

The role of support advocates: A case study

by

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B.S., Texas A&M University, 2007
M.P.H, Grand Canyon University, 2014
M.Ed., Wichita State University, 2018

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

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College of Education

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Manhattan, Kansas

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Abstract

This qualitative case study examined the role of three support advocates in an urban middle school setting when working with tier 3 students. Support advocates are support staff members who work with a specific caseload of students- identified because they are at risk of early drop out from high school- but defining their role as a wraparound intervention is necessary because of this approach to an intervention outside of the classroom setting. Bronfenbrenner's Socio-Ecological Framework and the Self-Advocacy Theory grounded this work, supporting the premise that a student's environment (and the adults within it) can have effects on their growth and development. Through semi-structured interviews of support advocates and six students, field observations, and online surveys submitted by 16 teachers of the students, the role of support advocates and their potential outcomes with students was investigated as an MTSS-like strategy of support (i.e. Multi-Tiered System of Supports). Data suggested support advocates provide varying support to multiple stakeholders including academic, behavioral, and social interventions. Findings suggested support advocates may be an effective arm of schoolwide improvement and intervention programs. The key findings of this study will allow educational practitioners and school and district leaders MTSS intervention evidence for student supports outside of the classroom.

Key words: socio-emotional; support advocate; Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS);

Response to Intervention (RTI); relationships; intervention

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Approved by:

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to the three most influential people in my life who have developed me as a scholar:

First, my grandmother Maxine Britt Johnson, who took her last breath during my first semester of my doctoral program. Her effortless wisdom and unwavering encouragement helped to establish the tenacious learner I am today.

Secondly, my mother Cheryl Chambliss, who mandated learning, offering it not as a choice but as a necessity to validate to the world what she always knew within our home: that I was smart and worthy to be listened to. Book reports during the summers of my childhood were foundational to the writing of this work today.

Finally, to my husband Brandon Redic. Brandon is my cheerleader and fiercest supporter, carrying the mantle from my mother and grandmother. He not only expects a lot of me but gives more than he expects. He has sacrificed the most for this work to be completed and I am nothing without him.

Preface

“...the tough ones show up for a reason, it’s the connection...every child deserves a champion...who...insists that they become the best that they can possibly be...”

Rita Pierson

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Though several efforts at school reform have been implemented, little has been done to improve high school graduation rates (Hayes et al., 2002). The goals of education reform are student retention through K-12 schools, graduation from high school, and post-secondary success as in gainful employment or completion of college or trade school (Lawson & Lawson, 2013). However, a component of education reform includes how educators within and around the classroom respond to students and how they create a warm and welcoming school environment (Sanders et al., 2018). The school environment is one institution that establishes the student's social capital, which is their collections of institutional experiences that determine their social standing, social understanding, and social decision making (Croninger & Lee, 2001). Acknowledging social capital is necessary for school success, many staff members contribute to the environment and social experience of students, including counselors, administrators, clerical and custodial staff, and support staff (Croninger & Lee, 2001).

A staff member, or advocate, can be an essential piece of creating a warm environment for students (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Klem & Connell, 2004). There is an extensive amount of research that supports the teacher's role in establishing a student's social capital and thus engagement in school, but other staff members outside of teachers play a role in advocating for and working with students toward success (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Klem & Connell, 2004; Khalifa, 2013; McLaughlin & Clarke, 2010). School reform conversations have thus widened to include not only performance on high stakes tests but the intangibles such as relationship building between staff and students, and the deepened agency for students (Khalifa, 2013; McLaughlin & Clarke, 2010).

The conversation concerning education reform is a continuous discourse among policy makers and elected officials, educational scholars, and practitioners. Updates to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) through No Child Left Behind (NCLB) enacted in the early 2000s allowed schools to use a portion of their special education funding to provide students tiered interventions based on test performance before they were referred for special education testing (Stephens et al., 2000). Advances and improvements to NCLB through the Every Student Succeeds Acts (ESSA) under President Obama added expectations but maintained testing demands to determine academic readiness (U. S. Department of Education, 2015). However, the increased accountability of student academic success expected and measured through high stakes testing has shown some increased student test anxiety (Segool et al., 2013). To address changing student mental health needs, including testing anxiety and disengagement- or misbehaviors that result due to rigorous (seemingly unattainable) academic standards- schools often employ an interventionist approach (Oxley, 2016). With this approach a team of specialists and/or a single staff member manages student intervention needs.

With these interventions, a teacher, support staff member, or other member of the school community works with students in the intervention to help with goal setting and progress monitoring. The work to catch the need for interventions early brought high stakes testing and the regular expectation of screeners to ensure students were on track to meet grade level goals by the end of the school year. Both supporters and rejectors of NCLB testing acknowledge a noticeable increase in the number of tests students take to identify their learning achievements, deficits, and gaps (Berliner, 2011). With NCLB, schools developed a sense sooner rather than later when a student was struggling academically. However, needs outside of academics remained uncategorized or unaddressed. Miller (1990) discussed data that high risk students

continued to encounter conventional classroom structures that were inflexible and lacked differentiation though it is documented those same students are academically unprepared and underdeveloped because of adverse events and experiences. A dedicated person who reviews data and addresses student needs may help. However, if interventions are employed too late, disengagement in school occurs as students lose ground in their educational progress and learning over time (Sanders et al., 2018).

The Research Problem

Teaching and learning strategies that are effective for many students do not often consider student mobility or disengagement that results from years of unsuccessful school performance and absenteeism (Salinas & Reyes, 2004). Disengagement may start small- as in micro-disengagement which includes non-compliance with activities, student misbehavior, and inattention during class (Daddis & Meadows, 2021)- but then bubble up to school disengagement. In fact, current statistics state less than fifty percent of students are currently engaged and engagement in school wanes as students transition from elementary school to middle school (Anderson, 2021; Collier, 2015). The larger presence of disengagement, to which current statistics refer, is disengagement as the beginning of a process that leads to dropping out of high school (Christle et al., 2007). This disengagement includes student self-doubt in their ability to learn and a lack of self-interest in the material being taught (İlter, 2023).

Defining engagement is essential to establishing a framework for supporting students under current reform efforts. Engagement is not only a single act in a classroom or the amount of investment in a learning task. In a post-ESSA era with the desire for increased post-secondary success, a definition of true student engagement can be the “...conceptual glue that connects student agency...and its ecological influences...to the organizational structures and cultures of

the school” (Lawson & Lawson, 2013, p. 433). This study investigated efforts to reduce disengagement, defining disengagement as a lack of student motivation for school (Christle et al., 2007; İlter, 2023). In middle schools, student engagement- and thus motivation for learning- leads to academic achievement in the classroom (İlter, 2023). Finding solutions for disengagement is key because disengagement in adolescent years may lead to high school disengagement and ultimately dropping out of high school (Christle et al., 2007). Engagement encompasses behavioral and emotional components (Skinner & Belmont, 1993) so interventions to combat disengagement must address both.

Around fifteen percent of American students are chronically absent (Gottfried & Ansari, 2022). Along with absenteeism comes amotivation, loss of learning, and loss of socialization (Hayes et al., 2002; İlter, 2023). Chronic absenteeism is a disengagement behavior and as schools struggle to positively manage challenging behaviors, suspensions and expulsions may result, leading to additional student absences and a disruption in their learning (Sanders et al., 2018). So, one could look at the opportunity to reduce chronic absenteeism and increase engagement through the social connections of the school (Lawson & Lawson, 2013).

Disengagement from school is not a new issue. However, as students across America experienced continuous changes between hybrid and brick and mortar learning during the pandemic, those changes might have left some students struggling to return to full normalcy, especially those students traditionally marginalized and disproportionately disadvantaged (Armitage & Nellums, 2020). Varying types of disengagement and amotivation lead to the likelihood that students will prematurely disengage or drop out of school completely (Croninger & Lee, 2001). Engagement in school, in contrast, can be qualified as a student’s sense of belonging and psychological safety within the school and the people that work there (Klem &

Connell, 2004). This belonging may build a student's social capital, as belonging can be defined as a student's perception of their involvement or engagement with the social system (Allen, Vella-Brodrick, et al., 2016).

Disengagement from school, which could lead to premature drop out before high school graduation, not only appears in students with high absenteeism, but in struggling learners. Students who are academically low, who struggle with learning in class or with high stakes assessments and testing accountability, are also at risk of dropping out (Christle et al., 2007). These students have a low social capital in school (Croninger & Lee, 2001) and do not readily acknowledge a sense of belonging in school. To support students with school bonding, learning, and coping, parental involvement is shown to have a protective effect (Maiya et al., 2021). In fact, the parental involvement that is encouraged and fostered by school support staff and leadership has shown to increase student achievement and agency (Khalifa, 2013).

However, beyond parent support Sanders et al. (2018) wrote, "...everyday relational practices within schools...make the most important contribution to the retention of high-risk students..." (p. 775). Rizzo and Bosacki (2013) wrote (in their explanation of the Social Cognitive Theory) that school cultures that reinforce a sense of belonging help to reinforce student commitments to that school. Relationships between students and adults in schools are the basis of sociomoral development, the combination of moral development and social cognitive theory (Rizzo & Bosacki, 2013). As adults encourage risk taking through their established relationships with students, students learn it is safe to make mistakes and stay engaged in learning rather than disengaging (Rizzo & Bosacki, 2013). It is the relationship between students and adults in the school that promote student agency and voice and help to reduce the chance of early dropouts (McLaughlin & Clarke, 2010; Christle et al., 2007).

Theoretical Framework

This study investigated the development of tier three students through the lens of support advocates, reviewing their work with those students in order to decrease school disengagement and potential high school dropouts. It is hypothesized that advocacy through support advocates are effective interventions for students in that they create a sense of safety and belonging within the school (satisfying Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs) and they satisfy tenants of the Socio-Ecological Framework and Self-Advocacy Theory that when combined offer a plan where adults in schools and the relationship building stability they offer are essential for the academic and behavioral success of students. Each of these theories will be discussed in depth in terms of their relationship to the support advocate model and potential outcomes of that work in chapter 2. A brief overview of key theories will follow for research conceptualization.

Bronfenbrenner's Socio-Ecological Framework (1979) established the spheres of influence on students, positing that adults with the closest relationships with students are essential to determining their beliefs and behaviors in school. Khalifa (2013) discussed past research of student agency and voice taught to special education students to advocate for their individualized needs and supported the Socio-Ecological Framework with a new self-advocacy theory that promotes ways for traditionally marginalized students to grow their self-advocacy skills. The congruence of both theories established the presence of adults outside of the classroom as a reformed approach to offering wholistic intervention. Connell and Klem (2006) support the presence of an advocate who works with families and students to set academic and behavioral goals and argue that goal setting for meeting academic standards with high stakes testing should also extend to goal setting for individual and social conduct. Researchers are

beginning to explore the role of an advocate in schools who address not only academic but behavioral needs; however, this work is under-researched.

Though research supports the role of teachers in building relationships with students to establish a sense of school belonging and student agency, the role of a non-teacher/support staff member in meeting the same needs is new. As the researcher, I've worked in a school where a support staff member, i.e. a support advocate was utilized. The support advocates worked with struggling learners to set academic and behavioral goals and regularly checked in with students monitoring progress toward those goals. The work of the support advocate modeled traditional systems of intervention; however, this work was novel in that it included both academic, behavioral, and sociomoral goal setting.

One might ask, "*What are support advocates?*" Support advocates in the research context provide ongoing support to struggling learners in school and work with students who are at the greatest risk of early disconnection from school. Defined simply, support advocates are school liaisons with multiple arms of influence. Support advocates work with struggling students, meeting with them individually for improved decision making during and after a classroom interruption. Support advocates intervene with students after a return from a disciplinary suspension. Support advocates also work with small groups of students for relationship and rapport building, community building, and discussions of interest developed by students. Interventions with a support advocate are provided for a targeted group of students who show behaviors often associated with early dropout such as chronic absenteeism, transferring in and out of school (or withdrawing altogether), poor academic performance, and a lack of involvement in school activities (Hayes et al., 2002). Support advocates work with students in several capacities, such as a) interviewing students after a significant discipline event and

helping them to develop a plan for alternative behavior moving forward, b) helping students with goal setting for their grades and performance on assessments, c) hosting lunch groups with specific character development lessons as the focus, and d) providing tutoring, as needed. However, the full role of support advocates and their effect on students is yet to be defined. Support advocates may provide an intervention (or additional layer of support outside of core instruction) to help students grow academically and socially. When designing the support advocate model Hayes et al. (2002) wrote, “Specific interventions should address remedial education, cultural differences, peer relationships, student-teacher relationships, and school parent relationships” (p 92). This established a school support structure that addresses student academic learning needs and social engagement in school. As we explore the support advocate model, contextualization of this study is important to clarify the use of terms that will appear regularly throughout the research: social-emotional, support advocate, Tiers and tier-3 students.

Operational Definitions

Social-emotional: This term is used to describe both tangible and intangible developments of student characteristics of self-control, self-awareness, and self-advocacy. The context of use in this study explains explicit school programs and group learning sessions that focus on character development topics of student agency and student self-awareness. The term is used for the intentional development of the mental and emotional state of students, aside from natural byproducts of everyday school outcomes related to academic success or failure.

Support advocate: This term is used to describe a specific staff member who works with struggling students in a one-on-one or small group setting. This role is different from a teacher who provides academic support in a classroom or a counselor who supports a large group, grade level, or school of students. Support advocates are staff members who were once classroom

teachers or have years of experience with students but who have received additional training in behavior support such as student de-escalations, conducting behavior interventions, and trauma-informed support of students. They work with students spontaneously as issues arise throughout the school day but also have scheduled times to work with students individually or in a group.

Tier-3 students: This term is used to describe students who have shown an increased need for support beyond core class instruction. These students have more than one school metric where they are below performance goals, such as poor academic progress via state testing metrics, failing grades in one or more core classes, chronic absenteeism, a discipline history of suspensions and/or expulsions, or they qualify for special education or English-Language Learner (ELL) services. These students receive intensive intervention support in pull out classes with less than 10 students and/or receive behavior support through an intervention with a support advocate or behavior interventionist.

Tiered Intervention: A systematic approach to student support where Tier I indicates support provided to the entire system of students across the school, Tier II indicates small group interventions, and Tier III indicates the level where individualized and intensive support is offered. For the purpose of this research study, Roman numbers (I, II, and III) will indicate levels or tiers but Arabic numerals (1, 2, and 3) will signify students found in these levels. Further discussion of tiers and interventions is provided in Chapter 2.

Purpose of the Study

With knowledge that the academic and social support of students through the role of a support advocate is a growing area of research interest, the purpose of this study is to explore the role of a school support advocate and potential outcomes of their work with tier 3 urban middle school students. The middle school students in this study displayed varying signs of

disengagement in school that could lead to premature withdrawal from school without intervention. Disengagement characteristics of these students included high suspension rates, excessive absences, poor performance on state and local assessments, or a combination of these characteristics.

Research Questions

This study utilized two primary research questions with three sub-questions:

1. What is the perceived role of support advocates working with tier-3 students in an urban middle school setting?

Sub-Questions:

- a. How do support advocates describe their role in an urban middle school setting?
 - b. How do teachers describe the role of support advocates in an urban middle school setting?
 - c. How do tier-3 middle school students describe the role of support advocates in an urban middle school setting?
2. What are social and academic outcomes for tier-3 middle school students engaging with support advocates in an urban middle school setting?

Methodology Overview

I was interested in studying the work of a school support advocate with struggling middle school students to identify how they served them, both academically and behaviorally. I used qualitative case study (Stake, 1995) to interpret information from support advocate and student interviews, teacher surveys, and field observations of support advocates, and compared existing school data (attendance, grades, discipline, etc) for students working with support advocates to

describe and interpret practices and potential outcomes of a support advocate and their work with students. Purposive sampling of advocates, students, and teachers followed by theoretical sampling in line with grounded theory methodology (Conlon et al., 2020) was employed for the selection of participants during the study. The triangulation of data (Stake, 1995) and qualitative coding and thematic analysis (Saldaña, 2013) helped me understand the perceived role of support advocates and the social and academic outcomes of the students with whom they worked. The presence of a support advocate for students at-risk of dropping out from high school might shed light on continued opportunities for implementation of support advocates in other schools or potential improvements in the use of support staff beyond support advocates.

Significance of this Research

Relationships with adults are significant contributors to the success of students, especially in their adolescent years. For example, research suggests that some students complete high school because of resources offered through their network of relationships with adults (Croninger & Lee, 2001). However, research from the student's perspective that supports the significance of those relationships is lacking. According to Labregue et al. (2021) there is, "...increasing evidence highlighting the value of... organizational and social support to assist an individual in attaining positive mental health outcomes..." (p. 1579). Therefore, student perceptions of their academic needs, and the progression of emotions and behaviors from dependence to agency is essential to the problem-solving plans of support that schools create. This research received firsthand information of the effects of support advocates from the advocates themselves but also a voice often silent in research, the students. Minhas & Freeman (2021) argue firsthand observations and emotions concerning learning, especially outside of the pandemic should come from students. Additionally, documentation of student academic and social-emotional learning

needs are essential for tiering students into appropriate school interventions, to meet state and federal expectations of NCLB, ESSA, and IDEA. More importantly, an understanding of student needs is essential in order to offer effective support to limit their school disengagement and foster a sense of belonging and agency.

Researcher Positionality

I am a Black female educator and at the time of research I was a secondary principal in a large mid-western city in Kansas. In a city where ten percent of inhabitants are Black, I sensed my existence as a minority regularly. Our city followed national trends of a high percentage of White teachers compared to a high percentage of minority students. Though I represent a group of underrepresented leaders for my students (Black and female), I also was one of only two Black female secondary principals in my district. When I first served as an assistant principal, I found that there were more principals that were male than female, and of those Black women were an even smaller subset. My experience leading as a minority in this sphere, kept me keenly interested in understanding the experiences and overall plight of minority and marginalized students and invested in seeking ways to support these students and create spaces in schools for them to be their authentic selves. I am and will always be specifically interested in our students' sense of belonging in our schools. These questions continually monopolize my planning and leadership strategy: *Do students feel they have a safe place or representation, especially in times of need? Do students believe someone like their principal (or any staff member) is interested in their connectedness to school and whether they're personally failing or succeeding, both academically and socially?*

An emotional motivation: I was promoted to principal at the school of study one year after the pandemic. This was the first school year of our district's return to full school

attendance. Our students struggled greatly to reset and attend school, business as usual. There were quite a few fights, often initiated via social disagreements, and I moved to our campus in the middle of the school year because our middle school had an exceptional number of disciplinary referrals that rivaled numbers at district high schools that were two and three times our size. Our students could not communicate their emotions, they were subject to outbursts, were caught with drugs, and had poor attendance. Our staff was also overworked and ill-equipped to balance learning and teaching demands with student social-emotional development, especially with such a high number of staff vacancies. Our students were crying out for help and there was no support team, or intermediary body, to absorb student issues and allow for problem solving in a non-threatening manner. If a student had an outburst or a bad day, they were immediately sent to the office to be disciplined and chastised. This turned the disciplinary office- meant to be a place to punish unsafe behaviors- into an area where students with drugs were in the same office awaiting discipline as a student who failed to follow dress code. *How did this type of reaction to minor infractions foster safety and belonging in our school?* Acknowledging something needed to change, I formed our support team so that support staff (non-teachers in our school) could talk with students, process their outbursts, and link misbehaviors to their emotions. After three years, disciplinary incidences were significantly down but this research was the first opportunity I had to formalize the qualitative effects of our support team on our school climate. As principal I felt our students now had a voice and a refuge, but I wanted data to formalize this.

A fiscal motivation: Over time, I developed a voice that speaks out against injustice and amplifies the conversation around needs for marginalized students. For example, the support advocate position was non-existent in our district before the pandemic (a few years before this research started), however identifying and hiring a support advocate in my building was a no-

brainer. Seeing results and wanting the position to remain despite funding meant providing proof of concept about this role and researching the effects of support by the advocate, to sell it to others as a necessity. The support advocate was a new role in our district, but I swiftly saw improvements in students informally through observations and student data. When the research started (and during data collection) I was faced with a loss of school funding due to declining enrollment (happening in many public schools nationally). I needed to allocate resources in places with proven results and this study formalized data to advocate for funding for additional positions across our district and schools like mine locally and statewide.

A professional motivation: Apart from the presence of support advocates in my middle school, I've witnessed the effects of an advocate in high schools for years. As a high school assistant principal, I saw students who clearly struggled with school, struggled to build relationships with staff, and struggled to convince their parents of the need to place a higher value on their education. Those students disengaged over time and when they met the 16-year-old mark many dropped out because their pleas for help or attention were ignored or categorized as defiance and their disengagement was defined as ambivalence. I held attendance waiver conversations with 16-year-olds as an assistant principal and could name a few who I directed toward alternative GED routes who finished school. Those who pursued the GED route kept in regular contact and I was sure to remind them of my request for a graduation invitation whenever they finished. The few I've seen complete a GED program seemed to invite me and/or my counselor peer who stayed in contact. Looking back, these struggling students seemed to latch on to my presence as an advocate and champion for their futures and they wanted me to celebrate their accomplishments with them. My study focused specifically on understanding support advocates as an intervention for these types of students, and their experiences of school when a

single adult takes a vested interest in them and follows through with support. *What could happen if the motivation to succeed and the problem-solving to persist was instilled earlier in these dropouts?* I specifically studied middle school students to offer insights into how to keep them from becoming a high school dropout, provided intentional interventions with a support advocate.

A personal motivation: Personally the experience of struggling students is of interest to me because I have siblings who struggled in school. I was an A student throughout all of my K-12 education, with a 2nd grade dream to be a doctor that I pursued fearlessly. However, I had a brother born on the same day as me only four minutes earlier, who went through school showing obvious signs of disengagement. He did not always participate in extracurricular activities, he talked during class most of the time, he maintained consistent grades of a C or sometimes lower, and did not ask teachers for help throughout the learning process. I believe he could name 1 or 2 teachers that had an impact on his education when I could name of list of teachers at every grade level. Though I graduated as valedictorian from high school, that sibling in the same graduating class was simply glad to be done. I had another sibling of mine receive speech services and they were labeled as a special education student. After being retained in elementary school I believe this changed their trajectory forever. With these memories in mind, one clear reason I can give to the five of us children graduating high school (and all attending college) was the presence of an advocate who counseled us (when we seemed to show no motivation for school) and consulted with school officials (when they seemed to avoid initiating problem-solving discussions). Our advocates- my parents- were those who attended Parent-Teacher Association meetings, who served on site councils, and who attended school concerts and field trips on a regular basis. My

parents also became advocates for our peers- they knew the behavioral progress of our neighbor friends and invited local church peers to dinner frequently.

If my siblings underperformed in any areas, their advocates (my parents) made sure they did not give up completely and they gave all of us no options in settling for defeat. I have worked in all types of schools and with almost 20 years of education experience can say many of my students do not have the level of engaged and overly supportive parents I had. No one can replace the role and importance of a parent, but adults in schools matter. My research explored the motivational supports offered by a non-parent advocate in middle school. Struggling students were paired with support staff and their reflections on their school experiences were assessed from a pre-support and post-support vantage point.

Organization of the Study

The chapters to follow include a literature review of the use of support advocates in school, mainly their precursor, academic and behavior interventionists (Chapter 2) and a description of the methodology and research design used to answer the research questions guiding this study (Chapter 3). To close data, findings, and implications from the research are offered in Chapters 4, 5, and 6 respectively.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

As scholars engage in conversations about American school reform, a desired end is a portrait of a high school graduate who is college and career ready (Rodriguez et al., 2009; Hayes et al., 2002; Christle et al., 2007). To achieve that end President Bush's *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) policy and President Obama's *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) both incorporated demands for higher academic rigor and improvements in student performance data (Hayes et al., 2002). Along with improvements in student performance data, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) underwent updates that required schools to develop plans for catching struggling students sooner, specifically requiring interventions for students underperforming in school (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.; Berkeley et al., 2020; Braun et al., 2020). So, though school reform sets a path for graduating deeper thinkers who perform well when tested against high academic standards, along the way there should be opportunities for catching students who are not yet meeting the mark (Rodriguez et al., 2009; Hayes et al., 2002; Christle et al., 2007).

Additionally, the NCLB act and ESSA mandated specific procedures for garnering feedback from families. Stakeholder input from families brought to light their desire for schools to assess student belonging and connectedness to school (McLaughlin & Clarke, 2010). Thus, both federal demands and stakeholder desires point toward schools as places of belonging where underperforming students have an opportunity to improve through systems of support. Investing time into the social connectedness of students has been shown to increase student engagement in school and contribute positively to the retention of students in school (Voelkl, 1995; Christle et al., 2007; McLaughlin & Clarke, 2010).

