coding practices of Charmaz through line-by-line coding (Charmaz, 1996, 2006). This practice of reading the text closely and developing simple, somewhat spontaneous codes helped me also frame interviews that followed. For example, as I listened to students talk about the many experiences that they had with their advocate counselors, I thought that one way to understand what was important in their relationship with their advocate counselor was to ask them what advice they would give to a potential advocate counselor just starting to work with students in a transfer school. In subsequent interviews, I started asking a
question about “advice” they would give to someone working as an Advocate Counselor in a transfer school. That question provided insights into what is important about adults in a different way because it was removed from their direct experiences.

Following the initial coding of interviews, I took my list of twenty codes (see attached list, Appendix C) and attempted to cluster some of the codes that were similar and related. Clustering is a technique that is used early on in data analyses to create a preliminary picture or sketch of how to think about the relationships between codes (Charmaz, 2006). After some preliminary attempts as clustering codes, I then created a visual chart of the conceptual categories that I was left with. From this process, I ended up with five conceptual categories—(1) I am known, I am cared about, and I matter; (2) Informal and formal interactions; (3) They respond to my needs; (4) They give me specific kinds of messages that help me; and (5) Characteristics of an advocate counselor that are important. Each conceptual category was connected to student quotes to illustrate those categories. The visual chart was helpful in seeing the whole picture of what students were describing when they talked about the relationship with their advocate counselors. I then used memo-writing to give me a way to think more deeply about the visual categories as they related to the text in the interviews. Memo-writing in grounded theory is a tool used to begin to analyze and connect categories early on in the research process (Charmaz, 2006). With additional memo-writing, those seven categories were further combined into the three broad conceptual categories that are presented in the findings.

**Human Subjects Protection**

There are a few concerns in regard to human subjects protection in this study that should be considered. I am the Director of a GSS transfer school in Queens and have daily interactions with the students in my school where there could have been the possibility of graduates feeling
coerced to answer questions a certain way given my role in the school. Also, because I have been
the Director at the school since it opened over eight years ago, the relationship that I may have
had with those graduates would have been a source of potential risk. Because of that, this study
is conducted at a GSS transfer school in Brooklyn where I have no affiliation with students or
with graduates of the school. Students selected for the research study are graduates of that
transfer school and will be asked to participate on a voluntary basis.

The IRB process at the CUNY Graduate Center was approved on March 11, 2014 for a
period of one year and has been renewed through March 28, 2017. There is no IRB process
required at the agency, but I did receive formal permission after submitting an application to
contact research to Good Shepherd Services (see Appendix D). The age of the participants in
this study is 18 or older and consented for their own interviews (see Appendix B). I informed
participants of the confidential nature of the interviews and their identity prior to the start of the
interview and explained the need to break confidentiality if they discuss wanting to harm
themselves or someone else. Although I did not anticipate that talking about relationships with
Advocate counselors would be a source of emotional distress, I had a list of resources for
referral. Other needs discussed in the interview such as public assistance, college advice, and
career advice were referred back to GSS and Brooklyn High School.
CHAPTER IV: “I AM KNOWN”

The questions driving this study sought to understand the role of an advocate counselor in the success of students, from the perspective of students who have attended and graduated from a transfer school. When I started this inquiry, I hoped to understand from the perspective of students what their advocate counselor did and said that was different from other adults in schools that helped them be successful, believing that “Building Healthy Relationships” (from GSS model) was perhaps a set of behaviors and actions that could be identified. I wanted a deeper understanding of the relationship between a student and an advocate counselor and thought I would come away with descriptions of what an advocate counselor did that was helpful to students. However, my analysis of interviews with students resulted not only in descriptions of what advocate counselors did that was different, but also highlighted the importance of interactions between the advocate counselor and student rooted in a set of relational elements that were important to a student’s success. The findings presented in the next three chapters describe those relational elements identified through my analysis of interviews with students that define not only what advocate counselors did that helped students graduate from high school, but what the relationship between the advocate counselor and student consisted of.

Carlos, the first student interviewed for this study, reflected in general on his experiences with adults in the schools that he attended prior to attending Brooklyn High School (BHS). He said, “I think that’s what is hard to understand is that sometimes, in big high schools, if adults could just act a little bit differently with students, they [students] may feel like they can be a lot more successful...even if you have all of the academic stuff, because it’s not just about that.” This statement confirmed for me early on in this inquiry that there might be some connection between how adults act, as Carlos describes, related to students success. It also confirmed what
is said in the literature that success for a student in school is about more than academics, which I will elaborate below.

There are two important points that Carlos makes in this statement that are echoed throughout my interviews with students. Carlos uses words like “sometimes” and “a little bit differently” to describe how relationships with adults in his former high school could change to help students be “a lot more successful,” suggesting that adults in school need to only make small changes to have a big impact on student success. In this study, “adults acting differently” is framed not only by adult behavior, but also by the relationship and the interactions that occur between a student and an advocate counselor. Second, his emphasis on needing more than “the academic stuff, because it’s not just about that” underscores that it is all of the other important “stuff” that students need outside of academics provided in the classroom, which is perhaps something that adults have not paid attention to, in Carlos’ experience. That other “stuff” is the focus of the next three chapters as students describe the important elements of the relationships that they had with their advocate counselor in BHS.

This study was about a relationship between each individual student and a particular adult in their lives, specifically an advocate counselor, in a transfer school for a group of students that had not been successful in their former high schools. Relationships with adults, although historically not emphasized in high schools based on the belief that students develop independence and autonomy by separating from adults, have more recently been shown to provide several benefits to high school students (Demanet & Van Houtte, 2012; Gregory & Weinstein, 2004; Tillery et al., 2013; Wallace et al., 2012). Those benefits include higher academic achievement, positive mental health outcomes, and an overall better connection to school. The findings presented in the next three chapters document ways that graduates from
BHS saw advocate counselors “act a little bit differently” than other adults, providing some of the extra “stuff” that students need.

**Relational Elements**

In my analysis of interviews with students, I discovered three specific elements in the relationship between the advocate counselor and student that helped students be successful in school. Those three elements are each defined by what the advocate counselor did as well as by the interactions that occurred between the advocate counselor and the student. Relational theory posits that interactions between people are the basis for growth and development (Gilligan, 1982; J. B. Miller, 1976). Relational theory has been applied to mentoring relationships between adults and adolescents as a way of understanding the process that occurs that centers on the relationship and the interactions between the mentor and the mentee (Beyene et al., 2002; Liang, Tracy, Taylor, & Williams, 2002; Spencer, 2006). “Relational mentoring” describes a mentoring relationship that is “an independent and generative developmental relationship that promotes mutual growth, learning, and development,” (Ragins & Fletcher, 2007, p.10). Relational mentoring challenges one-directional models of mentoring where the mentor directs the mentee to a model that is mutual and focused on the growth of both people in the relationship. Relational theory helps frame the relationships that students in this study describe, a relationship that is equally focused on the interactions between the student and the advocate counselor and what the advocate counselor did. The three elements of the relationship are also framed by how students felt in school in ways that were different from their former schools. Those interactions helped students feel known, cared for, and helped them start caring about themselves.

I first discuss the relational element of “I am known.” Being known means participants experienced the advocate counselor as interested in them and wanting to know things about
them. The experience of the student in the relationship is the advocate counselor also acts in ways that show that they want to know the whole student, not just the aspects of the student that involve school, but also the student’s life outside of school. Interactions between the student and advocate counselor are about being known as a whole person by an adult that is interested in them.

Second, I will discuss the relational element of “I am cared for.” Feeling cared for means that a student’s advocate counselor did things and acted in ways that showed that they cared which the participants experience as being cared for. That feeling of being cared for allowed students to have different interactions with their advocate counselor, to take risks, to share personal information, and to trust them. The process of mutual sharing, allowing students to know their advocate counselor because they share information with them, helps students feel cared for.

Third, I will discuss the relational element “I care about myself.” Students cared about themselves when they started caring about their progress in school, and their future. When they started caring about themselves, students’ behavior changed and their relationship with their advocate counselor changed. Caring for themselves, for some students, meant that they attended school more often or started thinking about their future. Caring about themselves seems to follow the experience of feeling cared for and being known by their advocate counselor.

The relationship with an advocate counselor for all of the students in this study included some of each of the three elements—being known, feeling cared for, and caring about self—and are what they describe as being important in the relationship with their advocate counselor. Although these are presented as separate and distinct elements of the relationship between an advocate counselor and student, there is a cross over and blending of each of these elements into
the other. The three elements of the relational process exist in the stories told throughout the interviews with former students in this study. Although my inclination is to see the three elements in a clear line, moving in one direction, the stories and the elements do not organize in such a neat and concise way.

I present my findings in three chapters. In the remainder of this chapter, I will first present a brief description of the experiences that the students in this study had prior to enrolling in BHS. Their experiences help frame an understanding of what happened to them that brought them to a transfer school. For the remainder of this chapter, I describe the relational element “I am known.” In Chapter 5, I describe the relational element “I am cared for” and the dimensions that are related to that element. In Chapter 6, I describe the relational element “I care about myself” and present a chart that outlines the three elements and their corresponding dimensions along with some preliminary impressions on what the relationship might be between these three elements.

**How did they get here?**

All of the students in this study were considered overage and under-credited when they enrolled in BHS. Students, prior to enrolling in BHS, disengaged from high school because they felt they did not belong. They either never felt like they belonged or, when they felt like they belonged, they may not have fully belonged to all aspects of school or something changed that caused them to disengage. They typically came from larger high schools (over 3,000 students) prior to transferring to BHS, although four of the students were attending smaller high schools (500 students or less) prior to enrolling in BHS. Understanding some of the reasons why they left their former high schools and enrolled in BHS is significant to understanding what was lacking for them and what their experiences were leaving their former schools. All of the
students expressed some sort of failure, whether it was the failure of the school to meet their needs or their own failure, which led them to enroll in BHS. Coming to BHS was seen as a second chance for all of them.

Most of the students in this study described the feeling of not fitting in to their former high schools, which often led to missing school and eventually falling behind. Anthony described the feeling of falling behind in his first high school as, “I felt like everybody was on one path and I was just in the background trying to catch up.” The feeling of not being on the same path as other students and being in the “background trying to catch up” is a feeling of loneliness and not fitting in that other students in this study described as they reflect on their former high schools. Anthony described himself as not being able to keep up with other students; he is also seeing others as being ahead of him. Andrea echoes this feeling when she described her former high school as a school for a specific type of student: “If you're not the type of person that can stay on top of your work, you're going to get sucked in and get lost in the system.” Her description of getting “sucked in” and “lost in the system” is the feeling of having little control over what happens to you. Andrea described a school that, as she experiences, is for students who “stay on top” of their work. All other students, she implies, are left out. Similar to Anthony, her inability to keep up leaves her lost and not fitting in, having fallen behind.

Other students described a feeling of loneliness and not fitting in because they did not know anyone or feel connected to their former school. Carolina described being in a K-12 school where she was making great progress, was on-track to graduate, and had even passed three of the required state tests needed to graduate. However, when the school suddenly closed down, she was transferred to a school in another borough where she felt like a “new kid” in an unfamiliar school. That is the point where she started falling behind in school, as she describes,
“We were new, everything was different. A part of me just didn’t want to go to school anymore.” That feeling of being new and not fitting in was what lead Carolina to disengage from school and eventually enroll in BHS. Similarly, Maria attended a high school where she describes having only one friend that she knew from her middle school. When that friend suddenly stopped coming to school, Maria started missing school. She described feeling that, “It was really hard for me to just blend in and fit in or even focus on schoolwork. I had no motivation.” The desire to “blend in” and “fit in” for these students, and feeling like something was wrong with them because they couldn’t fit in, was what lead them to fall behind in school and eventually leave.

Some of the students in this study pointed to a single event that happened which started their disengagement from school. Victor and Nina were both dropped from sports teams and then began to lose interest in school. Victor, who had played junior varsity sports since his freshman year, was not allowed to play on the varsity team because of his grades. The realization that he had gotten so far behind in school led him to decide that BHS would be a better option for him to finish high school. He and Nina both describe losing an attachment to a sports team, which was something important; it made school less interesting. Andrea and Emily both described situations at home where having a sick parent influenced their ability to do well in school at their former high schools. Those students all describe that event as being something that kept them from focusing on what they needed to do in school and led to their falling behind.

Another group of students lost interest in school quickly because they never really connected. Carlos, Roberto, Sabrina, and Lakesha all described wanting to do well in the beginning, meeting the wrong people, and, as Sabrina describes, getting in the “habit of not going to school.” Similarly, Omar got disinterested in school because he had to travel almost
two hours on public transportation to get to school. Another student, Terrance, enrolled in BHS after going to high school in another state where he had few credits that transferred.

For all of the students, there was initially a strong desire to finish high school that got derailed because of an experience or a series of experiences they had in their former high schools. They all exhibited typical behaviors of disengagement from school and many of them said in interviews that if they had not enrolled in BHS, they would have dropped out or gotten their GED (high school equivalency). They each decided to enroll in BHS because they knew they could not finish high school in their former schools.

Students in this study generally referred to BHS and their relationship with their advocate counselor as something that they belonged to; they described it as a family or a community. Anthony described the way the school is set up with advocate counselors, as part of what makes students successful. “It’s as good as it can be because you start to feel like you’re part of something bigger than just school, you feel a lot of love for everybody and it starts to feel like a family.” Feeling like a family and being “part of something bigger than just school” for Anthony and other students in this study helped him feel like he belonged. Carolina refers to her advocate counselor as a “second parent” and a “school parent,” as someone who knew her and looked out for her while she was in school. Belonging in school, as discussed in the literature review, leads to better school outcomes for students.

**They Know Me**

The students in this study described being known by their advocate counselor as essential to the relationship. The literature supports being known in school as linked to better school connections and academic success (Anderson, 2011; Chhuon & Wallace, 2014; Ozer et al., 2008; Wallace & Chhuon, 2014). There are three dimensions of being known that are important to the
students in this study. Being known means that their advocate counselor (1) knows what they are interested in, (2) responds to them based on what they know about them, and (3) are physically present and available in the formal and informal spaces at school. Many of the students described being known by an adult as unexpected in school, perhaps based on previous experiences in high school or on the more traditional structure of the large schools that many of the students in this study came from. These three dimensions of being known are intertwined in the student’s descriptions of their relationship with their advocate counselor and seem to be important in the beginning of the relationship, but also existed throughout the relationship.

**They Are Interested in Me**

All of the participants in this study felt known by their advocate counselors and shared examples of how their advocate counselor had shown an interest in them, what they liked, what they struggled with, and who they were. Advocate counselors were interested in the academic and non-academic aspects of students. They focused on what students needed to be successful in school in addition to what they were interested in outside of school. Letting advocate counselors in and sharing with them was not something that happened automatically for everyone, but for all of the students it was an important element of the relationship. Carlos described his first impression of his advocate counselor in the following way:

> Overbearing, White man. Really, I was like, okay, he's on it, but it doesn't seem like he's going to be on it. I think he was just saying everything I wanted to hear or everything my father wanted to hear. I didn't take it serious at first, at all. That was my first impression. Like, oh, this is nothing to take serious. He's just going to say what my father wants to hear and do what he has to do, but it's not going to be that serious.

Carlos described his initial reaction to his advocate counselor in a meeting with his advocate counselor and his father before he attended school. The meeting included a review of his transcript, his class schedule, his targeted graduation date, and an orientation to different
opportunities that were offered at BHS. Carlos explained that those were the things that his “father wants to hear” and he did not take it seriously or trust that his advocate counselor was “going to be on it.” His impression of his advocate counselor as an “overbearing, White man” is a reflection of Carlos’ expectation that his advocate counselor would say what he was supposed to say and do “what he has to do” because it is his job, without any expectation of a different relationship. The fact that he refers to his advocate counselor as not only “overbearing” but also “White” may be a reflection on past experiences with adults and white men in general and in schools. Carlos may have experienced White people not understanding him or he may have seen an automatic cultural or hierarchical separation as part of his lived experience. It may also reflect his experiences with adults as being serious and “on it” when parents were involved, but not really following through or taking anything “serious” after the meeting. The experiences of Carlos in his former school may shape how Carlos initially responds to adults in BHS and may be a reflection of what he expects adults to do in school. Carlos expects that this “overbearing White man” will side with his father, but does not expect that he will really be there for him. This may have been the result of his lack of success in his former school and his skepticism about how BHS will be different.

When Carlos is asked later in the interview about how he would describe his advocate counselor now (meaning after knowing him), he responds, “But, now, [my advocate counselor] is like, it sounds cliché but, to me, he was like an angel, literally...He guided me through school. I don’t know where I would be without [my advocate counselor]. I was lost when I came to this school.” From the first day that he met his advocate counselor to the present, a profound transformation took place in how Carlos viewed his advocate counselor. Carlos went from describing him as an “overbearing, White man” on the first day that he met him to an “angel.”
When questioned about what it was that lead to this changing view, Carlos at first responds that, “you can’t put it into words.” He then goes on to say:

It's like when I'm able to talk to somebody and they're listening and I'm able to open up to them, I feel like that's what draws me close to them. I can feel like they were honestly interested and wanted to hear what I had to say and what was going on. Not even just in school but outside of school, like they wanted to piece everything together and make it a whole.

Carlos described how his advocate counselor took an interest in him, wanted to know about him and “wanted to piece everything together and make it whole.” It wasn’t enough for his advocate counselor to just know about school because that only provided a piece of the whole. The advocate counselor’s interest in what he was going through outside of school, which may have been more important to Carlos and more defining of him than what was going on in school, is where Carlos identifies he starts to “open up.” Being interested in him, combined with Carlos feeling heard and listened to helped him move from seeing his advocate counselor as “overbearing” and “White” to an “angel.” This transformation in how Carlos viewed his advocate counselor is significant and occurred because his advocate counselor not only took an interest in Carlos and listened to him, but conveyed that he wanted to know him and was interested in what he said.

Being known in school often started with an advocate counselor taking an interest in information about a student that may be considered unnecessary or irrelevant, but is deeply important to the student. Victor, who enrolled in BHS because he lost interest in school after his grades were not good enough to continue playing sports at his former high school, said the following about the importance of knowing students in response to a question asking for his advice to future advocate counselors:

Find out what is it that they like. It might be a little extra work but I think it would be helpful because they will see that you took out the time. “Listen, your
favorite color is blue.” A lot of people don’t expect that. A lot of students don’t expect that. For some you can relate to them by sports, some by fashion, some by cars, at least just have a little knowledge in all those areas. I think it would be helpful because not only academically you will be helping them, but allowing them to open up to you because you’ve showed interest in what they’re interested in. I know you’re not here to be best friends, but I think having that kind of friendship/counselor would be very helpful for students. That’s just my personal opinion because it helped me out. I didn’t know my counselor liked sports and, when she did, it’s a whole new world. It’s like, “Okay, cool, I can relate to you.”

Victor’s initial advice of, “find out what they like,” created a connection for him that was a “whole new world” where he was able to begin to relate to his advocate counselor. “Taking the time” to get to know students meant that all students may not be willing to initially share things, but connecting to them and learning about them is a step towards knowing them more fully. Remembering a student’s favorite color, which Victor describes as something that students “don’t expect,” helped him feel like he was known to his advocate counselor and could then start to have a relationship with her. A key moment for Victor was when he learned that his advocate counselor loved sports as much as he did. At that moment, he felt like, “Okay, cool, I can relate to you.” That ability to feel known through having something in common and something that you can relate to together was important to Victor because then he felt like he could “open up” to her, because he had connected to her.

Victor used the term “friendship/counselor” to describe the type of relationship that he thinks works best between an advocate counselor and a student. That relationship goes beyond the academic conversations that occur between students and adults in schools to one that includes conversations about non-school related things as a way to feel known and connected to. Feeling that he could “relate to” his advocate counselor after he learned that she shared a similar interest with him was, for Victor, the hook he needed to be open to a relationship. Having a “friendship/counselor” pushes the role of the advocate counselor to one that encompasses the
importance of knowing things about a student as well as being there for them. He emphasizes the importance of not being “best friends” as a way of establishing a boundary and a distinction between a friend who is a best friend and a counselor who is also a friend.

Omar also referred to his advocate counselor as a counselor and “like a friend.” He described the importance of having an advocate counselor that knows things about what he is doing in school and what he is doing in his personal life:

[My advocate counselor] was ... even though [he] was a counselor, he was more like a friend, too, because he knew all the info. He knew everything about me. He knew my mother personally, he knew my family personally, he knew my job personally... . . . He even knew who I was, girlfriends and things like that. It was always something different. But it was always educational at the end of the day. He'll come to me, he'll talk to me about how I did in my class, how I did with my test, how I did homework wise, how I did everything. Then it wouldn't end just that note. Like, so how's your girlfriend doing, you know? He'll just get personal with you, and I didn't mind that. That's what made me look at him as a friend.

Omar’s description of his advocate counselor as both “like a friend” and a counselor, because he “knew everything about me,” allowed for conversations that were about school and conversations that were about personal things. Omar’s relationship with his advocate counselor included both the willingness of his advocate counselor to get to know Omar, his family, his job, and who he was, and the willingness of Omar to share those things. The ability of an advocate counselor to move between the academic and personal, to be a counselor and a friend, provides a more complete picture of who the student is and helps them feel known. Omar’s relationship with his advocate counselor also, as he describes later, allowed for difficult conversations and disagreements. He described those as, “Yeah. Tough love, I'll put it that way. He had his times where he had to be tough on me, but it was always love at the end of the day.” Perhaps knowing the academic and personal pieces of Omar, knowing him as a whole person, allowed for those
“tough love” interactions to occur, be accepted by Omar, and work, because both were secure in the fact that it “was always love at the end of the day.”

Andrea described her advocate counselor’s interest in her and what she had to say as a way that students find their “voice” at BHS:

It [BHS] helps you find your voice. You come here and people want to listen to you. They're asking you your opinion on school, on life, on things. For your advocate counselor to build that relationship with you, they're asking you about things like your everyday likes and interests so you know it's not—Let's say I had a counselor and I came in and every day all she wanted to talk about was school, I wouldn't feel as if I could talk to her about other things because I wouldn't be comfortable. The fact that they take an interest in your personal life, they want to know what your favorite color is, they want to know what's your favorite food, they want to know things like that, things that normally the administration don't care about. Why would a teacher care about your favorite color? You're here to write an essay, not to discuss colors. This is not kindergarten. It's just things like that. Since they're always asking your opinion, always asking, what do you want and what do you want to do.

Andrea described her advocate counselor reaching out to her to learn things about her and ask her opinion about things that are not school related and perhaps unimportant, like her favorite color, as conveying the desire to know all about her. Knowing the not especially significant “favorite color” provides a path to talking to her advocate counselor about “other things” because her advocate counselor has taken an interest in her. She explains that her advocate counselor built a relationship with her by asking her about her “everyday likes and interests” instead of just focusing on school. Andrea puts the responsibility of the advocate counselor to “build that relationship with you” and describes some clear examples of how to do that—ask students about their likes and dislikes, listen to students, ask students for their opinions, and find out what they want to do (their dreams). She described a general feeling from her former school that, typically, the “administration don’t care” or take an interest in knowing things about students because her perception was they believed “this is not kindergarten” and students are “here to write an essay”
instead of discuss things about themselves. That perception kept Andrea from being successful in her former school. Her advocate counselor’s interest in things about her, like her favorite color and her favorite food, which seemed irrelevant to the adults in Andrea’s former school who were only focused on academics, helped Andrea start to have a relationship with her. That feeling of being in “kindergarten” where adults care about knowing things about students, is what Andrea explains is missing in her former school. When her advocate counselor wanted to know those details about her, it provided a foundation for her to talk to her advocate counselor about anything.

**They Respond to Me**

The students in this study described specific situations where being known by their advocate counselor meant that their advocate counselor responded to them in ways that were helpful and meaningful. Carolina gave advice to a new advocate counselor during an interview that she was asked to participate in while she was a student at BHS:

> Each student is different. Remember that. Each student’s story is not the same. I think they [adults in general] think because we’re coming into a transfer school, that we have this bad past, and that’s just it. They’re just working off the badness that we have. It’s not like that for every student. Have patience with each kid, because each kid develops differently and they do things differently. They take each class differently and they learn differently. Some kids are still here and some kids get out faster than other kids. It’s about not losing hope with every kid.

Carolina emphasized the importance of knowing each student individually and responding to them based on their individual needs. When adults approach students knowing that “each students story is not the same,” they approach them as individuals. She explains that “each kid develops differently and they do things differently,” saying that adults in transfer schools need to know the individual student, how they do things, and how to best respond to and support them. Her statement, “It’s about not losing hope with every kid,” supports the differences in students
and emphasizes the importance of adults knowing students and responding to students in ways that support them, whether they are in school for a long time or move through faster than other students.

Roberto reflected the importance of knowing students and responding to them individually in a similar way. “Don’t expect everyone to open up to you in the same way. If anything, view everybody as an individual, not as a group of students that you are teaching. See their individual problems, their situations, their backgrounds, the way they grew up, where they live.” Knowing the individual situations and problems, Roberto says, is important to knowing the individual student because they can be responded to as individuals in ways that meet their individual needs. The idea that an advocate counselor should not “expect everyone to open up to you in the same way” reflects the advice that Carolina would give to new advocate counselors.

One way that advocate counselors responded to students in supportive and respectful ways was when they were angry or upset. Victor, who explained that he did not now how to express himself when things got difficult and instead would “go into my shell and not let anybody in,” said that his advocate counselor would always give him space until he was ready to talk because she knew that he needed that. He described the response that he always got from his advocate counselor as respectful to what he needed. His advocate counselor would say, “I’m always here,” and, “I’ll check up on you, let me know when you are ready to talk.” Victor felt that his advocate counselor was “allow[ing] you to be you and allow[ing] your time and way to speak to them.” The concept of “you be you” put the control in the hands of the student.

At BHS, students were responded to in ways that are not judged, even when students may not be respectful to their advocate counselor. A few of the students used the phrase “every day is a new day” to describe the relationship with their advocate counselor that allowed for bad
days to occur without impacting the relationship with their advocate counselor. Andrea described her impressions of how advocate counselors handled bad days:

It was always the fact that no matter what you did, no matter how many things you did wrong, every day is a new day. I could come in and I could curse you out, the next day everything is going to be fine again. Not that I did that, I’m just saying. You could come in and you could have a horrible day and the next day is going to be a new day. There’s no grudges. There’s no labeling students. There’s no bad students here.

Andrea linked having a bad day to being labeled as a bad student, which she said did not happen at BHS. A bad day or a horrible day is simply seen as that and does not define a student as “bad.” “Curse[ing] out” an advocate counselor is interpreted as a student having a “horrible day” rather than an attack on the advocate counselor. “A new day” means that the feeling from students is that advocate counselors do not see behavior as defining the student, but only the situation that the student may be in on a particular day. Because the advocate counselor knows the student, behavior on a particular day does not define the student forever. Advocate counselors, in knowing students, respond to days as isolated events in the life of a student.

Anthony described his advocate counselor’s response to times when he was angry or upset as being what he needed at the time. “She let me have my time. I felt like she knew that I would snap out of it, so it was always just best for me to have my moment, because nobody’s perfect. I would always snap out of it and come back to life.” Similarly, Lakesha’s advocate counselor gave her time when she was upset or angry because, as she explains, “Talking to me when I got an attitude and all that, you’re not as...nothing is going to get through...I’m not in the mood right now, so I’ll just talk to him when I feel better.” Because advocate counselors knew their students, knew that they would “snap out of it” or talk to them when they “feel better,” they were able to give them time and trust that the situation would be resolved later.
Carolina recalled her first negative interaction with her advocate counselor and explained how her advocate counselor responded to her:

I remember the time that she called my mom in; I was so mad at her. The next day I came in, and I would not speak to her for nothing. I went to class and I was ignoring her. She came in and was like, “Let’s go to my office.” I did not want to go to her office. I was like, “No, I’m in class. You can’t just take me out of class.” She was like, “No, let’s go to my office. Let’s have a little chat.” I didn’t speak to her. We walked into her office, and I’m not sure what she had said to me, but she started talking. That was [my advocate counselor], always talking. She started talking to me, and I don’t think I was mad at her anymore. I felt like, at that moment, that I needed somebody and she was the person that was there, and that I knew I was comfortable telling her my business. I think I was there for, like, two hours. I remember crying, and I was so upset about everything going on in school and my family stuff. She was just there. She didn’t have pity for me. That’s something that I’m thankful for. I don’t like pity. I don’t like people to feel sympathy for me or to be like, “Oh my god, you’re not feeling so good,” and things like that. She didn’t do that for me. I think that was the day that I was like, “This is a long road ahead of us, and she’s going to be here for a long time.” That was it.

Carolina’s advocate counselor responded to Carolina’s insistence on not speaking to her in several ways. First, she asked to come and have a conversation in her office, away from other students and her class. Instead of pushing Carolina to talk, her advocate counselor talked, which according to Carolina made her not “mad at her anymore.” Although the specifics of the conversation are not apparent in this passage, Carolina describes a strong feeling of needing somebody and her advocate counselor being there helped her feel “comfortable telling her business.” The fact that she was there for two hours, talking to her advocate counselor about everything that she was upset about even though she initially describes being mad at her advocate counselor for calling her mom, points to the response she got from her advocate counselor. In a sense, the advocate counselor reached out to her when she asked her to come talk in her office. This allowed Carolina the opportunity to really talk about what was upsetting her. Knowing Carolina, as her advocate counselor did, meant that she knew to give her time to talk
when she outwardly appeared mad. Even when Carolina thought that she wanted to just be mad to avoid the situation, her advocate counselor sought her out, leaving Carolina to respond, “I needed somebody and she was the person that was there.” In this example, Carolina’s advocate counselor knew what she needed even when Carolina may not have known.

A second important part of the interaction between Carolina and her advocate counselor was the feeling that her advocate counselor was “just there.” Her advocate counselor did not have “pity” on her for being in the situation that she was in; the advocate counselor was simply there with her to listen to what she was saying. Carolina’s realization at the end of the conversation of, “This is a long road ahead of us and she’s going to be here for a long time,” is an indication that, even though Carolina was upset and angry at her advocate counselor when she came to school, that did not mean that her advocate counselor would not be there for her.

Students also talked about the ability of their advocate counselor to gauge their readiness to engage with them and respect that readiness without ever giving up on them because they knew them. Two students in this study discussed the presence of an adult in their former school that was there for them and that they had a connection with, although the student’s readiness to engage in a relationship was not there either because they didn’t need it or didn’t want it at the time. Emily described how she felt about getting help from adults in her previous school when she reflected on a question about whether an adult who was like an advocate counselor could have made a difference in her previous school. She said, “I was just in my own world. I had to figure things out. As badly as other people around you want to help you, you have to want to do it. You have to want to make the change and I didn’t want to yet. I didn’t know anything yet. I was lost.” Emily was not willing to engage in a relationship with someone like an advocate counselor in her former school or with teachers who “tried to play the role of an advocate.
counselor,” but Emily was not ready to accept the help. Emily, who was attending a small school and had good relationships with some of the teachers, was not willing to engage with them even though she felt like they wanted to help her. She explained later in the interview that eventually those adults gave up on her and stopped asking her to go to class and stopped offering to help her. However, she describes her advocate counselor as someone who never gave up on her.

Speaking of how at my old school they had given up, they were like, “It’s just Emily, she’s not going to do it anyway.” [My advocate counselor] would always ask me if I wanted to do things even though she knew I would probably say “no.” She would always try to include me in it anyway. She didn’t give up. She just always kept trying to do it. I was like, “That’s nice, but no thanks.” At least you knew she was there. Knowing that she was there if you did need her, even though you don’t at the moment...

Even though Emily was resistant to joining in with group activities and seldom sought out her advocate counselor for help, she knew she was there. The ability of her advocate counselor to understand her need to be more independent and to not participate in group activities and other things helped her respond to her in appropriate ways, while always making her feel supported.

**They See Me—Shared School Spaces**

Informal interactions in non-instructional spaces such as hallways, the cafeteria, the front steps, and other public places between students and advocate counselor were extremely important to the students in this study and helped them feel known in BHS. They felt known because their advocate counselor was present in places where adults may not have been present in their former schools. Many of the students in this study describe the guidance counselor in their previous school as someone who stayed in their office all day and rarely interacted with them. Nina’s impression of the counselors in her former school was, “They never left the office. I barely seen them leave the office. They always stood in that office. If they leave that office,
it’s probably to go to the store. I never seen a counselor actually come up to a classroom and say, ‘Hey, let’s talk.’ I never see that.” This impression of counselors changed for students at BHS. At BHS, advocate counselors joined students in spaces where adults may not have been present in their previous schools. The constant interaction that students had with their advocate counselor throughout the day was much different that the experience they had with adults in their previous school.

**Hallways and Classrooms**

Hallways in schools, in particular, have been described as student controlled areas where adults are either not present or have little authority over what happens (Dickar, 2008). In contrast, students and adults occupy the hallways and other spaces at BHS and it is normal for interactions to occur between advocate counselors and students in those spaces. The advocate counselor’s presence in the hallway and classrooms was important to the students because it helped them feel like someone was always there. At BHS, it was normal for advocate counselors to be present in a student’s life throughout the school day and to approach students just to check in. Carolina found her advocate counselor especially helpful when she showed up to classes that she was really struggling in. The counselor’s presence in the class, Carolina felt, helped the advocate counselor understand her struggle in the class and help her work through it with the teacher. Maria recalled instances where her advocate counselor was there for her when she was lashing out in class and just needed to talk about what was going on so that she could go back to class and focus.