With rising performance expectations and a consideration of adjusting current school support models, the fundamental research questions are a) What is the perceived role of support

advocates working with tier-3 students in an urban middle school setting? and b)What are social and academic outcomes for tier-3 students engaging with support advocates in an urban middle school setting?

Recent efforts at reform have employed systems to expose struggling learners sooner and highlight the need for targeted support to improve their school outcomes. Hayes et al. (2002) write, “In this era of educational reform, greater emphasis is being placed upon making school personnel accountable for bringing all students to high levels of academic performance” (p 87). Realizing that staff members in schools can help to make the difference in decreasing student achievement gaps, some schools have employed additional personnel to offer students interventions within a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework. These personnel, known as support advocates, are staff members who work with students individually and in small groups to provide help with decision making around a significant school event, but also to help with academic goal setting and accountability.

Student support advocates are school employees who might offer solutions to intervention needs. How families and communities can support students is a well-researched topic along with the role that teachers play in the development of students (LaRocque et al., 2011; Henderson et al., 2007; Khalifa et al., 2015). However, the role of individuals outside of the classroom and how they support the development of students is still underdeveloped (McLaughlin & Clarke, 2010). Many individuals within a school, such as a school leader and counselor can contribute to the success of a student (Khalifa, 2013). A support advocate- a staff member who offers interventions to students requiring support above and beyond general education supports- may also contribute to student success.

A role is a set of behaviors and expectations associated within a position in society (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). To determine the role of support advocates in the support of tier-3 students, it is important to establish the need for support advocates in schools and identify the work they do. The goal of schools that employ support advocates is that they work with students to foster and develop the self-management skills within them for school success. On a practical basis, support advocates provide support for students based on their needs, following the intervention models of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) and Response to Intervention (RTI). The theoretical and historical information that follows seeks to connect those concepts. The following literature review seeks to establish the case for support staff as primary advocates that build key connections between the student and their environment, previous models of advocacy established in academic interventions, and potential outcomes of student interventions when employed with fidelity.

Theoretical Framework

In order to combat school disengagement- paying close attention to behaviors most evidenced in struggling students such as a history of poor academic performance, absenteeism and an extensive disciplinary history (Voelkl, 1995; Christle et al., 2007; Hayes et al., 2002)- I reviewed theoretical frameworks that supported a student's need to belong and connect with their school to establish the premise of a system of support between adults and students whose environment reinforces relationships, rapport, and accountability (Allen & Bowles, 2012; Skinner & Belmont, 1993; McLaughlin & Clarke, 2010). One such theory is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Disengagement in schools has been linked to amotivation. In fact, İlter (2023) argues that amotivation as a poor self-belief/ self-interest, poor interest in academic tasks, or poor belief concerning other's perceptions of you, leads to middle school absenteeism and reduced academic performance. Disengagement and belonging are sides of the same coin according to Libbey (2004), where other terms to describe student engagement include school attachment, school bonding, school connectedness, and school climate. In fact, sense of belonging plays a positive role in absenteeism and academic effort evidenced more in environments where students feel accepted, encouraged, and respected (Sánchez et al., 2005). Thus, schools must invest in cultures that support student self-actualization and feed man's instinctoid tendencies to belong (Maslow, 1951). *What are the basic instinctoid tendencies that man (or humans) feed on?*

Abraham Harold Maslow in his 1943 work "A Theory of Human Motivation" introduced what we now call the Hierarchy of Needs, where he established the foundational motivations that drive human behaviors. When one studies school disengagement, or the loss of motivation for learning that leads to dropping out of school (Croninger & Lee, 2001; İlter, 2023; Christle et al., 2007), one must consider the basic needs (or motivations) that drive decision making. Maslow (1943) argued the foundation of needs for humans is physiological, as in the need to maintain homeostasis with salt and water intake or the need to eat. One cannot move on to other needs without the satisfaction of this basis for continued existence. Humans will maintain the need to eat, fight disease, or live; and maintaining those is the meaning of a fulfilled life until the threat of their loss is gone (Maslow, 1943). However, once this need is satisfied and as Maslow (1943) argued the want is removed (because the want that is met is no longer a want), one can move on to another need, and safety is the new set of needs that emerges.

Safety includes a freedom from fear of harm or death (Maslow, 1943), but also includes the rigidity of schedules and the predictability of structure, organization, and order. Though researchers today discuss the need for safety and belonging in schools in synchronous fashions, levels of needs for Maslow (1943) differ between safety and belonging. Belonging, from Maslow's needs is a level of need above safety and is connected to love and affection (Maslow, 1943). While both safety and belonging help to secure an individual's place in society (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), love is the hierarchal level where humans may feel the absence of friends, family, or community (Maslow, 1943). Love at the psychological level may include friendships and partnerships (Maslow, 1943), and at the school level- less affectionately- trusted relationships between students, colleagues and peers, teachers, and staff. Resnick et al. (1993) helped to show that connection, affection, and belonging can help to reduce the risk of adolescents engaging in life altering social morbidities such as school absenteeism, drinking and driving, teenage pregnancy, and delinquency. With this research, one may begin to see how the higher need of belonging can help to sustain the lower need of life and homeostasis. Resnick et al. (1993) described protective factors of family connectedness and school connectedness to combat quietly disturbed and acting out behaviors.

It is not the intention of this researcher to differentiate between needs to establish whether the work of students with support advocates satisfies needs of safety or love. Instead, it is my goal to generalize student needs above the physiological need of survival and offer that schools may be institutions that offer opportunities for the meeting of both safety and love as needs, predominately in establishing safety and belonging. With the structured and interventional use of support advocates and the rapport they establish with students, safety and belonging may help to reduce the likelihood that students with a greater risk of drop out will do so due to

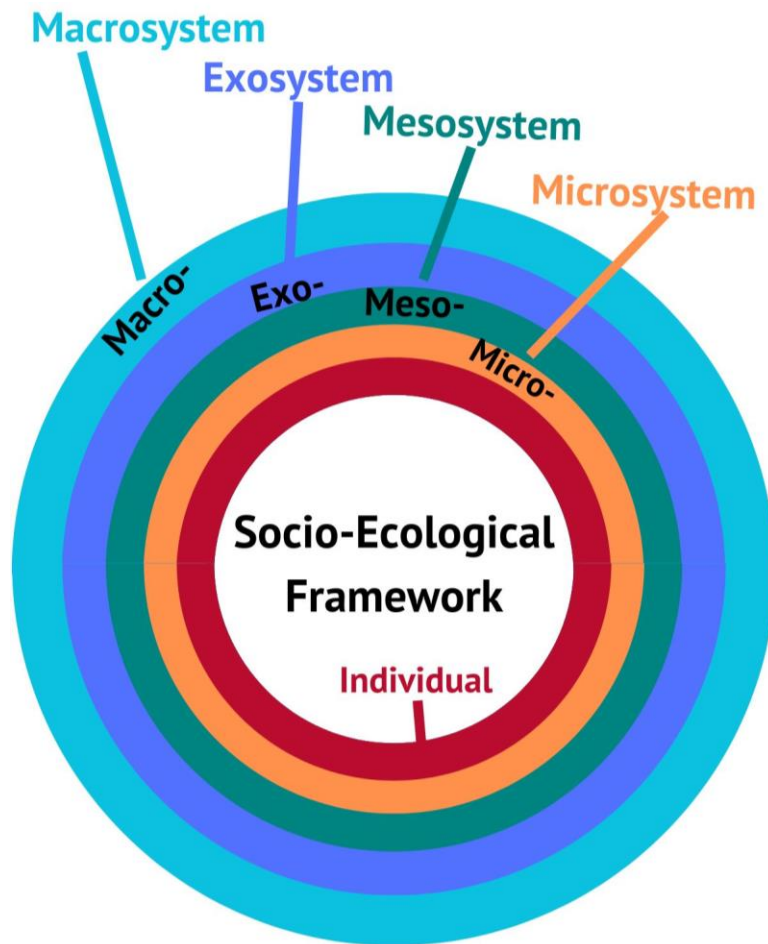
disengagement or a reduction in motivational satisfaction (Maslow, 1943; İlter, 2023). Moreover, the sense of belonging or community fostered in schools helps to reduce negative outcomes, stress, and maladjustment (Sánchez et al., 2005). As children develop, the focus of social development shifts from the home to the school, where schools assume the primary responsibility and unintended consequences of a student's social development by selecting and developing the peers and adults they face daily (Lee & Burkam, 2003). In fact, according to Lee and Burkam (2003), "...students who leave high school before graduating often cite lack of social support as one reason for doing so" (p. 363). The student behaviors of disengagement and absenteeism signal this perceived lack of social support (Lee & Burkam, 2003; Croninger & Lee, 2001).

One cannot simply look at student behaviors as motivations, but remember, "While behavior is almost always motivated, it is also almost always biologically, culturally and situationally determined..." (Maslow, 1943, p. 371). So, a look into the culture schools create to support the foundational belief that students learn and persist in school when motivated, leads to the social investigation of support advocates in their support of students.

Bronfenbrenner's Socio-Ecological Framework

The hypothesis that relationships between support advocates and students may help to increase school engagement and reduce the likelihood of school disengagement is primarily based on the Socio-Ecological Framework developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner. Bronfenbrenner (1979) discussed schools as social environments where layers of environmental influences (or ecologies) contribute to student development. Bronfenbrenner referenced interacting environments as nested concentric arenas similar to nested Russian dolls (see Figure 2.1). Students as individuals inherently have personality traits, academic motivation, and emotional

wellbeing (Allen & Boyle, 2018) and are at the center of the framework. At the next layer, each individual student is influenced by their most immediate setting, i.e. a microsystem of parents, teachers, friends, and peers (Allen & Boyle, 2018; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Allen & Bowles, 2012). According to Bronfenbrenner (1979) not only is it important to recognize the individual but, “Regarded as of equal importance are connections between other persons present in the setting, the nature of these links, and their indirect influence on the developing person...” (p. 7). This microsystem helps with decision making and establishing how one determines their role in the next layer (a mesosystem) which includes practices, procedures, and the moral purpose of school mission and vision, for example (Allen & Boyle, 2018). The mesosystem plays a part in connecting the student and their family with school resources and expectations that support overall academic achievement. To round out the discussion of layers, the exosystem represents the community that surrounds the school and shows ways the school brings groups, communities, and families together (Allen & Boyle, 2018). Finally, the macrosystem is legislation and policies at the state and federal level, as well as the history and cultures that govern schools. The organization of the Socio-Ecological Framework layers, as seen in Figure 2.1, celebrates the home- and in the case of this study- the school, as a place that fosters community and development for every individual. Thus, when considering educational interventions, leaders should think of programs that foster psychological membership so that intentional community building allows for achievement of individual student outcomes (Goodenow & Grady, 1993).



Adapted from Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Allen & Boyle (2018)

Figure 2.1.

Socio-Ecological Framework by Bronfenbrenner (1979)

Of key importance to this study is the microsystem, where relationships with adults help in the direct development of the student. The microsystem, as it relates to this research study, would be the classroom or the support advocate-student partnership, or it could be every other environment with people that directly interacts with students, i.e., parents, siblings, teachers, administrators, etc. To limit the discussion to a school, at the ecological microsystem level it is important for students to have adults they know support them and believe in them, but who also have a connection (and accountability) to the school system (Allen & Boyle, 2018). These adults

can help to build student self-competence, which in turn builds their self-efficacy and thus their sense of school belonging (Allen & Boyle, 2018). Bronfenbrenner (1979) argued this level and the interconnections between it and the other levels are most essential for student development, in that the interconnections between school, family, staff, teachers, etc- i.e. relationships- are the determining factor for decisive growth. The interworking of school socialization within the school environment of relationship building supported by people and procedures, particularly the adult-student relationships, are thought to provide positive connections to students that aid in their growth and development. In fact, research supports the notion that positive adult-student relationships along with high academic expectations and safety (physical and emotional) contribute to connectedness, which may impact academic performance, antisocial behaviors of fights and bullying, absenteeism, and school completion rates (Wingspread Declaration on School Connections, 2004; Allen & Boyle, 2018). Lee and Burkam (2003) further support this notion arguing the student establishes their social capital with adults in the school (in their specific example- teachers), to grow as part of the macrosystem, achieving success through norms and behaviors reinforced by their adult-student relationship.

A student's work with a support advocate may be considered a molar activity. A molar activity, as described by Bronfenbrenner (1979), is the principal vehicle for the influence of the system (in this case the microsystem) on the developing individual. This is to say, a microsystem dependent on the interconnections between all other systems and the individual uses people and their relationships with the individual to foster growth. The molar activity, according to Bronfenbrenner (1979), exists in its optimal form as a dyad, meaning two people work in relationship to each other. The people of the microsystem exhibit specific patterns of supporting and challenging students which leads to their development. Relationships between support

advocates and the students they serve, may serve as this influence on the system, but according to Bronfenbrenner (1979) for a molar activity to be effective it must have a) extensive time investment (be long lasting and not short-lived or a momentary event), b) goal structure (in that it contains momentum of its own, established by initiative or a conscious goal), and c) involvement of people (as in the extent of relations with other people or involvement of the individual with another person or persons). The intervention between support advocates and students- including the defined roles and the perceived outcomes- must be explored to establish if the support advocate intervention within a microsystem meets the qualifications of a molar activity.

As schools endeavor to combat disengagement and thus build school belonging, they should employ practices that build emotional well-being, support the development of self-esteem and coping skills, and encourage academic motivation and engagement (Allen & Boyle, 2018). Establishing the roles of adults within the microsystem that supports school belonging may help in building those skills. When students have a relationship with adults who have high academic expectations and means to reinforce those expectations through support, belonging to the school system as a whole is deepened (Allen & Bowles, 2012; Wingspread Declaration on School Connections, 2004). Additionally, Voelkl (1995) argued the student who feels more connected in school becomes more involved. Though connectedness does not directly affect achievement, connectedness (or belonging), has been shown to increase student engagement. This foundational need for belonging that every human possesses (Maslow, 1943) is supported via four fundamental practices, a) adult support, b) positive peer groups, c) an emphasis on education, and d) a positive school environment (Allen & Bowles, 2012).

Much of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) microsystem analysis centered around the developmental formation of an individual through their home and parental environments or as

institutionalized children. However, according to Allen and Boyle (2018), “Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological framework ...provides the most widely theoretical construct to date...to investigate belonging in an organizational setting as a school, while acknowledging the innate desire humans have to belong” (p. 193). School belonging and its development of students has been studied on the internal level of the individual student but frameworks or interventions within the school to foster that belonging are limited in research and understanding (Allen & Boyle, 2018). Bronfenbrenner (1979) argued that molar activities exist dyadically, an individual interacting with another individual, but research is often limited to the study of the individual rather than the study of interactions between individuals. The Socio-Ecological Framework may offer insight into the importance of the relationship between support advocates and their work with students (helping to answer research question 1) but it leaves questions concerning expected outcomes, to help answer research question 2. Though Bronfenbrenner’s Socio-Ecological Framework has substantial support and is based on empirical evidence, the connection between school belonging and academic engagement also requires additional correlational support (Allen & Boyle, 2018). To provide the correlation between belonging and academic engagement and potential outcomes of tier 3 students receiving support, the Self-Advocacy Theory is necessary.

Self-Advocacy Theory

The Self-advocacy theory has roots in special education where students, often identified as intellectually disabled (ID), are provided tools to become their own advocates (Petri et al., 2020; Fiedler & Danneker, 2007; Anderson & Bigby, 2017). The advocacy support takes different forms- support groups, classrooms, one on one relationships- but the overall effect is advocacy developed in those who often feel marginalized, ignored, or misunderstood (Petri et al.,

2020; Anderson & Bigby, 2017). Actions of advocacy according to Petri et al. fall under 5 competencies:

- a) Informing and being informed, in skills and development
- b) Giving and receiving information, in communication and through forms of media
- c) Supporting others in solidarity
- d) Speaking up, protecting rights, and advocating for
- e) Organizing and keeping routines for paperwork management

Petri et al. (2020) described self-advocacy groups where advocates worked with ID people and fostered their personal self-advocacy. The Self-Advocacy Theory (in some research referred to as the *self-determination theory* or *self-system process*, clarified later) encourages the building of competence, autonomy, relatedness, and generally doing well to encourage others to seek their optimal status (Fiedler & Danneker, 2007). So, the Self-Advocacy Theory reflects a position of empowering the learner to become the doer and then the teacher (Petri, 2020). The Self-Advocacy Theory in schools is thus the formation of relationships between a school representative (i.e. advocate) that works with parents and students to help navigate their educational rights, school services, and explore educational and social opportunities available through their own social capital (Khalifa, 2013; Fiedler & Danneker, 2007). Though Khalifa (2013) advocated for a principal leader as the primary advocate, this research study broadened the role of an advocate to a support staff member whose primary obligation is to marginalized and struggling students.

Anderson and Bigby (2017) discussed a failure to offer community engagement support and noted the result is “...people are physically present rather than socially included” (p. 109). Though Anderson and Bigby studied self-advocacy for the disabled, a struggling learner with a

history of school failure can have not only the lack of social inclusion but also may resort to not being physically present (Sánchez et al., 2005; Lee & Burkam, 2003; Lawson & Lawson, 2013). As such, research to connect the work of support advocates by defining their role and everyday practices with the community of students they support- and assessing of their growth, development, and other potential outcomes- is essential. The Socio-Ecological Framework establishes multiple layers, but the microsystem specifically, may have the greatest effect on deepening a student's sense of self, along with their self-esteem, agency, and self-management skills (Allen & Boyle, 2018). Strengthened by the Self-Advocacy Theory, Allen and Boyle (2018) argue, "Elements of this model include relationship skills with peers and adults, self-awareness...emotional regulation, and conflict resolution skills...it is clear that both the individual and microsystem levels work together to foster school belonging" (p. 201).

The Self-Advocacy Theory advocates for processes and procedures that build advocacy in the most vulnerable of populations (Khalifa, 2013; Petri, 2020). Tier 3 students, though not a special education population, are a vulnerable group of students at risk of high school drop out if they are not taught the skills of advocacy through a support advocate (Christle et al., 2007; McLaughlin & Clarke, 2010).

Alternative Theory Supports

The Socio-Ecological Framework and Self-Advocacy Theory establish a combined foundation for the research, social support of tier 3 students and their potential development through support advocates. However, it is important to differentiate between other theories that came close to supporting the work as well.

Self-System Process Model

Motivation for learning can be placed at the center of reasons for disengagement from school as students matriculate from preschool to high school. However, when social environments provide for a student's basic psychological needs, motivation increases (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). The *self-system process model* might help to connect the relational support offered using a socio-ecological approach with a sense of belonging established in students when motivation increases, however this model is primarily designed to argue for efforts on the part of classroom teachers to increase motivation. Classroom teachers can increase student motivation in three ways, i.e. a student's need for competence being satisfied with structure, a student's need for autonomy being met with autonomous opportunities, or a student's need for relatedness being met with involvement (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). This study may serve to identify and illustrate opportunities for structure, autonomy, and involvement offered via support advocates, however that support does not happen primarily through the use of incentives, as with the *self-system process model*. Advocacy also was not offered to strengthen competence, autonomy, or relatedness in this study. Though those may be byproducts, the goal of a support advocate and tier 3 student relationships is to offer an intervention to catch a student in danger of failing. It is important to note the *self-system process* has its roots in the *self-determination theory* of Deci and Ryan, which argues satisfaction of the three needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness increases intrinsic motivation (Fiedler & Danneker, 2007). For students with learning disabilities, or persistent learned helplessness because of a history of failure in school, self-determination is necessary for psychological health (Fiedler & Danneker, 2007).

The *self-system process model* though connected to intervention development and sustainability also falls short on its own since the goal is increased motivation or engagement within the classroom, and the objective of this work is to provide greater engagement in school,

leading to a reduced likelihood of dropping out. Moreover, since the *self-system model* is designed for classroom interventions, it must work in tandem with other theories to provide the foundation for expected outcomes of support offered to students by support advocates, since they are not classroom teachers.

Social Cognitive Theory

When researching the effects of adult interactions in schools on student behaviors, adequate research identified the social/moral functioning of students, specifically through the *domain theory*, also known as the *social cognitive theory*. The Socio-Ecological Framework that identifies the microsystem of peers, parents, and teachers as a direct influencer on a student's development is similar but contrasts the *social cognitive theory*, also known as the *domain theory*. Both theories may be used to offer explanations for a student's decision making in school, but one seeks to explain how environments influence the individual student to act (Socio-Ecological Framework) while the other seeks to identify the moral, social, and personal conventions of a student's existence (Social Cognitive Theory). It is true that both theories place a high value on social connections and the necessity of relationships for student development, but the Socio-Ecological Framework offers a broader explanation of multiple spheres of influence on a student, not just teachers and staff or the school but also school procedures and processes, the neighboring community, and policies and procedures that govern schools.

The *domain theory* argues for the simultaneous existence of three domains, moral universal, social convention, and personal (Rizzo & Bosacki, 2013). The coexistence of sociomoral understanding allows students to accept the rules of an adult and engage in relationships with teachers and peers. With that, the social connections students make in school are a critical piece of character development (Rizzo & Bosacki, 2013). The *domain theory* proposes that relationships between students and adults are essential to helping students manage

complexities they experience throughout school (Rizzo & Bosacki, 2013). Students need adults to help navigate right from wrong, fairness, and satisfy their innate care for the welfare of others (Rizzo & Bosacki, 2013). As schools establish themselves as a community- allowing adults to work with students in multiple roles- this helps students feel free to make choices and feel safe and respected (Guillaume, 2013).

A component of parent expectations with school reform is the desire for student connectedness to school. Rizzo and Bosacki (2013) provide a solution for this and explain the *social cognitive theory* of education and the character development of students in school. Rizzo and Bosacki (2013) write, “Relationships between peers and teachers can support student academic achievement...their sense of belonging...and improve peer relations” (p 596). Rizzo and Bosacki (2013) expand their discussion further to the entire school system acknowledging that daily social interactions for students are vital to developing a sense of belonging and safety. Thus, the expectations from the federal government for academic interventions and family engagement along with the foundational understanding of the *social domain theory* make the case for a school intervention that supports students not only academically, but socially. The *social cognitive theory* falls short for this study, however, as its emphasis is on the behavioral and socio-moral development of students, leaving behind academic pursuits. Though the research is not concerned with the moral decision making of students, the *social domain theory* helps to support the foundational belief of this research that relationships with adults matter, especially in how they develop the individual core of students.

Alternative Theory Supports

There are other theories that propose various school interventions for assisting students in behavior modification. Glasser’s Control Theory (as in behavioral control) combines the

behavioral control theory with K-12 education and introduces a framework where educators work with students to establish rules of success, student responsibility, learning to maintain persistence, and provide an opportunity for students to associate with adults who care about them (Cassell & Nelson, 2013). School staff help students make better choices but also take proactive measures to limit academic failure rates among students (Cassell & Nelson, 2013). Kohn's Theory, as an alternative behavior management theory, advocates for student practice with making meaningful decisions, otherwise students disengage (Guillaume, 2013). Under the umbrella of this theory, when considering the use of student support advocates in school, potential roles and expectations include community building, the establishment of trust and rapport, and problem-solving techniques that allow students choice and voice. Acknowledging that schools are microcosms of society, not only should students see schools as a community, but schools should use their established purpose as an educational institution to aid in the holistic growth of students. These theories did not establish the case for the research primarily because tier 3 students in danger of dropping out of high school may display questionable decision making resulting in suspensions and expulsions, but they also display silent acts of rebellion in classroom disengagement and absenteeism (McLaughlin & Clarke, 2010; İlter, 2023). Limiting support of tier 3 students to merely behavioral support may limit potential outcomes experienced by the support advocate intervention.

Theoretical Conclusion

The theoretical context in support of support advocates simply states that support advocates build relationships with students and while connecting parents, staff, and others with the school, they provide an intervention that not only helps students with short term goals of improved grades, attendance, and behavior but help with the potential for long-term outcomes and advocacy. Even though interventions depend on the hierarchy of an experienced adult to

support a struggling student, the recurring use of interventions help to establish relationships whereby which support advocates help students academically, build their sense of belonging, and solidify peer relations. However, school belonging is largely theoretical and as such, interventions that foster school belonging are under-researched and thus underdeveloped (Allen & Boyle, 2018). It is important to review the historical context of interventions to link support advocates as a school intervention with their support of reinforcing belonging.

Intervention Historical Context

Student support advocates can be thought of as a combination of a behavior interventionist who helps students evaluate their work habits and future goals to make behavioral changes and an intervention teacher who helps struggling learners identify their learning needs and helps them set goals to reach them. Because there is limited research related to the support advocate model, it is important to look at the roles most closely related to the support advocate, i.e., a behavior interventionist and academic intervention teacher.

Many scholars and educational practitioners make the case for the relationship between student achievement and impacts of a culturally responsive and supportive teacher (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Pransky & Bailey, 2002; Maye & Day, 2012). There is research that further indicates the importance of strong teacher relationships for struggling students, to prevent premature disruption from school, disengagement, and chronic absenteeism (Miller, 1990; Klem & Connell, 2004; Christle et al., 2007; McLaughlin & Clarke, 2010). Connell and Klem (2006) describe the role of an advocate as one who will partner with families to work with students to set both academic and behavioral goals. The advocate then works with the student to monitor their progress and establish interventions as needed. Particularly for struggling learners, an advocate hand-picked for them can make all the difference (Balkus, 2006). Henderson et al.

(2007) described advocates as those who speak up for students, set high expectations and goals for the future, monitor students out-of-school time to ensure it's constructive, and intervene when the student is under pressure.

However, the role of an advocate (and non-teacher) in helping struggling students set academic and behavioral goals is underdeveloped in research. As such, models of a support advocate in schools are derived from the intervention model of Response to Intervention (RTI)- also known as a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)- employed in schools across the nation. Authors for the Center for Health and Health Care in Schools et al. (2021) write, “An MTSS framework offers an effective way to organize the delivery of supports responsive to student needs and allows schools to still function in both a familiar and collaborative way” (p. 6). Support advocates work with students who have been identified as in need of intensive support and they provide regular, ongoing behavioral and academic support for students based on data. Similar support structures in schools are identified below.

Interventionists

Response to Intervention

Response to Intervention (RTI) is traditionally organized into a pyramid, where the base establishes access to general education curriculum for all students, level two (Tier II) provides interventions to some, and the top level of the pyramid (Tier III) provides immediate remediation for a few (Bayewitz et al., 2020). RTI was intended to avoid discrepancies in identifying special education students and avoid the ‘wait until they fail’ approach employed before its inception (Al Otaiba & Petscher, 2020; Moore-Brown et al., 2005). RTI was implemented as a tiered way to identify special education students but is also heralded for its ability to increase accountability in

core classes and potentially reduce the identification of students with high incidence disabilities in special education (Moore-Brown et al., 2005). Response to Intervention has undergone a name change to a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) though current applications of MTSS are similar to the initial inception of RTI (Braun et al., 2020).

Response to Intervention (RTI) uses multiple tiers to scaffold the intensity of interventions for students. The first tier, Tier I, describes core instruction provided to all students by a general education teacher. When a student shows a diminished amount of success at Tier I, small group interventions are employed, promoting the student to Tier II. In schools where support advocates work, this Tier II support promotes them to a caseload where they participate in lunch groups and/or study groups after school. Those groups are led by support advocates and their progress- behaviorally and academically- is checked regularly. Students who are not adequately responding to Tier I instruction or Tier II interventions, receive intensified intervention and sometimes one-on-one instruction, known as Tier III interventions (Braun et al., 2020). RTI uses problem solving to help identify student learning needs and staff instructional needs (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012). In totality, RTI should include an integrated system of assessment, data collection, and instruction to make improvements or changes to the interventions offered (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012).

The use of support advocates mimics RTI in that support advocates use data to design interventions of support for students. Support advocates use behavioral data, absence data, and grades or other academic course performance data to determine if students need a Tier II intervention as a small group or a Tier III intervention with intensive support of adult check ins and 1-on-1 support. The triangulated use of data for student support takes a proactive, integrated approach to student behavior support, as suggested by Musa and Aidah (2018). An area of

contrast for support advocates and RTI is that interventions offered through RTI most often address poor academic performance, often identified through a specific assessment system with screeners and progress monitoring. However, in the current research study support advocates help to establish interventions for academic and social concerns without offering screeners themselves.

Literacy Coaches

Support advocate roles may also take on components of a literacy coach, i.e. literacy interventionist or specialist. Literacy coaches are intervention specialists who take data from screeners and assessments as part of the RTI framework to design instruction for struggling learners. Porter et al. (2022) wrote the role of literacy coaches is to, "...support the identification of students in need of instructional support and intervention...and...deliver evidence-informed instruction and intervention to address the needs of these students" (p. 81). Some literacy coaches have a special reading endorsement, and others provide intervention support without formal training (Bean et al., 2015; Porter et al., 2022). Based on the severity of student needs, students work with a literacy specialist during a pull-out session (away from their traditional course schedule) for a few days a week or daily through a more intensive intervention schedule. Literacy coaches and specialists in some schools might have distinctive responsibilities, where a coach ensures the overall school MTSS structures remain intact while the specialist/interventionist works with specific students (Bean et al., 2010). However, these terms may be interchangeable in other schools where due to smaller staff the coach (supporting all teachers with literacy needs) is also the interventionist who provides direct instruction to students (Bean et al, 2010; Braun et al., 2020). Despite the size of the school, the overall effect on MTSS is the same, i.e. targeted interventions for tier 2 and tier 3 students as needed. Bean et al. (2010) found

that coaches identified almost 35% of their time was spent supporting teachers along with another significant portion spent on administrative tasks of data management and analysis, and almost 10% of time working individually with students. Coaches take time to support, coach, and develop students and teachers based on present needs (Bean et al., 2010).

Though RTI as an intervention is often academic in its supportive nature, Denton et al. (2021) cited value in incorporating self-regulation instruction into reading interventions. Nonetheless, student needs that arise (such as character development within an intervention), may not be met by reading teachers because of their core instructional demands. So, support advocates might be able to meet those needs due to flexibility in their schedule and the lack of teaching demands. Support advocates are staff members who have teaching and/or extensive school experience, but they do not provide formal reading (or other core) lessons to students. They implement interventions on a daily, weekly, or biweekly rotation that help students with problem solving, decision making, and appropriate social skills. Some of their interventions might incorporate reading and/or other core instruction, but not with a consistent scheduled intervention time to be considered a pure reading or otherwise core intervention. Interventions provided by support advocates are based on areas of need identified for individual students, some including academic support and others including behavioral support.

Behavior Specialists

Support advocates provide regular behavior support to students similar to behavior interventionists, as many students they work with are identified as needing support due to behavior management difficulties at the Tier I level (Miller, 1990; Khalifa, 2013). Behavior interventionists are staff who work with teachers and students to ensure the conduct of students

does not negatively impact their academic success or the overall school culture (Scott et al., 2019). School-wide behavior interventions use a multitiered framework to evaluate discipline systems and how they affect a positive school culture (Scott et al., 2019; Gage et al., 2017). Tier I support in positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS) is support all students receive, such as positively stated behavior expectations, teacher-directed support of those expectations and support at the classroom level, modeling of expected behavior in common areas, and incentives for positive behaviors to minimize the frequency of behavioral events that lead to suspension/expulsion. The emphasis is “...contextually relevant social skills...frequent positive reinforcement...and...teaching and learning environments that discourage inappropriate behavior” (Sugai & Horner, 2006, p. 247). When students are unsuccessful at the first tier, similar to RTI and MTSS, interventions are offered through small groups and/or 1-on-1 support. Behavioral interventionists can provide such support, often working with students to teach socially accepted behavior, positively reinforcing desired behaviors and allowing for reflection in how to avoid undesired behaviors (Sugai & Horner, 2006).

Sugai and Horner (2006) offer a roadmap to schools attempting to implement a behavior intervention system:

- a. Set measurable and achievable outcomes that are endorsed by all stakeholders (students, educators, and families)
- b. Identify trustworthy, research-based, and replicable practices for an intervention
- c. Conduct data analysis of current practices, decide processes to keep, change, or eliminate (based on the analysis), and persist in continued intervention evaluation
- d. Develop schoolwide systems (financially, politically, etc) to ensure continued implementation and fidelity

The consistency of a schoolwide behavior support intervention implemented with fidelity, with involvement with families is of specific importance (Connell et al., 1994). The use of RTI, MTSS, and PBIS can work together to support students holistically (Connell & Klem, 2006).

Goal Setting

Though work of support advocates with students models RTI/MTSS frameworks, the role is under researched. The work of support advocates with students relates to the other interventionists within schools such as behavior specialists and literacy coaches, in that they all use some form of goal setting. For students who've experienced little success in school, goal setting is an effective metacognitive reminder to ensure academic achievement (Bursali & Öz, 2018). Allen et al. (2016) support the implementation of goal setting at the microsystem level for developing and growing student prosocial behaviors and academic motivation. Once goals are sets and students and support advocates create regular rhythms of interactions, potential outcomes of this rhythm are varied.

Potential Outcomes

Support advocate work with tier 3 students can serve as an intervention, as part of a school's implementation strategy of MTSS. MTSS at the school level requires standardized instruction practices, systems to monitor progress, administrative support and distributed leadership, and the provision of quality resources for continued success (Bohanon et al., 2023). With effective schoolwide implementation of MTSS, students may experience high expectations, build meaningful and long-lasting relationships, engage in deliberate and purposeful actions, and experience the effects of strong school collaborative learning communities (Bohanon et al.,

2023). Further exploration of expected outcomes of the support advocate intervention occurs below.

Tier 3 Student Promotion

As previously stated, tier-3 students are those who have not experienced widespread success even with small group Tier II interventions. Traditionally they are identified through school-based data sources such as performance data, behavior data, and/or attendance data and when placed in a Tier II intervention, tier-3 students do not show adequate progress. When students enter the third tier of intervention, this is often due to a lack of sustained success in Tier I (core instruction) and Tier II (targeted research-based intervention) supports (Hunley & McNamara, 2010). As such, Tier III interventions are those that are hypothesized to work but that are often individualized for each student (Hunley & McNamara, 2010).

One component of Tier III interventions is that interventionists (in this case support advocates) offer 1-on-1 individualized support to students. The check ins that occur during 1-on-1 conversations allow for student goal setting with an experienced staff member. Denton et al. (2021) discussed interventions that include self-monitoring for students, along with reading intervention, and the increased chance of enhancing reading outcomes. Because of the individualized nature of Tier III interventions, support advocates work with students to develop plans that allow for sustained success, because the goals are set and drafted with student input. These plans are communicated to other staff members and teachers throughout the school. This could potentially result in movement down from the third tier into the second tier. Moore-Brown et al. (2005) also note that natural consequences of a coordinated Response to Intervention (RTI) program include improved problem-solving efforts, increased communication between regular and special education teachers, and the potential for service providers (psychologists, speech-

language pathologists, etc) to work directly with students in activities that promote success. Traditionally, quality core instruction can lack in large classrooms or those with discipline issues, leading to a high population of students requiring intervention that leads to students who live in the second tier (Braun et al., 2020). However, with support advocates to monitor interventions and develop individualized plans, the improvement of students in the core and in the second tier might occur.

Teacher Support

Support advocates take on the role of working with students in small groups and individually in the hopes of students developing self-management skills and becoming more engaged and productive. However, the support of students through support advocates may also lead to teachers feeling supported in their instruction of struggling students, which will improve MTSS fidelity. As staff outside the classroom support student progress through the MTSS protocol and note student growth, teacher buyin and support of MTSS increases (Bahr et al., 2023). Establishing a sustained system of teacher support with continued professional learning and established options for problem solving, instead of a ‘train and hope’ approach, may result in increased fidelity to MTSS processes and other interventions within the classroom (Sugai & Horner, 2006).

Vanderburg and Stephens (2010) reviewed the outcomes of literacy coaches in schools. When surveyed, teachers described literacy coaches as an encourager, facilitator, and demonstrator. Additionally, teachers also appreciated the accessibility of the coach and their support in offering varying teaching strategies for student success. Knowing the premise of a support advocate is to model the work of behavior specialists and intervention teachers, the

recognition of support and encouragement from teachers who are surveyed is a potential outcome.

Student Social-Emotional Growth

The goal of school reform and this study is to reduce the likelihood that students disrupt from school and drop out before high school graduation. On the path to drop out a student might display acting out behaviors such as drug use, absenteeism, and risky sexual behaviors or more quietly disturbed behaviors such as eating disorders or suicidal ideations (Resnick et al., 1993). When studying resiliency, what has been seen in students that persevere is the existence of deep relationships with family and those within their community (Resnick et al., 1993). Croninger and Lee (2001) argue that schools establish the social capital for adolescents and those that complete high school do so because of resources and their network of relationships with adults. Additionally, students who don't complete high school cite a lack of academic and social support when matriculating through school (Croninger & Lee, 2001). Feelings of connection affect social emotional health and connected students display less disengagement (Wingspread Declaration on School Connections, 2004; Anderson & Bigby, 2015; Sánchez et al., 2005). With that in mind "...fostering a sense of caring and connectedness between adolescents and adults should be an integral part of interventions designed to promote resiliency and protective factors..." (Resnick et al., 1993, p. S7).

Belonging may lead to change in student emotional states. Resnick et al. (1993) found that students who enjoyed school due to connectedness and belonging were less likely to engage in behaviors that signaled acting out or disengagement. As such, school belonging and connectedness could be a consequence of student participation with a support advocate. When

measuring school attachment, i.e. belonging, some scales include a measurement of closeness to people, feeling part of school, and happiness being at school (Libbey, 2004). Moreover, Skinner and Belmont (1993) included ratings of happiness and sadness when measuring student engagement and motivation. Additionally, Moore et al. (2005) found a consequence of traditional RTI programs included positive reactions from student participants and stakeholders. Further research showed students who participated in self-advocacy groups reported feeling happy and having fun with peers (Anderson & Bigby, 2015). So, students who work with support advocates and participate in intervention programs where they experience success could develop joy and happiness toward learning and school.

Additionally, increased student agency and voice could be a potential outcome when students build relationships with support advocates. Garnering student input about their learning goals and curriculum choices is essential to pursue relevant learning, though this practice is rare (Cook-Sather, 2002). Since the return to brick-and-mortar schools from the international shutdowns during the 2020 global pandemic, students have displayed multiple issues behaviorally, academically, and socially and sometimes without known reasons (Banerjee et al., 2022). However, even before the pandemic Khalifa (2013) argued that true school reform does not exist until students can advocate for themselves and their learning needs. Some of this self-advocacy is created, encouraged, and fostered by school leaders and school staff, especially with students at-risk of disengagement from school and students of color (Khalifa, 2013). Fiedler and Danneker (2007) argue that as adults use practices with students that encourage self-management skills, goal setting, problem solving, and appropriate decision making, self-determination and self-agency is strengthened. Therefore, when support advocates work with students, a potential outcome of their work is the authentic establishment of student self-advocacy.

Improved Discipline and Behavior Data

Students who have experienced disparaging outcomes and elect to drop out from high school before graduation have a history of academic risk factors that indicate their potential to do so. Academic risk includes low grades, low educational expectations, placement in special education, grade level retention, and discipline issues (Lee & Burkam, 2003; Croninger & Lee, 2001). Of interest are higher suspension and expulsion rates for marginalized students, as they experience higher exclusionary discipline practices, meaning they are systematically removed from class due to discipline (Khalifa, 2013; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Sanders et al., 2018; Christle et al., 2007). However, support advocates serve to reduce exclusionary practices by intervening when a student escalates (before they're suspended), thus potentially improving student discipline records and patterns.

Additionally, Scott et al. (2019) found that schools who effectively implemented MTSS processes, even with just 80% fidelity, reduced discipline incidents by 30% and discipline referrals by 5%. Likewise, schools implementing Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) have seen a reduction in disciplinary referrals (Scott et al., 2019). Intervention programs that target academic and behavioral growth may experience similar or even greater outcomes. Schoolwide discipline programs that establish effective classroom management create a safe and inclusive environment (Sugai & Horner, 2006). As support advocates provide guidance for student awareness of their behaviors and ways to improve, student behavioral support may model discipline (training expected to produce improvement) rather than punishment (often employed to eliminate behavior rather than correct it) (Maag, 2020).

Improved School Engagement

Secondary school supports that allow a culturally sensitive, integrated curriculum can help to increase student engagement (Miller, 1990). Additionally, when students feel supported by school staff and build relationships with them, they are more likely to report engagement in school (Klem & Connell, 2004). Working with a support advocate can help students feel a sense of belonging in school and decrease the likelihood of premature dropout (Christle et al., 2007; McLaughlin & Clarke, 2010). Finally, Gage et al. (2017) found a positive behavior support intervention when implemented with fidelity has a significant effect on student math and reading achievement scores. Improved academic success has been linked to increased student engagement (Christle et al., 2007, Klem & Connell, 2004; McLaughlin & Clarke, 2010).

Summary

In this chapter I began with a theoretical framework that discussed Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in relation to the Socio-Ecological Framework to establish the claim that relationship building and accountability through a support advocate in school helps to strengthen student agency and belonging that leads to persistence and tenacity in school. From there a historical review of Response to Intervention programs was provided as a foundational basis of support advocates as an alternate form of intervention, with RTI typically used to formally test students and assess those in greater need of intervention beyond Tier I instruction. I then described current intervention instructor roles to establish a framework for the work of support advocates. Finally, I reviewed potential outcomes of support advocates when providing targeted interventions to students. Together, these areas of study provide me with background knowledge

to conduct an exploration of inquiry into the perceived roles of support advocates from student and staff perspectives.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

Students who experience challenges in school- low academic performance, lack of connection to the school and staff, and retention in a grade level- are at risk of becoming disengaged from school (Croninger & Lee, 2001). Connectedness and a sense of belonging in school has been shown to positively contribute to retention of students at risk for academic failure (Sanders et al., 2018; Christle et al., 2007). To foster this connectedness, Sanders et al. (2018) proposed that school professionals work with vulnerable youth and work collaboratively with other school personnel for continued integration of those youth into school. Support staff and support advocates directly aware of student needs are a link to connecting disengaged students to school, ultimately through the development of student self-advocacy skills (Khalifa, 2013; Petri et al., 2020; Anderson & Bigby, 2017).

The purpose of this study was to explore the role and potential effects of a school support advocate's work with urban middle school students. To understand the study purpose, I proposed two research questions with three sub questions:

1. What is the perceived role of support advocates working with tier-3 students in an urban middle school setting?
 - a. How do support advocates describe their role in an urban middle school setting?
 - b. How do teachers describe the role of support advocates in an urban middle school setting?
 - c. How do tier-3 middle school students describe the role of support advocates?

2. What are the social and academic outcomes for tier-3 students engaging with support advocates in an urban middle school setting?

Setting

The setting of this research project was a middle school in a large district in a Midwestern state. Students in the school experienced varying social and academic barriers to accessing a quality education. Social barriers included a high rate of poverty with more than 90% of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch and a high migrant percentage (or mobility rate) averaging forty-percent mobility throughout the school year. Beyond prevalent historical social disenfranchisement, twenty percent of students in the middle school possessed varying learning abilities warranting Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) because of their qualification for special education services. Additionally, this school educated students with an extraordinary amount of other characteristics that placed them at risk of disengaging from school prematurely (KSDE, n.d.), in that 15-20% had absences due to suspensions, 29% were identified as English-Language Learners (ELL), and 30% of students at any given time had at least one failing grade in one of their core courses, which followed standards referenced grading expectations. With this in mind, at least one-third of students were at-risk of not finishing high school and test scores at the state level indicated less than ten percent of students were proficient in both mathematics and reading and were thus performing below grade level expectations (KSDE, n.d.). This low performance on state assessments, especially at the sixth-grade level, indicates a higher probability of students dropping out of high school (Christle et al., 2007).

When the researcher assumed the role of principal just two years before the research study began, the school was in need of several organizational shifts for a few reasons. First, there were

staff members with varying levels of experience. Though many had been at the school for five years or more, approximately 25% of staff were new to the school during the school year of this study. In fact, consistently for two years preceding this study there was turnover of 10-15% of staff, so that (leading into this study) three years after the pandemic yielded a staff where 40% were new to the school than three years prior. Additionally, the school faced a tremendous challenge in its operation, attempting to maintain a commitment to procedures of the past that brought order and stability while accepting the need for innovative teaching and leading. The ZOOM rooms of the pandemic left behind some teachers who still used lecture mode for instruction that bored students (“If we use AI...”, 2023) and this boredom led to misbehaviors due to disengagement. Finally, the district in which the school was situated, was involved in an investigation with the Department of Justice who reviewed significant discipline disparities in students of color and students with disabilities. All of these factors changed the landscape and dynamic of the school, which warranted the researcher approaching discipline from a relationship building perspective as an alternative to previous years. It is important to note the principal and researcher invested a significant amount of time in teaching staff about culture and unifying them around a common mission, vision, and core values, to allow for effective change management (Bowditch et al., 2007). The significance of this learning will be discussed in next steps (Chapter 6).

Rationale for Study Design

Research Design

This research most appropriately lent itself to a qualitative approach. Creswell (2013) states, “Qualitative research begins with assumptions...that inform the study of research problems...the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under

study” (p. 44). Studying support advocates and their effectiveness in their role as described by stakeholders (students and staff) helped to form assumptions about their work in schools. Adding to this qualitative research definition is the expectation that the researcher’s culture, background, politics, and social experiences influenced the design of the instruments of study. Knowing that support advocates worked with students while offering support to teachers who teach those students, instruments of data collection were surveys and interviews with those stakeholders. My role as the researcher was to analyze data from the interviews and surveys, along with conducting field observations of support advocates when working with students in and around the school. Creswell (2013) writes, “...qualitative researchers gather up-close information by actually talking directly to people and seeing them behave and act within their context” (p. 45). The patterns and themes derived from induction and deduction and the data that emerged helped to draw conclusions (Creswell, 2013). My intent was to maintain a consistent relationship with the data to conceptualize and define what was occurring (Gubrium & Holstein, 2014).

The human experience can be studied, and assumptions can be made, but student descriptions and personal accounts helped to establish a holistic view of support advocates and their role in schools. As a researcher and building leader, my experience with a support advocate and their contributions to the lives of students could vary from the impact felt by the students themselves. Combining interviews and field observations, which are typical qualitative data methods, with student data (as a baseline for participant selection) helped to present a holistic view of perceptions of the support advocate role (Creswell, 2013; Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016).

Methodology

Case Study

Though there are varying types of qualitative research methods, this research methodology employed a case study model. Support advocates were actors in this case, and it was important for me as the researcher to identify if the case was a single person, group of people, activity, or program (Creswell, 2013). The three support advocates surveyed represented a single case, the nucleus or core of the research study, with their interactions with others as the fence around them similar to "...a circle with a heart in the center" (Merriam, 1998, p. 27). Stake (1995) argues that viewing an individual case requires examination of single specimens, in this case the specimens examined were support advocates. Students who work with support advocates as members of the larger school body were interviewed as the supporting cast to the support advocate main actors. Issues surrounding actors of the case were observed and their thoughts and views were recorded through interviews (interviews occurred with support advocates and students) and surveys (with teachers). Stake (1995) discusses various data gathering methods including observations, interviews, and document review; all of which were utilized in this case study.

Observations conducted with support advocates took a lite ethnographic approach, in that observations were conducted within two weeks over several days (explained in detail later). Ethnography is useful in that it creates a narrative from participants that might not be told simply through interviews or surveys. Creswell (2013) defines ethnography as "...extended observations of the group, most often through participant observation, in which the researcher is immersed in the day-to-day lives of the people..." (p. 90).

How was this like an ethnography? As a building leader in the school where I was also the researcher, I had a deeper knowledge of the support advocate and their demands, the students, and the school culture/climate beyond a typical researcher who would visit for an

established number of visits in a confined amount of time. Beyond a traditional research observer, I possessed firsthand knowledge of the inner workings of many school procedures that involved support advocates and their work with students:

- I was familiar with students in our school who utilized a support advocate on a regular basis.
- I was involved in the MTSS selection of students who worked with a support advocate, those receiving Tier II support such as a lunch group or other small group and those receiving Tier III (intensive) support.
- As the principal researcher I continued to work with both groups of students, those recruited who participated in the study and those who declined to participate.
- I was privy to the day-to-day interactions of students with a support advocate and other support staff not part of this study.
- I was familiar with student attendance trends, behavior data, issues between students or with multiple teachers throughout the day, and had knowledge of teachers' discussions about student behaviors during team meetings not included in field notes.

This information provided more than a bird's eye view of the school as a case and this professional knowledge away from the research allowed me to write a case study narrative that spoke to the outside influences of the support advocate on students. I interviewed students as a researcher (who could take notes) and principal (as a person they saw every day and could enact change); thus, the student experiences dictated through interviews helped to paint an intricate

picture of the influences of a support advocate beyond what I as a leader (or researcher) would have seen alone.