Carlos described the difference between what is almost an absence of relationship to the counselor in his former school to the constant presence he felt from his advocate counselor:

> [In my previous school], there would never be a day where I would be called to her [my counselor’s] office or have a letter from a teacher or anything. But [my
advocate counselor], it’s like, he needed me, he’ll call me. He would just walk by the classroom, wave at us, not just me, but all of the kids that he had. So it’s like he always looked for us and it was, like, always weekly check-ins. Even during lunch, he’ll come and sit by his kids, go around to the kids and talk to us. So it’s always a communication. You could tell he’s always there for you. You could feel like it was like a shadow or something.

The contrast between what interactions Carlos had with adults, which were minimal, at his former school and the interactions he describes with his advocate counselor made him feel like his advocate counselor was “always there” for him. His description of his advocate counselor as a “shadow” suggests that the advocate counselor is a constant and inseparable person for him. Being a shadow means that the advocate counselor was constantly with Carlos, in all of the spaces in the school throughout the school day. Being in all of the spaces in school helped Carlos feel that his advocate counselor was there for him and always communicating.

Other students described their advocate counselors in similar ways. Sabrina described her advocate counselor as “always there” whether it was in the hallway or the cafeteria or the classroom. Terrence described the interactions with his advocate counselor in the hallway and other places as important because an interaction always took place. “He talks to me all the time. If he walks past me in the hallway, he has something to say. It’s not just like, ‘drive on,’ maybe just walk past each other. Every time I see him, there was something said.” Terrence points out the on-going interaction with his advocate counselor throughout the school day, many of which occur in hallways. This acknowledgement of students by advocate counselors in the hallway counteracts the “invisible” feeling that students felt in their former school. This acknowledgement by the advocate counselor was important in helping students feel known by an adult.

Carlos related his advocate counselor’s presence in the hallways and the interactions that they had about how he was doing in his classes as important to him knowing where he stood in
classes and to re-focus him on what he needed to do. His advocate counselor always carried a
folder in the hallways and used that to have a discussion with Carlos when he was out of class:

The folder had everyone's transcript in it, everyone's benchmark grades [progress report] and all that stuff so it's like they knew right off the top of their head, “Why you in the bathroom? You're doing such and such in this class at that period.” Like he knew what period I had that time of day...Why I wasn't in that class because I've got that grade in that class. He knew everything that there was to know about the kid in the class. If I was in, let's say, science and I was in the bathroom and I was failing science he'd be like, “Why are you in the bathroom? You've got to stay in Science class because you need to get at least a 75 so you can push it up. Go back to class. You're going to be late twice.” Like he knows everything. That really was, like, he knows everything—get out of here. That really made me feel important. Even though he did that for all the kids, that’s something that, like, yo, he really is taking this seriously, like he knows everything. I don’t even know that. I didn’t even know how many days I was late.

Carlos’ trip to the bathroom during class turned into a discussion with his advocate counselor
about his progress in class and the decision he was making to be late for class, when he had
already been late twice. The fact that Carlos didn’t know that he had already been late to class
twice and wasn’t connecting that to passing the class, although his advocate counselor “knows
everything,” made that conversation important and meaningful to Carlos. The conversation that
Carlos describes having with his advocate counselor in the hallway consists of several important
pieces contributing to Carlos feeling known. First, his advocate counselor was there in the
hallway and approached Carlos to talk to him. Instead of just telling him to go back to class, he
explained why being in a particular class was important and what he needed to do while in class.
By knowing information about the class that Carlos says he did not know made Carlos feel
“important.” Carlos ends with saying that his advocate counselor “really is taking this
seriously.” That is in stark contrast to Carlos’ first impression that he described earlier as an
“overbearing white man” who would not take things seriously. Being in the spaces traditionally
assigned to students gave Carlos’ advocate counselor a unique opportunity to know him better and interact with him in a different way.

The Cafeteria

The cafeteria at the transfer school was a place where interactions with advocate counselors were a normal occurrence, deepening the relationship between advocate counselors and students. Noddings (2005) describes schools as driven by academic purposes, thus opportunities are missed with students in non-instructional spaces like the cafeteria where, “Kids are fed, but educators rarely consider providing adult companionship with food,” (p. 13). In contrast, the cafeteria at BHS was described as an important place for interactions between students and advocate counselors. Andrea described lunch at BHS in the following way:

When you have lunch, the whole school is in the cafeteria—teachers, counselors, principal, everybody. Everybody is there at once. At my old school, you got lunch from first period, second period, third period—it didn’t matter. You was never with the same people, you were always with different people, always. You never got a sense of closeness to anybody because everybody was in their own cliques. There was groups of, like, three or four. But in here [BHS], it’s a group of 150.

Andrea described the cafeteria as a community that did not change from day to day where she expected to see other students, but also advocate counselors, teachers, and the principal. That, for her, was important because it allowed her to feel part of a “group of 150.” The somewhat randomness of lunch in her former school that she describes as never knowing who you would see or what period you would have lunch kept her from feeling close to anybody. She described lunch as consisting of small groups of students that, she implies, were hard to become a part of. At BHS, everybody was a part of the same group at lunch and her advocate counselor and other adults were in the cafeteria with the students.
Christian described lunch with his advocate counselors and other group members as an “everyday thing.” Victor also expected that his advocate counselor would show up in the cafeteria just to ask him how his day was going. Carlos interpreted the visits to the cafeteria by his advocate counselor as an indication that he would always be there for him. For students at BHS, seeing their advocate counselor in the cafeteria was something that was normal and expected. Students willingly invited advocate counselors to be a part of what is traditionally students’ free time in school.

Emily’s advocate counselor joined her students in the hallway outside of the cafeteria every day during lunch because, as Emily recalls, “We [the advocate counselor’s group of students] refused to eat in the cafeteria because we didn’t want to.” Emily describes a picture that she remembers where her advocate counselor is sitting in the hallway surrounded by the students in her group during lunch, which was a typical day at lunch. The advocate counselor was willing to join the group of students in the hall during lunch and sit with them rather than ignore them or require them to be in the cafeteria because that is the space they chose to be in. That willingness to go where the students are in the school, whether it is the cafeteria or a hallway right outside the cafeteria, helped advocate counselors know their students and helped students feel like they were being seen.

**Dropping By and Checking In**

The most often mentioned informal meetings that took place between advocate counselors and students were the opportunities that students took throughout the school day to drop by and check in with their advocate counselor. Dropping by occurred for many different reasons and was usually initiated by the student. It most often occurred when they wanted to just say, “Hello,” or talk about a problem they were having, or to just talk about their day. Andrea
remembers always being in her advocate counselor’s office. “Until the day I graduated, I lived in her office. In between classes, you can ask anybody, it’s so funny. I was the person in my counselor’s office the most. All day long.” Being able to drop by her advocate counselor’s office helped Andrea feel like she always had someone that would support her. Those drop-by meetings for Andrea were often what helped her get through the school day, especially when she was dealing with a lot of stuff outside of school.

We built that relationship where I can come and tell her anything. That was important because there were days when there was outside stress, there’s family problems, there’s this, there’s that, and you don’t want to come to school because that’s on your head. You’re like, I don’t want to have to sit in class all day when I’m thinking about this and I’m supposed to be concentrating on writing this paper or I’m supposed to be doing this math test or something. All you’re thinking about is what’s going on at home or you’re thinking about what’s going on outside of school. Having the counselor to be able to get up, be like, “Can you call my counselor? I need a minute.” They call your counselor and you can go upstairs and you can go and sit with your counselor. You can talk about whatever you want to talk about and even if you don’t want to talk, you can just be like I need a couple minutes. You sit there with your head down and you relax, take a breath, then you go back to class.

By being available throughout the day and providing an office space that was accessible to students as needed, the advocate counselor could build relationships with students in a more informal way. The school also seemed to support the notion that sometimes students may need a moment with their advocate counselor so that they can be fully present in class. Andrea’s advocate counselor provided a space for her to get support around what is happening outside of school so that she can be more focused in school, although she is also available to her when she just wants to say, “Hi.” Andrea described how her advocate counselor helped her deal with outside situations by providing a space to take a break and think or talk through “outside stress” so that she could then return to class. Andrea begins with the very real experience of her having days where she does not want to come to school because all of the “outside stress,” the “family
problems,” the “this,” the “that,” that are “on [her] head.” However, knowing that she has a person, her advocate counselor, to talk to so that she can be ready to go to class brings her to school instead of taking her away from school.

Roberto, similarly, saw his advocate counselor “almost every day between classes” during his first year at the transfer school and his feeling is that she was “always there for me.” Victor described the importance of those informal meetings throughout the school day as contributing to the sense of belonging that he felt in the transfer school. “I always sought [my advocate counselor] out when I wanted to say hi and whatnot. I think there was nothing better than that. There’s nothing better than to feel like you belong. A lot of people don’t feel that, unfortunately.” Access to the advocate counselor during non-scheduled times helped students feel like someone was always there for them. The ability for students to choose when they needed support from their counselor or when they just wanted to drop by and check-in was important because it related directly to the needs of the student and what was happening in their lives on any given day.

**Summary**

This chapter began with descriptions of each student in this study and a brief story about why the fell behind in their former high school as a way to understand the varied experiences that brought students to BHS. Students felt known by their advocate counselors because through specific interactions and ways of being, they experienced an adult that expressed interest in them, wanted to know about their whole self, responded to them in ways that were helpful, and were physically there in school spaces. The act of being known is important to students immediately after they enroll in BHS and many of the students talked about the importance of their advocate counselor showing interest in them early on—whether it was in a first advisory group meeting or
the first time they met their advocate counselor during intake. When framed by relational theory, being known represents those initial messages that advocate counselors give to students that they want to engage with them and know them.

Several students referred to their advocate counselor as falling somewhere between a counselor and a friend, as if there was an in-between point that represented what advocate counselors needed to be. Finding that space, however, is crucial to a successful relationship and seems to begin with students feeling that their advocate counselor wants to know them and actively shows that they want to know them. There is a large body of literature that supports the importance of being known in school (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014; Goodenow, 1993; Osterman, 2000; Wallace et al., 2012). Being known is the place that a relationship can start between a student and an adult. The next chapter will focus on students feeling cared for, a second element in the relationship between advocate counselors and students.
CHAPTER V: “I AM CARED FOR”

A second relational element occurring in the relationship between an advocate counselor and a student is the perception of the student that they are cared for. As discussed in the previous chapter, being known meant that an advocate counselor knew things about students and, as a result, students perceived that they were known and connected. The perception of being cared for goes beyond the perception of feeling known to include dimensions of authenticity, trust, and mutual sharing. Central to feeling cared for are interactions that occur between the advocate counselor and the student, or what Noddings (2005) refers to as a “caring relation,” (p. 16). In a caring relation, two individuals are involved in an exchange, one as the “carer” and one as the “recipient of care.” Both individuals in a caring relation have specific roles; the carer experiences “motivational displacement” and “engrossment” and the person cared for experiences “reception, recognition, and response.” The experiences of the carer and the cared for are both necessary components of a caring relation because, as Noddings describes, “Caring is a way of being in relation, not a set of behaviors.” Caring for students in this study centered on interactions that occurred between advocate counselors and students, as well as what advocate counselors did. The relationship between the advocate counselor and the student includes a willingness on both sides to engage.

What follows are descriptions of three dimensions of student perceptions of feeling cared for as discovered in their stories. Feeling cared for meant students had a relationship with their advocate counselor that is authentic and real, where both the students and the advocate counselor are themselves. Being authentic and real meant that students could trust their advocate counselors. The relationship with the advocate counselor that was authentic and real also allowed for truth in conversations that included mutual sharing. The final dimension of being
cared for are the actions that advocate counselors took on a student’s behalf, something that they
felt was extraordinary because either no one had ever done something like that for them before or
the student felt it was more than “just their job.” Those actions are often about following
through on something they said or doing something extraordinary.

**Authentic Relationships**

Feeling cared for by their advocate counselor was different for every student, although
every student described one or more occasions when they felt cared for. Some students
immediately felt as if someone cared for them and, for others, it took weeks or months. An
authentic exchange between the advocate counselor and student indicated to the student that they
are cared for. Andrea describes a caring interaction during intake during intake: “Because when
you come here, ever since you do your interview, you can tell the counselors care. The questions
that they ask you—they’re not only asking you about school and stuff like that, they ask you
about your personal life. They’re trying to figure out why you didn’t want to go to school, what
was going on.” The initial interview with a counselor at intake for Andrea was the first
indication that a relationship with an adult in school could be different. For Andrea, listening to
her and asking questions indicated a kind of engagement from an adult who wanted to figure her
out. Her perception that an adult was “trying to figure out why” she had fallen behind in her
former school through an authentic interaction expressed care to Andrea.

Maria, who had a similar experience during intake, recalled how she felt meeting her
advocate counselor for the first time during intake:

I don’t know why I keep thinking about this, but for some reason, I keep thinking
about when I had to do this entrance exam, a placement test, just to see what my
reading and math score was. I think I cried. I got so overwhelmed because I was
afraid. Well, at the time, I mean now I’m older, but at the time, I just felt like
everyone was going to look at me like a failure, and [the advocate counselor] was
just so nice. For the first time, someone was just like, “No, It’s okay. This isn’t a
real exam. You’ll get through eventually.” She really just...She understood what it was that I was getting overwhelmed about. It wasn’t just that I was overwhelmed. It was also that I was getting frustrated and angry, and she really just...I was so used to people just yelling at me in front of the entire classroom, so I wasn’t used to someone just really sitting there for a moment and taking out the time to ask what’s wrong.

The reaction that Maria got from her advocate Counselor at intake was, as she described, the first time an adult had asked her what was wrong regarding school and reassured her that everything would be “okay.” Her feeling that “everyone was going to look at me like a failure” was the result of experiences she had in her previous school where she describes being yelled at “in front of the entire classroom.” The advocate counselor addressed her feelings of frustration and anger, the result of being “overwhelmed’ and “afraid,” differently. Her advocate counselor, by being there in the moment with her and understanding her feelings, was acting out of care. By reassuring her, understanding her situation and “taking out the time to ask what’s wrong,” the advocate counselor acted differently than what Maria had come to expect in school. For her, that moment was important because she could start to see the possibility of having a different relationship and getting different responses from adults in school. The authenticity of the exchange between Maria and her advocate counselor was counter her expectations and her experiences with adults in school.

An authentic relationship with an advocate counselor, one that included trust, was important to students’ perception that they were cared about. Authentic relationships, as described by the participants in this study, meant that advocate counselors and students were in a relationship where they could each be themselves and interact in ways that were real and authentic. In relational theory, authenticity in a therapeutic relationship is essential to creating a relationship between therapist and patient that fosters growth and movement (Beyene et al., 2002; L. M. Brown & Gilligan, 1993; Gilligan, 1982; Liang et al., 2002; J. B. Miller et al., 1999;
Ragins & Fletcher, 2007; Spencer, 2006). In schools, authentic relationships between adults and students exist in relationships that foster both the teacher’s and the student’s ability to be open and genuine (Cranton, 2006; Cranton & Carusetta, 2004). Authenticity for the students in this study existed when they were able to not only trust their advocate counselor, but also trust them to tell them the truth. In this next section, I discuss the meanings of trust students describe in relationships with advocate counselors.

**Trust**

Trust between a student and advocate counselor occurred with time and consistency in the relationship between a student and an advocate counselor. Maria explained why transfer school students might have trouble trusting adults, while also emphasizing why it is important to have trust between an advocate counselor and student:

I think that all of us are in some way used to being just shut out or not listened to, not cared about, but we're also those kids that you need to give us time. We all have problems trusting people. If that wasn't the case then we probably wouldn't be here. We probably would have spoken to someone else who would have helped us, keep us in our other school. . . . It takes some people one day, and it can take some people a year. Maybe it takes something to trigger the wall to come down. We all feel vulnerable which is why our wall is up. We think we're vulnerable, so we're like, "No. No. We have to be guarded and..." You have to make us feel just safe, at ease, that we can trust you, that you'll be loyal to us. We don’t want to come back to school, and then one of the students is looking at us like, "I didn't know you were going through that." "Like, how do you know?" Which is why sometimes, even our friends, we don’t have anybody to talk to because friends talk to friends and talk to other friends and...

Maria explained how, she believed, most students enter BHS and “have problems trusting people” because they are “used to being just shut out or not listened to” and “not cared about.” In a sense, the students who end up in transfer schools have somehow lost trust along the way because of the way they have been treated. Her assessment that if students were able to trust someone, “we probably would have spoken to someone else who would have helped us, keep us
in our other schools,” implies that part of the work that occurs in the relationship between an advocate counselor and a student is building a relationship where trust can happen. Students need this because of experiences they have had in the past that influenced their ability to trust. Students need the time to trust their advocate counselor and feel that their advocate counselor will be “loyal” to them and not talk about them to other students. The fear of coming to school one day with other students knowing what you are “going through” is one reason why students are wary of talking to others, because it is hard to trust friends to not share information. The image of having a wall up, representing a student’s vulnerability and guardedness to trusting an adult, that comes down only after a student feels “safe” and “at ease” that they can trust their advocate counselor, is the result of not having the trust to speak to someone that might keep them in their former schools. Maria explains that those walls may take “one day” or “a year” to come down, but is individual to the student and the relationship with the advocate counselor.