How was this ethnographically lite? The congruence of my role as building leader and researcher gave me a deeply involved lens as a researcher. However, because I did not forsake my daily work as an administrator to live and work among the support advocates of this study, it was not formally an ethnographic study. I conducted multiple observations over two days, but not to the extent of typical ethnographic fieldwork where as Gubrium and Holstein (2014) write it “...is traditionally participatory and observational...” for an extended period of time (Chapter 3). The relationship building work of support advocates (the case) with groups of students occurred for more than a year before the formal research study began, indicating this culture-sharing group was together long enough to develop identifiable patterns (Creswell, 2013). As such, case studies as a method of qualitative research allowed for an approach (i.e. methodology) and an object of study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016).

Students involved in the research study were reluctant to trust school officials and the relationship built with a support advocate was a delicate one that required trust for the researcher to be allowed in, and to hold their position as a gatekeeper (Creswell, 2013). As a building leader in the school of study I had a natural trust-building position to allow for the prolonged immersion in the field required of observations as a data collection technique (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). This professional immersion provided me as the researcher the rapport necessary to represent the needs of the group studied. Additionally, the multiple vantage points explored by the case study approach: an interview with the support advocate, interviews with students, surveys with teachers, and field observations allowed for multiple lenses in evaluating various experiences of multiple stakeholders when working with a support advocate. This allowed for a holistic picture

that represented the participants (emic) and my views as a researcher (etic) (Creswell, 2013; Madison, 2019; Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016).

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is a research methodology where “...everything the researcher encounters when studying the topic of concern is data” (Conlon et al., 2020, p. 948). Though qualitative case studies involve specifically selecting participants or data that allow pertinent data to arise, grounded theory methodology includes the generation of data that emerges to decide what data to collect next, i.e. theoretical sampling (Conlon et al., 2020). With theoretical sampling, there are planned sources of data and optimal participants to ensure the data is meaningful. However, as themes and codes emerge, grounded theory (and thus theoretical sampling), allows for pivots to identify how the initial theory might be reviewed and reconsidered (Conlon et al., 2020). What follows is a brief explanation of the methodology used as grounded theory. During the discussion of themes and codes, the discussion of grounded theory practices will emerge again to show how I used data to simultaneously code and theme patterns.

Of particular interest when answering the research questions were varying perceptions of the work of a support advocate, not just from their personal experiences but also from the lens of stakeholders they spent the most time with, the students. As an MTSS-type intervention, the work of support advocates and how they helped in the development of students within and around the school were essential, hence both support advocates and students were interviewed. Students were interviewed along with support advocates for firsthand accounts of the support advocate role and potential outcomes. Two support advocates were initial cases but as students were interviewed and interviewees mentioned another support advocate, that support advocate

was invited into the research study, in line with grounded theory methodology (Conlon et al., 2020; Braun et al., 2020; Anderson & Bigby; 2017; Bryant & Charmaz, 2017). As the additional interviewee shed light on students they worked with (not mentioned by another support advocate), those students were invited to participate in the study. This mimicked grounded theory methodology in that there was purposive sampling of key cases, but the simultaneous involvement of data collection and analysis that led to the addition of subjects based on data and codes (Bryant & Charmaz, 2017; Conlon et al, 2020).

Another form of data collection were surveys from teachers. As students agreed to participation, their teachers were included in the study. Teachers of those students were surveyed to confirm (or add to) the perceived roles of advocates (the case). When reviewing teacher survey data, they discussed specific areas of support that they depended on support advocates to provide. As the researcher I used the indicated areas of support to craft my schedule of when and where I would conduct field observations. Again, data review and analysis from one group of participants (in this case teachers) informed the methodology of another data source, i.e. field observations (Conlon et al., 2020; Palinkas, 2015).

Additionally, field observations of support advocates during the school day were conducted to assess their work with students- those part of their caseload with observable demands on their work and those not part of their caseload. Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) support data collection methods in case studies that draw on multiple forms of data collection including interviews, observations, surveys, and focus groups. Through the multiple forms of data collection, an intimate narrative of student perceptions and experiences was written. Creswell (2013) writes, "...a good qualitative case study...collects many forms of qualitative data...one source...is typically not enough to develop...in-depth understanding" (p. 98). Case studies allow

for a multifaceted view of each case, with experiences and accounts categorized, sorted, and thematically analyzed for an overall picture of a singularly defined experience.

Participant Recruitment and Sample Selection

Within the school of study there were multiple adults that served in a support capacity to complete tasks in line with the research definition of a support advocate- those who work with students in a group and/or one-on-one basis to provide guidance and/or monitor progress toward previously established goals. As such, I will narrow the definition to define the first level of sample selection for the case and then the second level of sampling that resulted, as is often necessary with qualitative case studies (Merriam, 1998).

Support Advocate Sample Selection

Defining support advocates in this study was essential. In the district studied, there were multiple positions of staff (classified and certified) where a portion of their role was work with students in a group and/or to provide individualized support in a one-on-one context. There were varying titles for these staff members- General Education Para, Behavior Intervention Teacher, Student Success Advocate, Future Ready Advocate, Student Success Para, Counselor, Special Education Case Manager, and Child Study Team member- to name some. Because of the varied titles across campuses within the district, the specific definition of support advocates in this study was limited to those whose primary and singular role was to provide support to an individual student or a small group of students on a regular basis for targeted intervention. The students they worked with were part of a targeted caseload because they had been identified as a student in need of intensive support to function regularly in and around the school. To further the definition: the support advocate was a non-classroom district employee with flexibility in their schedule to meet one-on-one with a student in times of extreme need or escalation but also to

provide support to multiple students throughout the day, collectively in a group or individually as needed. For this study, others in the school who worked one-on-one with students or provided individualized support were eliminated if the student support arm was one function of multiple (equal) extensions in their body of work. For example, though counselors work with students in a one-on-one capacity, they also have master schedule and curricular demands, crisis intervention tasks, and other expectations for classroom lessons and school support that limited their work with individual students to a fraction of the day (Schmidt, 2010).

Support advocates in this specific school setting were part of a support team that regularly analyzed data- discipline, academic, and attendance- to identify students in the greatest need of an extra layer of support. This support was built on the premise of relationships and the presence of an adult when demands of learning in the classroom became overwhelming for students (Hawkes Learning, 2015). With the above determined specificity of a support advocate there were six individuals in the school of study who might have qualified as worthy of being studied as a case. However, some individuals worked with more students at the second tier rather than at Tier III; while others provided lunch and small group supports to multiple campuses with no individual 1-on-1 student support at a single campus. As such, the work of support advocates along with the ratio of Tier II to Tier III demands of the students they supported ultimately determined who was considered for recruitment and two potential advocates were disqualified from recruitment. An additional support advocate was excluded because though they worked solely on the campus of study, they were a contract employee of a para organization and were not directly employed by the district. This means their overall understanding of MTSS, RTI, and interventions was limited, disqualifying them as having knowledge of an intervention and tiers. Finally, though there are no prescribed maximum caseloads to determine movement between

interventions (Braun et al., 2020; Moore-Brown, 2005), this study limited effective Tier II and Tier III caseloads of support to no more than 25 students per advocate. The contracted para-organization advocate in the school of study had a caseload of more than 70 students and acknowledged their work with students individually was infrequent, further disqualifying them from recruitment.

From the considerations above, there were three support advocates who collectively became the case of this study. It is essential to describe them and their backgrounds before investigating their work with others. While the demographic background information of student participants could be accessed by the researcher (as an employee in the district of study), demographic information concerning the support advocates could not be accessed through digital means, as all three advocates came from three separate geographic regions. Thus, the researcher asked the three support advocates demographic questions that could establish their identity outside of the interview protocol. While keeping their true identities confidential, here is a description of their demographic qualities:

- Two out of three advocates were African American, and the average age of the support advocates was 61.7 years old.
- All three advocates graduated from high schools with more than 2000 students (a large size classification) and two out of three attended an urban high school.
- All three advocates earned a bachelor's degree and two of the three earned a master's degree

A summary of demographic information for all three advocates can be found in Table 3.1 with their corresponding pseudonym, to maintain confidentiality.

Table 3.1.

Support Advocate Demographic Information

Support Advocate	Age	Race	High School; State	Highest Level of Education
Advocate A- Mr. Johnson	61	White	Suburban; KS	Master of Music
Advocate B- Ms. Thompson	63	African American	Urban; MI	Master of Education
Advocate C- Mr. Brown	61	African American	Urban; KS	Bachelor of Arts

Also revealed during informal discussions, all three advocates discussed personal experiences that helped them in their ability to work closely with students:

- Mr. Johnson stated he listened to students when working in urban schools to understand their experiences, since he knew they were different from his as a white male who grew up in an affluent, suburban environment.
- Ms. Thompson stated she was the oldest of her siblings and her experience as a mother of one son and a foster mother developed her compassionate capacity to take care of others.
- Mr. Brown stated he sees himself in the students he works with, growing up on welfare with divorced parents and history of abuse, all with a goal to play sports in college.

Including their unique approach to educating others, it is important to note all three advocates communicated a deep sense of faith and religion that contributed to their passion for supporting others.

Zeroing in on three potential support advocate candidates, support advocates in this study held job responsibilities that centralized their work around student support. Samples of the job descriptions for each advocate can be found in Figure 3.1, Figure 3.2, and Figure 3.3. For the

support advocates interviewed, one served in the role of Student Success Advocate (Figure 3.1), one served as a Behavior Intervention Teacher (Figure 3.2), and one served as a Future Ready Advocate (Figure 3.3).



Figure 3.1.

Student Success Advocate Job Description

Adapted from job descriptions provided by the district studied

POSITION FUNCTION

Instructional teacher, to the Building Principal for assisting with the coordination of student's daily behavior regulation, relationship building and problem solving. Responsible for modeling SECD and Positive Behavior Supports to develop behavior experts in their building.

BEHAVIOR INTERVENTION TEACHER

Qualification Profile

- Bachelor's Degree required
- [state] Teaching or School Counseling License or Social Work accreditation required
- 3 to 5 years of teaching experience preferred

Essential Performance Responsibilities:

- Assists the Principal with the development and revision of the school-wide improvement plan while working as part of the Leadership Team.
- Provides behavioral leadership and results based staff development focused on meeting the goals of the school-wide program and comprehensive school reform
- Modeling of SECD and positive behavior supports while working directly with students.
- Collaborating with teachers and building administrator on positive behavior supports put in place for individual students.
- Assists in identifying, acquiring and organizing available resources for students.
- Identifies and communicates to classroom teacher's effective behavioral strategies to meet the educational needs of the students
- Analyzes behavior data, identifies and implements strategies and resources to address individual student needs
- Collects data to monitor and report students' progress
- Collaborates with Child Study Team Members, and classroom teachers as part of Individual Problem Solving Process.
- Serves as a consultant to administration, teachers and families
- Performs other duties as assigned to insure the success of the school-wide behavior development program and increased student achievement
- Must be able to work directly with students

Figure 3.2.

Behavior Intervention Teacher Job Description

Adapted from job descriptions provided by the district studied



Figure 3.3.

Future Ready Advocate Job Description

Adapted from job descriptions provided by the district studied

Two support advocates were selected as cases of study once the case criterion was determined (Merriam, 1998), but as students were selected for participation in the study

(described in depth below) and were interviewed, a third support advocate was named repeatedly during interviews and thus asked to become part of the study, referred to as theoretical sampling (Conlon et al., 2020). All three support advocates participated particularly in offering time for an interview with the researcher and two were observed during field observations. Comparative work histories for the three advocates recruited and interviewed is provided in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2.

Support Advocate Work Histories

Support Advocate	Support Advocate Title	Years in Education	Previous Work History
Advocate A- Mr. Johnson	Student Success Advocate	19	Teacher: Middle School- 11 years High School- 7 years
Advocate B- Ms. Thompson	Behavior Intervention Teacher	13	Success Advocate: 1 year Building Sub: 3 years Para-educator: 5 years Teacher: Middle School- 4 years
Advocate C- Mr. Brown	Future Ready Advocate	34	Behavior Intervention Teacher: 1 year Recruiting Advisor/ Talent Searcher: University* – 31 years [*through grants/ partnerships w/ K-12 schools] Future Ready Advocate: 3 years

As part of their employment, support advocates received tailored professional learning that targeted their work with students and equipped them for training others in the strategies they used regularly. Through informal dialogue, advocates were asked what training or previous background experiences they felt contributed the most to their current work. All three support advocates offered restorative practices training as the most significant formal training they

received to support their development and aid in their support of other stakeholders. The professional training experiences of restorative practices along with personal life experiences (previously discussed) offered support advocates unique perspectives to assist students in the Tier III intervention.

Student Sample Selection

Selection of students for this study was strategic and purposeful. As a school leader in the middle school, data was regularly reviewed to identify students meeting multiple at-risk identifiers. Croninger and Lee (2001) define students socially and academically at risk, in that they are at risk of having trouble in school. Having trouble might include excessive disciplinary action resulting in removal from classroom environments and suspensions or minimal academic advancement leading to academic learning gaps. These risk factors may lead to disengagement from school and often are present as characteristics in teenage dropouts (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Sanders et al., 2018; Christle et al., 2007). All students in this study were at risk of school disengagement without intervention, in that they all had multiple suspensions from school, performed below the proficiency level on state assessments, were labeled as chronically absent (missing more than 10% of school) and/or were identified as students with disabilities that received special education services (Christle et al., 2007; Croninger & Lee, 2001). When tiering students using a multi-tiered system of support, they would be identified as tier-3 students requiring work with a specialist (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). Demographic information for student participants can be found in Table 3.3. Student names within the table are listed as pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.

Table 3.3.

Student Participant Demographic Data

Student Name	Grade	Age (at time of interview)	Gender	Race/ Ethnicity
Jonathan	8	13	M	African American
Diego	8	14	M	Hispanic
Michael	7	13	M	Hispanic
Dennis	8	13	M	Hispanic
Monica	8	14	F	Multi-Racial
Casey	8	13	F	Hispanic

Once students were identified as tier three students in the school system, they were paired with a support advocate who committed to weekly one-on-one meetings with the student, at a minimum. This one-on-one meeting time was used as a social-emotional check-in with the student to assess their readiness for learning (often at the start of the day) and performance in class (during the school day). Additionally, throughout the day if students were sent out of class for misbehaviors or for classroom disengagement that distracted others, a support advocate was called to offer on demand support to help with student de-escalation and refocusing. Tier-3 students paired with a support advocate comprised approximately three percent of the total school population. According to Maag (2020), five percent or less of a school population should be categorized in Tier III as those non-responsive to systems of schoolwide classroom management techniques and discipline.

For specific recruitment, two support advocates identified as candidates for the case study (explained above; who worked regularly with tier 3 students) were asked what students from the school demographic report they worked with most often (see Table 3.4 and Table 3.5 for pieces of data found within the report), as in multiple times a week or almost daily. The school demographic report contained hundreds of student names, identifying those at risk due to state

assessment performance scores, poor attendance or chronic absenteeism, the frequency of exclusionary discipline practices, and excessive tardies to class (Khalifa, 2013; Sanders et al., 2018; Christle et al., 2007). One support advocate offered seven names and the other advocate offered three. I then gathered paperwork to contact each of these ten students' families for their potential participation in the study. While contacting parents and setting appointments to review the informed consent (Appendix F), one student was exited from the school due to judicial matters unrelated to the school. As such, nine of the ten suggested students' parents were contacted. It is important to note that before approaching parents support advocates provided a list of students that they worked with closely- not only who they worked with regularly but who also showed receptiveness to coaching, feedback, and intervention. After at least one semester of previous support during the school year, students and their families were consulted for formal participation in the research study. One student's family of the remaining nine was not approached as I felt I'd had too many conversations with their family- in my administrator capacity- related to teacher concerns (for the student's behavior and poor academic performance) and parent concerns (believing their student encountered unfair bias from staff). I did not want to abuse trust and request the kind act of participation in the study when I felt the family may be displeased with our school.

As such, eight student guardians were approached for participation (to respect the need for parent permission since student participants were all under the age of 18). One parent declined participation for their student, and they were assured their student could still receive support from a support advocate. Parents/guardians of the other seven students met with the researcher, reviewed the informed consent, and agreed for their student to participate. The informed consent- acknowledging parent assent for participation and student consent- is

provided in Appendix F. It was only after receiving signed parent consents that I approached students for potential participation. One student of the seven I approached declined to participate, stating they were nervous to be interviewed. This dropped the pool of participants down to six student participants.

In summary, though support advocates worked with dozens of tier two and three students of the ten recommended: two disqualified themselves from an invitation in that they were either unwilling to participate or were removed from the school campus through a district reassignment (because of a violation of a board of education policy) and one was not approached by the researcher due to the parent declining the invitation. A graphic of the support advocate and student recruitment process is provided in Figure 3.4.

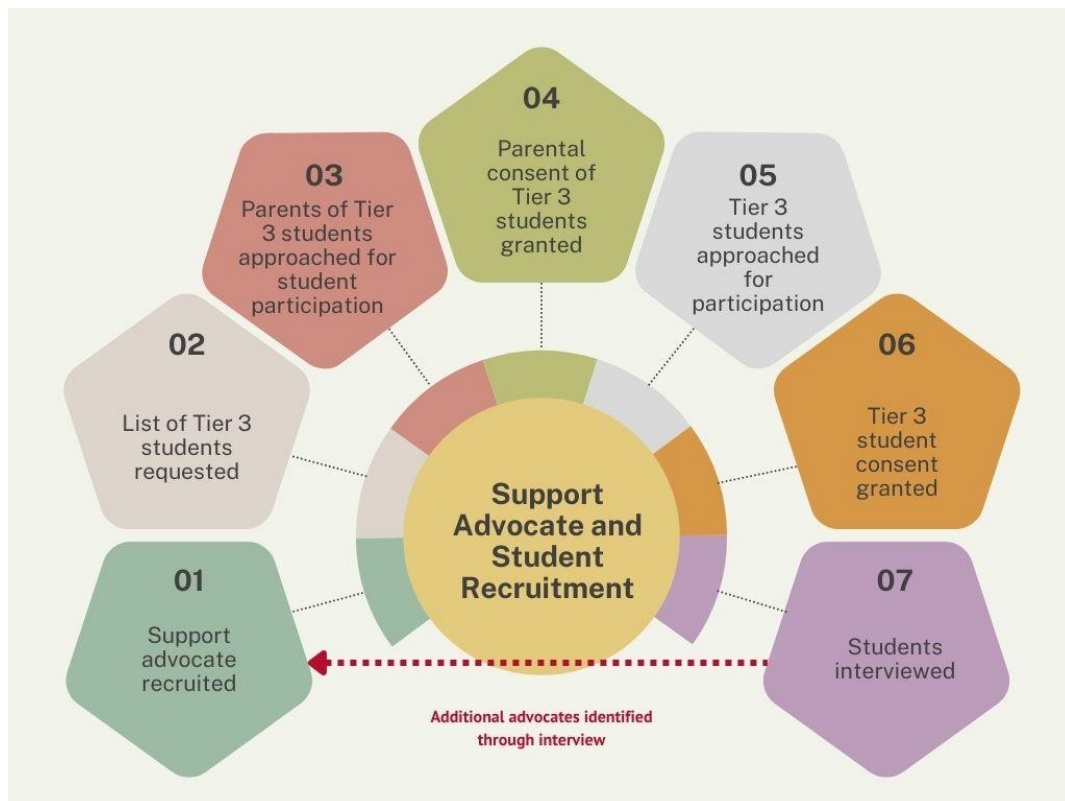


Figure 3.4.

Support Advocate and Student Recruitment Steps

Six of the tier three students who specifically worked with support advocates were identified as students who received almost daily support from a support advocate. When interviewed, at least half of the students referenced working with a third support advocate. As such, this support advocate was approached for their participation in the study. Though the selection of the first two advocates was purposive, the theoretical sampling of the third advocate happened in line with grounded theory methodology as described by Conlon et al. (2020), where I was “concerned with generating data specifically related to conceptual categories that emerge as of interest to the inquiry” (p. 947). The third support advocate agreed to participate; as such, they were asked for a list of students they worked most closely with and provided a list of 16 students (see recruitment steps in Figure 3.4). I desired to maintain student recruitment practices similar to the student recruitment steps I utilized with the first two support advocates (Conlon et al., 2020). As such, during the research study three students from the third support advocate’s list were disqualified since they went through the district reassignment process and were sent to another school. Additionally, another three students were disqualified by the researcher since recent interactions with a school administrator and their parents were less than favorable. Finally, two students suggested by the third support advocate were actively involved in the school problem solving process, meaning there were active conversations between parents and school officials concerning areas of concern needing greater support. So as not to confuse the problem-solving process and the research study, I elected not to approach those families for potential participation. The families of the remaining eight students provided by the third advocate were approached for participation but none of the researcher’s efforts in over a month with multiple forms of contact resulted in additional students being added to the study.

Teacher Selection

Teacher perceptions concerning the role of support advocates was important to connect the work support advocates described to the experiences students described. Though I as the researcher did not intend to interview teachers- as each student could have up to eight different teachers at the secondary level and this would be cumbersome- their input on everyday practices of support advocates with students could help shed light on support advocate intentions versus the reality of their work. Additionally, teachers respond differently to questions in interviews and observations compared to surveys (Wilhelm & Andrews-Larson, 2016), so using their survey responses to guide field observations (described below), allowed me to utilize their feedback in a purposive yet simultaneous way (Conlon et al., 2020; Braun et al., 2020).

To recruit teachers, once students consented to participation a list of their teachers was compiled. Teachers of each student participant were e-mailed as a blind copy group to request their participation in the research through the form of a survey. Additionally, teachers were only emailed for participation after the student was interviewed, to ensure the thoughts of survey respondents could reflect the voices of students who were included in the research. The identity of the teachers was unknown, but 29 unique educators were invited and 16 responded to the request for survey participation. A reminder e-mail was sent once, three weeks after the original e-mail invitation was sent and the request for participation was made.

Though the identity of teacher participants is unknown as participation in the survey included anonymity, listed here is the makeup of survey invitees:

- Sixty-two percent of survey invites were sent to female teachers.
- Eight of twenty-nine teachers invited were minorities (non-white).
- Four of twenty-nine teachers invited were born outside of the United States.

- The majority of survey invites were sent to teachers with less than 16 years of experience (20 out of 29 invites).
- The highest frequency for years of experience for survey respondents was 16 years or more (nine invites; 7 respondents).

Only two teachers invited with 16 or more years of experience were male, all others (seven invited) were female; thus it is likely that the perspective of a majority of the 16 years or more responses could be attributed to females. A figure of years of experience for the group of educators that responded to the survey can be viewed in Figure 3.5.

How many years have you worked in this role? (n=16)

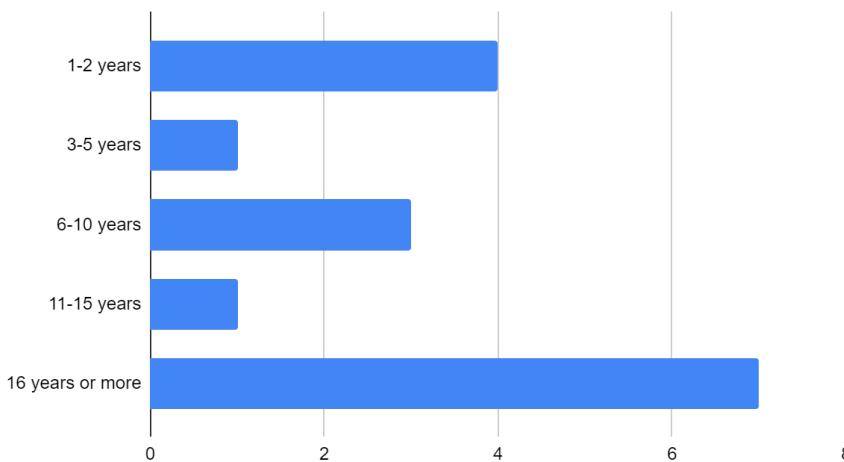


Figure 3.5.

Teacher Survey Participant Years of Experience

Data Collection

The data collection progressed over 3 months. The three-month time span included recruitment of support advocates, teachers, and students and the employment of all data collection instruments including a) semi-structured interviews with support advocates and students, b) surveys provided to teachers and follow up requests for participation, and c) field

observations of support advocates. The grounded theory method of data collection and analysis allowed for coding and theming, while interviewing participants and analyzing survey responses (Conlon et al., 2020).