Maria’s description provides several insights into what is important in the relationship between an advocate counselor and a student in developing trust. Advocate counselors and students develop trust over time, a period of time determined by the student and the interactions that occur between the student and advocate counselor. The interactions between the advocate counselor and student need to be based on trust and keeping information private. Those interactions occur in relation to each other, so students and advocate counselors need to trust one another.

Anthony, in responding to a question about advice that he would give to an advocate counselor, described what might happen to the relationship between an advocate counselor and student when an advocate counselor is “fake.” When a counselor is “fake,” it means that they
Anthony emphasized the importance of keeping information between the advocate counselor and student four times in this one passage—“definitely keep everything that the student tells you,” “for the most part just keep everything that you guys talk about between you two,” “don’t really share a lot,” and “just keep it between you two.” His emphasis on trust applies to the “stuff that [you] didn’t think that you would tell anybody else” that a student shares with an advocate counselor. Trust for Anthony is important enough in the relationship between an advocate counselor and a student that breaking trust may mean the end of a relationship. Getting labeled “fake” by students in the school, Anthony describes, results in a “bad, bad relationship” where the student does not feel like they can talk about personal issues with their advocate counselor without risking other people knowing.

The trust that Anthony described seems to emphasize trust on both sides of the relationship when he says to keep things “between you two.” He described a responsibility for both the advocate counselor and student to keep things “private,” which applies to the conversations that they both participate in. Trust between an advocate counselor and student goes beyond the counselor only keeping things private, but also applies to the student. For
authenticity to exist in the relationship between a student and an advocate counselor, both the student and advocate counselor need to trust each other.

Roberto trusted his advocate counselor to have honest conversations with him about choices he was making to continue using marijuana, something he had started doing in his former school when, as he says, “I hung around with the wrong crowd.” He explains that as he left his former school and enrolled in BHS, he still wanted to use marijuana “recreationally,” but was conflicted because he also “knew that wasn’t good for me.” When he discussed it with his advocate counselor, she responded by telling Roberto that she would be there to support him if he ever needed to talk about it. He says, “If I ever need to talk to somebody, if I have an urge to talk to somebody, she’s always going to be there.” Knowing that, Roberto decided, “I didn’t want to continue using” and was able to stop his marijuana use.

His trust in his advocate counselor to, first, tell her that he was using marijuana and, second, get support in stopping his use of marijuana in a conversation that he knew would be kept confidential allowed him to make a change. When he was asked to imagine having that conversation with an adult at his former school, his response is completely opposite:

No. First of all, I wouldn’t even admit that I was doing such a thing because obviously they would call the school security and see if I had anything on me right now. That’s the first thing that comes to their minds. If you’re in possession of any drugs, they have to follow school rules and call security, call the police, see if you have anything on you. Also, with cutting class, I can’t admit that I’m cutting class because that affects my grade and they’ll call my parents. I was trying to avoid all of that. So, first of all, the conversation wouldn’t even last that long. Whatever comes after I tell them my problems wouldn’t be their concern or their personal opinion, but what the school wants them to say to students that have those types of problems.

The feeling that Roberto portrays in his description of how things would go at his former school if he tried to talk about any of his problem is in stark contrast to the reaction that he got from his advocate counselor who did not search him, “call security,” report it to administration, “call the
police,” or involve his parents. His perception that once he mentioned marijuana in his former school, he would be labeled as a student with “those types of problems” and responded to the way the school wants adults to respond, not based on “their concern or their personal opinion.” He describes a school where policy and reporting things and keeping order outweigh a student’s problem and get in the way of getting real help. The perceived lack of trust in adults at his former school to handle difficult problems in a way that would be helpful to him may be why Roberto never tried to reach out to anyone. Roberto describes a situation where he had no one to turn to when he was dealing with a serious situation and needed help. His assumption that he would be treated a certain way by adults kept him from asking for help. At BHS, he was able to trust his advocate counselor to be authentic with him about the situation and trust that she would respond differently than what he previously expected from adults in school. The trust he had in his advocate counselor, knowing that he would get support and that she would handle it in a way that was helpful to him was part of having an authentic relationship.

The Truth: They Don’t “Sugar Coat” Anything

Part of trusting advocate counselors and having an authentic relationship was also trusting that they would tell students the truth. Many students in this study said their advocate counselor told them the truth and didn’t “sugar coat” things when they were talking to them about what they needed to do to achieve personal and academic goals while attending BHS. The idea of not “sugar coating” conversations meant that the advocate counselor told students the truth about a situation, whether it was about how they were doing in a class, their attendance in school, or a personal matter. Students see that being told the truth is an advocate counselor acting on their behalf, not against them. Victor described the importance of hearing the truth from his advocate counselor in the following way:
I feel like they [advocate counselors] always give you the truth. When you feel like they’re giving the truth, then there’s nothing that could really go wrong. As long as you feel like you have somebody’s honesty, I think that’s key for me. Trust is really big and honesty. When I saw that [my advocate counselor] wasn’t lying to me, she said, “Listen. It’s going to be hard, but you’re going to have to do this.” I appreciated it because you’re not sugar coating anything or you’re not making me feel like I can’t make it. You’re telling me what I need to do, how I need to do it, or what I might go through to get there. I appreciated the truth.

Victor described three aspects of being told the truth and “not sugar coating” things that were important to him in his relationship with his advocate counselor. First, she told him the truth and, as he describes, as long as he is told the truth, “then there’s nothing that can really go wrong.” Being told the truth, the real story about what was going on in a situation, does not seem to be something that students expected from adults. Perhaps the relationship between Victor and his advocate counselor allowed for always “giving the truth” because Victor perceived “honesty” as caring. Second, he describes how part of telling the truth is getting the message from his advocate counselor that he can “make it.” Her use of the phrase, “Listen, it’s going to be hard, but you’re going to have to do this” seems serious, but is “appreciated” by Victor because he is not alone in facing the problem and, ultimately, identifying a solution. Third, his advocate counselor doesn’t leave him with the truth, but supports him in moving forward. She helps Victor identify “what I need to do now, how I need to do it” and “what I might go through to get there.” For him, the idea of hearing the truth from his advocate counselor also meant that he would leave with a plan and support about how to make the plan successful. His final comment, “I appreciated the truth,” reiterates “truth” as something that Victor wants in the relationship with his advocate counselor, even in a situation where the truth is about something difficult.
Several students had situations when they were falling off academically and their advocate counselor intervened in a way where they told the truth about the situation and helped them put a plan in place to fix the situation. Roberto described one of those situations:

Here, they stop you once they see that you're straying off track. Once they see from that first quarter turn that you're doing bad, they'll stop. They’ll sit you down with your counselor and ask what's going on in your personal life or here that you think might be bothering you or keeping you from your studies? I like that because I think the reason why I didn't succeed before academically in my other schools because there was a lot of situations that prevented me to do so, but I wasn't really fixing them. Sometimes I wouldn't even be aware of them. Here they don't do that. They make you aware because you have to think back to what is really stopping me from doing my best. Then you have to work to fix that. They always help you, not only when it comes to figuring out what it is, but how to solve it, how they might help.

Roberto explains a three step process that occurs when there is something “off track” that needs to be corrected. First, “they stop you once they see that you’re straying off track.” The “they” that Roberto refers to is perhaps an advocate counselor or a teacher or both working together. Second, “they’ll sit [the student] down with [their] counselor and ask what’s going on” to find out what is going on that is taking them off track. They do that by asking questions about school and the student’s personal life to try and understand what is happening to get the student off track. Third, “you have to work to fix” the problem through a process that includes help with “figuring out what it is” and “how to solve it.” Roberto describes an awareness in his former school that he was getting off track, though says he would sometimes not be aware of what the problem was or know how to fix it. At BHS, the advocate counselor works with the student to “think back to what is really stopping me from doing my best.” Advocate counselors told the truth to students for the benefit of the student and were also there to support them in figuring out how to solve a problem. Roberto’s description of being off track with no intervention about how
to fix it or no one telling him the truth about being off track in his former school contrasted with what his advocate counselor did to keep him on track.

This process of being told the truth about a problem in school and giving support to a student so that the problem can be fixed is most likely not the experience of students prior to attending BHS. Roberto describes situations in his former school that got in the way of him succeeding academically, though he “wasn’t really fixing them.” He also says that, “Sometimes I wouldn’t even be aware of them,” meaning no one had told him the truth about a situation and given him the chance to “fix” it. Advocate counselors, in being authentic in their relationships with students, told students the truth, helped them devise a plan to “fix” a situation, and stayed with them for support.

Trust and authentic relationships with advocate counselors meant that students could take risks to share things with their advocate counselor that they may have not shared before. Lakesha describes a struggle years of feeling like she couldn’t be successful in school because of feeling “stupid.” She started to miss some of the classes that she was struggling in and her advocate counselor noticed that she had started “shutting down.”

I always told people I’m a slow learner, I don’t know what I’m doing, I’m stupid...and sometimes I really actually felt like that. People would be like, “You know this answer. You know that. You know how to answer that question.” But, deep down inside I knew I really did not know how to answer that question and it was just I really believed I couldn’t do it. After a while [my advocate counselor] got me a tutor and I was doing one-on-ones, I was getting taken out of class and everything and after a while I started doing it on my own. I started coming to those classes and, like I said, I just always repeat [my advocate counselor], just always seeing [my advocate counselor] saying, “You can do this, Lakesha. You can do it,” and he would tell me like he knows.

Lakesha’s assessment of herself as a “slow learner” and “stupid” was the result of years of being in school without someone noticing what she needed. She describes holding on to a secret throughout school that “deep down inside I knew I really did not know,” which led to the feeling,
“I really believed I couldn’t do it.” She talks about the years of summer school, “since fourth grade,” that she attended as the way the school dealt with her failed classes during the school year. The belief that she developed “deep down inside” was that she would never really get it and, therefore, had labeled herself as “stupid.” In her mind, no one was telling her anything different or trying to get her to believe anything different, so she stopped trying. She goes on to say that even though her parents were supportive of her finishing school, the big age difference between them and her made Lakesha feel like she couldn’t talk to them about school because they wouldn’t understand. Eventually, like many transfer school students, Lakesha’s struggles in school and her feelings of not being able to do anything lead her to act out in school and do worse. She continued her story with an explanation of how she got to really not care anymore about school.

Teachers [in my former school], they just can’t focus on one person or one child because it’s twenty others that they got to worry about too. It was times where I am in class and I will raise my hand, but if the teacher don’t see me, I’ll put it right down or you think, “Oh well, it was just...” I really actually felt like I didn’t care, and when I would tell a teacher or anybody that I didn’t care, I really didn’t care. It was one of those like, “You don’t care, I don’t care.” It was like, “All right, I don’t care.” It was kind of like a back and forth thing like, “You don’t care, I don’t care,” and just, like, whatever.

Unfortunately, the result of years of not knowing how to address her own struggles in school led to her proclaiming that, “I don’t care.” Equally regrettable is the response that she got from the teacher who also expressed her lack of caring. Lakesha was understanding of her teacher’s inability to focus on her when there were so many others who needed her in the class, but her struggle not being addressed eventually lead to her not caring. Lakesha’s advocate counselor, however, did ask her about what was going on, supported her by telling her that the struggle could be resolved, and helped her get resources to do that. It was not until her advocate
counselor talked to her about what was going on in her classes that she was able to share her struggles in class and get help with resolving them.

Omar said his advocate counselor followed through on “his word” no matter what. His emphasis on the importance of following through on your word is in his description of his advocate counselor is, “He would never lie to us (his group) about it. He won’t ever exaggerate. He’ll let you know exactly what it was. That’s what I respect him for.” Omar shares an example that he remembers about his advocate counselor following through on his word that was “memorable” to him and the other members of group:

I remember we used to always talk about his hair. He had real curly hair, real thick mustache and a beard. We used to always tell him, “Yo,” we'd be like, “Yo, we know [the advocate counselor’s wife] don't like you like that. You always looking scruffy and stuff like that.” We always talked about it. He's like, “If everybody in the class, if everybody passes this benchmark, I'll cut my hair.” Everybody passed their classes; he cut his hair.

Interviewer: He did?

He cut it. We was like, “What?” But that was his way of letting everybody know that everybody passed their benchmark. We didn't know what [grade] we had yet. Usually, we used to have group, and then he'll give us the benchmark [grade report]. “All right, here you go. You pass or you fail.” Once he came in, we seen him with the haircut. I guess he must have did it during his break, because he had hair when we came here in the morning and then when we came back, it was cut. Then one of the students was like, “We all passed, didn't we?” He's like, “Yep!” Everyone’s clapping, and we was all hyped. Those are memorable times.

Although the story that Omar describes may have started off as a joke between the advocate counselor and the students in his advisory group, Omar and the other students’ surprise at their advocate counselor following through is “memorable.” This example is not about an academic situation or personal situation that the advocate counselor helps “solve,” but it sends a message to students that the advocate counselor will follow through on his word. Omar’s advocate counselor turns something as mundane as a haircut in to a “memorable” moment where he kept
his word. Staying true to his word, even in a situation that perhaps started with a conversation among a group of students about the advocate counselor’s hair is meaningful to students.

**Mutual Sharing**

Mutual sharing and the reciprocal process of advocate counselors listening to students talk about important things and sharing information with students helped students feel cared for. This process of mutual sharing, or “mutuality” as it is referred to by relational theorists (J. B. Miller et al., 1999), is essential to relationships that foster growth and development. In relationships between adults and adolescents, mutuality provides that necessary exchange needed for both people to experience each other’s feelings and thinking in a relationship that is constructed by both the adult and the student (Spencer, 2002). Many students emphasized the importance of having a relationship with their advocate counselor that included both mutual sharing and responses that were “real.” For students, that meant that their advocate counselor shared things with them, their likes, their dislikes, and their experiences, as a way to connect to them, but also had a dialogue with them based on deeper understanding and sharing. Mutual sharing was, for several students, the reason that they started to feel like they could open up and have a relationship with their advocate counselor. Anthony described the importance of mutual sharing as a part of the relationship with his advocate counselor that helped him open up and feel connected:

> Other humans, we can sense when somebody’s attaching [themselves] to it this much to the point where they care about this. Sometimes that can be bad, but sometimes it can work out, because as students we have to feel like this person cares this much and they go home and they still think about us. That’s the most important part. Once we feel that, we will just totally open up to our counselors.

Lainey: Did something happen that made you feel she does care about me?

This is crazy because nothing really happened, it was just I felt very comfortable. I felt like all of her responses to questions that I had was very genuine and not
textbook. Everything was very genuine. Oh, what she did was actually tell us about her personal life collectively, so as a group, we would all share information about our lives and stuff, and she would also share the same information. That was important to us because then we feel like, okay, she’s not just doing this because. She really wants to do this. She’s trying to be here with us doing this too. She’s sharing information about her personal life too sometimes. That makes me feel like she’s more normal as opposed to somebody just sitting in our group somewhere [who] is not going to share any type of information like that with you. She shared some, not too crazy personal, but just enough to where we felt like she didn’t hide all these things and she just spoke to us like we were regular people and not just students. We all shared information and she shared the same information back. That was very important.

There are several important aspects of the relationship between Anthony and his advocate counselor that he points out in this passage. His emphasis on needing to feel that his advocate counselor was attached to him enough to “go home and still think about us (students who are part of the advocate counselor’s caseload)” meant, for him, that she “cares this much” about him so that he could “totally open up” to her. Anthony describes that as “the most important part,” placing the expectation on his advocate counselor that he be a part of her life outside of the walls of the school, that she think about him when she is not at work, so that he can then know that she cares about him, which means that he can open up to her. This may not be a completely linear process, as I am describing it, but all of the pieces interact together towards Anthony perceiving that he is cared for. This emphasis on being a part of the advocate counselor’s life outside of school echoes students desire to be known as a whole person, not just as a student. By describing the advocate counselor’s role in the relationship—he knows he is cared for because she thinks about him when school is over—he is pointing to the importance of the reciprocal relationship and how that relates to feeling cared for. Anthony’s perception of being thought of by his advocate counselor after work helped him feel a connection with her and recognized as a person worth being cared for. This contrasts student descriptions of some of the “dehumanizing” that they felt in their former schools.
Anthony goes on to describe the sharing of information that happened in weekly advisory group meetings as not only occurring among students, but also with the advocate counselor. His advocate counselor’s willingness to share information about herself in a general way helped Anthony feel comfortable and known by her because “she didn’t hide all these things” from him or the other students in the group. The reciprocal process of sharing information with his advocate counselor and her sharing information back and the way “she spoke to us like we were regular people and not just students” indicates that being known for Anthony included knowing things about his advocate counselor so that he could feel like a “regular” person. Anthony’s description of the difference between being talked to like a “regular” person or as a “student” points to the importance of dialogue between adults and students that includes mutual sharing. Being talked to like a “regular” person helped Anthony feel human, feel known, and feel worth caring for.

For Anthony, mutual sharing also meant that his advocate counselor wanted to be there with him and wanted to know things about him. The mutual sharing that he describes goes beyond knowing information about a student to include a reciprocal process of learning from each other. Anthony distinguishes the dialogue that he had with his advocate counselor, one that included both sharing things about himself and knowing things about his advocate counselor, as a way of him knowing that she was “not just doing this because.” His emphasis on, “She really wants to do this,” and “She’s trying to be here with us, doing this,” contrast accounts from other students who describe adults in their former schools as “only there for the paycheck” and “just at work,” which I discuss below.
Later in his interview, Anthony, in response to a question about advice that he would give to advocate counselors just starting out at BHS, emphasized again the importance of being “normal” and “human:”

When you speak to them [students], you got to let them know that you’re normal; you’re human, too. If you do happen to bump into a situation where you can relate to that person, “Oh, I’ve been there, too,” then that’s good because we want to feel like you’re not just at work and you don’t really care. Our [students] main thing is, “Does this person care about me? Can I share my secrets with them?” You have to make sure the student feels that comfortable. When you get on that level, it’s like everything should have been good from there, but you just got to get on that personal level. Don’t think about it like, “Oh, this is just work.”

Anthony experienced adults being “just at work” as meaning they “don’t really care,” emphasizing the importance of advocate counselors being more than just at work through developing reciprocal relationships with students and sharing with students as a way of knowing them. If students perceive that an advocate counselor is more than “just at work” because they have shared things with them, then students start to feel that their advocate counselor cares and they can then share their “secrets” with them. Anthony calls this a “personal level” and says that, “everything should have been good from there.” Anthony, in his advice to new counselors, is describing the reciprocal relationship of sharing as it relates to being known and then feeling cared for. Anthony begins this passage saying that advocate counselors need to “let [students] know that you’re normal” and “you’re human.” It brings to mind the contrasting, somewhat standard answers that a school might typically give to students who are not known. Roberto, earlier, describes that type of response when he hypothesizes that his former school would have responded to him seeking help for his drug use by calling in the authorities.

Carolina described her advocate counselor’s choice to share things in advisory meetings as a way to not be a “head figure.” For her, the way that her advocate counselor interacted with her and other students as a participant in both listening to students and sharing her own
experiences made her feel comfortable and cared for. She describes a typical day in advisory group with her advocate counselor and the other students on her advocate counselor’s caseload:

Inside that room, everybody was comfortable. I know a lot of kids said things that I don’t think they would tell friends or anybody. You’re talking to a group of 15, 20 kids who are not your daily friends and you still sit there and say things to them. [My advocate counselor] would say things, too. She would make it comfortable. She would say things and you piggy-backed off what she said, “Yeah, I know exactly how that is.” That’s just how it went. It was a sense of she’s actually human. She understands and she’s one of us. She cares. That was good for her.

Carolina also reflects what other students have said about how having a relationship that includes mutual sharing with her advocate counselor helped her seem “actually human.” That phrase “actually human” denotes an expectation that adults in schools are not human. Carolina almost seems surprised that her advocate counselor would act “human” because her experience is that adults don’t act “human.” Her advocate counselor, by engaging in a conversation, would “make it comfortable” because “she would say things and you piggy-backed off what she said,” which made it “human.” Her description of advisory as a place where she and other students felt comfortable sharing things, even though they were not “daily friends,” shows the importance of her advocate counselor modeling sharing and showing that she understands. Carolina’s reflection that, “She’s one of us,” shows the advocate counselor as part of the group, a contributing member, as opposed to an observer. That difference, for Carolina, meant that her advocate counselor cares.

The mutual sharing that took place between students and advocate counselors individually and in groups was an important aspect of feeling known for students. Being known for students meant that there were adults who were willing to try and figure them out and engage with them, much like Noddings' (2005) description of the relational process between a teacher and student that emphasizes not only the effort of the teacher in listening and responding to a
student’s individual needs, but also includes the willingness of the student to receive the caring of the teacher. Students describe the mutual sharing that occurred in advisory group and individual meetings as adding to their perception that they are cared for.

**Extraordinary Actions**

Students described actions by their advocate counselor to show that the advocate counselor cared about them, which I refer to as “extraordinary actions.” Extraordinary actions are actions that are unexpected by students and are focused on improving the student’s progress both in school and outside of school. They are actions that the advocate counselor took that students perceived were motivated by caring for students and their success in school. Most of the actions mentioned by students centered on attendance outreach and academic support, although other actions outside of school also occurred. I will discuss several examples of how extraordinary actions by advocate counselors help students feel cared for.

Several students focused on how their counselor responded when they were late or absent from school as showing that they cared. Lakesha described a day when she just did not feel like coming to school. She had heard from other students that your counselor would come to your house if you missed school, but she did not believe it and, even after her mom had a discussion with her counselor on the phone, she still expected nothing. When her counselor did show up at her house, she knew he cared. “For my advocate counselor to take time out to do that for me, I knew he cared. Then I was really like, ‘Oh yeah, I really got to get it together.’ He is really here to help me and I don’t want to push that away because, at that point, that’s what I needed.” Lakesha’s disbelief that her advocate counselor would come to her house because she had missed school was challenged when the advocate counselor did show up, which confirmed that she “knew he cared.” Lakesha’s response to her advocate counselor’s home visit that, “I really got to
get it together,” was a reaction to the extraordinary action that her advocate counselor had taken in response to her absence at school. That home visit was important because it showed Lakesha that her advocate counselor cared about her and wanted her to be successful because he did something that she did not expect when she missed school; he came to her house to get her and encourage her to come to school.

Victor’s counselor visited him after he missed school for two days when he was very close to graduation. He had fallen behind in his math class and remembers feeling like he could never catch up, so felt unmotivated to come to school. He describes that meeting in the following way:

It was great. It shows you that we believe in you. We’re going to push you when you want to see us and when you don’t want to see us, we’re going to be here. When you feel like we’re annoying, we’re going to be there. At that point, you might find it annoying and you might just want to be like just leave me alone. That day is so crucial because you think back and, wow, if that meeting would have never taken place, where would I really have been today? Would I have finished school or would I have dropped out? I think that’s the importance of that meeting.

Victor’s reaction to the home visit from his advocate counselor, an event that he calls “crucial” because he wonders whether he would have continued school or dropped out, left him feeling that his advocate counselor “believes” in him, is going to “push” him, and will always be there. He described his relationship with his advocate counselor as one where he knows she will always be there, “when you want to see us and when you don’t want to see us, we’re going to be there.” He feels cared for through her action of coming to his house after he was not in school. Her reaction to his missing school because she cares about him prompts Victor to return to school because he feels cared about and believed in. The action of his advocate counselor coming to his house after he did not come to school is the important thing that Victor remembers, not a conversation.
Victor and other students used “annoying” to describe interventions such as this where an advocate counselor showed up at their house because he had missed school or made multiple calls to their phone when they were not in school, which they interpreted as caring. His advocate counselor cared enough about him to be “annoying.” Nina describes her counselors reaction to being late to school as, “When they don’t see you, it’s like, ‘Hey, where are you? I didn’t see you this morning.’ Sometimes it gets annoying, but you know that you have somebody that cares for you and wants you to walk in. That’s how I seen it after a while, that’s how I seen it.” In these examples, the students describe the unique relationship with their advocate counselor, one where “being annoyed” meant being cared for.

Not arriving on time to school and the response a student got from their advocate counselor was also something that students described as showing that they felt cared about. Maria wondered why her old school did not care about her attendance in the same way that the transfer school did. She described herself as a late person and every day, “I was getting phone calls from my counselor at like 8:45, like, ‘Are you almost here?’ I’m like, ‘Are you serious?’ Blowing up my phone, calling my house, leaving messages...there is just no way that you don’t go to school.” Andrea described those same phone calls as one of the things that made her feel like her advocate counselor wanted her to be successful and also made her feel like she couldn’t be absent from school. She says, “You can tell when somebody wants you to succeed. Just the fact that I couldn’t be more than 10 minutes late or I got a call and I couldn’t be absent. It’s the little things. The very little things.” Omar described those phone calls as making him feel like he was his advocate counselor’s “number one priority” and, because of that, he felt like there was someone who really cared about his education. Terrence repeats the importance of phone calls in the morning as something his advocate counselor did to show that he cared for him.
Yeah, well, I definitely knew that they cared for me. There was no signs of them showing that they didn’t. They was always on top of me. If they didn’t care it would show, but they would call me when … when school started at 8:30, they would call me 7:45 until 8:30 every single day just to make sure I’m up, or even after 8:30, they were like, “Okay, it’s after 8:30. What’s going on here?”

Phone calls and inquiries about where students are on a daily basis was mentioned by almost all of the students in this study as a way that advocate counselor’s showed that they cared about students. Terrence links being “on top of me” to knowing his advocate counselor “cared for me. He describes phone calls from “7:45 to 8:30 every single day just to make sure I’m up” as knowing he is cared for. This signifies an extra level of attention that existed in BHS that students did not receive in former schools.

Much like the extraordinary ways that advocate counselors worked to get students to school, they also worked to keep them there. Cutting school during the day was also treated differently at the transfer school. Lakesha and Andrea both described interactions that they had had in their previous schools when adults had told them to leave school or dropout when they expressed frustration at how far they had gotten behind. Carlos, however, describes a very different reaction from his advocate counselor when he decided to cut school one day with a friend. His advocate counselor followed Carlos out of the building, down the block, and chased them until they jumped on a passing bus. Carlos describes his reaction to the incident in the following way:

At the time, I felt like he was crazy. I even talked like he must really care about us. He really chased us down the block. Like, left the school building and we were about to run into the projects. If we would’ve run into the projects, I’m pretty sure he would’ve run in to the projects with us, but we just jumped on a bus instead of doing that. He has to care about us. I told my dad he must really care—for him to do that, he must really care. That shows a lot.

Carlos recalled this story in response to a question asking about the first time he thought his advocate counselor cared about him. It was fairly early after his transfer to BHS, but seems to
shift how Carlos starts to think about his advocate counselor. Carlos connects the action that his advocate counselor took when he left the building to two different thoughts—he is “crazy” and “he must really care.” The relationship with his advocate counselor allows for a “crazy” response to Carlos’ action to cut school during the day that ends with Carlos feeling cared for. The feeling that his advocate counselor “chased us down the block” and “would have run into the projects with us” indicated to Carlos that his advocate counselor would do extraordinary things to get him to stay in school, which benefits Carlos and shows that his advocate counselor cares. Rather than ignoring Carlos when he walked out of the building early, the advocate counselor left school and ran after him when he saw him on the street. That action contrasts with how other students describe the reactions of adults in their former schools when they cut school, which usually sent the message, “I don’t care.”

Other students had similar stories where they felt that their advocate counselor helped them accomplish something that they had not been able to accomplish in school before. Terrence had completed all of his credit requirements for graduation, but still needed to pass a state exam in US History in order to graduate. On his own, he had studied and done everything that he could think of to pass the exam, but he kept failing it. His advocate counselor suggested an after-school tutor, which Terrence reluctantly agreed to and, he explains, tried to avoid most of the time. “I still was like, I’m not going to no tutor. [My advocate counselor] really had to hound me...I’m trying to sneak out these doors after school and [my advocate counselor] got security and people watching me so I won’t go home, just to cover the school like that. It actually worked, I scored an 81.” The suggestion of a tutor and the support to get to the tutor every day, by alerting other adults that Terrence shouldn’t leave the school and “hounding” him
to attend helped him be successful. As in other examples, “hounding,” which can be seen as a negative act is perceived by Terrence to be care.

Students related the advocate counselor’s willingness to attend events and activities outside of the school day and outside of regular school hours as an indication that they were cared for. Those activities included sports games, births of children, family events, and other situations where the presence of the advocate counselor was supportive to the student. Doing things outside of the school building and school day helped students feel like this was not just a job for advocate counselors, but that they were noticed and cared for. Anthony was on the school basketball team and relates the presence of his advocate counselor at games after the school day had ended as an indication that he was important:

In this school they first started up a basketball team, then she would be, oh, well … Well, she would even try to come to the game, whether it be her time or on the clock as a counselor and not, she still tried to come and support me and all the other students. Things like that are pretty important because then it's, oh, good game that you had, all that stuff, and just being involved with everything. Whether it be related to school or not related to academics. She was still being involved with everything. The fact that she was like that, I know it would actually feel like me and her relationship was very important. I feel like she would probably never forget me. I feel like I will never forget her. It's just one of those things that that's how it is no matter what she does. If I see her one day, we would probably talk for hours and that's just how it's always going to be.

He appreciated the comments about the game that he got from his advocate counselor who would tell him how well he played, but he also relates the fact that she was there as a way of adding importance to their relationship. So important, that he reflects, “I feel like she would probably never forget me. I feel like I will never forget her.” The presence of his advocate counselor at his game, a game that happened when he knew that it was not her “time on the clock as a counselor,” strengthened his relationship with her because she was there when he knew she didn’t have to be there.
Andrea, who dealt with a number of difficult family issues while she was enrolled at BHS, including a sick parent, sums up the importance of her advocate counselor’s outside involvement in the following way:

When she gives you support, it’s also outside of school, it's not only inside of school. She had a lot of girls, a lot of her students ended up getting pregnant and giving birth and she went to the hospital every single time. Every single one of her girls that got pregnant and ended up giving birth, she went to the hospital to see the baby. My father was sick so she did the same for me three years in a row just because my father was sick. We went to the cancer ward together. She does things that go beyond school to show you that she cares.

Andrea says her advocate counselor gives the kind of support that is “not only inside the school,” but is “also outside the school” as a way of describing the extraordinary acts that her advocate counselor did to show that she cares for students. In one example, the advocate counselor “went to the hospital to see the baby” whenever “one of her girls got pregnant and ended up giving birth. The advocate counselor’s presence in the hospital on the occasion of the birth of a child is unexpected. Andrea’s advocate counselor also accompanied her to the “cancer ward” when her father was sick, “three years in a row.” Her perception is that her advocate counselor “does things that go beyond the school to show you that she cares.” The extraordinary action of going to the hospital to either see a new baby or visit a sick father showed care.

**Summary**

Feeling cared for is a central element of the relationship between an advocate counselor and a student and is expressed through mutual interactions, an authentic relationship between an advocate counselor and a student, and extraordinary actions that showed care for students. The literature supports the concept of caring in schools and a community of caring has been described as essential in order for students to accomplish their academic goals (Noddings, 2005; Ozer et al., 2008; Rodriguez, 2008). The perception that students have about whether their
teacher cares about them or not relates significantly to a student’s academic effort and pursuit of positive social activities and goals (Wentzel, 1997). At BHS, authenticity, trust, mutual sharing, and extraordinary actions define advocate counselors caring for students.

Following this chapter, I describe I Care as the final element in the relationship between an advocate counselor and student and a developing theory on how these elements interact in relationship to each other.
CHAPTER VI: “I CARE ABOUT MYSELF”

Before I begin the final chapter of findings, I return briefly to the relational elements discussed at the beginning of chapter four. I introduced three elements of the relationship between an advocate counselor and student at BHS. Those elements—“I am known,” “I am cared for,” and “I care about myself”—are related to each other in a way that allows for knowing and caring to be happening throughout the relationship, with “I care about myself” occurring later in the relationship. Before, I present the third element, “I care about myself,” some discussion about how that element relates to the others and why it seems to follow “I am known” and “I am cared for” is important.

A caring relationship includes not only being the person who cares for another person, but also helping to develop a capacity to care in the person who is cared for (Noddings, 2005). In developing a capacity to care for self, Noddings says, students in school need to be exploring questions about who they are and who they want to become. That capacity to care for themselves, meaning they took more ownership over their progress in school and their own futures, when described by the students in this study, was usually something that happened after they had been at BHS for some time. In this study, caring for oneself is an element of the relationship students have with their advocate counselor that developed over time. Being known and feeling cared for both seem to be important precursors to students then being able to care about themselves.

I have outlined the elements of the relationship between an advocate counselor and student as I have discovered them in my interviews with students who graduated from BHS. The figure below (Figure 1) shows the elements of the relationship, the dimensions of each of those
elements, and the possible relationship between “I am known,” “I am cared for,” and “I care about myself.”

Figure 1: Relational elements and corresponding dimensions in a student/advocate counselor relationship. The arrows represent proposed connections between the elements.
The figure above, although preliminary, shows the three elements of a relationship between an advocate counselor and student. The elements “I am known” and “I am cared for” are situated across the top of the diagram and are mutually exclusive to and interacting together throughout the relationship. The arrow that joins “I am known” and “I am cared for” to “I care about myself” shows the possible relationship and linear connection between the elements. The proposal, as discussed above, is that “I am known” and “I am cared for” occur prior to and influence the element “I care about myself.”

**I Care About Myself**

As discussed above, a third element found in the relationship between an advocate counselor and a student occurs when students shift towards caring about themselves and their future. Prior to transferring to BHS, students described schools where they did not feel connected or cared for by the adults in the school. As a result, they stopped caring about their own success in school and either stopped going to school or disengaged to the point where they had fallen behind. Some of the students described that perceived lack of caring from adults as one reason they eventually left their former schools. I will start this chapter with some of the experiences that students describe from their former schools as a way of understanding what led students to stop caring about school. The students in this study did care about high school when they first entered their former schools—many of them say that they started off well and wanted to be successful, but eventually became less and less engaged along the way. Andrea, a student who transferred to BHS after two years of being in a school where she rarely went to class and, instead, hung out with friends in various “optional” periods throughout the day, felt this lack of caring even when she was trying to do better:

At my old high school I was late to English class and it was my first period class and I was always late. I would always be 20 minutes late. One day I finally came
and I was five minutes late and it was like the earliest I had ever been. She [the teacher] made the whole class clap because I was on time. She was like, “Look who's here,” and she had the whole class clap. I was like, "Fuck you." I walked out. You're not going to embarrass me and have the whole class clap for me like I'm a circus freak or something like that is incapable of coming to class on time. I need a whole applause because I finally done it, like I'm some retarded person or something that has achieved nothing? I was like, “I'm never coming to your class again. You don't have to do that.”

She goes on to explain that teachers in some classes would say that they did not care if students came to class or did assignments because, “They would still get paid anyway.” Andrea’s perception of how her teacher felt, meaning she did not care about the efforts that Andrea was making to get to class, led her to stop going to class—if teachers didn’t care, than she didn’t care. Her decision to never return to class because of the humiliation she felt as a “circus freak,” a “retarded person” and “something that has achieved nothing,” was a way of avoiding further humiliation. Her efforts to try hard to get to class earlier than she had ever gotten there were met with embarrassment and ridicule, leading her to decide to never return to class as a way at getting back at the teacher. There is a logic that leads to her self-destructive response of never returning to class that is not related to either her desire to want to be in class or her ability, but to the feelings she had about being humiliated in class. Those feelings came directly from the response she received from her teacher on a day when she had done better than any other day to get to class on time.

Other students described their lack of caring directly related to how they experience adults responding to them. Emily describes her preference at her former school to hang out in the hallways and play guitar. Teachers responded to Emily’s lack of motivation and interest to be in class by just leaving her alone, giving her the feeling that they had already given up on her. “At a certain point, they would stop telling me to get out of the hallway and go to class. They would be like, ‘That’s Emily.’” The perceived lack of interest in telling Emily to go to the class
left her out in the halls where she continued to miss class and fall behind—they did not care, so she stopped caring. Roberto’s perceived lack of caring from adults in his former school related to a lack of resources that he felt in the school. Roberto described his guidance counselor as just being too busy to pay attention to him. “My counselor wasn’t even a counselor. He would just advise my classes and that’s it. I don’t blame him. Dealing with 4,000 students is not an easy task. I can understand why an adult doesn’t want to interact with students anymore because they’re just tired and exhausted of dealing with maybe hundreds and hundreds of them.”

Roberto connects his guidance counselor’s inability to do anything else except “advise my classes” to the overwhelming number of students that he was responsible for in the school. The guidance counselor’s lack of time to see students and the perceived feeling that adults are “just tired and exhausted of dealing with maybe hundreds and hundreds of [students]” portrays and is experienced as a lack of caring. The lack of caring that students perceived in adults as they were leaving their former schools, whether it was as extreme as the experience Andrea describes or a systemic issue as Roberto describes, was still, after all of these years, very clear and present to this group of students.

The stories told by these former students who had been successful at BHS suggest that they started to act and think differently about themselves, school, and their progress when they started to care. This shift seemed to be the result of a supportive relationship with an advocate counselor that included elements of being known and being cared for. Several students repeated the notion, “If they care, I care,” as a way of describing the change they experienced. One student, in response to a question asking for advice to new advocate counselors, described this progression from being cared for to caring in the following way: “I would say to just, to care about them, show them that they care, and eventually they will just...eventually they’ll just do
everything because they’re going to see that they care.” The emphasis on “care about them” and “show them that they care” defines the role of the advocate counselor in not only caring for a student, but also showing the student that they (have the ability to) care about school and about themselves. Implicit in the phrase, “show them that they care,” is a belief that students may come to BHS not caring, but it may be the role of the advocate counselor to help them start to care. The moment that a student starts to “do everything,” which perhaps means do everything necessary to be successful and graduate, is when they “see that they [students] care.” The shift from a student being known and cared for by an advocate counselor to a student caring about themselves is seen in the changing behavior from doing what is presumably nothing or not enough to be successful in school to doing “everything.” Emily describes a process that she believes is how advocate counselor/student relationships work at BHS. She says, “It goes in steps...First, you have to get the kid to trust you and then trust your counselor and then you have to wean them off when they start to graduate. You have to be like, ‘I’m not going to be here. You have to learn to be self-sufficient.’” In a simple way, she is describing what she perceives should happen in a relationship between an advocate counselor and a student: Trust occurs between the advocate counselor and student that leads to a meaningful relationship, which then leads to letting the student go so they can be “self sufficient.” That corresponds to the importance of students starting to care about themselves because without that, without the ability to be “self sufficient” as Emily describes, leaving BHS may be challenging.

In a sense, students who had lost the ability to care about themselves because of experiences prior to BHS were able to again start caring about themselves as a result of feeling cared for. I will discuss three dimensions of students caring about themselves—changing
behavior in the student, changing relationship between the advocate counselor and the student, and the student’s changing view of themselves.

**Changing Behavior: “I Don’t Care” to “I Care”**

How a student felt cared for or noticed by both their advocate counselor and other adults in the school community impacted changes in student behavior. Anthony says, “This is hard to explain, but let’s just say everybody made you feel special, like you mattered, and that was important for me emotionally because then that made me want to be here even more. After a while, I started coming to school, I started feeling like I was real important.” He says this as part of a longer dialogue where he focuses on three specific people in school who made him feel this way—his advocate counselor, a math tutor, and the gym teacher. Over time, he developed a larger group of adults in the building, one of which was his advocate counselor, who supported him in ways that led to him caring about himself. Feeling “real important,” “special,” and “like you mattered” pushed Anthony to change his behavior and come to school more often. The connection between what he felt from this small group of adults, which are all dimensions of being known and cared for discussed earlier, and “made me want to be here even more” is one example of changing behavior related to how he felt known and cared for and then started caring about himself.

Andrea described a similar experience where caring from her advocate counselor, in particular, made her care, leading to better attendance and success in school. Andrea describes counselors as caring after having the experience that “nobody cares” in her previous school:

Once I came here it took me a month or two to transition, to finally get it in my head that this is what I want to do and I want to graduate. Because when you come here, ever since you do your interview, you can tell the counselors care. The questions that they ask you, they’re not only asking you about school and stuff like that, they ask you about your personal life. They’re trying to figure out
why you didn’t want to go to school, what was going on other than what was going on in the building. When you see that they care, you want to care.

Andrea begins this passage talking about her transition to BHS, which took “a month or two” before she decided, “I want to graduate.” She immediately points to the advocate counselor, who would spend time trying to “figure out why you didn’t want to go to school” as a way that she can “tell counselors care.” Asking about your “personal life” is another indicator for Andrea that her advocate counselor cares about her. Expressing an interest in students and wanting to know the whole person are dimensions of being known discussed earlier. Andrea responds to the advocate counselor’s efforts to get to know her, the whole person, and understand her and links that to being cared for. In contrast to her earlier description of a school where she felt nobody cared, so she didn’t care, Andrea cares here because her advocate counselor cares. She links being cared for to her advocate counselor asking her questions about school and her life outside of school. Her perception that her advocate counselor, by asking questions, is, “trying to figure out why you didn’t want to go to school, what was going on other than what was going on in the building” means that her advocate counselor cares. Andrea directly links being cared for by her advocate counselor to her own desire to “want to care.”

Sabrina linked the caring she felt from her advocate counselor to her beginning to care about herself. She described her advocate counselor in the following way: “I liked him from the beginning, but at the beginning I didn’t care. Sometimes I used to leave [school]. Then, later on I started actually caring about [my advocate counselor] too, about what he thought of me, because I saw that he cared about me. I think that’s also what made me not want to disappoint him.” Sabrina connects her advocate counselor’s caring to her wanting to do well in school for him, so she starts to care more about school. Not wanting to disappoint her advocate counselor meant that she would start caring about school, would come to school more often and stop
cutting. That shift in her behavior, because she started to care more about doing well in school, is the result of care she felt from her advocate counselor.

Terrence recalled a situation while he was attending BHS when he simply gave up and stopped coming to school. He had been coming to school and felt like he was not making progress in some of his classes, so he just stopped coming to school. He went in to what he terms, “shutdown mode.” Terrence is responding to a question about advice he would give to an advocate counselor who was just starting at BHS, but his advice is based on a personal situation he went through while at BHS:

I feel like the more you stay on top of a student and help a student out, no matter what...it could be an at-home problem, it could be an in-school problem, it could be an education problem, as long as you’re on top of the child, the student, I feel like the child will open up eventually and be productive, give you what you need, as well as going to get what the child needs. We need our diplomas. If I’m on shutdown mode and you’re on top of me, you’re trying to get me out. That’ll help me to get out of shutdown mode and to go get my diploma...When I was in shutdown mode for three months and not going to school, they was on top of me and they was calling me, and made me come back into school. Without that, I would still be there because I wouldn’t care.

Terrence had earlier described this time in school when he had gotten frustrated with his repeated failure in a certain class and decided not to come back to school. He returns to the same incident to emphasize that his advocate counselor staying on him during that time when he was on “shutdown mode” making him come back to school. Terrence describes being “on top of me” as the efforts of the advocate counselor to call him and make him come back to school. The term “on top of me” can be interpreted in a negative sense, although Terrence sees it as a positive because it showed him that his advocate counselor cares about him. Those extraordinary efforts, as described earlier, are linked to being cared for. With those efforts, Terrence was helped to “get out of shutdown mode and to go get my diploma.”
Terrence described an important aspect of the advocate counselor/student relationship as it shifts to students caring. Within the relationship, he says the role of the advocate counselor is to “stay on top of a student and help a student out, no matter what.” He is describing the elements of knowing and caring for students. Staying on top of a student expresses care and being there to help them out with an “at-home problem,” an in-school problem,” or an “education problem” expresses being known. If those elements are in place, he says, “I feel like the child will open up eventually and be productive, give you [the advocate counselor] what you need, as well as going to get what the child needs.” He includes in his description the student’s perspective of meeting the needs of the advocate counselor, “give you what you need,” as part or a consequence of meeting the needs of the student. This is related to Sabrina’s description that linked her perception that her advocate counselor cared to her “caring about what he thought of me,” which resulted in her doing better. Sabrina expresses that link between her starting to care and a desire to give her advocate counselor something by “not want[ing] to disappoint him.”

Nina described the morning routine that was the same every morning at BHS where advocate counselors greet students as they walk in to school. That routine meant for her that someone cared about her, which led to her wanting to care about how well she did in school. In contrast, the morning routine at her former school was about negotiating relationships with adults so that she could cut school:

Oh yeah, it completely took a whole different turn. I walked into school, the only people I was really cool with is security guards. “Hey, don't tell on me.” “Hey, be cool. I'll leave school.” . . . Here, it's more or less I came in here and they [advocate counselors] greet you as soon as you walked in the school. You see all the counselors there. When they don't see you, it's like, “Hey, where are you? I didn't see you this morning.” Sometimes it gets annoying but you know that you have somebody that cares for you and wants you to walk in. You want to stay and you want to do good for yourself. That's how I seen it after awhile. That's how I seen it.
The difference in relationships between adults in her former school and in BHS, represented by wanting to be “really cool” with security guards so that she could cut school versus wanting adults at BHS to notice her as she walks in to school and notice if she is missing, point to Nina’s different responses towards school. Being noticed, even though she says “sometimes it gets annoying,” meant for her that someone cared about her and wanted her to be in school, which made her want to be in school and do well. Nina changes her behavior from looking for ways to leave school undetected, as she describes in her former school, to making efforts to get to school every day because “you know that you have somebody that cares for you and wants you to walk in.” Adults in her former school were a way for her to escape school and be invisible without getting in trouble because being “cool” with security guards meant that she could say to them, “Hey, don’t tell on me.” Missing school at BHS, however, meant that an advocate counselor would notice and ask, “Hey, where are you?” That difference, in Nina’s description, is the difference between having an adult who would help you cut school and, in a sense, did not care whether you were there or not and an adult, her advocate counselor, who would “greet” her and notice if she was not in school, which she perceived as caring. Her advocate counselor looked for her and noticed when she was there and when she was not there. To Nina, that meant that her advocate counselor cares about her and wants her to be successful, which made her “want to stay and do good for herself.” Nina was “cool” with both the safety agents in her former school and her advocate counselor at BHS, but the difference in messages about whether they cared about her being in school led to her making different decisions about whether she would leave school for the day or stay and, ultimately, whether she cared about herself—“to do good for yourself”—or not.
Changing Relationship with Advocate Counselor

Students’ relationships with advocate counselors seem to change over time, from being more dependent to more independent, which indicates a shift towards students caring more about themselves. As students described this change, it seems to be a natural progression in the relationship and the result of being known and cared for. Students essentially step forward to take on more responsibility, sometimes in a conscious decision to prepare themselves for leaving high school and others in reaction to interactions they have with their advocate counselors.

Carolina describes the changing relationship that she had with her advocate counselor as important to starting to do things for herself. Her initial statement was a reflection on how her relationship with her advocate counselor changed over time. She says, “It’s hard because I feel like sometimes you have to set a boundary as an advocate counselor. You’re like their [students] parents, in a sense, but you can’t baby them to the point where, when you let them go, they can’t do anything on their own. I feel like she did that.” Carolina points to what she perceives to be a deliberate process that her advocate counselor did to help students develop independence. When she reflected on how her advocate counselor did that she said:

I just felt like she gave you the foot … she just put your foot in front for you and then you had to keep going. I felt like certain situations that I had, she gave me advice. It was up to you to then [to] do everything else. Every time we spoke about my credits and everything she was like, “If you get this, this and that, you’re getting here. If you don’t do that, that’s on you. I can only do so much,” which is true. An advocate counselor can’t pass your classes for you. They can’t go to school for you. You have to do things on your own. I think it’s a balance between being an advocate counselor, and being a little bit more than that, for certain students, if they have that kind of relationship. Here, I think everybody has that with their kids. I feel like it’s a balance.

Carolina described an advocate counselor relationship that includes some pushing from her advocate counselor and some acting on her part to accomplish what needs to be accomplished. Her description of the relationship being a “balance” allows for support from the advocate
counselor alongside the expectation that the student will take action. Carolina’s advocate counselor provides support, a picture of the reality of the situation, and the expectation that she do things on her own. Initially, she is provided with the tools to be successful and advice on how to do things, followed by an explanation of what the results might be. Her advocate counselor portrays that through, “If you get this, this and that, you’re getting here. If you don’t do that, that’s on you. I can only do so much.” Although the language, “If you don’t do that, that’s on you,” may sound harsh, Carolina responds that she knows it is “true.” She seems to appreciate the truth, a dimension of being cared for discussed earlier, and takes that to mean that sometimes you have to “do things on your own,” which reflects a shift to more independence.

Carolina uses the image of a foot and walking to describe the role of the advocate counselor in both supporting the student and letting them go to do things on their own. The counselor “put your foot in front for you” and the student “had to keep going.” In that image, the impression is not that the student is left alone to walk, but maintains contact as needed with the advocate counselor to get support. Pushing Carolina to do things on her own ultimately helped her do things on her own. The balance is perhaps an understanding on the part of the advocate counselor that students will be in different places about their readiness for independence and “if they have that kind of relationship” then that balance will exist. Emily used a similar metaphor when she described the importance of advocate counselors giving students space to try things on their own, while being there for the student in case they need you. “Knowing that [the advocate counselor] was there if you did need her, even though you don’t at the moment, like learning how to ride a bike. . . Your parents have to push you and then let go of the bike and then they just watch you. Then you know they’re fifty feet away if you need them. . . If you fall, they’ll come with a band aid, but you’re still riding the bike in the meantime.” The emphasis on trying
something new with the support of caring adults, much like what happens as relationships
between advocate counselors and students begin to shift from dependent to independent, is what
creates change in relationships that allows students to start doing things and caring for
themselves.

Maria described how her relationship changed with her advocate counselor, with turning
18 being the point at which her advocate counselor really started to treat her as, as she says, an
“adult:”

I also think once I was 18, it's different. When you have...an eighteen year old, it was kind of like well, I make the decision myself. I'm legal. I don’t even have to be here. I think that she was really trying to respect, treat me like an adult in a sense. If I needed someone to talk to, she was going to be there. If she thought it was an emergency, then she would involve my mom. If I wanted my mom to come, I would tell her. Maybe she would call my mom or something, but she always respected my feelings, my emotions, everything.