Interviews were conducted in person and recorded via two platforms, a) the K-state password-protected and encrypted ZOOM account and b) via a password-protected otter.ai account. Interviews were recorded via ZOOM only as a backup and were saved to the researcher's password-protected ZOOM cloud account online. Interviews recorded through the otter.ai account- the researcher's password-protected transcription service- allowed for ease of transcription during review.

Data Collection Schedule

Data was collected and analyzed through multiple means. Demographic data was provided for historical information of student performance in school before working with a support advocate. That demographic data determined all students eligible for a Tier II or Tier III intervention (Maag, 2020; Braun et al., 2020; Scott et al., 2019). Work with a support advocate was dependent on intensive support needed beyond general support provided to all students, i.e. Tier I interventions. To assess the implications and potential outcomes on students working with support advocates, surveys, interviews, and field observations were conducted among various stakeholders.

Demographic Data

The school studied had a student support team (which I formed as principal outside of the research) that met to regularly review demographic data as a system of monitoring students at risk. The student support team, of which support advocates are members, met weekly to review comprehensive school data that organized all students by multiple areas of risks. Students with

multiple areas of risk were categorized via tiers to determine school supports that could be offered. Those identified tiers and planned supports were further established after staff input based on experiences with students determined that their needs for intervention above general education support existed. This promoted students to the targeted caseload of an advocate.

Support advocates determined their student caseloads from students promoted to Tier III. Portions of the demographic data that monitored trends of student performance specifically in the areas of behavior, attendance, and academics was reviewed for the purposes of supporting the identification of students selected for the case study. An excerpt of those pieces of the data can be found in Table 3.4 and Table 3.5. The tables (Tables 3.3, 3.4, and 3.5) show data specific to the six student participants and all names are listed as pseudonyms to protect the identity of participants.

Table 3.4.

Student Support Team Data Excerpt of Learning Abilities and Suspensions

Student Name	Grade	Sped ^a	ELL ^b	# of Referrals	Out of School Suspension (Days)	In School Suspension (Days)
Jonathan	8	SWD ^c		13	2	11
Diego	8			12	2	3
Michael	7			1	0	0
Dennis	8	504 ^d		27	5	8
Monica	8			3	1	0
Casey	8			11	3	7

^aSped= Special Education classification. ^bELL= English Language Learner. ^cSWD=Student with Disability (i.e. Individualized Education Program). ^d504= Section 504 plan

Table 3.5.

Student Support Team Data Excerpt of Absences and Tardies

Student Name	Grade	UNX ^a (Periods)	UNX (Days)	Chronic Absenteeism	Late to School (freq)	Tardies During School (freq)
Jonathan	8	54	6	No	7	1
Diego	8	42	4.67	No	3	7
Michael	7	3	0.33	No	2	2
Dennis	8	99	11	No	0	1
Monica	8	140	15.56	Yes	41	4
Casey	8	49	5.44	No	31	26

^aUNX= unexcused class periods (a 45-minute block). **freq**= frequency

Areas of risk related to school concerns of absenteeism, skipping class, low grades, early grade retention, and discipline problems (Croninger & Lee, 2001) were highlighted for students on this school-based data sheet and students were placed into tiers for intervention planning, based on the presence of multiple risk factors. Students with more than one area of need, i.e. a school risk factor, were labeled as a tier two student and received additional support from a support advocate. This second-tier support included biweekly check ins, lunch groups, and goal setting with students based on agreed upon areas for improvement. Further tiering of students occurred through behavioral observations of staff and suspension data that is monitored throughout the school year, which helped to classify students who are at the greatest risk of expulsion without intervention. These students were identified as tier three students. In Tables 3.4 and 3.5, student data that represented an extreme occurrence (in that it fell in the top 5% of the school population) was highlighted in red. Of significance, all student participants had at least one risk factor in the top 5% of the student body, except Michael. However, teacher recommendations due to classroom behaviors (not quantified in the demographic data) warranted Michael's work with a support advocate and his placement in the tier three support advocate intervention. Maag's (2020) work in advocating for schoolwide behavior intervention programs argues that while 60% of students will behave appropriately in school without a structured

discipline system, 35% benefit from a schoolwide system while 5% do not and need a Tier III intervention of support. Most of the student participants in this study were part of that 5%.

Tier three students were partnered with a school support advocate who added students to their caseload for intensified intervention that included weekly (and sometimes daily) meetings with a support advocate among other classroom interventions. Student data on the at-risk identifier spreadsheet was unidentified and replaced with pseudonyms. Pseudonyms for the six students were applied for continuity throughout the research. Protection of information for research subjects was of the utmost importance.

Data Collection Instruments

Surveys

Surveys were provided to teachers of students participating in the study and were administered to these stakeholders using the *Qualtrics* platform. General school experiences with support advocates were assessed from teacher perspectives. Teachers were asked about their informal observation of students that warranted them being paired with a student support advocate. Acknowledgement of informed consent was provided through e-mail in which the survey link was attached and on the home screen of the survey. Once teachers read the statement of confidentiality their agreement to participate in the survey was indicated through progressing past the survey home screen.

Teachers were invited to participate once their student was interviewed, to ensure they were part of the study (and to plan against the presence of survey data for students who might drop out of the study). All requests for survey completion occurred within a month of time from March to April. Most teachers received at least one reminder for survey completion, however others might have received more as requests and reminders were sent simultaneously as students

were interviewed. Sixteen teachers of 29 invitees accepted the request to participate in the online survey. Questions posed to teachers of student participants can be found in Appendix A.

Interviews

Support advocates work with students regularly to help them with decision making and self-advocacy in school. Interviewing support advocates allowed for rich descriptions of their perceived role and the potential growth of students over time while also clarifying additional information not provided in the survey from teachers (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Since the support advocate had multiple students as part of their caseload, one interview was conducted for their perceptions concerning their work with all students. If the work of a support advocate varied between specific students, a question in the interview protocol provided an opportunity for examination of those differences through the semi-structured interview. All responses to interview questions from support advocates was kept confidential during the data collection process. The interview protocol for student support advocates can be found in Appendix C.

Students who worked with a support advocate at least one semester were the only students considered as potential subjects. Upon receiving targeted interventions with a support advocate, the principal researcher contacted parents/guardians (via email or phone) to set up an appointment explaining the research and identifying an initial request for their student to be interviewed for the research project. Once preliminary interest was established, informed consent was provided first to parents. Once signed and returned, students were presented with the informed consent for their willingness to participate. Once consent was obtained by parent/guardians and students, a semi-structured interview outside of school hours was scheduled with students. All responses to interview questions from students was kept confidential during the data collection process. Student interview questions can be found in Appendix B.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted solely with students and support advocates. Students were interviewed outside of the school day to establish a clear delineation between my temporary role as a researcher and the daily role of serving as their principal. Each interviewee was provided an interview slot that coincided with the end of the school day, a non-school day, or weekend. Interviews were scheduled for one hour and were conducted at a place of preference for all interviewees (though all participants elected to be interviewed at school in the researcher's office). All responses to interview questions were kept confidential during the data collection process.

Field Observations

Field observations are common practice in case studies and observations for this research study occurred during my work in the school as principal (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). To observe support advocates in their work with students, several windows of opportunity existed: during 1-on-1 support sessions with a support advocate; during classroom instruction; during unstructured times of lunch, hallway passing periods, or after school; during a support team meeting with colleagues, or during professional learning with teachers. Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) write that with observations the "...researcher obtains a first-hand account...rather than relying on someone else's interpretation or perspective" (p. 155). To observe support advocates with as many students as possible (and based on teacher survey data), I planned for at least two 30-60 minute observations, at least two weeks apart. Observations were not announced to students so that they were more apt to freely be themselves during the planned field observation.

Data Analysis

Grounded Theory

The data analysis process was guided by grounded theory. First, in the methods used to select support advocate interviewees. Secondly, in the researcher's use of reflective writing and journaling following interviews, surveys responses, and field observations (Conlon et al., 2020; Bryant & Charmaz, 2017). After each interview was completed, responses were transcribed within 48 hours and transcriptions of each interview were shared with interviewees to confirm that their words were accurately transcribed. All students agreed that interviews reflected what they intended to say with no corrections requested. However, when sharing transcriptions with support advocates, each of them had additions to help elaborate on a specific practice or subject they felt they under-represented when interviewed. Corrections were included in the paragraphs of the original transcriptions before any coding, themeing, or analysis occurred.

Bryant and Charmaz (2007) write, "Memo writing is essential to Grounded Theory...it is *the* fundamental process...the methodological link....which the researcher transforms data into theory" (p. 245). Following confirmation of accurate transcriptions, I utilized memo writing as I read through interview transcriptions and wrote out my thoughts on interviewee statements. The notes I wrote in the margins paid specific attention to whether the interview response indicated an answer to the research question concerning the role of support advocates or the question concerned with potential outcomes from the work of support advocates. Clarke (2005) recommends a period of digesting and considering responses through reflective thought before formally documenting coding patterns as a situational analysis, not as an end to data analysis but as an opener to a grounded theory framework. Since interviews occurred over a month's stretch of time, I decided to continually unearth my thoughts with each interviewees' responses and record them directly on the printed transcriptions, without formalizing the connection between interviews until all interviews were completed. Recording my thoughts immediately after each

interview occurred (after being verified by the respondent) helped with documenting my initial thoughts and helped with the beginning practices of reflections necessary when memoing after field observations.

Additionally, I printed the collective teacher survey responses once the survey window closed and recorded thoughts and questions after reading their responses. The questions I wrote helped to determine my field observation schedule since this was the last data collection tool employed. This method of using data analysis to determine data collection followed grounded theory recommendations (Conlon et al., 2020; Palinkas et al., 2015). Field observations as a natural memoing excursion helped to round out tangible representations of support advocate work hypothesized via interviews and surveys. Thus, every data collection tool resulted in a memo-type reflective document to chronicle my thoughts before formal coding and themeing (Clarke, 2005; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007).

Coding

Coding followed three cycles, with written portions of the interviews highlighted alone for the first cycle through initial coding. Saldaña (2013) writes, “Initial Coding is appropriate for virtually all qualitative studies, but particularly for...ethnographies, and studies with a wide variety of data forms (e.g., interview...field notes...” (p. 101). During initial coding I highlighted phrases from student and support advocate interviews that provided a general direction of where the research was going while acknowledging the possibility of rewording codes as the analysis continued (Saldaña, 2013). Specific phrases were labeled with potential categories from each interview and categories were written in the margins of printed transcriptions. These marginal codes were written out with at least a day between each interview’s analysis to allow for continuity of thought but an opportunity for new categories to emerge, if necessary. When all

interviews were coded with potential categories using the initial coding strategy (Saldaña, 2013), potential categories along with the initial phrases/ideas that connected to those categories were recorded in a coding spreadsheet for tracking.

In a second round of coding, phrases from teacher survey responses were bolded and categorized under the established categories from the initial coding of student and support advocate interviews. The bolding of phrases and categorization followed *In Vivo* coding so that the voices from student interviews and support advocate interviews could be compared to teacher voices (Saldaña, 2013). Two additional sub-categories developed from teacher surveys, but they fit well under the original categories developed during initial coding. These sub-categories were highlighted (to note their temporary placement), while the researcher went back and read interviews through the *In Vivo* method of bolding phrases to ensure the sub-categories found through teacher surveys were also present in interviews. Discovering that the sub-categories were present across interviews and surveys, the highlights were removed and their permanence was secured. Saldaña writes, “The primary goal during Second Cycle coding is to develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual...organization from your array of...codes” (p. 207). Support advocate interviews (as support advocates were the cases in this study) were reviewed again in this round to ensure the categories and sub-categories identified were present in their interviews (Creswell, 2013). After this round of coding, categories and sub-categories were grouped together (with short phrases that described the sub-category) and potential themes were assigned within the coding spreadsheet. As some phrases overlapped within multiple categories, a coding guide was developed to differentiate between categories and definitions and descriptive terms were assigned to similar phrases to indicate the opportunity for different meanings (Appendix E). Themeing was reserved for analysis of interview and survey data, before field

observations were reviewed as Saldaña (2013) suggested, “Themeing the data is perhaps more applicable to interviews and participant-generated documents...rather than researcher-generated field notes” (p. 177).

Finally, for a third round of coding field observations were coded using descriptive coding steps (Saldaña, 2013), where I highlighted phrases to assist me in generalizing what I heard and saw. Descriptive coding allowed for a detailed inventory of field notes and I reviewed those codes and compared them to established themes to identify appropriate names for the themes or the potential for re-naming of themes. Additionally, the otter.ai software utilized for interview transcription offered summaries of each interview and those ai (artificial intelligence) summaries with their headings were compared to categories created by the researcher. Where summary categories differed from researcher categories, a note was made in the coding guide for future reference. These summaries were also compared to teacher survey responses and interviews, used as a basis for further coding and thematic consolidation throughout cycle three (Saldaña, 2013).

Ethical Issues

Credibility

Potential threats to the credibility of the study stem primarily from the role of the researcher as an administrator in the school. The investment of various school resources into support advocates (and the researcher as the dispenser of those resources) could serve as a potential incentive for support advocates and/or students and staff to exaggerate support advocate effectiveness. To account for this, much of the researcher’s language was rooted in the separation of research from decision making as it related to the hiring, discipline, and firing of staff, the recruitment and discipline of students, and conversations concerning the research study and its

progress. Teachers were assured of anonymity when responding to survey requests and their participation (or lack thereof), had no bearing on their position within the school. Requests for participation were sent from the researcher's university school account to maintain separation. Additionally, when parents were contacted for the potential participation of their student, they were called after hours and their students were interviewed outside of school hours.

Often, credibility can be established through significant involvement in the field with a journal of notes throughout the research process (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). I maintained notes and conducted memoing during and after the use of each data collection tool to document potential biases and recorded questions present outside of my everyday work but related to research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Triangulation of data was used to justify the students involved and their need for interventions offered by support advocates, along with the cross referencing of data through thematic coding.

“Member checks” were utilized after interviews to ensure the thoughts of interviewees were accurately represented. Finally, surveys can be of limited value as it relates to discrete patterns (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016); thus, a combination of open-ended and closed questions were used in surveys to allow for further elaboration of responses among teachers.

Overall, my role as a decision maker in the school community helped to support my role as researcher and was essential to the trust and rapport required for effective case studies. Families of marginalized students- especially students of color, or those with disabilities, high suspension rates, or other disparaging data- often develop a bias against school systems and the leaders that represent those systems (Khalifa, 2013). The opportunity to build trust as a school leader, invested in the improvement of student academics and their school belonging, served as a conduit of trust for the performance of the research study.

Transferability

Justifying the support advocate's relevance to the broader school context was critical for transferability in this qualitative case study. As such, rich descriptions of the support advocates as cases along with the data analyzed through multiple data collection methods added to transferability (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). The experiences of support advocates gathered through interviews were enriched by student interviews, teacher surveys and field observations conducted by the researcher. These data collection methods occurred over several months allowing for the researcher to continue her day-to-day practices of administration but also remain immersed in the work of support advocates with multiple stakeholders within the school.

Finally, triangulation of data occurred in the collection of demographic data that was used to identify and support struggling students and in the collection of information from multiple stakeholders regarding their perceptions of support advocate and student relationships and potential outcomes from those partnerships (Stake, 1995; Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016).

Delimitations

Delimitations establish and identify the conceptual boundaries of a study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Delimitations in this study included the setting of the research, stakeholder data collection, and the selection of students.

Research Setting

This study was conducted in an urban middle school in a midwestern state. As the researcher I also served as an administrator in the school studied, though the district in which the research study occurred had multiple school sites with support advocates. As the researcher, I chose to study support advocates and students from the campus where I worked because of an established relationship with the students and families of the study, as they experienced my

leadership on a daily basis outside of the research. Dana (2009) discusses principal inquiry, where principals engage in continuous research for professional learning in contrast to traditional educational research. However, the struggling students in this study (those identified as tier-3 students), had a deepened sense of trust and respect for me as principal, because of the support they received after several years in the building. The setting could have extended to multiple school sites to include additional support advocates but three support advocates within one school campus offered an intimate case study and choosing the campus where the researcher served as a school leader helped to support the respect and rapport necessary for case studies rather than the researcher approaching students from another school campus where familiarity and relationship were not present.

Stakeholders

For triangulation of data (Stake, 1995), this case study involved multiple stakeholders that described the work of students and potential outcomes after extended time working with a support advocate. Surveys were administered to teachers while one-on-one interviews were only utilized with students and support advocates. Due to varying scheduling needs of each family, it was unrealistic to schedule interviews with each student's family, though this might have served as another lens to help describe perceptions of the role of support advocates. Additionally, interviews were not conducted with teachers because each student at this secondary level had at least seven potential teachers to be interviewed and the time to conduct a semi-structured interview would be excessive for teachers and the researcher. As such, a less obtrusive research method of surveys was employed (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2016) and open-ended questions were offered for free feedback. It is important to note that there were teachers throughout the school (not part of the study) who have regular interactions with a support advocate. However, the

beliefs and opinions of those teachers were not included in this study, since the perceptions of their specific students were not included in the study (meaning their student(s) were not interviewed).

Student Selection

The goal of the research was to study the role and potential outcomes of a support advocate working with tier-3 middle school students. Though support advocates worked with multiple students, they worked most closely with tier three students, offering weekly (sometimes daily) supports. The research study could have been opened to tier 1 students (those who excel with no interventions beyond the general school structure) and tier 2 students (those who engaged in semi-frequent interventions or interventions within small groups). However, the sheer amount of hours devoted to the support of tier three students (and the percentage of those hours as part of the support advocate's total day) is why the research was limited to research subjects identified in the third tier.

Summary

In summary, this chapter provided a detailed description of the study's research methodology, i.e. a qualitative case study (Stake, 1995; Merriam, 1998; Creswell, 2013) with grounded theory sampling (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Conlon et al., 2020). Qualitative case study methods were employed where the role of support advocates and potential outcomes of their work with students were investigated through surveys, interviews, and field observations as data collection tools. The sample selection of 3 support advocates, 6 students, and 16 teachers was purposive and simultaneous (Conlon et al., 2020; Palinkas, 2015). Three rounds of coding allowed for the emergence of three key themes to be described in the following chapter, Chapter 4.

Chapter 4 - Findings

Students who struggle in school have deleterious academic outcomes such as a lower prevalence of on-time graduation, higher rates of absenteeism, and a higher likelihood of dropping out of high school (Center for Health and Health Care in Schools et al., 2020). To investigate the role of support advocates in working with tier-3 students to reduce their demotivation and thus slow (or stop) the gradual phase of dropping out, this study utilized semi-structured interviews with 3 support advocates and six students, gathered data through surveys from sixteen teacher participants, and utilized field observations to gather insight into a support advocate's work. The following chapter outlines patterns of data discovered during analysis, presented based on research questions.

Research Question 1- Role of Support Advocates

To investigate the role of support advocates as facilitators of a Tier III intervention, I offered two questions, the first of which was, "What is the perceived role of support advocates working with tier-3 students in an urban middle school setting?" Three sub-questions contributed to the investigation of question #1:

- a. How do support advocates describe their role in an urban middle school setting?
- b. How do teachers describe the role of support advocates in an urban middle school setting?
- c. How do tier-3 middle school students describe the role of support advocates in an urban middle school setting?

Data from support advocate and student interviews and teacher survey responses was essential. What follows are sorted responses categorized toward themes.

Support Advocate Interviews

Support advocates in the urban middle school setting described their roles with both similarities and nuanced differences, reflecting the diversity in their responsibilities and approaches. Though all three support advocates interviewed held a different title and slightly varied job descriptions (see Figures 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3) one stated their role as primarily addressing behavioral challenges through tailored interventions, while another indicated a broader focus on ensuring overall student success to include behavioral, academic, and social dimensions, and yet the third suggested a focus on long-term student outcomes, particularly in preparing students for future academic and career success. Direct interview statements will be referenced for Mr. Johnson (Student Success Advocate), Ms. Thompson (Behavior Intervention Teacher) and Mr. Brown (Future Ready Advocate). All names are pseudonyms to protect support advocate identities.

Support

A common theme across the interviews was individualized support with an emphasis on behavioral interventions. Support advocates established a pattern of intervention support that included students, their families, and staff within the school. All three advocates stated their day-to-day tasks involved serving as an intervention facilitator to work with struggling students and provide goal setting for success. The immediate need for intervention was evident, but the desire to reduce the recurrence of crisis interventions requiring immediate attention was a goal. Therefore, there were several items under that umbrella of facilitation that will be discussed in detail.

When reviewing support advocate interviews, they described day to day interactions with multiple stakeholders, specifically students, staff, and families where areas of support differed

based on their relationships and needs. Table 4.1 provides an overview of support to those stakeholders and the discussion that follows explains each of those elements.

Table 4.1.

Support Advocate Stakeholder Support

Supporting Stakeholders		
Student	Family	Teachers/Staff
tiered support	liaison	liaison
emotional support		professional learning
tangible support		specific student insight
consistent support		Classroom/ 1on1 teacher support
practical support		

Student Support. Student support included the tiered support of Tier II groups (where students worked in small groups with other peers in an organized setting, such as lunch groups) or Tier III support that was much more individualized and frequent throughout the week. The Tier II support occurred for some students on a weekly basis versus the Tier III support that was offered several times a week. According to support advocates some tier-2 students received contact from them 2-3 times a week, whereas tier-3 students (as those in this study) had interactions with a support advocate daily. To differentiate Tier II from Tier III support, advocates stated Tier III support was more intensive and students in this tier often required a combination of support, including emotional support, behavioral support, academic support, and generalized support that occurred consistently almost daily. Despite the tiered level of support, goal setting occurred with students categorized as tier 2 and tier 3. Ms. Thompson said, “...our lunch groups...I set goals for both levels...tier two and tier three...provide rewards based on their accomplishments.” Students were promoted from Tier II group support to the caseload level

of Tier III support when they became highfliers in the discipline office or demonstrated multiple behaviors that placed them at risk of dropout or school disengagement.

Support advocates also offered examples of support that was categorized and coded as emotional support. This type of support included helping students manage their emotions or tempers depending on incidences throughout the school day. However, this support also extended to students outside of school, as many students in this study found school difficult and admitted to destructive behaviors. Ms. Thompson stated, "...some of them...this year are struggling with drug use, whether it be marijuana or smoking. Pills...their home life...and not being regulated." Support advocates stated they talked with students concerning their emotions and why they acted out and stated they would work to help students consider alternatives to their destructive behavior. Components of this emotional support also included support advocates offering a listening ear or providing counsel and problem-solving strategies to students. All three support advocates mentioned checking on the mental state of students and allowing students to confide in them during their interviews. It was mentioned that students with repeated emotional outbursts required a plan of assistance, and the support advocates were often the morning check in person part of the plan to ensure they were ready for learning.

Thirdly, support advocates stated support to students included tangible support where one advocate mentioned providing shoes and lunch money to students while all three discussed tutoring and academic support to help with grades. Tangible support was the coded category to include any support an advocate offered to meet every day needs or other needs that satisfied the survival level of Maslow's Hierarchy. Grade checks were a commonly discussed support technique that surfaced throughout support advocate interviews and was a recurring point in student interviews, teacher surveys, and field observations (discussed later). The conversation of

academic and grade checks occurred throughout interviews in multiple contexts, so the mention of grades as tangible support was categorized here when the process of a grade check (pulling up report cards digitally to check progress) was discussed. Though students were considered tier 3 because they demonstrated multiple at-risk behaviors (absenteeism, poor grades, etc), support advocates made it a point to highlight the ways they helped to ensure student safety and the meeting of basic needs before addressing the problems that placed students in Tier III.

The consistency of support in that it was scheduled and planned was identified by advocates. They mentioned schedules of when they pulled students for tutoring, compared to days of the week and times when they held lunch groups. Mr. Brown recalled his regular practices and routines,

Different parts of different weeks, they know I'm going to be asking them about their grades, and then if I know I see them on the lunch detention, I'm going to be getting on them...If I see them on the after school detention...what can we do to stop that from being a regular occurrence

Additionally, support advocates discussed supporting teachers in professional learning and attending support team meetings, which required a significant amount of scheduling. Support advocates also discussed keeping holes in their schedule to absorb emergency requests for assistance from students and staff.

Finally, a sub-category of practical support- i.e. individualized support based on each student's need- was a recurring topic. Each advocate discussed goal setting with students, and they talked at length about establishing incentives and opportunities for celebration when those goals were met. Support advocates offered examples of support offered to their tier 3 students on an as needed basis. Examples were meeting student needs with hygiene items and shoes, but also

emailing teachers when a student's home burned down. Ms. Thompson also discussed a student being hospitalized due to a suicide attempt and they talked with the student's parent about a reintegration plan back into school. Though the district of the school studied has mental health liaisons for these types of discussions, the example provided by the support advocate was noteworthy.