For Maria, turning eighteen indicated to her that she could “make the decision myself” about
whether she wanted to be in school or not. Her advocate counselor shifts, either consciously or
subconsciously, to accommodate Maria’s need to be treated “like an adult.” Maria described her
advocate counselor’s role as more student-directed than advocate counselor-directed. Maria
says, “If I needed someone to talk to, she was going to be there,” putting the oneness on Maria to
seek out the advocate counselor if she needed her. There seems to be an understanding between
Maria and her advocate counselor that decisions about how to handle situations are made
between the two of them. Involving Maria’s mom in a situation is either something Maria
“would tell her” to do or the advocate counselor would do in an “emergency.” These shifts in
the relationship show Maria’s growing independence in school and less dependence on her
advocate counselor and her shift to caring more about herself.
Roberto explained a similar change in his relationship with his advocate counselor over time, as he got closer to graduation from high school:

As I went on, I also had to realize that I needed to get ready to transition between high school and college. I don't want to say that I wanted to cut off relationships with the adults here, but I tried to become less dependent on them in a way because I know they won't be there when I'm in college. They are definitely going to be there always for emotional support, but they're not going to be there to help me out. They are not going to pull strings or see if we can talk to teachers to see if we can come to agreement because they won't be at my college.

Roberto’s realization that graduating from BHS and going to college meant that he would not physically have an advocate counselor there with him helped him to start thinking about changing his relationship with his advocate counselor. His decision to “become less dependent on them in a way because I know they won’t be there when I am in college” represents a change in what he needed from his advocate counselor as he prepared to leave school. That conscious change on his part represents a need and desire to take on more and become “less dependent,” which indicates caring more about himself. That decision to be less dependent as a way of preparing for what would happen in college was, for Roberto, what he needed towards the end of his time at BHS. As the other students described, Roberto’s desire is to maintain the “emotional support” and the connection to his advocate counselor and other “adults.” However, the reality that “they’re not going to be there to help me out” when he is in college pushes him to become more independent and care more about himself. Emily describes this shift earlier as how advocate counselors need to “wean” students as they get closer to graduation so that they can begin to take on things on their own, and care about themselves.

The changing relationship between a student and an advocate counselor seems to be a natural progression in the relationship that students have with their advocate counselor. The separation and independence that starts to occur in each of the relationships seems to be timely
and appropriate for where the student and the advocate counselor are in their relationship. Each one is about how the relationships change in response to students caring about themselves and acting in ways that show they care about themselves. The changing relationship in each of these examples seems to occur with a certain ease, indicating the appropriateness of the shift in the relationship for student and advocate counselor. It appears that these changes more likely occur towards the end of a student’s time at BHS, perhaps due to the amount of time that has passed and students feeling known and cared for.

**Changing View of Self**

Students at BHS describe how their view of self-changed while they were a student. A student’s changing view of self was sometimes related to something that the advocate counselor did or said, but was also attributed to a general feeling that students had in the school community. A student’s changing view of self seemed to more often occur after a relationship had been established with the advocate counselor through being known and cared for. All of the changes that students described in themselves were what they perceived to be in a positive direction. They described positive changes in self as a result of doing something in the school, as a result of knowing and having a relationship with their advocate counselor, and/or as a result of attending BHS. I will discuss each one of those as it relates to a changing view of self.

Omar’s advocate counselor allowed him and another student to run an activity in the biweekly group that consisted of Omar and other students on his advocate counselor’s caseload. That group meeting, which Omar says, “went perfect,” was a product of a discussion that the advocate counselor and group members had about ways to make group meetings more relevant to students. By allowing Omar to lead a group activity and group discussion, the advocate counselor set up an experience for Omar that made him feel more important. When asked about
how it made him feel different, he responded, “Very different. It made me feel like I had a purpose in here. Like what I was doing was actually worth it.” This is one example of many where a student was given a role that they found meaningful which, in turn, made them feel important or “like I had a purpose.”

Roberto reflected on how he not only changed as a student, but how he sees himself today and attributes much of that change to his advocate counselor. His advocate counselor, he says, modeled that for him:

She’s made me strong mentally and emotionally to deal with challenges that I face in college daily. I feel like she’s prepared me well for how I’m going to live for years to come. I am most grateful to her for that.

Lainey: Can you think of how she did that?

Like I said, her experiences. She was a valedictorian. She got into a good college and I want that for myself. I’m like, my advocate counselor looks like a person that she’s happy with who she is and how her life is turning out. She went to [a state college]. She got her degree. She’s working here and she’s happy. She looks genuinely happy. . . If I want to become a teacher because I want to teach [and] because I want to become an important figure like [my advocate counselor] has become to me, I feel like that will be self-satisfying to me and in turn make me happy.

Roberto connected his interactions with his advocate counselor, what he knows about her, and what he has observed to something that he wants to achieve in his life. His statement that, “She’s made me strong mentally and emotionally to deal with challenges that I face in college daily,” describes the impact that his advocate counselor had on him, continues to have on him, and will have on him “for years to come.” That impact, Roberto says, pushes him to “want to become a teacher because I want to teach” and pushes him to “become an important figure” for a student, perhaps, “like [my advocate counselor] has become to me.” Roberto’s focus on what he sees visually, meaning his advocate counselor looks “genuinely happy” and what he knows about his advocate counselor because she has shared details about her life with him combine to give
him a visible model for himself. The advocate counselor may not have set out to do that for him, but through the interactions with his advocate counselor that helped him feel known and cared for, Roberto creates a new view of himself and his future self.

Often, in response to a final question in the interview that asked students to share anything else that they would like to share about their experiences not yet shared, students would talk about their own transformation. Andrea, in a final reflection of what BHS meant for her describes her transformation:

When you think about a transfer school you automatically think truant student, you think kids that have messed up and drop outs and drug addicts and that's not what BHS is. BHS has so many people that can really make a difference. The students that are in BHS, they're the future. They're the ones that [are] going to become the doctors and scientists and this and that. They're not just going to become nothing. If it wasn't for BHS, you don't know how many of us would have become nothing. Not only BHS, if it wasn't for a transfer school. If it wasn't for a place that we could go and feel as if somebody cares and feels as if you can do it and you can succeed, without that, some of us might not have found that elsewhere. BHS was our one place to find that and really be able to- it was our last chance. It was my last chance. If it wasn't for BHS, I don't think I ever would have graduated. I think I would have got my GED then I think I would be working minimum wage jobs for the rest of my life. Now, I have that mindset that every day I want better. And that's what you learn from BHS. Every day you can get better. That's it basically.

Andrea begins this passage with an assumption that “you,” perhaps meaning people in general, think about kids who attend transfer schools are “messed up,” “drop outs,” and “drug addicts.” That description provides some insight into how students such as Andrea may have viewed themselves prior to entering BHS—they were the students that did not attend school and were not earning credits—and how they felt labeled as a group. Feeling labeled as a “dropout” and “drug addict,” but ending up a graduate despite the labels that were placed on her, gave Andrea a whole different view of herself. Andrea’s emphasis on the role that BHS played in her life and the life of other students as a transformative place where she went from not believing that she
could graduate from high school to not only graduating, but having a “mindset that every day I want better.” For her, BHS took her from a place where she and many others believed that they might “become nothing” to graduation and having ambitions beyond graduation. She describes the environment of BHS as one where “somebody cares and feels as if you [the student] can do it and you can succeed.” Through that support and caring, she describes her feeling of moving from “nothing” to a belief that “every day can get better.”

The role of the advocate counselor in this transformation can be seen in the line, “If it wasn’t for a place that we could go and feel as if somebody cares and feels as if you can do it and you can succeed.” Those are all words that Andrea and others have used to describe their advocate counselors, and that is what she points to as the reason for her transformation in caring about herself. Andrea’s transformation is particularly meaningful given her earlier description of an interaction with a teacher in her former school that left her feeling like “something that has achieved nothing.” Her statement, “If it wasn't for BHS, you don't know how many of us would have become nothing,” contrasts how she felt coming in to BHS and how she feels after attending and graduating from BHS. Her transformation is about going from feeling like “nothing” to feeling like “I want better.”

Summary

In this chapter, I presented the third element, Caring About Myself, in the relationship between an advocate counselor and student and developing theory about how being known and feeling cared for are precursors to students caring about themselves. As discussed in the beginning of this chapter, the dimensions that define students caring about themselves include the following: change in actions and behaviors from “I don’t care” to “I care,” changing relationships with advocate counselors from dependent to more independent, and a changing
view of self. These dimensions seem to come about after a student has formed a relationship with their advocate counselor and feels known and cared for. Moving towards I care occurs because students say that their advocate counselor cares for them.

One final consideration about the relationship between the three elements in a student/advocate counselor relationship that I will end with is the relationship that exists between the dimensions of the elements. The dimensions that define “I am known”—they are there, they respond to me, they want to know me—are dependent on the counselor to act on the student and are generally counselor-led. The dimensions that define “I am cared for”—authenticity, trust, mutual sharing, and extraordinary actions—are dependent on the student and advocate counselor acting in relation to each other. The dimensions of “I care about myself”—changing student behavior, changing relationship with advocate counselor, and changing view of self—are dependent on the student leading the actions, while the advocate counselor offers support. Perhaps the relationship between the dimensions and the changing role of the advocate counselor and student in each of these gives some evidence towards the relationship among the three elements discussed earlier.
CHAPTER VII: CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Students in this study described feelings about their advocate counselor that I found at times surprising and unexpected because they portrayed such deep meanings about a relationship that occurred in a school three to five years ago. Most of the students had not seen their advocate counselor since graduation, although the relationship still seemed to carry weight and meaning for them. Those that are in contact with their advocate counselor described an easy, family-like relationship that they maintained mostly through text messages and phone calls, or on social media. All of the students expected that a reunion with their advocate counselor would be positive and they repeatedly returned to the theme of not being forgotten by their advocate counselor or by the school. The students experiences at BHS and with their relationships with their advocate counselors, although not part of their present lives, continues to shape them. As someone who has worked in a similar model transfer school and witnessed the graduation of several hundred students, my understanding of the possible meaning of a student/advocate counselor relationship has expanded after conducting this study.

As I stated earlier, I started this inquiry thinking that there exists some set of interventions that adults could do to form more meaningful and supportive relationships with students. Much like Carlos said in the first interview that I conducted, I thought that if I could identify how adults could act in different ways, then those actions could be applied in other relationships between advocate counselors and students, and more meaningful relationships with students would follow. There is literature that supports adults doing things differently in schools to help students belong and feel cared for—like listening to them, knowing their name, being honest and dependable, and respecting them (Finn, 1989; Rodriguez, 2008; Tillery et al., 2013; Wallace et al., 2012). However, as Noddings explains, being someone who cares does not
always mean that the connections that need to occur to develop a caring relationship actually happen if both people in the relationship are not willing (Noddings, 2005). I have found that a meaningful relationship with an advocate counselor means much more than what is said or done by the advocate counselor; it is about the interactions and experiences that happen *between* the advocate counselor and the student that create the important feelings that these students describe of being known and feeling cared for. The key to the relationships in this study are both the willingness of adults and students to participate in a relationship and the adult acting in certain ways that encourage the knowing of students and the caring of students, which in turn led to students caring about themselves. The implications for work in schools and work with adolescents and, specifically, relationship building between an adult and a student, are discussed below.

**More Questions: Relational Process**

Through this study, I have found that the relational process between an advocate counselor and a student consists of three elements—being known, being cared for, and caring about myself. In this analysis, a theory of how a meaningful relationship between an advocate counselor and student has begun to emerge. Although not fully explored in this study, there is some evidence that an important relationship exists among those three elements that is related to time and depth of experiences in the relationship. Students describe interactions where the advocate counselor took the time to learn things about them, like their favorite color or their favorite sports team, as occurring early on in their relationship. Knowing things, always being around and responding in the *right* way seems to form a foundation for being cared for. Feeling cared for, which occurs through authenticity and trust, mutual sharing, and extraordinary actions, led to what seem to be deeper conversations about more personal things and a more authentic
and open relationship. Being cared for then led to students caring about themselves and acting in ways that showed they cared. That progression appears to be somewhat linear, but may also be more circular, allowing for all elements to occur throughout the relationship.

The dimensions that operationalize the elements in the relationship between a student and an advocate counselor also show some evidence of growth over time. As discussed at the end of Chapter 6, those dimensions shift from counselor-directed actions to actions that are mutual, to actions that are more student-directed. For example, the dimensions of being known, which include knowing things about students, responding to their needs, and seeing them are predominantly actions that the advocate counselor does to know the student. An advocate counselor knows a student’s favorite color because they show an interest and ask the student, and remember what the student says. When students perceive that they are cared for, interactions and mutual exchanges are dimensions of being cared for. As students start to care about themselves, actions are more student-directed. This may be an indication that there is a deeper relationship between the three elements that shows relationships between students who are successful at BHS and their advocate counselors work best when all three of the elements exist in the relationship.

One question that I am left with is: What is the relationship, if any, between these three elements? Each element seems to build on the previous element and within each one are what seem to be different required levels of trust and openness for the student and the advocate counselor. The elements all seem to be inter-related in a somewhat linear way, though one does not replace the other as the relationship develops. For example, being known does not become less important because a student feels cared for or starts to care about herself or himself. There may also exist a fluidity among these elements that allows the relationship between an advocate
counselor and student to flow between being known and feeling cared for. The connection between the three elements and the building of one upon the other show a possible progression on the relationship between an advocate counselor and student that needs further study. The diagram of relational elements (Figure 1) shown in Chapter 6 tentatively lays out some of the relationships between and among the elements. Thus far, this study has shown that *I am Known* and *I am Cared for* are potential precursors to *I Care About Myself*. I imagine that there may also be arrows that run between *I am Known* and *I am Cared for* that run in both directions, illustrating the reliance of each on the other.

**Implications for Practice in Schools**

In this study, student voices illuminated the importance of relationships with advocate counselors in the lives of young people in high school. They all describe relationships with advocate counselors that are important, meaningful, authentic, and supportive. This, I believe, can be generalized and applied to all adults working in schools as an additional way to support students. For schools, especially schools working with marginalized youth, opportunities for students to have relationships with adults in a way that is not scripted, but involves meaningful interactions and the time to develop a connection may help with the engagement and success of students. The students in this study identify the following as being important in their relationships: (1) they know things about me because they are interested in *me*, (2) they see me because they are available and present in school (3) they respond to me in ways that are meaningful, (4) they do extraordinary things, (5) they share personal information with me about themselves, and (6) the relationship is authentic and based on trust. Each of these constructions offers some ways in to developing meaningful relationships with adults. I expand on each
construction to give some ways in which we can start to think differently about developing relationships with students in schools.

Knowing things about students by taking an interest in them, by asking them about their life outside of school, and by finding ways to connect with them are all ways that students felt known. Although a favorite color or a favorite sports team may seem unimportant in a high school setting, knowing those personal things creates a way for students to connect to adults and can be a “hook” for students to start to build a relationship with an adult. It also communicates to students than an adult is interested in them and wants to know them. For overage, under-credited students who have spent most of their high school years on the margins, being known offers a way for them not only not to be invisible in school, but to be a student who is worthy of being known and being cared about and has the capacity to care about themselves. Being known by an adult enables students to begin to reimagine themselves as, perhaps, a student who belongs in school and can be successful in school, as the participants in this study expressed.

Adult presence in spaces that are traditionally reserved for students in schools, when reclaimed as shared spaces for students and adults, creates more opportunities for positive interactions to occur between students and adults. It also conveys to students that adults want to be there in those spaces with them. The students in this study expected to see their advocate counselor in the foyer in the morning, in the cafeteria at lunch, and in classrooms and hallways throughout the day. That, coupled with the open access to advocate counselors throughout the day as needed, creates a culture that adults are there for students and adjust to meet their needs so that they students can be successful. This re-imagined role for adults recalls the role of the visiting teacher in schools at the turn of the 20th century discussed earlier. Visiting teachers spent time getting to know students and their community by being in spaces where students and
their families lived (Knupfer, 1999). Most of the students in this study associated the counselor in their previous schools with an office and a desk and, therefore, only saw them a few times. A re-configuring of space in schools, and perhaps a re-configuring of offices, to allow for adult and student interactions outside of classrooms and offices sends a visual message that hallways and the cafeteria, for example, are additional spaces for student/adult interactions. Adults in schools can begin to play a different role, not as an enforcer of rules, but as a participant, in the cafeteria and other places as a way to expand their interactions with all students and create informal interactions and build relationships.

Students at BHS want to be responded to by adults in ways that meet their needs in specific situations that are based on being known. For example, being angry in school required different interventions for every student in this study and each responded to interventions from their advocate counselor because they knew what they needed—space, a conversation, a walk outside, or a place to calm down. For adults working in schools, that has two implications for working with students. First, knowing students means that in any given situation, the response used with the student is one that fits the student and the situation because an adult knows them. Second, knowing students means that individual situations, especially negative ones, do not define and label students forever. The perception of students in this study was that advocate counselors knew them outside of one bad day or one negative interaction. They were defined by the multitude of interactions that students had with advocate counselors, not by one bad day.

Adult responses to situations with students need to include unexpected and extraordinary actions. Unexpected actions for the students in this study, like looking for a student at their house when they are not in school or following them down the street when they cut school, often led to the student responding, “They must care.” Those instances that many of the students
described as “annoying” and were probably perceived as negative in their former schools, were perceived as care. Adults who have relationships with students are able to be “annoying” and have it perceived as care. Adults acting in ways that go above and beyond what might have been experienced or expected by students in school settings sets those adults apart from what students expect. Adults who go beyond the expectation and exhaust all efforts to support students are linked to meaningful relationships.

Relationships in schools between adults and students need to be authentic and real, based on trust and genuine interactions with students, while also including some mutual sharing between the adult and student. Students who felt known and cared for in this study also felt like they knew things about their advocate counselor because their advocate counselor also shared things with them. Mutual sharing creates a relationship that operates in both directions and is much more real than some of the other relationships student describe with adults in former schools. Although there are no specific guidelines for what mutual sharing between an advocate counselor and student consists of, students do say to not share anything “too personal” as a way of describing a boundary that needs to exist. Students in this study found meaningful interaction with adults when they discussed shared experiences, paths to college and career, and shared likes and dislikes. Adults in schools need to include some aspect of mutual sharing in their relationships with students.

If we rethink how relationships with students develop in schools as related to a process instead of just linked to a set of things that adults do, relationships with students may also start to feel more authentic for adults in schools. Relationships with students that are based on an understanding that relationships take time and are unique to each individual student have the possibility of being more meaningful for adults and students. My theory is that when students
feel known and cared for, adults in the relationship also fell known and cared for because of the mutual sharing in the relationship.

**Implications for Transfer Schools**

Transfer schools were created to work exclusively with students who are considered overage and under-credited and have either disengaged or dropped out of high school. The connection to an advocate counselor is one of the five principles of the model for the transfer school discussed in this study. Students in this study, who were all successful at BHS and all said they had meaningful relationships with their advocate counselor, provide a deeper understanding of what happens in the relationship between an advocate counselor and student to create meaningful relationships. Adults working in transfer schools, by emphasizing relationships with students and taking care to make sure students feel known and cared for, can perhaps impact a student’s success and ultimate graduation. All adults working in a transfer school can apply the elements of a relationship between an advocate counselor and student found in this study. Opportunities for the development and support of those relationships between students and advocate counselors (and teachers and administrators) should be supported in transfer schools and built in to the institutional structures, if they do not already exist.

Relationships with students should be central to the other work that happens in a transfer school.

Training for adults in transfer schools about the meanings that students in a transfer school assigned to actions that adults took and ways that adults interacted with students could help deepen the understanding and help adults think differently about the process of a relationship with a student. The importance of knowing and caring for students, seeing the clues in a relationship that show that knowing and caring is happening, and responding in ways that deepen the relationship are all important to creating a meaningful relationship. Raising the
awareness of adults in schools to understand the benefit to students when they perceive that they are known and cared for may impact how students succeed in schools.

**Implications for Social Work**

The traditional role of the social worker in school has remained virtually unchanged in the past twenty years as seen in nationwide surveys of school social workers (Kelly et al., 2016, 2010). Social workers continue to do less preventive work with students than any other type of work with students in schools, although they express an interest and desire to do more. With the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001, school social workers in many states were mandated to implement evidence-based practices that have pulled them further away from preventive work (Avant & Lindsey, 2015). Placing relationships with students at the center of work with students in schools means shifting some of the ways that social workers work in schools. I often think about Maria’s comment that if there had been an adult in her former school that she could talk to, then she wouldn’t have needed a transfer school. An important role of social workers in schools is to identify students like Maria who need an adult to talk to so that more of them can be successful in school. This study provides some evidence that students in schools who are on the verge of disengaging from school may benefit from a relationship with a social worker in school who knows them and cares for them and that more resources should be put into those students.

Aside from the traditional school social worker, partnerships between social service agencies and school districts that bring more agency staff into school buildings during the school day to work with students would provide more opportunities for students to connect with an adult in school. As it stands in New York City, most guidance counselors and social workers have more students on caseloads than they can actually meet with—some carry caseloads of 300
to 400 students (New York City Comptroller, 2012)—and often the work of guidance counselors and social workers is directed by state and federal mandates. Adding social service agency staff in the form of advocate counselors to work directly with students in school, especially for youth who have disengaged and are in the process or at risk of disengaging from school, would fill a gap, the need for relationships with adults, that is identified by the students in this study. This need for adult relationships calls for a restructuring of the school/social service agency relationship and a commitment from the profession to train more social workers to work in less traditional roles in schools.

**Implications for Further Research**

The relationship between a student and an advocate counselor in a transfer school consists of both what adults do in the relationship and what the interactions are between the student and the advocate counselor. The existence of both of those is necessary for students to feel known and cared for, which I posit is then related to students caring about themselves. The students in this study all said, prior to participating in an interview, that the relationship they had with their advocate counselor was meaningful while they were at BHS. I purposefully went in to this study to look at meaningful relationships between advocate counselors and students to discover what was happening in those relationships from the perspective of the student. While I was able to tentatively lay out a set of elements that occur in the relationship that each student described with their advocate counselor, I did not explore the student perspective in relationships with advocate counselors that did not work. Understanding the student perspective in those relationships may help to further define the student/advocate counselor relationship by uncovering elements that were perhaps missing in those relationships. There may exist some “best match” that can be identified with further research on various types of relationships.
between particular kinds of advocate counselors. Identifying students who were not successful at BHS would help deepen the understanding of the elements of a student/advocate counselor relationship and the “missing” elements as a way of understanding what students need, but did not get.

Another area not explored in this study that might provide further insight into the advocate counselor/student relationship is the advocate counselor perspective. As mentioned earlier, there are a few studies that look at the advocate counselor/student relationship from the perspective of the advocate counselor (i.e., Eskolta School Research and Design, 2013; Tapper et al., 2015), although none that ask specifically about individual relationships with students. The adult perspective, especially when limited to a relationship with one particular student, would help deepen the understanding of the whole relationship. A study that explores a meaningful relationship between an advocate counselor and a student that allows for both perspectives, much like the mentor/mentee interviews conducted by Jean Rhodes and Renee Spencer, would provide insight on the important interactions that occur between them and what those interactions mean to each participant in the relationship (Rhodes, 2008).

**Conclusion**

I return again and again to some of these successful students’ descriptions of their advocate counselor while they were in Brooklyn High School. They all spoke about them in positive ways, using words like “friendly,” “passionate,” “honest,” “caring,” “fun,” and many others to describe their initial and ongoing impressions. The students also all described multiple important conversations that they were able to have with their advocate counselors about things like girlfriends, boyfriends, family, death, and drug use. They also described situations that were difficult with their advocate counselor and where they got angry and frustrated. The presence of
an advocate counselor in school for students like the ones in this study was essential, I would say, to the success of the students. Applying relational theory and an ethic of care to an important student/adult relationship calls for a re-thinking of the purpose and roles that adults play in the lives of young people, especially those who are marginalized in schools.
Appendix A: Interview Guide

Name___________________________  Current Age________________

Ethnicity________________________  Graduation Year______________________

Introduction:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study. The purpose of this study is to learn about the relationship between a student and an Advocate Counselor in a transfer school. I will ask you a series of questions, but am really interested in hearing from you what you believe was important about the relationship you had with you Advocate Counselor and about what they did that was important to you in being successful in school.

The information collected in these interviews will be use in my dissertation. The question I am trying to answer is: What is key in the relationship between a student and an Advocate Counselor that help transfer school students be successful in school?

I would like to record this interview with your permission.

Your answers will be confidential and your name will not be used in the publication of my dissertation. Information will only be shared if you disclose that you are being harmed by someone else or would like to harm yourself.

Questions:

1. First, I would like you to talk about the decision you made to transfer to the school you graduated from?
   What was not going well for you in your previous high school?

   What prompted you to make a change?

2. What was your relationship with adults in your previous high school?
   Are there specific examples of positive interactions? Who?

   Are there specific examples of negative interactions? Who?

3. What did you find different about the transfer school?

4. Can you describe the first time you met your Advocate Counselor?
   What were your first impressions?

   What was the situation?
5. How often did you see/interact with your Advocate Counselor?
   How did these interactions come about?
   Were there interactions that were especially productive? Which ones? Can you describe one of them?

6. How would you describe your Advocate Counselor?

7. How would you describe your relationship with your Advocate Counselor?

8. How do you imagine they would describe the relationship?

9. How would you describe your Advocate Counselor’s relationship with your parent/guardian?
   Did this change the relationship you had with your parent/guardian? How?

10. In the relationship with your Advocate Counselor, what important things did they do that made you feel supported? Use specific examples.

11. In the relationship with your Advocate Counselor, what important things did they do or say that made you feel like they cared for you?

12. What did your Advocate Counselor do that was important to you in helping you feel successful in school?

13. What is your most memorable moment with your Advocate Counselor?

14. Think about a time when your Advocate Counselor was especially helpful. What happened?
   What did they say that was helpful?
   What did they do that was helpful?

15. Think about a time when your Advocate Counselor helped you resolve a problem. What happened?
   What did they say that was helpful?
   What did they do that was helpful?
16. Think about a time when you and your Advocate Counselor had a disagreement—or had a difference of opinion. Tell me about what happened. How did you resole the disagreement?

Was this different than in other high schools you have been in?

17. What, if any, decisions have you made since graduating from high school that are the result of your relationship with your Advocate Counselor?

18. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

19. Do you have any questions for me?

Thank you for your participation.
Appendix B: Participant Release Agreement

![Hunter College Logo]

**Department of Social Welfare**

**CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH PROJECT**

**Project Title:** What is a Positive Adult? Student Perspectives on the Meaning of Adult Relationships in a Transfer High School

**Principal Investigator:** Lainey Collins, Graduate Student, Hunter College Silberman School of Social Work 212.396.7526 scollins@gc.cuny.edu

**Faculty Advisor:** Deborah Tolman, Professor of Social Welfare & Psychology Hunter College & The CUNY Graduate Center Silberman School of Social Work 2180 3rd Avenue, Room 423 New York, NY 10035 212.396.7526 dtolman@hunter.cuny.edu

**Site where study is to be conducted:** Good Shepherd Services/South Brooklyn Community High School, Red Hook, Brooklyn

**Introduction/Purpose:** You are invited to participate in a research study. The study is conducted under the direction of Lainey Collins, a graduate student at Hunter College School of Social Work. The purpose of this research study is to learn more about the relationship between Advocate Counselors and students while attending South Brooklyn Community High School. The results of this study may help to further understand the meaning of the relationship of the student and the Advocate Counselor in a transfer school.

**Procedures:** Approximately 12 - 15 individuals are expected to participate in this study. Each subject will participate in one interview. The time commitment of each participant is expected to be approximately 60-90 minutes. Each interview will take place at Good Shepherd Services in Red Hook, Brooklyn. The audio portion of each interview will be digitally recorded with the consent of the participant to be later used for transcription and data analysis.

**Possible Discomforts and Risks:** Your participation in this study may involve possible identification of you as a former student at South Brooklyn Community High School. To minimize these risks, your name will not be used on any documents or recordings related to this research. Other identifying information such as your year of graduation or the name of your Advocate Counselor will not be recorded or used to further protect your identity.

**Benefits:** There are no direct benefits from this study. However, participating in the study may increase general knowledge of overage, under-credited students and what is important to them in relationships with adults in school.

**Voluntary Participation:** Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you may decide not to participate without prejudice, penalty, or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you decide to leave the study, please contact the principal investigator, Lainey Collins, to inform her of your decision. Deciding not to participate in this study in no way impacts any present or future affiliation with any programs at Good Shepherd Services.
Confidentiality: The audio portion of your interview will be collected via digital recording with your consent. The collected data will be accessible to Lainey Collins (Principal Investigator) and Deborah Tolman (Faculty Advisor). The researcher will protect your confidentiality by coding the data and removing all identifying names. The collected data will be transcribed for data purposes and stored without identifying names on a personal computer that the PI only has access to. Data will be password protected and will be stored for a minimum of three years.

You will have the opportunity, if requested, to review, edit, and/or erase the recording of your interview prior to the analysis of your interview. Please indicate your desire to review recordings by checking the "yes" or "no" box below.

Contact Questions/Persons: If you have any questions about the research now or in the future, you should contact the Principal Investigator, Lainey Collins, at scollins@gc.cuny.edu or 212.817.8905. If you have any questions concerning your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact the Hunter College Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) at 212.650.3053 or hrpp@hunter.cuny.edu.

Statement of Consent:
I have read the above description of this research and I understand it. I have been informed of the risks and benefits involved, and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. Furthermore, I have been assured that any future questions that I may have will also be answered by the Principal Investigator of the research study. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

By signing this form I have not waived any of my legal rights to which I would otherwise be entitled.

I will be given a copy of this statement.

☐ I give consent for this interview to be audio-recorded. yes ☐ no

☐ I would like to review any recordings of this interview and have the opportunity to edit and/or erase before it is transcribed and analyzed yes ☐ no

Printed Name of Subject ___________________________ Signature of Subject ___________________________ Date Signed ___________________________

Printed Name of Person Explaining Consent Form ___________________________ Signature of Person Explaining Consent Form ___________________________ Date Signed ___________________________

Printed Name of Investigator ___________________________ Signature of Investigator ___________________________ Date Signed ___________________________

CUNY UI - Institutional Review Board
Approval Date: March 07, 2014
Expiration Date: March 06, 2015
Coordinator Initials: [Signature]
Appendix C: Initial Codes

• I know people
• I am known
• Someone is always there
• I have support
• They are “on my back”
• I want to do well
• Formal meetings and interactions
• Informal meetings and interactions
• They approach me
• They are approachable
• Meet different needs at different times
• Family—feel like part of a family
• Business vs. personal
• Respond to my needs
• They are like an “angel”
• Made me not give up
• Never gave up on me
• Something “clicked”
• They care about me
Appendix D: Approval to conduct research at Good Shepherd Services

REQUEST FOR APPROVAL TO CONDUCT AN EVALUATION AT GOOD SHEPHERD SERVICES

Applicant Name: Lainey Collins
Date: January 22, 2013

School Name: CUNY Graduate Center
Degree Sought: PhD/Social Welfare

Name of Project: What is a Positive Adult? The Meaning of Advocate Counselor Relationships to Transfer High School Graduates (working title)

GSS Program/Site Involved: West Brooklyn Community High School (graduates)

Proposed Start Date: Winter 2012 – Spring 2013

Nature of Prior Contact with GSS Program (e.g., as staff, volunteer, participant, intern)
I am the Director of North Queens Community High School, a transfer school that follows the same model as GSS transfer schools.

Project Abstract. Please summarize of the purpose, methods, and benefits of the proposed project. Studies not solely involving a review of case records much address any risks, alternatives, and participant right to refuse without consequence.

The Advocate Counselor in transfer schools that operate under the GSS Transfer School Model provide students with a positive adult; this is one of the principles of Positive Youth Development and, from my perspective, an extremely important aspect of the school model. The purpose of this proposed project is to look deeper at the relationship between an Advocate Counselor and student in a transfer school to begin to understand what happens, from the perspective of the student, that is meaningful and leads to their success. The hope is that understanding the relationship from the students’ perspective will help identify ways that Advocate Counselors can work with students to promote positive relationships.

The proposed project is a qualitative study based in grounded theory. I would like to interview 12 – 15 graduates of West Brooklyn Community who have graduated in the past three years, who demonstrated steady progress while at school, and who identify the relationship with their Advocate Counselor as one reason why they were successful. Graduates will be interviewed only if they consent to the interview and their identity will be kept confidential.

The proposed project seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How does a positive relationship between an Advocate Counselor and student work?
2. What happens, as identified by students, in the relationship between an Advocate Counselor and student that is important in contributing to their success?
GSS Evaluation Request Form – 04/11

The proposed project would involve identifying graduates since the 2008 – 2009 school year that made steady progress at school (maintained above average attendance and above average credit accumulation) and identify their Advocate Counselor as one reason why they were successful. From that group, purposive sampling will be used to identify graduates for interviews. Graduates will be interviewed using a semi-structured format.

**Contribution to Agency Mission.** Please describe how this project will assist with the mission of Good Shepherd Services?

This proposed project seeks to deepen the understanding of the relationship between an Advocate Counselor and a student in transfer schools and provide a student perspective on that relationship. Having a better understanding about what works in that relationship will help to work with students in transfer schools in ways that better contribute to their success.

**Do you agree to the following:**

- To attach a copy of your complete proposal, including [IRB materials](#), and any instrument(s) to be used (Note: Verification of IRB approval required prior to commencement of data collection.)
  - Yes

- To have no evaluation activity that is not described in your proposal.
  - Yes

- To ensure that there is no adverse consequence to participants who do not agree to participate.
  - Yes

- To speak immediately to your GSS supervisor if any adverse consequences occur as a result of the evaluation.
  - Yes

- To provide Good Shepherd Services with a copy of your final project prior to submission to your school and make yourself available to present findings to GSS staff.
  - Yes

Signature: Lainey Collins 
Date: January 22, 2013

Review by GSS staff: [Signature] 
Date: [Signature] 22/13
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