Family Support. Support for families included support advocates serving as a liaison between the student and the school and helping students take lessons learned at school to externalize those behaviors at home. All three support advocates discussed a component of meeting with families, describing their work with students, and soliciting insight from families in how their student could best be supported at school. Support advocates also had regular habits of updating parents on student progress. Some of this progress was academic, with updates on grades and student responses to tutoring, while other updates specifically addressed school and classroom behavior.

There were times mentioned within two of the three support advocate interviews where a family member called the support advocate to see if they could get through to their student because they noticed the student withdrawn and unwilling to talk at home. So, the support advocate served as a confidant with the student and family member.

School Support. The final arm of support by advocates according to advocate interviews extended to teachers and staff. When interviewed, support advocates described support for teachers addressing immediate, crisis intervention needs requiring a reactive response along with long-term, proactive responses to address ongoing needs. Reactive needs included student outbursts or discipline incidents that happened within the classroom resulting in a teacher's request for a student conversation with a support advocate to keep the behavior from escalating

to an office referral. Support advocates stated they were called by classroom teachers to assist in the moment of a classroom crisis, and they left flexibility in their schedule to go to the aid of the student. Mr. Johnson said, "...some teachers email me or call me or speak to me in the hallway about certain students...so I'll go maybe observe in the classroom...or...I'll meet with them one on one. And then usually we develop goals."

Proactive measures included counseling students before and after these outbursts to reduce the overall occurrence of outbursts and continuous disruptions to learning. Additionally, proactive practices on the part of support advocates included offering teachers professional learning in behavior and classroom management. Some professional learning for teachers simply included team meetings where support advocates provided student insight to staff to alert them of changes in the student's life or specific goals the student was working on so teachers could modify or adjust instruction or individual expectations.

Qualifications

Though questions within the support advocate interview centered around the support advocate's work (see Appendix C), support advocates offered responses that revealed a theme of their qualifications to serve as support advocates and student qualifications necessary to warrant work with a support advocate. Thus, a theme of qualifications was coded when any discussion of why students warranted tier 3 support or qualifications for support advocates during their with students was discussed. Mr. Johnson, operating as a Student Success Advocate, highlighted the importance of flexibility and adaptability in his approach to working with students. He noted that working with a larger caseload required him to be strategic in allocating his time and resources, ensuring that each student received the support they needed to succeed. He discussed meeting a student:

Diego...when I first was introduced to him, we sat down and talked...some issues of concern...with attendance and ...just not doing work...It had nothing to do with his intelligence...he was not motivated...[so I] let his teachers know that I'm working with him, that he has accountability for what he should be doing in his classes on a weekly basis.

Ms. Thompson- with her focused role as a Behavior Interventionist- emphasized the importance of building strong, trusting relationships with students as the foundation for effective intervention. She viewed her role as not just addressing immediate behavioral issues but also as helping students develop long-term coping strategies so that they did not remain dependent on her. Thinking of her work she stated, "...a student having a bad day...send them to my office...[I will] give them the tools...to help them be more successful within the classroom."

In contrast, Mr. Brown's broader role as a Future Ready Advocate led him to focus more on preparing students for future academic and career challenges. Mr. Brown processed his priorities aloud, "...concerns regarding attendance warrant a daily check-in to get the student...future ready as I set their minds on high school and being prepared to work a job as being late or tardy is unacceptable."

Students needed consistent check ins, tutoring, behavioral and academic goal setting, and opportunities to vent, according to support advocates. Thus, students were best qualified for this intervention if they struggled in one or more of these areas- namely communicating and acknowledging issues behaviorally, academically, or emotionally. All support advocates spoke to the levels of needs within students part of their Tier III caseload; they also identified when a student was better suited for Tier II support rather than intensive (Tier III) support.

Contrasts

Despite these commonalities, the scope of responsibilities varied among the advocates. Two highlighted individualized support, yet their caseloads differed significantly, from 20 students to 50. This difference in caseload suggested varying levels of intensity in the support provided, where those with smaller caseloads provided more in-depth, personalized interventions compared to the broader, perhaps more generalized, support offered by the advocate with a larger caseload.

The interviews also revealed shared challenges among the support advocates, particularly in managing the varying needs of tier-3 students. All three advocates acknowledged the difficulty of addressing both academic and social-emotional needs simultaneously, especially when resources were limited. Despite these challenges, they shared a common strategy of prioritizing relationship-building with students, recognizing that strong, positive relationships are critical to successful intervention. Mr. Brown stated, "...the main thing is building the relationships. Because once they trust you, they will do what you ask them. They'll tell you things that they may not...tell others..."

Summary

In conclusion, the interviews with support advocates highlighted both similarities and differences in how they described their roles and the outcomes they observed among tier-3 students. While all advocates emphasized the importance of individualized support and relationship-building, their approaches and focus varied depending on their specific work with each student and the needs of their students.

Student Interviews

Interviews with students did not address the nuanced levels of support that support advocate interviews highlighted. As such student interview responses to the role of support advocates were logged under the general theme of support, though student descriptions varied. Students also presented a theme of qualifications for receiving support, discussed in detail.

Support

The research study included the perspective of six students and the role of support advocates gathered through semi-structured interviews. The students interviewed described the role of support advocates as crucial in both academic and behavioral support. Included are portions of their discussions of support advocates during interviews:

Casey. Casey was on the Tier III list of interventions for poor attendance and a high number of disciplinary referrals. Casey said of the ease of talking to Ms. Thompson, "...my cousin passed away recently and she was just trying to help me get through...[she] was just really encouraging..." Casey also discussed Ms. Thompson's academic support stating, "...we go over my grades... She was a science teacher...I just tell her straight up...I...really need help...those years...my grades were...in such bad condition..." So, Casey discussed emotional support and tangible tutoring describing her support from an advocate.

Michael. Michael- who showed no signs of risk via demographic data (see Tables 3.4 and 3.5), but was recommended by teachers for support- said, "...I'll get...up...and like start wandering...they'll just send me out of the classroom...Mr. Johnson helped to like choose ways and figure out how I can...keep myself under control and like calm..." Michael also saw that support advocates made connections with his family saying, "...he's [Mr. Johnson] contacted my dad a few times...my dad told me once..."

Monica. Monica's critical area of need was supporting her poor attendance. Monica recalled the emotional support she needed to make it to school and through the day, "My anxiety, my focus and sometimes my depression will kick in...so it messes up my focus, and then I end up just not doing [anything]...I used to not really care all that much about my grades..."

Diego. Diego was a Tier III intervention student for a significant number of behavior referrals and sporadic absences to class. He [Mr. Johnson] "...always asking me...not how you doing. It's always 'so how are your grades?'...I email him...asked him if he could help me with my math..."

Dennis. Dennis qualified for Tier III support for multiple reasons, including attendance, disciplinary referrals, and the presence of a Section 504 plan. Dennis discussed Mr. Johnson's support initiated because of his Section 504 plan (according to Dennis). He [Mr. Johnson] helps with, "...Discipline. He makes me check my grades...When I'm just frustrated...can help you through things. Someone you can talk to. You can vent."

Jonathan. Jonathan had perhaps the most indicators for risk of high school drop out including the presence of a special education IEP, a high number of referrals and exclusionary discipline days, and absences (see Tables 3.4 and 3.5). Jonathan said of support advocates, "...I'll be mad, and I need someone to talk to....when I get mad....I'm ready to fight...They help me with my work. Help me with my grades..."

Though all students discussed versions of support, there were differences in how they perceived and utilized this support. For example, two students emphasized the academic help they received from their support advocates, such as tutoring and assistance with assignments. In contrast, another student highlighted the role of the support advocate in classroom management and behavioral interventions, such as when a teacher called for help from a member of the SST

(Student Support Team) to help with disruptive behavior. Despite differences in how students perceived support a notable similarity among the students was the importance they placed on the relationship and communication with their support advocates. Most students described their support advocates as dependable figures who provided not just academic or behavioral assistance, but also emotional support. All students mentioned consistent methods of reaching out to a support advocate- they email advocates directly and/or they requested follow up through a teacher. Of note: even when students stated they were doing better in school- meaning their grades or behavior improved- they all stated they would request to visit with a support advocate when they finished their work to just hang out or see their advocates during down time. According to students, support advocates were confidants and a reliable source of guidance.

Differences with students lied in scheduling. Some students appreciated the formal interactions that were predictable and focused on academic support, while another student relied heavily on the advocate for emotional management and motivation, irrespective of scheduling.

Qualifications

Student Qualifications. All six students consistently described significant emotional challenges, particularly related to anger management and behavioral issues as reasons why they felt they received support. A common thread across their responses was the difficulty in controlling emotions, which often led to disruptive behavior, fights, or conflicts with teachers and peers. For instance, Jonathan frequently mentioned anger and the struggle to manage it, leading to violent outbursts. He stated, "...I used to be a very bad boy...last year I used to get into plenty of fights. Fights with teachers...arguments..." Similarly, two other students reported issues with anger and the need for strategies to calm down, such as taking breaks or engaging in breathing exercises. This pattern of emotional struggle highlighted a shared need among these

students for support in managing their emotions to prevent escalation into more serious behavioral issues resulting in serious behavioral consequences (i.e. suspension and expulsion).

Though it is assumed students were unaware of school demographic data that tracked their progress throughout the school year (academic, behavioral, and attendance data), all of them felt their work with a support advocate was because they engaged in disruptive classroom behaviors. Students used personal descriptions such as being mad or angry, disruptive, or having a lack of focus in class, or consistently in trouble with a principal to justify why they warranted help from a support advocate. One student (Dennis) mentioned the presence of a Section 504 plan that put them on the radar of a support advocate, but they also acknowledged anger management issues that caused blow ups in class. Every student discussed a history of trouble in school, in that they were not surprised (or offended) to be set up with a support advocate for intensive support.

Support Advocate Qualifications. Every student interviewed mentioned the expected routine of checking grades. Some students also discussed the organizational strengths of an advocate required when responding to multiple requests from multiple stakeholders. Casey said of Ms. Thompson, "...she's very strict and makes sure I get myself together. She was like, 'We need to get those Fs up'. I was like, I know." Students stated they could send a support advocate an email to schedule a meeting or schedule time for a 1-on-1 conversation.

Teacher Surveys

The first research question sought to describe the role of support advocates in their work with tier 3 students in an urban setting. One group of stakeholders, teachers, provided their perspective through surveys. There were several themes that were similarly found in support advocate and student interviews. Teachers listed support of students and of themselves along

with qualifications of a student's placement at the Tier III support level. These themes collectively illustrate the multifaceted yet consistent work of support advocates in fostering a supportive and nurturing environment for students.

Support

Student Support. Teachers consistently described support advocates as essential figures in the educational environment, particularly in their role of helping tier 3 students navigate the complex challenges they faced. A key similarity in the responses was that teachers saw support advocates as instrumental in teaching students coping skills and life lessons. Advocates were not only responsible for reducing barriers that hindered students' academic progress but also for providing practical and emotional support. According to teachers, advocates acted as liaisons between students and the broader school community, ensuring that students received the necessary resources and attention to thrive. Teachers acknowledged that support advocates wore many hats in the support of students:

- Help teach coping skills
- Help reduce behavioral issues or barriers to learning
- Help improve student academic mindset
- Help monitor student progress
- Serve as a trusted adult/ confidant
- Serve as a liaison beyond the classroom

Teachers described support similarly to how advocates described their work- proactive to reduce anticipated issues, but also as emergency supports in the moment of an issue for students.

Teachers listed the opportunity to contact a support advocate if a student was having a bad day or actively rebelling against the work (or teacher) in front of them. Support advocates were

described as mediators to calm the student down and help them ease into the work expectations ahead.

Despite these common perceptions, there were notable differences in how teachers emphasized the role of support advocates. Some teachers placed a strong emphasis on the advocates' role in teaching coping skills and life lessons, highlighting their contribution to each students' personal development. Others focused more on the advocates' ability to reduce academic barriers, such as providing emotional support to help students perform better in school.

Teacher Support. Survey respondents acknowledged that support advocates provided information on two fronts, insight into a student's life and professional learning. Since students met with support advocates frequently, support advocates were often the first point of contact for teachers if a student was absent for an extended period of time or if a student had other exceptional patterns of behavior such as tardies or detentions. Support advocates met with students to establish goals like specific deadlines to improve grades or a specific threshold days present in school to overcome, and when those goals were met students would receive mutually agreed upon incentives. These goals were communicated to teachers from support advocates so that they could encourage students in those goals when they saw them in class. Additionally, support advocates were the first point of contact for families, so they could be trusted with relaying information to teachers such as home issues, family job or transportation loss, etc.

Support advocates also provided professional learning to staff. Teachers mentioned receiving professional learning in differentiation strategies, problem-solving strategies, and restorative discipline. They also discussed classroom management techniques provided individually or during whole group instruction within professional learning. A few survey

respondents discussed a support advocate's visit to their classroom before meeting with them individually to develop a classroom management or student behavior plan.

Qualifications

Advocate Qualifications. While reviewing teacher surveys, they consistently stated the presence of support advocates influenced their professional practices and routines. Several teachers mentioned that having support advocates allowed them to better differentiate instruction and manage classroom dynamics, as advocates provided specific insights into students' needs and behaviors. This collaboration between teachers and support advocates led to a more cohesive approach to addressing the needs of tier-3 students, particularly those who required additional support. Teachers noted that this partnership not only benefitted students but also enhanced their ability to teach effectively. Support advocates were trusted to be the source of information and professional learning, because as some teachers said, they had connections schoolwide.

Teachers also described routines of the support advocate that allowed for effective support. These routines were coded as qualifications (or minimum duties) a support advocate should possess, which included communication, clarity in providing instructions to students, and facilitating progress checks with students. Teachers recognized a portion of everyday practices of support advocates included progress checks within goal setting to support schoolwide systems for monitoring student response to interventions. Teachers also noted that grade checks and goal setting were recurring elements of the support advocate's day to day practices.

Student Qualifications. Teachers offered ideas on why a student warranted additional support with a support advocate. Their proposed reasons were:

- Students who continually act out or display disruptive behavior
- Students with poor social skills or who were extremely quiet and shy

- Amotivated students with incomplete or missing assignments
- Students with low grades or poor academic performance
- Students with discipline referrals

In summary, data from the teacher surveys highlighted both similarities and differences to information provided from support advocate and student interviews in describing the role of support advocates and their impact on tier-3 students.

Field Observations

I visited support advocates on two separate occasions for a period of one hour during each observation. Support advocates shared a room coined the mindfulness room where intentional decorations were utilized such as floor lamps, rugs, sofas, and bean bags for lounging. There was an adjustment of the room's ambience with dimmed and blue lights in selective areas, and more than half of fluorescent lights hanging from the ceiling (standard to the classroom) were turned off; this helped with the dimmed effect. There was an interactive TV screen on wheels used by support advocates during professional learning with staff or during yoga time with students. The room was an old FACS classroom that had been repurposed with cabinets ripped out to create an open area. Only one sink with a washer/dryer remained outside of the newer furnishings described above.

Though two different times were selected (10:45 AM and 12:30 PM), both observations I conducted happened to overlap a period of lunch. During the first observation in the morning, a support advocate was talking one on one with a student and when the school bell rang (signaling a transition in classes), additional students began to enter for a lunch group. The time of this observation showed a shift in the support advocate's work from the one-on-one conversation with a tier-3 (i.e. caseload) student to the second tier of lunch groups that support advocates

hosted. The second observation occurred during the school's third lunch with older students. Even with observations at two different times, they revealed several themes related to the role of support advocates working with students.

As the individual student left the 1-on-1 conversation during the first observation, Ms. Thompson hugged them. The relationship building was strengthened because as students entered (or exited) during the lunch groups, support advocates greeted students warmly, offered hugs and high fives, and ensured students felt comfortable in the space by moving chairs around and placing footrests in various areas. The advocates emphasized building personal connections and providing a safe, calm environment for students to relax and refocus. Both observations were organized group activities, like lunch discussions, where students could share their goals and challenges. During the first visit, Mr. Johnson moved around the room asking students to display their grades and when a grade was unsatisfactory, the advocate asked the room of students, "How did your grade improve in --- class?" to which one student responded that they began to hang around a smaller circle and another offered that they wanted to play sports where their grade would be monitored more by coaches. Several students chimed in about how to keep grades higher and avoid distractions.

During the second visit, a group of around 15 students sat around in a circle type format discussing their post-high school ambitions. Mr. Johnson facilitated the discussion asking questions of students, calling on random names when there was silence. Both observations revealed academic guidance and accountability. During both visits, advocates asked students about their grades and helped students stay on track academically. Mr. Johnson addressed a group in the corner during the first visit, "...What's the next steps? No Cs, obviously no Ds and Fs...you guys are much better than Cs..."

The observations showed staff members engaging students in discussions about their grades, encouraging them to check their progress, and holding them accountable for their academic performance. During the lunch discussions, students and advocates discussed the importance of maintaining good grades and the impact this had on future opportunities, such as scholarships and their high school Grade Point Average (GPA).

Research Question 2- Perceived Outcomes

To investigate the effects of support advocates and their work with tier 3 students, a second question was asked, “What are social and academic outcomes for tier-3 middle school students engaging with support advocates in an urban middle school setting?” Several themes arose across multiple data sources, identified as **agency**, **awareness**, **academic**, **aspirational**, and **accountability**. These themes and examples of each are identified in Table 4.2. Information gleaned from support advocate and student interviews, teacher surveys, and field observations is discussed in detail.

Table 4.2.

Perceived Outcomes from Interviews

Outcomes and Long-Term Impact				
Agency	Awareness	Academic	Aspirational	Accountability
Decision-making	Interpersonal	Engagement	Goal-oriented	
Choice	Intrapersonal	Grade performance	Post-secondary	

Support Advocate Interviews

The social and academic outcomes reported by support advocates revealed both shared and distinct perspectives. A consistent observation among the advocates was that their work led to improved student behavior. For example, Mr. Brown noted that his efforts resulted in fewer

instances of students getting into trouble in school activities. He remarked, "...If I walk in the office and they're in there, they put their heads down, because they know that they disappointed me." This outcome of increased **academic** engagement was echoed by Ms. Thompson, who reported similar behavioral improvements among her students, attributing these changes to the individualized behavioral interventions support advocates provide. When reflecting on the progress she's seen in a semester Ms. Thompson said, "...their personalities, their skill set to make decisions and better choices...not going down a path of destructive behaviors" were changes she's seen now and reasons for her work to continue with students. Additionally, advocates all agreed that they saw improved **academic** performance and increased engagement, as shown by the rise in student grades. Mr. Johnson, more concerned with academic improvement than behavior, celebrated saying,

the biggest one, the improvement on grades....they always know they're showing me their grades, and how important their grade is and how that prepares them not just for now but for high school and...college...to be whatever you want to be...higher the grades...GPA...the higher the money you get for college, and...free college education...

Mr. Johnson discussed his impact even with students not part of his Tier III caseload stating other students found him around the school to celebrate their progress in classes they were previously struggling in.

Advocates also discussed student **aspirations** in achieving short-term and long-term goals. Mr. Johnson and Ms. Thompson discussed students meeting smaller local goals of the "Big Three" as in a) having their binder for organization, b) wearing an ID badge for identification, and c) carrying an iPad for learning. They both discussed students setting goals to carry those three consistently. Additionally, Ms. Thompson discussed other goals, "...for

attendance, to make sure that they're here regularly and arrive on time...and also for grades to improve..." Mr. Johnson discussed goal setting and hoped students "...continue to set excellence...without someone always there to watch...[that] they would push themselves..." He discussed student joy (Tier II and Tier III students) in showing the grades that improved quoting students to say, 'we feel really good, and we realized...we are wanting to get ready to go to high school'. Mr. Brown discussed outcomes to be met beyond high school, stating he wanted students to "...be the best man or best woman or best parent or best person that they can be. So that's my goal." Overall, the focus on outcomes varied depending on the advocate's role. While Mr. Brown emphasized long-term outcomes like reducing dropout rates and preparing students for future success, Ms. Thompson and Mr. Johnson were more focused on immediate behavioral and academic improvements.

Student Interviews

Students made statements reflecting their perceptions of potential outcomes from their work with support advocates and reinforcing themes listed in Table 4.2:

Casey developed intrapersonal **awareness** saying, "I can really see a change in my attitude...I really have put in a lot of effort into getting my grades up and being a better student, not just for me, but the people around me." Along with acknowledging her **accountability** for improving her grades, Casey showed interpersonal **awareness** highlighted in her acknowledgment that her decisions affect others. Additionally, she said with continued help from an advocate, "...I would get...better...in high school...better than the last two years of these middle school years..." Casey, acknowledging improved **academics** with better grades, also admitted to being suspended at the start of the year but said "And I stayed off the detention list lately, I haven't had ISS [In School Suspension] or anything, so I really do see a change in

myself.” She referenced changes in attitude, behavior, and grade performance due to support from a support advocate.

Michael stated Mr. Johnson “...helped me to like choose ways...I can...keep myself under control and like calm...” again adding to the intrapersonal **awareness** students have developed over time. Michael acknowledged his ability to think about the effects of his actions and choose better behaviors. He said his improvement in class was because he had a support advocate who, “...is there for you, to help you to get better at like things that you need help with...that you may struggle with or...just need a little bit more help to get there”

Monica stated she had issues with her mental health, controlling her emotions, and “...zoning out and not listening to whatever the teacher is saying.” Her intrapersonal **awareness** was highlighted as she said, “...I used to not really care all that much about my grades...But now I’m more focused about it and more trying to be on top of it because of high school.” Monica admitted to being socially isolated and rude to teachers and peers but said she learned how to request a seat elsewhere or ask a teacher how she could move seats once she finished her work. This **agency** in speaking up for how she learned best was also coupled with **aspirations** to do more than she initially thought she could do. Monica said neither of her parents graduated high school, but she now wanted to become a cosmetologist.

Diego reflected on his work with a support advocate and said, “I saw this new kid. He was doing this dumb voice...And I was like ‘is that what I sound like?’...” and he understood support advocates exist to “...stop kids from ruining their lives.” With the new focus Diego believed that continued work with a support advocate would develop his **aspirations** to “...be pushed so hard...I end up probably in like Harvard or...Cornell” stating he wanted to be an accountant and chef.

Dennis admitted he did not get the breaks he desired during class that led to many frustrations. But said, “I feel happier! I smile more! He [Mr. Johnson] lets me get stuff off my chest. I was more like, it was pent up. [now] I can be like way better...without maybe...as much trouble.” Dennis also **aspired** to play high school basketball and admitted his grades were never good enough before for that to be an option.

Jonathan’s interpersonal **awareness** reflected fights and arguments with teachers and peers alike, allowing others to think he was a bad kid, but he stated “...I just need people to know I’m not that kid no more. I’m a new kid.” He said Mr. Johnson’s support could “...get me far in life. He always talks to me about if you do good in school, you can do go outside...because I do good as a kid right now...the NFL, that’s where I’m trying to go...trying to do good in school, get in college...” Jonathan also discussed his development of **agency** and if there were issues with teachers, rather than arguing he would schedule a meeting with teachers (with Mr. Johnson present) to talk about the issues. Finally, he celebrated his **academic** growth in grades and stated, “When I first got here like the first month, I had like five Fs, but...I just got three of my grades up today...”

In summary, the students' responses indicated positive social and academic outcomes from engaging with support advocates, though the extent of these outcomes varied. Three students noted significant improvements in behavior and academic performance, such as higher grades and reduced disciplinary actions. One of these three students specifically reported that engaging with a support advocate helped turn around their reputation from a bad kid to someone who was trying better. Another of those three also highlighted improvements in academic grades and a more positive attitude towards school. All students stated the accountability of grades now helped them to think about high school/college later.

Teacher Surveys

Teachers also provided insights into the social and academic outcomes for tier-3 students who engaged with support advocates. A significant similarity in the survey responses was the recognition that support advocates play a critical role in enhancing students' interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. Many teachers noted that students who worked closely with advocates developed better self-management skills, improved decision-making abilities, and a stronger sense of **agency**. Also, there was a consensus of improvement in preparation for class and improved focus, along with improved grades. A summary of responses teachers provided concerning outcomes for students can be found in Table 4.3. Though student and support advocate interviews revealed sub-categories of choice and post-secondary planning, these topics were not discussed in teacher surveys. Both sub-categories remain in Table 4.3 but are crossed out acknowledging the difference in teacher data, compared to students and support advocates. The table provided (Table 4.3) also tells how many respondents made statements placed under the identified outcomes coded under each theme.

Table 4.3.

Perceived Outcomes from Surveys

Outcomes and Long Impact				
Agency	Awareness	Academic	Aspirational	Accountability (3/16)
Decision-making (3/16)	Interpersonal: (4/16)	Engagement (7/16)	Goal-oriented (3/16)	
Choice	Intrapersonal: Coping (8/16)	Grade performance (4/16)	Post- secondary	

n= 16; number of survey respondents was 16

Despite similarities in observed outcomes, there were differences in how teachers perceived the academic outcomes of interactions with advocates. Some teachers emphasized the

positive impact on students' academic performance, noting that support advocates helped students stay motivated and improved their grades by providing tailored support and practical advice. Others, while acknowledging the benefits, focused more on the social outcomes such as improved student social adjustment, intrapersonal awareness and better relationships with peers and teachers (noted as interpersonal awareness).

Field Observations

Both hour long observations showed career and future planning on the part of the support advocates. They involved students in conversations around their goals and **aspirations**, discussed the importance of good grades for career opportunities, and helped students understand the long-term implications of their **academic** performance. This included talking about college, scholarships, and career choices, linking current efforts to future success.

Conclusion

Reviewing all data sources helped to establish a foundation of understanding practices support advocates employ when providing tier-3 students support. Their role may include working one on one with students, serving as a liaison with staff, and/or guiding students toward future goals during personal conversations and lunch groups. Support advocates had recognizable patterns of work that were revealed across all data collection tools. There were also consistent findings of potentials outcomes because of student support through a support advocate. Chapter 5 presents a discussion of these findings, identifying similarities and differences with support advocates and interventions that preceded them.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceived role of support advocates as a new structure under the MTSS framework when working with tier-3 students. Additionally, this research sought to investigate the potential outcomes of support advocates when supporting tier-3 students. The perceived role and potential outcomes were gleaned from the perspective of support advocates, teachers, and students. The primary theories of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) and Bronfenbrenner's Socio-Ecological Framework (1979) established the theory of this role as an essential system and environment influence in ensuring a student's connection to school and eventual motivation for success. At Bronfenbrenner's core is the belief that students are shaped by the adults and environments around them, and intentional investment in the support of students most at risk of disengagement, could help to change the course of their school outlook and involvement (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Multiple themes arose when reviewing the data. Themes were categorized under the work of support advocates with a general heading of **advocacy**, identifying the work of the advocate as an interventionist but extending beyond interventionists as liaisons to stakeholders and relationship builders. The liaison work and relationship building existed due to regular communication with administration, families, and teachers. The second theme that arose from data could be split into potential outcomes for tier 3 students who receive support from support advocates including a) increased student **agency**, b) improved student interpersonal and intrapersonal **awareness**, c) the potential for improved **academic** success, d) recognition of greater **aspirational** goals, and e) growth in student **accountability**. Each of these outcomes will

be discussed further in detail and are documented for reference in a coding guide found in Appendix E.

Advocacy

The first research question asked, “What is the perceived role of support advocates working with tier-3 students in an urban middle school setting?” Support advocates serve as interventionists to provide unique and individualized support to tier-3 students, but this is done through creative goal setting and effective relationship building.

Intervention

Individualized Intervention

According to interviews, surveys, and field observations, the primary role of support advocates was to support struggling tier 3 students in recognizing their needs for intervention and help to reduce barriers to student success. Support advocates- according to the data coded and themed- offered individualized and personalized support (sometimes emotional, academic, or behavioral, or all three); tangible and practical support that met needs as they arose; and consistent and predictable support to reduce those barriers. Support advocates developed trust with students because of the individualized support that happened daily and because of their persistence in ensuring students made progress.

To individualize support, support advocates ensured the most critical needs were prioritized. From most stakeholders involved in the study (support advocates, students, and teachers), it was no surprise which students were selected for Tier III intervention and potential goals necessary for progress were also easily recognizable. Support advocates were aware of student needs as they used data with markers to identify students at the greatest risk of early school disengagement. According to survey data, teachers also recognized student qualifications

for working with a support advocate and were able to express those qualifications in terms resembling research characteristics of potential high school dropouts (Christle et al., 2007; Croninger & Lee, 2001). However, students did not use educational jargon when explaining how they warranted a Tier III intervention. Students acknowledged that their qualifications for a support advocate partnership included their low grades, poor behavior, poor attitude/socialization with others, and/or inconsistent attendance- all of which are indicators of an increased likelihood of high school disruption (Christle et al., 2007; Sanders et al., 2018). But, students did not use terms such as ‘I was retained’ or ‘I am chronically absent.’ With that in mind, it is noteworthy support advocates were able to take unmotivated students (seemingly unaware of their deep level of need) and co-develop goals that students were excited to monitor. Students were willing to receive coaching and in fact, they looked forward to meetings with advocates, seeking them out whenever they could find time to do so.

As middle school is often where engagement and interest in school wanes (Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Goodenow & Grady, 1993), it was critical to support advocates that they reinvigorate a passion for learning and student hope for the future, while also helping students become accountable for their progress. The follow up to co-developed goal setting plans was progress monitoring that occurred 3-4 times a week or daily, in line with a traditional Tier III intervention (Maag, 2020). The organization of support advocates tracking multiple student needs and carrying the load of consistent goal setting (for students in multiple tiers) was where students received the greatest benefit. As an effective microsystem intervention (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), maintaining fidelity to school processes and procedures while also providing individualized progress monitoring and feedback for each student, establishes the support advocate intervention as a socially and ecologically enriching system.

Though goals were individualized, there was evidence that suggested teachers were not fully aware of each student's specific goal. Though support advocates and students knew where students needed to improve, that end goal for each tier-3 student was not as evident to staff. Though teachers saw improvements in students, when asked about student progress some acknowledged a change in grades, some acknowledged improvement in attendance, while some acknowledged a change in attitude or behavior; yet others discussed the completion of assignments or the development of coping skills. These varied observations indicated varied expectations for each student. This variation suggested that while the overall role of support advocates was valued (as stated by students and teachers), the specific aspects of their responsibilities (as defined by teachers) could vary depending on individual teacher perspectives or the individual needs of their students.

However, the variation of goals is a positive for this Tier III intervention. Though having multiple goals for tier-3 students is not ideal in a school attempting to streamline MTSS, this further supports the establishment of support advocates as an intervention, in that Tier III interventions should be individualized to each students' needs (Maag, 2020). Additionally, the integration of support advocates as interventionists into a schoolwide MTSS framework, helped to support school improvement and could lead to improved student outcomes especially when plans for support were behavioral, social, and academic in nature (Bohanon et al., 2023). The plans co-created by support advocates and students in this study offered an integrated approach to problem-solving, similar to recent school improvement suggestions.

Social-Emotional Intervention

Students in this study needed an advocate and listening ear, specifically someone to take a vested interest in their problems and talk with them to process solutions. Most students

identified a support advocate as someone who is there (consistency), with expectations (goal setting and accountability) to ensure students don't fail (academic achievement). Support advocate interviews were a significant source of data for establishing their role, but student interviews were also significant. Student interviews revealed both similarities and differences in how tier-3 middle school students described their interactions with support advocates.

While all students shared common challenges related to emotional regulation and behavior, their experiences with support advocates varied in terms of the type of support they prioritized, the outcomes they felt they achieved, and their future aspirations. All students discussed the appreciation of someone to talk to because of the inability to control and manage their emotions on their own. Support advocates provided social-emotional interventions, in that they provided students an opportunity to self-assess their emotions and the regulation of students could be tracked and monitored, because support advocates were the point of contact for teachers when students were escalated and needed a break. The accountability of this emotional support further reinforced the self-advocacy development (Fiedler & Danneker, 2007), but it was also individualized based on each student's level of dysregulation. These findings suggest that the role of support advocates is multifaceted and must be tailored to meet the unique needs of each student, with a strong emphasis on building trust and providing both emotional and academic support.

In order to provide individualized support, support advocates needed to be flexible. This need for flexibility was also underscored by the work of advocates to respond at a moment's notice when a student was in crisis, but also to keep track of plans revisited regularly with students. Flexibility and adaptability were key to managing the diverse needs of a larger group of students (where caseloads hovered around 20 students or higher per advocate), emphasizing the

importance of a dynamic and responsive approach to advocacy in an urban middle school setting. The roles of each support advocate determined what they prioritized in conversations with students. Ms. Thompson, the behavior interventionist, discussed student behaviors and character traits consistently. During her interview she discussed concerns with student fights, socialization, and their illicit drug use. Mr. Johnson, the Student Success Advocate, often reinforced with students that grades were the key to future success. Mr. Johnson linked his support to increased student success in academics, highlighting the role of consistent support in helping students achieve better grades and develop essential skills for academic progress. Mr. Brown discussed his qualifications as a Future Ready Advocate and emphasized student grades and future goals, suggesting a longer-term perspective on student development. Overall, the variations in needs and support offered help to reaffirm the individualized nature of this Tier III intervention, which should be student-focused and goal oriented. A multi-tiered system of support, especially at the Tier III level, is best implemented when individualized and based on specific student needs identified through data (Bahr et al., 2023).

It is important to note the support advocate intervention differed from traditional intervention programs in that it was not focused on reading or math standards and did not use a school or district purchased curriculum to monitor progress (Moore-Brown et al., 2005). It also was not used to assess a student's need for special education services, as some interventions were historically initiated to do (Moore-Brown et al., 2005; Lindstrom Johnson et al., 2023). It most closely resembled a PBIS intervention, but with an emphasis on individual behavior growth and development rather than a schoolwide system of behavior management (Gage et al., 2017; Lindstrom Johnson et al., 2023).

Self-Advocacy Intervention

While students made it to a support advocate's radar due to demographic data (see Tables 3.4 and 3.5), support advocates met with students and co-developed goals to ensure the area of focus was something students believed was essential in changing. This co-development of goals is an essential step in developing the self-advocacy of others (Khalifa, 2013). Fielder and Danneker (2007) discuss autonomy as a self-advocacy building strategy and autonomy comes from choice and acknowledgement of feelings. Plans that were developed by the collaboration of support advocates and students support this first step of autonomy.

Students did not use educational jargon in describing why they were eligible for the support advocate intervention. They knew they had trouble with grades, or their attitude, or amotivation, but did not use their data as a reason for qualifying (except one student who thought he received support due to his Section 504 plan). So, though students mentioned feeling like a bad kid or having anger problems, they were not able to verbalize their areas of risk in research terms. With that in mind, the ability for students to recognize their placement in a Tier III intervention and recognize potential growth over time (as evidenced during interviews) helps to support the notion that students began to develop advocacy (and the initial awareness required) over time. This self-advocacy must have been modeled by support advocates in order for it to be passed on to students (Petri et al., 2020; Fiedler & Danneker, 2007; Anderson & Bigby, 2017). Without the habit(s) of support advocates setting goals, checking progress, performing grade checks, and providing accountability for student progress, it is unlikely student motivation for learning and growth would have occurred on its own (İlter, 2023).

The self-advocacy model (also known as self-determination) establishes steps that teachers and leaders of self-advocacy curriculum can offer to ensure the development of self-advocacy in students including, self-awareness, self-advocacy, decision making, and adjustment

of plans based on data (Fiedler & Danneker, 2007). Components of these were present in the support offered to students via advocates. Though self-advocacy research is often utilized for special education populations (Petri et al., 2020; Fiedler & Danneker, 2007; Anderson & Bigby, 2017), withdrawing from mainstream community was a characteristic of students in this study (Anderson & Bigby, 2017). Thus it was important to teach self-advocacy to overcome the stigma of school failure (Anderson & Bigby, 2017). Support advocates helped to remove the stigma of failure by setting realistic and reachable goals, celebrating small wins with incentives, and offering Tier II lunch groups and meetings to tier-3 students for community building.

Goal Setting

Not only was the support advocate an intervention to meet the unique needs of tier-3 students, but all stakeholders participating in the study identified goal setting as a significant arm of support students received. Support advocates in this study used demographic data to tier students into three levels, consistent with MTSS and RTI procedures (Bayewitz et al., 2020; Al Otaiba & Petscher, 2020; Moore-Brown et al., 2005). Once students were tiered, advocates had goal setting techniques and feedback structures for students at each level of MTSS, specifically Tier II and Tier III. Advocates discussed at length student grade checks and progress monitoring so that students had accountability with their academic performance in class. Support advocates also identified incentives offered to students when meeting goals. Allen et al. (2016) identifies goal setting with students as a form of advocacy in helping students build their perception of self-confidence. They write, "...this increases the student's relational skills. This in turns strengthens relationships within the student's microsystem..." (p. 106). To this end, the goal setting arm of the support advocate intervention served to reinforce the Socio-Ecological Framework where the goal setting led to relationship building that strengthened the bond of

students and support advocates (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The microsystem under investigation (i.e. the relationship between students and advocates, and teachers/ staff) started as an intervention, but developed more into a relationship of confidence and trust between support advocates and students and support advocates and teachers.

Support advocates set goals for school expectations (the ‘Big Three’) reinforcing school policies and procedures- as contributors to the microsystem and supporters of the mesosystem and beyond (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). But, they also set goals for students related to attendance, disciplinary referrals, and disruptions from class. Though teachers did not mention the specifics of the behavioral goals, they acknowledged noticeable progress in students managing their behaviors and the development of coping skills. Some teachers prioritized these as outcomes for students, where others desired academic improvement by way of grades for students. As such, while there was consensus on the importance of support advocates in helping students develop coping skills and improve their academic and social outcomes, the specific areas of focus and perceived effectiveness for each student varied. All in all, teacher surveys further supported the findings identified via support advocate and student interviews in establishing the role of support advocates as goal-setting agents.

Relationship Building

All advocates emphasized the importance of relationship building. This focus on relationships underscores the importance of trust and connection in the work of support advocates, regardless of the specific needs or growth plan of the students or size of the caseload. Students described support advocates as critical figures who helped them manage both emotional and academic challenges, often citing their role in de-escalating situations and providing a safe

space for expression. The higher need of safety and predictability of a support advocate's attention and support helped to further establish student trust in support advocates (Maslow, 1951). As the basic need of safety was met (or at least supported by support advocates), students could progress to satisfying the higher need of belonging and love (Maslow, 1951). This was evidenced by students seeking out support advocates throughout various times of the day, even when they were not in trouble or when their grades had improved. Requesting to visit with a support advocate (when finished with work or during lunch time) was a habit every student discussed during interviews, speaking to the social connection support advocates established with students.

Additionally, the connection between advocates and student families was referenced by students and teachers who saw support advocates as key in maintaining a link between home and school, particularly in addressing behavioral and emotional issues that impacted academic performance. The student microsystem was strengthened by the strong relationships support advocates built with student families (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Teachers further acknowledged the role of support advocates in providing additional resources and insights into a student's home life, which contributed to a more supportive learning environment. All members of the school microsystem- students, teachers, support advocates- strengthened their communication with and dependence on each other through practices and routines of the support advocate that connected them together. Students stated they used support advocates as mediators when they needed to address issues with a teacher. Voelkl (1995) writes, "A student...who feels comfortable when interacting with teachers may strive harder in schoolwork, become more involved in class activities, and realize greater education gains" (p. 127). Teachers expressed additional patience and understanding applied to students because of information gleaned from advocates.

Essentially, the growth of students because of their connections with support advocates supports the premise that stronger environments and stronger relationships in schools make stronger groups of support for students which makes stronger individuals (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). All of these findings speak to the predicted outcome of strengthened relationships between adults and the struggling learners in school. According to Allen et al. (2016), “Bronfenbrenner’s ecological framework...provides the most widely applied theoretical construct...to investigate belonging in an organisational setting such as a school...” (p. 99). Research suggests adults in the school can shift the culture positively to help reduce student disengagement and amotivation (Resnick, 1993; Croninger & Lee, 2001) and data from student reflections supports this in this study.

Field observations served to support the importance of creating a welcoming and supportive environment for students (to support the counseling and problem-solving efforts discussed in both support advocate and student interviews). Relationship building and a supportive environment was strengthened because as students entered (or exited) the mindfulness room [or hub] of support advocates, they greeted students warmly, offered hugs, and ensured students felt comfortable in the space. Intentional décor of sofas and bean bags meant students could lounge and relax. Additionally, the observations showed that support advocates helped foster a sense of community among students. They organized group activities like lunch discussions, where students could share their goals and challenges. Several students spoke aloud when posed open-ended questions by support advocates. Moore-Brown et al. (2005) discussed the development of school systems acknowledging they must provide early interventions that are meaningful, bring together a community of learners, and show adaptability to the diverse and changing needs of learners. The support advocate use of the mindfulness space on its own helped to show forth that

endeavor while also establishing belonging, as the lunch group allowed for community within the school community (Allen et al., 2016).

Data from interviews of support of advocates and students also helped to substantiate that support advocate work with students is a molar activity (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Recall that molar activities were events that a) required extensive time investment, b) required an established goal structure and c) included the involvement of people (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The support advocate intervention is one where time is consistently and daily invested with a goal in mind through the relationship built between the student and the support advocate. Students in this study knew when and how to reach out to a support advocate and took advantage- in times of extreme need and when things were settled- to seek out the insight of support advocates. Even when not personally receiving support, students noticed the presence of support advocates in classrooms and their response to teacher calls for help in crisis situations. However, what they recalled varied based on the advocate; so, this variation suggested that while all students acknowledged the importance of support advocates, the specific type of support they saw prioritized differed based on their individual needs and challenges.

Summary

Support advocates wear multiple hats in providing tiered support to students and serving as a liaison between various stakeholders. Support advocates are seen as essential in providing multi-level interventions tailored to tier-3 students' needs; this includes direct emotional and tangible support. In addition to intervention, emotional, and tangible support, support advocates act as intermediaries between students, families, and teachers, ensuring that communication and support mechanisms are effectively implemented.

Agency

Students developed a sense of control over their academic and social lives, according to findings. Lawson and Lawson (2013) write schools that create smaller and more intimate learning environments, as a consequence, are often autonomy-supporting and tend to allow for positive school-related dispositions on the part of their students, especially those who are underserved. The school in this study that prioritized one on one interactions between support advocates and tier-3 students who historically found school difficult, began to see the initial fruit of agency where students deepened their sense of self and ownership of their behavior and future success.

A point on the path to agency is improved student problem-solving. Students in this study could identify that they needed help but over time they grew in requesting help and telling adults specifically what they needed help with. Fiedler and Danneker (2007) state effective self-advocacy is a student knowing their likes/dislikes, but moreover their needs, as well as limitations and strengths. Several students when interviewed discussed knowing their grades, and not only improving them, but the intermediate steps of seeking help/ tutoring to improve. There were also examples where students used their voice and choice to schedule a meeting with a support advocate or request their presence as mediators when meeting with teachers. Several students acknowledged their beginning relationships with teachers were those of tension and disrespect but work with support advocates helped to mature their communication. Teachers also acknowledged the development of additional maturity and coping skills on the part of students.

Awareness

Support advocates provided more than academic and behavioral support to students. Much of their role was a holistic approach to student well-being, addressing not just academic needs but also personal and social aspects. Both interpersonal and intrapersonal awareness was cultivated, helping students better navigate their school environment. Advocates provided support with issues ranging from personal growth to providing basic necessities. When interviewing students, they acknowledged a troubled past that they felt led them to receiving the aid and support of an advocate. Students were grateful to work with someone to help them manage their behaviors and emotions and felt with long-term support they could recognize the signs of failing (or escalating emotions that might negatively impact their school success) and they could work to proactively address them.

Students were aware of the issues they faced that caused poor grades or excessive discipline referrals but may not have always been aware of the sustained presence of those issues without intervention. Support advocates helped to stabilize their interpersonal and intrapersonal awareness. These outcomes are crucial for students' overall development, as they help students become more independent and capable of managing their own behavior and emotions.

Interpersonal

Building strong, trusting relationships between students and support advocates was a recurring theme. Advocates focused on creating safe and supportive environments where students felt comfortable sharing their issues and seeking help. As such, the practical support discussed in the findings identified a support advocate intervention that focused not only on behavioral or academic support but that ensured health, wellness, and the emotional security of students. This support in meeting basic needs (life preservation) and safety/predictability (safety)

modeled the varying levels of human needs introduced by Maslow (1951). Support advocates even took it upon themselves to buy students shoes or they sent e-mails to staff for donations to student needs. Emailing staff to alert them of a student's misfortune with a home fire (and requesting donations) goes beyond the traditional model of an intervention where students participate in lessons, testing, and progress monitoring to meet an academic goal (Moore-Brown et al., 2005). Though support advocates were concerned with academic progress, they also invested in the mental and emotional state of their students, attempting to eliminate or decrease the distractions of their environment (even their home life) that would limit school success.

This emphasis on trust and relationship-building suggested that the personal connections between the student and the support advocate played a critical role in the success of the interventions and the students' short- and long-term success. The beginning of success is the acknowledgement of resources that surround the student and helping students to tap into those resources on their own.

Intrapersonal

Student interviews also emphasized the importance of emotional and behavioral support. Students discussed how their advocates helped them manage their emotions, reduce negative behaviors, and develop better coping strategies. Before the support advocate intervention, male students stated they had fights with both peers and adults while girls demonstrated silent destructive behaviors of absenteeism and social withdrawal, similar to the acting out and quietly rebellious behaviors of Resnick et al. (1993). Students labeled themselves as bad kids or uninterested and unfocused in learning. However, they began to acknowledge the progress they made over the year, celebrating their improvement in grades or attendance and recognizing how their attitude toward school and others changed over time.

However, while students reported substantial progress, a student mentioned ongoing struggles with socialization and maintaining focus. This student communicated a desire to graduate high school (having grown up in a home with two high-school dropout parents) but also the desire to be left alone by teachers. Even while acknowledging the goal to finish high school, she felt it necessary to mention she still struggles with focus as times. The student went on to say she liked working alone, so when she completed her work, she asked teachers if she could move by herself away from others. This suggests that the rating of the effectiveness of the support provided could vary depending on the student's specific goals for themselves. It also supports the self-advocacy the student developed over time.

Academic Achievement

Though the primary work of support advocates served to support student social-emotional needs there was high academic accountability according to students, teachers, and support advocates. Students consistently mentioned the expectation of passing grades and tutoring offered by support advocates to meet grade goals. Field observations reinforced the emphasis on grades that was established through surveys and interviews. Students identified structured times for tutoring (and classes when they would not receive help/tutoring) helping to reiterate the consistent and predictable academic support provided by support advocates. However, this support occurred within the confines of the school system and scheduling constraints. This structured support helped students stay motivated and focused, leading to better academic outcomes. The goal of support advocates as an intervention was to reduce the likelihood that students will disrupt from the learning environment prematurely, witnessed at an older age as a high school dropout or gradually demonstrated as school disengagement (Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Lee & Burkam, 2003). The intervention with support advocates allowed

students to experience success because it incorporated the meeting of foundational needs of safety and higher needs of love and belonging (Skinner & Belmont, 1993).

The improved student engagement that resulted in greater classroom participation, student-initiated questions, and the completion of extra classwork assignments has been shown to lead to higher academic achievement than when these actions have not happened (Voelkl, 1995). Also, Voelkl (1995) suggested active participants score higher on achievement tests than passive students. In more than four student interviews they highlighted the significant impact of support advocates on their lives, both academically and emotionally. The advocates provided personalized support and guidance, helping students navigate challenges and improve their overall well-being. All students reported improvements in their grades and academic performance due to the support and encouragement from their advocates. A few common strategies support advocates mentioned included regular check-ins and assistance with schoolwork.

Gauging the academic effects on students from the teacher perspectives was not as clear. From the teacher surveys there was a difference in the perceived effectiveness of support advocates. While many teachers viewed the role of support advocates as broadly effective, there was variation in how they measured this effectiveness. Some teachers gauged success by improvements in students' academic performance, citing instances where students showed marked progress in their grades and classroom engagement. Others assessed effectiveness based on behavioral changes, such as reduced instances of acting out or better emotional regulation. This indicated that while support advocates were generally seen as beneficial, the metrics for success differed among teachers. Additionally, the impact of support advocates (as stated by teachers) could vary depending on the specific needs of the students and the focus of the

advocate's support. However, whether changes were academic or behavioral in nature, improved academic participation has been defined as fewer tardies and absences to class, showing up to class better prepared, fewer office visits, and teacher reports of engagement (Libbey, 2004). Thus, research that supported this work notes both outcomes- improved student engagement and reduced behavioral issues (resulting in missing class and/or suspensions)- may be related to a reduced likelihood of dropouts (Resnick et al., 1993; Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Sanders et al., 2018).

Aspirations

There is a focus on the long-term impact of advocacy where support advocates work with students setting future goals and working towards sustained improvements in their academic and personal lives. Advocates assisted in preparing students for future educational and career opportunities. Support advocates helped students set and pursue long-term goals, fostering a sense of purpose and direction. The support of future goals was discussed in every interview and survey, along with field observations where the communal environment of lunch groups encouraged students to support each other and work together towards common goals.

The students expressed different future goals, reflecting varying levels of optimism and ambition. For example, two students articulated clear academic and career goals, such as attending an Ivy League school or pursuing a career in cosmetology. These students saw their support advocates as instrumental in helping them achieve these aspirations. On the other hand, another student's goals were more focused on immediate behavioral improvements and avoiding discipline consequences, indicating a shorter-term outlook compared to their peers. This difference in future orientation highlights the diverse ways in which students engage with their support advocates and the varying expectations they have for their future success.

Support advocates all discussed improvement in students' futures, but some were concerned more with the here and now while another was future focused (post-high school). This variation in focus reflects the different objectives and strategies employed by each advocate, depending on their specific role and the needs of their students.

Accountability

Support advocates are valued for their holistic approach, organizational skills, and ability to build relationships with students. They were seen as accountable and capable of implementing strategies that have a lasting impact on students' lives. The accountability they provided to students was fostered through continuous grade checks and progress monitoring of goals. However, support advocates also offered accountability supports to teachers. Advocates contributed to teachers' professional development by providing specific insights into student behavior and needs, enhancing the overall school support structure. Similar to Vanderburg and Stephens (2010) observations, teachers in this study discussed the support they received from support advocates as a) immediate support at the moment of a crisis and b) proactive support that's offered around student incidents, in areas of professional learning and individualized coaching. Schools with systemized behavior support programs, where staff are regularly trained and supported through professional learning, are more likely to experience sustained MTSS and PBIS fidelity with large changes in student outcomes (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Gage et al., 2017). The support and professional learning teachers received in this study could help with continued behavioral and academic support of tier 3 students.

Conclusion

In summary, the role of support advocates involved providing emotional support, academic guidance, future planning, and fostering a sense of community. They help students

navigate their academic and personal challenges by creating a supportive environment, holding them accountable for their academic progress, and guiding them toward their future aspirations. As Libbey (2004) writes, "...young people who feel connected to school, that they belong...do better" (p. 282). Evidence has suggested that parents, families, and schools have an active role in the school connectedness and belonging of students in building self-advocacy and this research contributes to that evidence (Resnick et al., 1993). These findings provide a nuanced understanding of the role of support advocates in an urban middle school setting and set the stage for a more in-depth discussion of their impact on student success.

Chapter 6 – Implications

The purpose of this research study was to evaluate relationships built between support advocates and students to assess if support advocates can provide an intervention for tier-3 students to increase their school belonging. School belonging could help reduce their school disengagement and decrease the likelihood of a decision to drop out of high school (Lee & Burkam, 2003; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Goodenow & Grady, 1993). Additionally, offering this intervention to middle school students, to catch disengagement earlier is ideal (Musa & Aidah, 2018).

Interventions often involve the placement of students underperforming in a course or one identified as an academic deficiency (often reading or math) and the work of the interventionist with the student is to improve academic performance (Moore-Brown et al., 2005; Maag, 2020). This intervention was unique in that tier-3 students exhibited data of concern beyond academic deficiencies. These tier-3 students were labeled as students at risk of premature disruption from school because of their grades and/or their discipline history or attendance (İlter, 2023; Sánchez, 2005; Lee & Burkam, 2003). So, support advocates- school employees with flexibility in their schedule to work 1-on-1 with students- offered individualized support to tier-3 students and the role and potential outcomes of their work was defined by advocates themselves, students, and teachers.

After months of the study, the research supported support advocate work as an intervention. Similar to typical interventions, Tier III support was individualized and based on individual student needs and involved consistent and predictable goal setting opportunities with time for students to reflect on their progress. Support advocates served as liaisons to classroom teachers working with tier-3 students. When students were having a bad day or experiencing an

emotional or behavioral blow up, the support advocate was the first point of contact for these tier-3 students on their caseload. Support advocates provided teachers classroom management professional learning and behavior management support. Additionally, support advocates were liaisons to families of students, often helping to update parents and guardians on the progress of their student and updating the school of incidences at the student's home.

With every student there was progress, and progress was notable with all stakeholders involved in the research study- support advocates, students, and teachers. However, the progress observed differed from student to student. Some students made improvements in their grades, others had a reduction in discipline incidents, and another mentioned feeling happier at school and enjoying school more (so much so that they looked forward to high school sports). Though the outcomes for students were varied, it is critical not to discount the support advocate intervention as an effective school intervention. In fact, the varied outcomes of student progress help to re-establish the individualized nature of the support advocate intervention, often meeting each individual student's needs where they are.

Recommendations

It is the researcher's recommendation that since outcomes for students are individualized and depend on the specific needs of each student, that support advocates develop group sizes feasible for the individualized support they strive to offer. Currently, the study involved three support advocates with varying caseloads ranging from 20-50 students. Support advocates mentioned tier-2 students they support along with tier-3 students, some of which were involved in this study. The relationship building that occurred with advocates, supporting Bronfenbrenner's Socio-Ecological Framework (1979), could best be strengthened by advocates focusing their attention on a limited number of students in the greatest need of intervention.

In addition to support advocates developing specific caseload limits to ensure optimal support to the Tier III students they support, the research helped to shed light on the use of interventionists altogether. Support advocates mentioned flexibility in their schedule to set appointments for meeting with students, but also to respond to crisis calls from teachers when their caseload students were struggling. There are varying models of interventionists across the nation- some with interventionists who have a teaching load of students to others that serve as a literacy coach supporting other classroom teachers (Moore-Brown et al., 2005; Lee & Burkam, 2003). The support advocates offering intervention in this study may have experienced success because advocates had no classroom teaching demands and were thus available for the everyday emergencies that happen in student lives. The availability and open access (during school hours) to a support advocate was appreciated by students, indicating support advocates contributed to student's sense of safety and predictability in accordance with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943).

Finally, a recommendation of the researcher is the problem-solving of school leaders of urban middle schools in large metropolitan areas to consider how they might use their staff toward systems that establish belonging in their school (Khalifa, 2013; Maag, 2020; Allen et al., 2016). Research abounds concerning the importance of positive relationships between students and teachers (Lee & Burkam, 2003; İlter, 2023; Allen & Bowles, 2012; McLaughlin & Clarke, 2010). However, this research supports Bronfenbrenner's Framework upholding that a microsystem of adults (teachers, parents, and in this case, support advocates) aid in the development of students, their sense of self and their interpretation of their environment. As schools develop school improvement plans that address the social-emotional health of their students, a worthy conversation is that of adults in schools and how they work with students to

develop their sense of belonging (Christle et al., 2007; Khalifa, 2013; McLaughlin & Clarke, 2010).

Next Steps

As a principal leader where the research study occurred, I was fascinated by the responses of our students when they discussed the effects that support advocates had on them. One student said with joy “I am happier!” while another student was moved to tears describing the relationship that had been built. It was also encouraging to review teacher survey responses where staff indicated noticeable growth and progress in students receiving support from a support advocate. With these findings in mind, I have considered how to continue the research locally (or elements of the support advocate intervention), for continued school improvement. This local continuation would maintain several tenants of the support advocate model in the research: the identification of tier 3 students, their pairing with a support advocate, and the continued progress monitoring for improvement (ideally) of the factors that landed students on the watch list.

In addition to continuing the support advocate intervention locally, I wondered what additional outcomes tier-3 students might experience if support advocates were not also providing Tier II interventions simultaneously with Tier III interventions. Present in all forms of the data (interview and surveys) was a discussion of support advocates hosting Tier II small group interventions (most often through lunch groups) or working with tier-2 students once or twice weekly. Some tier 3 students in this study were part of those Tier II groups and others were not. It might be important to consider if the Tier II peer groups that some tier-3 students participated in had an effect on how those tier-3 students progressed with support advocates when meeting individually. Additionally, it is of interest to the researcher to investigate if the

impact of support advocates could be greater and farther reaching if support advocates did not have the load of balancing tier-2 and tier-3 student needs simultaneously.

Though not particularly investigated in this study, all support advocates informally discussed the importance of restorative practices training in their coaching and professional development. If school and district leaders are interested in utilizing a support advocate intervention as a model to develop and support struggling learners, it is critical that professional learning be offered to allow advocates proper coaching and support. The district (and school) studied engaged in mass restorative practices training of all employees through a staggered professional development cycle over several years. Even when one of the three support advocates was hired after this training was offered (the Success Advocate), I provided professional learning days and travel for him to attend restorative practices training in another city in the state. Hearing the invaluable learning gleaned from this training by all three advocates, it is recommended that leaders consider this training (or other trainings) in the development of advocates. It is also important to note the researcher (as principal) invested in the organizational building, climate, and culture of the school so that the support advocate intervention could thrive. Teachers welcomed support advocates into their room (evident in their survey responses), and they saw advocates as peers that helped to foster an organized and structured learning environment. School leaders cannot simply hire support advocates as intermediaries between multiple stakeholders without establishing the proper cultural foundation for the work and soliciting the right people in support of that work.

The research could be extended to investigate the perceptions of support advocates from the parent perspective. When contacting parents for student participation, I introduced myself as the principal but stated I was serving in a researcher capacity. I mentioned the name of the advocate their student had been working with and said the purpose of the research was to study the work of the

advocate with their student. Every parent I called spoke positively of the advocate named and indicated an initial interest to discuss the research further, wondering how their student might help. Parents were fond of the advocates and were aware of their work with their students. Investigating the perspectives of parents on the role of support advocates could be next steps.

Finally, next steps of the research could include an extension beyond what was studied. *What might the impact of support advocates look like beyond middle schools, when students turn 16 and have the option to drop out?* As the researcher I was curious of the high school experience for 8th grade students who were part of this study. A longitudinal study could be next to follow students beyond middle school.

Limitations

One limitation of this study is the definition of the research period. The research period was formally started after students worked with a support advocate for at least a semester and their parents were consulted for their inclusion in the study. Thus, interviews, surveys, and field observations though conducted over a specific period, are but a small portion of time where the interventions of a support advocate working closely with a student happened. As such, perceptions of changes in student behaviors and outcomes offered via interviews and surveys during the research period could have resulted due to interactions of the student with the support advocate before formal documentation of the research study began. One could infer that working with a support advocate can result in changes in student behaviors, aspirations, etc after three months of intensive intervention, while forgetting more time was spent studying students and their schoolwide behaviors outside of the 3-month study period. Despite the amount of time the research ensued (recruitment, interviews, surveys, and field observations), any outcomes realized

further support the researcher's thesis that support advocates have a place in schools and they may contribute to positive intended outcomes.

Additionally, student recruitment and retention was a challenge for this research study. Tier three students were paired with a support advocate because of excessive absences, repeated disciplinary infractions, and other behaviors that signaled disengagement from school and the school community. Because of noticeable disengagement, symptoms of a deeper issue identified too late (that likely existed for years) resulted in students exiting school or getting in trouble via district policies for their actions, often leading to their removal from the school environment anyway. The middle school studied also had a high mobility rate, so the attendance of students from year to year was not guaranteed. With this in mind, interventions with a support advocate are not consistently experienced or may be short lived. In fact, potential candidates for this study were removed from the school before they could be invited to participate in this case study. Ideally, more students would have been involved in the research study. To combat the mobility and removal of tier-3 students, research could have extended to multiple school sites to track students when they were removed from the campus of study but stayed within the district.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the role of support advocates is multi-faceted. They work with multiple stakeholders to support tier-3 students providing access to them as a confidant, tutoring and offering academic help, but also holding students accountable through goal setting. As schools identify students in danger of disengaging from school- due to unsustained success in school concerning their behavior, academics, or attendance- support advocates with flexibility in their schedule to provide 1-on-1 support and accountability should be a viable option considered. Students who worked with support advocates noticed changes in their commitment to learning

goals over time. If implemented, school leaders should develop job responsibilities and systems of feedback to monitor progress of this non-traditional intervention.

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Appendix A Teacher Survey



Institutional Review Board (IRB) Informed Consent Form

comply@k-state.edu | 785-532-3224

Teacher Survey and Informed Consent

[Informed Consent Included on Page before Advancing to complete the survey]

Dear Teacher,

My name is Connie Redic and I am a doctoral student at Kansas State University. I am a researcher seeking information from you related to your experiences working with a support advocate. The responses to this survey will be used as part of a study that seeks to answer the following questions:

- 1. What is the perceived role of support advocates working with Tier-3 students in an urban middle school setting?*
- 2. What are social and academic outcomes for Tier-3 middle school students engaging with support advocates in an urban middle school setting?*

Participation in this study is strictly voluntary. The length of time reasonably expected to complete the survey is 20 minutes. Prompts that make you uncomfortable may be skipped.

This research is titled, "The Role of Support Advocates: A Case Study." As an investigator, I can be reached by email at clredic@k-state.edu or cell phone (972) 890-6250. The principal investigator, J. Spencer Clark, may be reached at 44 Bluemont Hall, 1114 Mid-Campus Drive, Manhattan, KS 66506, telephone (785) 532-5904, or jspencerclark@ksu.edu. Additionally, should you have questions or wish to discuss any aspect of the research with an official of the Institutional Review Board, contact, Lisa Rubin, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224; Brad Woods, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224.

It is important to note:

- There are minimal risks or discomforts anticipated. However, if at any time you feel you are unable to continue as a participant, please exit the survey and notify both investigators listed above.*
- Results of this study can help identify areas of strength and opportunities for growth in the support of students via a support staff member. Results from this research may be presented at a conference or published in a journal article to share the findings with fellow educators and future researchers. Additionally, the data from this study may be used for future research without additional consent.*

**Institutional Review Board (IRB)
Informed Consent Form**

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- *Your responses in this survey are completely anonymous. Confidentiality is paramount and will be taken seriously. The data will be stored on my password-protected personal computer and online via a password protected account. Electronic data will be deleted after research completion.*

By advancing into the survey, you acknowledge:

- *I understand this project is research, and that my participation is strictly voluntary. You may skip any questions that make you feel uncomfortable, or you may choose to respond in written form.*
- *It is anticipated it will take about a half-hour to contribute to the study via the survey. If at any time you feel you are unable to continue as a participant or wish to withdraw, you may do so with no repercussions.*
- *I verify that my participation means I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described.*

Thank you for taking time to share insight into your thoughts and experiences concerning work with a support advocate.

Survey Questions

1. What is your role in the school system? (Please briefly describe your responsibilities, if not previously answered)
2. How many years have you worked in this role?
 - a. 1-2 years
 - b. 3-5 years
 - c. 6-10 years
 - d. 11-15 years
 - e. 15+ years
3. How many students do you work with that receive support from a support advocate?
 - a. 1
 - b. 2-3

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- c. 4-5
 - d. 6-10
 - e. 11-15
 - f. 16+
4. What behaviors, in your opinion, warranted your students' placement with a support advocate?
 5. How would you describe the role of support advocates to a peer wondering if they should solicit help from a support advocate?
 6. What are regular practices and routines you see the support advocate employ with your student(s)?
 7. What support, if any, has the support advocate provided to you as an educator?
 8. What short-term effects (less than 3 months) have you noticed on your student(s) because of their work with a support advocate?
 9. What outcomes do you anticipate students having with prolonged work with a support advocate?

Appendix B Student Interview Protocol

Student Interview Protocol

Hello. My name is Connie Redic. Thank you for your time today. Though I regularly serve as your principal, today I am a researcher seeking information from you related to your experiences with a support advocate. The purpose of my questions is to gain insight into your work with a support advocate. Please feel free to be as candid and honest as you can.

Your response to my questions will have no effect on your status in our school. Your responses will simply be used to describe your work with a support advocate in our school and potential outcomes.

There are no anticipated risks with this interview. If at any time you feel uncomfortable or need to stop the interview, please let me know.

With your permission, I will tape-record our conversation. This is to ensure an attentive conversation with you and verification of your true thoughts later. I assure you that all your comments will remain confidential. I will compile a report which will contain all comments without any reference to you as an individual.

Do I have your permission to start the recording?

Section I: Role of Support Advocates

1. How long have you received support from a support advocate?
2. Why do you think you receive help from a support advocate?
3. What support, if any, have you received individually (on your own)?
4. What support, if any, have you received in a group?
5. Are there varying levels of support you receive? Such as by the week or day? Or with certain classes?
6. How do you let your support advocate know you need help?
7. Do you know of any support that's provided to your guardian or family?
8. Do you know of any support that's provided to you teachers?
9. If someone asked you to describe what a support advocate does, what would you tell them?

Section II: Student Outcomes

10. What short-term effects or recent changes have you noticed because of your work with a support advocate?
11. What do you think could happen with prolonged work with a support advocate?

Appendix C Support Advocate Interview Protocol

Support Advocate Interview Protocol

Hello. My name is Connie Redic. Thank you for your time today. Though I regularly serve as your principal, today I am a researcher seeking information from you related to your experiences as a support advocate. The purpose of my questions is to gain insight into your role as a student support advocate, particularly your support of Tier 3 students. Please feel free to be as candid and honest as you can.

Your response to my questions will have no effect on your employment in our school. Your responses will simply be used to describe your role as a support advocate in our school.

There are no anticipated risks with this interview. If at any time you feel uncomfortable or need to stop the interview, please let me know.

With your permission, I will tape-record our conversation. This is to ensure an attentive conversation with you and verification of your true thoughts later. I assure you that all your comments will remain confidential. I will compile a report which will contain all comments without any reference to individuals.

Do I have your permission to start the recording?

Section I: Role of Support Advocates

1. What is your role in the school system?
2. How many years have you worked in this role?
3. With how many students do you work to provide support as a support advocate?
4. Are there varying levels of support you provide to different students? If so, please describe your work at each level?
5. What regular practices and routines do you employ with your students?
6. How would you describe your role to a peer wondering if they should solicit help from you?
7. What support, if any, do you provide to teachers?
8. What support, if any, do you provide to parents?

Section II: Student Outcomes

9. What short-term effects have you noticed on student(s) because of your work with them as a support advocate?
10. What outcomes do you anticipate students having with prolonged work with you as a support advocate?
11. Are there any limitations to your work with students that if removed, could lead to different outcomes for students?

Appendix D IRB Approval Letter



TO: J. Spencer Clark
Curriculum and Instruction
Manhattan, KS 66506

FROM: Lisa Rubin, Chair
Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects

DATE: 01/18/2024

RE: Approval of Proposal Entitled, "The Role of Support Advocates: A Case Study."

Proposal Number IRB-11904

The Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects has reviewed your proposal and has granted full approval. This proposal is **approved for three years from the date of this correspondence.**

APPROVAL DATE: 01/18/2024

EXPIRATION DATE: 01/17/2027

In giving its approval, the Committee has determined that:

No more than minimal risk to subjects

This approval applies only to the proposal currently on file as written. Any change or modification affecting human subjects must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation. All approved proposals are subject to continuing review, which may include the examination of records connected with the project. Announced post-approval monitoring may be performed during the course of this approval period by URCO staff. Injuries, unanticipated problems or adverse events involving risk to subjects or to others must be reported immediately to the Chair of the IRB and / or the URCO.

Electronically signed by Lisa Rubin on 01/18/2024 11:59 PM ET

Appendix E Coding Guide

Theme	Category	Sub-Categories	Description
STUDENT QUALIFICATIONS	Reasons for Support	Emotional Support	mad/ angry anxiety depression
		SOCIAL	antisocial escalated unmotivated
STAFF QUALIFICATIONS	Skills Required	Academic	discouraged inattentive marginalized
		Behavioral	disruptive insubordinate fights/ violent
		Relationship Building	discuss interests regular check-ins recognize changes/ distress
		Accountability	parent figure regular check-ins proactive
SUPPORT	Services provided	Tiered support	T3/individualized T2/ group
		Emotional support	motivation counseling behavioral problem solving conflict resolution safe environment/ classroom breaks
		Tangible support	tutoring/ academic support goal setting
		Consistency	confidant progress monitoring group/peer development supply basic needs dependability
		Liasion	individualized/structured parent contact teacher resource professional learning administration
			daily/ 3X a week 2X/ week behavioral academic attendance NOT STUDENT IDENTIFIED SST/ PL/ Classroom Management NOT STUDENT IDENTIFIED
OUTCOMES	Outcomes	Aspirations	goal setting post-secondary goals/dreams
		Academics	improved discipline improved grades
		Awareness: Interpersonal	emotional regulation emotional awareness
		Awareness: Intrapersonal	emotional regulation attitude shift
		Agency	choice decision making

Appendix F Parent/Student Informed Consent

KANSAS STATE
UNIVERSITY

University Research
Compliance Office

Institutional Review Board (IRB) Student Informed Consent Form

comply@k-state.edu | 785-532-3224

PROJECT TITLE:

The Role of Support Advocates: A Case Study

PROJECT APPROVAL DATE:

1/18/2024

PROJECT EXPIRATION DATE:

06/30/2023

LENGTH OF STUDY:

3
months

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: J. Spencer Clark

CO-INVESTIGATOR(S): Connie Redic

CONTACT DETAILS FOR PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS:

244 Bluemont Hall, 1114 Mid-Campus Drive,
Manhattan, KS 66506, telephone (785) 532-5904, or
jspencerclark@ksu.edu

IRB CHAIR CONTACT INFORMATION (if
you have any questions pertaining to your
rights as a research participant, or about
research related injury):

Lisa Rubin, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human
Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University,
Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224 or Brad Woods,
Associate Vice President for Research Compliance, 203
Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506,
(785) 532-3224.

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH:

You are invited to participate in a study to examine the role of support advocates in our middle school. The purpose of this research is to learn more about the role of support advocates and potential outcomes of working with students. Research results will provide an evaluation of the outcomes observed because of collaboration between support advocates and school staff and students and identify opportunities in which those interactions can be improved.

PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED:

You were selected as a possible participant because you are provided Tier 2 and/or Tier 3 support by a support advocate in the research context. At least 10 students, including yourself, and three individuals in the support advocate role will be asked to participate in individual interviews to gain insight into the experiences of support advocates working with students.

If you decide to participate, your participation will consist of an interview that will last approximately 60 minutes. With your permission, the researcher will audio record the interview. Interviews will be scheduled at your convenience. Audio interviews will be transcribed by the [researcher](#) and you will be provided a copy of the written transcription to check for clarity and accuracy. You will not be paid and agree to participate at your own discretion. If you have any additional inquiries concerning the procedure, I am happy to answer those upon request.

BIOLOGICAL SAMPLES COLLECTED:

Any identifiers associated with you and your identity will be removed from the identifiable private information. Your identifiers and information collected, even when removed, will not be [used](#) or distributed for future research studies. Results from this research may be presented at a conference or published in a journal article to share the findings with future researchers. Thoughts or beliefs expressed during your interview or themes identified after research has concluded may be used in future research studies without additional informed consent.

Whole genome sequencing will not be included as part of the research

RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS ANTICIPATED:

There are no anticipated risks associated with participating in this study; however, participants who are shy or uncomfortable with interview settings may experience discomfort. If you feel uncomfortable at any time you may skip any questions or stop participation. In order to protect participants from any repercussions, responses to interviews will be confidential and no identifying information will be used in the final report.

BENEFITS ANTICIPATED:

Results of this study can help identify areas of strength and opportunities for growth in the support of students via a support staff member. Ultimately, this study will provide insight into potential outcomes of support advocates in varying school settings. Results from this research may be presented at a conference or published in a journal article to share the findings with fellow educators and future researchers. Additionally, the data from this study may be used for future research without additional consent.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY:

Information obtained through participant interviews will remain confidential throughout the study and no sites or individuals will be personally identified in the report. You will select a pseudonym and pseudonyms for all participants will be used throughout the study with the identity of participants known only to the researcher. Recordings of interviews will be stored in a secured, online password protected location and only used by the researcher for data analysis. Electronic copies will be erased after research completion. Any hard copies generated from data collection including notes and transcripts will be destroyed after research completion.

The researcher may publish the results of the study. Your name will not be used in any publication or presentation about the study.

The information or biospecimens that will be collected as part of this research could be used for future research studies or distributed to other investigators for future research studies without additional informed consent.

IS COMPENSATION OR MEDICAL TREATMENT AVAILABLE IF INJURY OCCURS? ☐ Yes ☒ No

PARENT/GUARDIAN APPROVAL (FOR MINORS) SIGNATURE:

DATE:

Terms of participation: I understand this project is research, and that my participation is voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.

I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described, and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

PARTICIPANT NAME:

PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE:

DATE:

**WITNESS TO SIGNATURE:
(PROJECT STAFF)**

DATE: