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Curricular, Instructional, and Co-curricular Factors Perceived to Influence Students Dropping Out

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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Walden University
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Abstract

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Kimberly Shanta Jones

MA, Jackson State University, 1997

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

District administrators face concerns over students dropping out of school without a high school diploma. District personnel in a Mississippi urban school district identified specific curricular, instructional, and co-curricular factors that prompted students to leave school. The purpose of this bounded qualitative case study was to explore perceptions of principals, teachers, and counselors regarding factors that influenced students' disengagement and dropping out of school. Battin-Pearson's theory of academic mediation, which attributes poor academic performance and student-centered learning to students dropping out, framed this study. The research questions focused on how district personnel identified and monitored at-risk students and provided interventions to prevent them from disengaging and dropping out. A purposeful sample of 2 principals, 5 teachers, and 2 counselors, who had knowledge of dropout prevention strategies, volunteered and participated in semistructured interviews and classroom observations. Data were analyzed inductively using segment and thematic coding. Results indicated a multi-tiered system of support was used to identify and monitor at-risk students. Participants expressed a need to build cohesive and collaborative learning communities and relationships, provide student guidance and support, engage more with students, and provide targeted professional development (PD) for educators. Based on these findings, a 3-day PD was developed to address student engagement and dropout prevention. These endeavors may contribute to positive social change by providing educators with learner-centered strategies through a collaborative, flexible blended-learning PD aimed at identifying and assisting at-risk students, resulting in an increase in graduation rates and reduce in dropouts.

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Dedication

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord. “Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” Jeremiah 29:11 NIV

To God be the Glory for without his grace and mercy, this endeavor would not have been possible. It is in the honor of my heavenly father that I first dedicate this study for He requires us to be servants and helpers of mankind. It is through this research that I aspire to be obedient by allowing my work to contribute to the field of education.

It is then to my earthly father, Bishop Booker C Parks, in his demise that I dedicate the will and desire to complete this journey. At a moment in my life, when I chose to work instead of pursuing a college education, he gave me two options: go to college or get out. As harsh as that may sound, I knew the latter was not part of his plan but that he wanted me to excel beyond a high school diploma and aspire to achieve more. Even after my first selection of a college degree, he told me that I could do more. For his determination for me to do and be better, I am where I am, and I know it’s not by my might or wisdom but by the power of my Heavenly Father. To my mother, Emma Parks, most people ask themselves wwjd, but as I face obstacles in life, my spirit to persevere comes from asking myself, what would momma do – thank you for being a praying mother! The three reasons I pray, have faith, hope, and believe - my children: Charles, Antonio, and Shantia, you are the wind beneath my wings and my drive to see my dream to fruition. Without your patience, love, and support, this dream would not have become a reality. So many nights, the common phrase that echoed loudly in your ears was “not

tonight, I have homework," and you patiently waited until my eyes were no longer focused on the computer screen. Thanks for understanding and sacrificing time with me!

Acknowledgments

To whom much is given, much is required. Luke 12:48 KJV

It would take some pages to acknowledge everyone who has been instrumental in supporting me along this journey; therefore, I will start by saying THANKS to everyone for whatever part you played in helping make this moment come to fruition for me. As the process prolonged the support drew silent and sometimes didn't appear to be there at all; however, I know I had some still voices praying me on. Howard Cooper, though you left in 2016, I know you are still sitting on that coach cheering me on. Boss, thank you!

Dr. White, you stepped in as my committee chair during a moment of stagnation and desperation and helped me move this process to completion. I can't say I would have made it without your initial compassion and steadfast encouragement and support! From the first day I spoke with you, I felt your commitment to my success, and I am most appreciative of your rapid feedback and dedication that guided me along the path to done! Dr. Aguilar also stepped in late in the process as my second member and contributed to my moving forward. Special thanks to my URR, Dr. Mary Howe for your feedback and insight and my academic advisor who occasionally contacted me to check in and see how things were going and to see if I needed assistance. It was not without sacrifice, dedication, tears, and roadblocks that I made it, but I can look in the rearview mirror and say, it's done!

forever grateful!

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Section 1: The Problem

Introduction

Students' engagement in the educational process and their academic achievement are consistently at the forefront of national, state, and local agendas. Research reflects that poor academic achievement and dropping out of high school create lifetime negative repercussions for students, families, schools, communities, and society (Hawkins, Jaccard, & Needle, 2013; Henry, Knight, & Thornberry, 2012; Iachini, Buettner, Anderson-Butcher, & Reno, 2013). Academic achievement and student engagement are identified as two prevailing school dropout factors (Renda & Villares, 2015). Due to the long-term effects on students and society caused by dropouts, there has been a surge in national and local dropout prevention efforts. The goal is to curtail poor academic achievement and disengagement (Iachini et al., 2013). The literature indicated that student disengagement serves as a gateway for at-risk students who leave school before graduating, which prompts the needed implementation of school reform efforts and dropout prevention programs (Carter, Reschly, Lovelace, Appleton, & Thompson, 2012).

There are many factors that contribute to students staying in school and not dropping out. Student-centered classrooms offer carefully designed learning environments including classroom settings, flexible curriculum, teaching methods, policy evaluation, and course content that entice students to stay in school (Janor et al., 2013). In addition to classroom activities, co-curricular activities, and after-school programs create

a meaningful connection to the school and academic process (Mahoney, 2014). Participation in activities guards against students dropping out of school early and improves the academic achievement of students (Mahoney, 2014; Yeung, 2015). But until all factors that contribute to students becoming academically disengaged have been addressed or eliminated, dropout prevention efforts and preventive measures must continue to be implemented to decrease poor academic achievement and dropouts.

This study was written to introduce the problem, purpose, and approach to investigate curricular, instructional, and co-curricular CICC influences on disengagement and dropouts in an urban school district. It will provide an overview of the current literature on CICC practices, student-centered classrooms, and the dropout phenomena.

The Local Problem

High school dropouts create changes in learning processes which prompts educators to develop curriculum and assessments to address the overall needs of students. (Bronson, 2013; Martinez, Bragelman, & Stoelinga, 2016). There is a problem with students in the Cuponia School District (CSD) dropping out of high school, and a subsequent need to identify CICC factors that principals, teachers, and counselors perceive may be influencing students' decision to leave school early. Many factors that may prompt a student to drop out can be related to academics, - such as issues with learning and instruction, school disengagement, or a lack of understanding the curricula (Fries, Carney, Blackman-Urteaga, & Savas, 2012; Hawkins et al., 2013; Kent, Jones, Mundy, & Issacson, 2017).

Once students become unsuccessful in academics and then drop out, they are faced with earning lower incomes than high school graduates and living in poverty (Hawkins et al., 2013). Montgomery and Hirth (2011) noted the urgency for administrators to identify the potential factors that contribute to at-risk students dropping out and to provide interventions before students beforehand. There is a gap in practice in that CSD has not identified specific CICC factors that contribute to the district's dropout and graduation rates or to the effectiveness of the adopted interventions.

During the 2013-2014 school year, CSD had a 4-year graduation rate of 65.1% and a dropout rate of 23.2% (Mississippi Department of Education [MDE], 2014a). These rates are below the national 2014 Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR) of 82.3% (DePaoli, Bridgeland, & Balfanz, 2016), below the 2014 ACGR for the State of Mississippi of 74.5%, and above the state's 2014 dropout rate of 13.9% (MDE, 2014a). Table 1 shows the recent 5-year trend of the state and CSD's 4-year graduation and dropout rates (MDE, 2012b, 2013, 2014, 2016a, & 2016b), which indicate unacceptable graduation rates and undesirable dropout rates.

Table 1

5-Year Trend of 4-Year Graduation Rates and Dropout Rates

Level	Rate	2015-2016	2014-2015	2013-2014	2012-2013	2011-2012
District	Graduation	67.7%	66.9%	65.1%	64.1%	62.9%
	Dropout	21.3%	23.5%	23.2%	23.0%	25.0%
State	Graduation	80.0%	78.4%	74.5%	75.5%	73.7%
	Dropout	11.8%	12.8%	13.9%	13.9%	16.7%

Note. Adapted from Mississippi Department of Education (). (2016a). 2016 District Graduation and Dropout Rates. Accountability Results. Retrieved July 18, 2016, from http://reports.mde.k12.ms.us/report.

While the rates are reflective of positive change over the course of the 5-year period, the dropout and graduation rates remain systemic issues that require the district to identify underlying causes. The MDE (2014a) reports 4-year dropout rates for the seven high schools in CSD ranging from 9–41.5%. As noted in the CSD 2013 Executive Summary and the 2014 Annual Report, in an attempt to improve its dropout rates, the district offers intervention and preventive measures throughout the district to enhance the regular curriculum and provides additional support through its Response to Intervention/Teacher Support Teams for at-risk students. According to the 2013-2016 Dropout Prevention Plan, strategies were identified to assist the district in meeting the state's goals of increasing the graduation rates to 85% by 2018-2019 and reducing the dropout rate by 50%. A 2014 Annual Report released by the district identified three reasons why some students dropped out during the 2013-2014 school year: dislike of school experiences, enrollment in GED programs, and suspensions/expulsions.

With the dropout rates of many of the high schools in CSD exceeding the state and national rates, there is a need for the district to identify CICC factors that may contribute to low academic achievement and students dropping out. The district could improve its level of student engagement and achievement if the curriculum and instructional strategies were learner-centered and were developed to address the needs of the district (Farooq, 2013; Weimer, 2013). Until CSD is able to understand and identify CICC issues that contribute to disengagement, low academic achievement, and high dropout rates, the district may struggle with implementing strategies to improve students' academic success.

Rationale

The literature reflects that high school dropouts and the rate at which students are dropping out present substantial problems for those individuals and society and have been an ongoing concern for legislators, educators, and the general public (Hawkins et al., 2013; Landis & Reschly, 2013; Maynard, Kjellstrand & Thompson, 2014; Wilkins & Bost, 2016). Landis and Reschly (2013) noted that the dropout phenomenon is a topic that is overtaking academic and financial issues in the United States. In the following subsection, evidence of the problem in CSD will be presented as well as the need for conducting the study at both the local and national level. This is followed by an introduction to the problem as it manifests in the literature.

Evidence of the Problem in the Local Setting

School districts in the United States, especially large urban districts such as CSD, use graduation and dropout rates as key indicators of academic success (Subedi & Howard, 2013). A 2013 Executive Summary showed that the district consists of 60 schools that stretch from one end of a large, urban school district in Mississippi to the distant other end of the district. The Summary also indicated that the district was comprised of seven feeder patterns, where students in grades pre-K through eighth grade attended the 38 elementary and 13 middle schools and then matriculated to one of the seven high schools in the district. Approximately 2,059 or 21.3%of the students enrolled in CSD during the 2015-2016 school year were identified as dropouts (MDE, 2016a). During the 2013-2014 school year, the MDE (2017) made available to Mississippi students, graduation options that provided opportunities for more students to pass state assessments in order to meet graduation requirements. As depicted in Table 1, there has been a constant decrease in the number of students dropping out. However, the district's dropout rate is still nearly double that of the state, a condition that validates this study in further identifying factors contributing to the district's dropouts.

Due to the number of students leaving school districts in Mississippi without a high school diploma each year, options have been made available to districts so that students could still graduate (MDE, 2012a). According to the 2013-2016 CSD Dropout Prevention Plan, in an effort to further curtail dropouts, the district formed a dropout prevention team to implement initiatives to address its K-12 dropout prevention efforts.

The CSD Dropout Prevention Plan addressed its dropout problem by identifying strategies to address at-risk students and dropouts. As reported in the Dropout Prevention Policy (2016), there are special programs to address concerns that the district has about the effectiveness of its curriculum and instruction in addressing the needs of high-risk students. Some of the supplemental supports provided by the district to enhance its regular curriculum and instruction and thus address its high-risk students effectively, include the following:

- Title I Reading and Math program that provides targeted reading and math support for at-risk learners
- District Reading, which is a summer reading initiative to encourage students to read books during the summer
- Extended Time Summer School
- Re-engaging in Education for All to Progress (R.E.A.P.)

Despite supplemental supports and interventions in the district, the district is still faced with students dropping out. For those involved in the identification and implementation of supports and interventions, this study could provide information that could help them determine more relevant and useful methods to engage students and thus reduce the number of students dropping out.

Evidence of the Problem in the Literature

High school dropout rates remain social and economic issues for society, although the United States' rates have been decreasing since 1972 (Maynard, Kjellstrand, &

Thompson, 2014). Poor academic achievement and dropping out are related to long-term negative consequences for the dropout and have significant effects on the social and public health of society (Iachini et al., 2013; Maynard et al., 2014; McKee & Caldarella, 2016; Wilkins & Bost, 2016). Dropout consequences include high costs to the individual and society, for example, economic losses of $240,000 per dropout nationally, poorer health, higher criminal activity, and increased federal emphasis on student achievement (Cavendish, 2013; Hawkins et al., 2013; Mahoney, 2014; Maynard et al., 2014). These consequences present a significant need for early detection of at-risk students and the need to develop and implement strategies to curtail dropout rates and increase student engagement (Maynard et al., 2014). Current graduation and dropout rates dictate a need to improve graduation rates for students and the national economy (Cavendish, 2013).

The purpose of this qualitative, descriptive case study was to collect and analyze principals', teachers', and counselors' impressions of CICC factors that can influence students' disengagement and decisions to drop out of high school. Paige, Sizemore, and Neace (2013) indicated that student disengagement from learning can be evident through poor academic performance, disinterest in academics, and early withdrawal from school which are issues many schools face and which require administrators identify interventions for to increase academic achievement. There is a need for increased understanding early academic events that prompt students to drop out so that CSD may identify students at risk of dropping out before they become disengaged (Barry &

Reschly, 2012). Prevailing high dropout rates in the CSD dictated the urgency to identify factors leading to student disengagement and eventual dropout (Dansby & Giles, 2011).

Definition of Terms

Academic achievement: Students performance in academics and co-curricular activities (Ganai & Mir, 2013); a factor used to determine schools' success (Tubin, 2015).

Adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR): A method used by school districts to track a group or cohort of students who enter high school together as first-time ninth graders and graduate on-time with a regular diploma (DePaoli et al., 2016, p. 87).

At-risk students: Students who are not meeting requirements for on-grade promotion; achieving below peers; a potential dropout; pregnant; a parent (MDE, 2009).

Curriculum: The "topics taught as well as the books and materials used for teaching" (Griffith, Massey, & Atkinson, 2013, p. 308) or the central aspect of a course of study including goals and expectations for teaching and learning (MDE, 2016c).

Dropout: The event of a student exiting school before completing high school and the status of an individual who is not in school and who did not complete school (Aud et al., 2013; Carter et al., 2012; Kena et al., 2014; Mahoney, 2014)

Dropout rates: The total number of students who drop out from all grades in a school or district in a given year, divided by the total enrollment in those grades (DePaoli et al., 2016, p. 89)

Graduation rates: Percentage of students in public high schools who graduate on time with a regular diploma after four years of entrance (Aud et al., 2013)

Learner-centered or student-centered classrooms: Classrooms where teachers assume passive facilitator roles and students assume more active roles allowing learners to create their own learning while being directly involved in the learning process (Ahmed, 2013; Tawalbeh & Alasmari, 2015; Vogler and Carnes, 2014, p. 39).

Pull factors: Dropout factors that are considered individual student factors as family, jobs, lack of interest in school, and high mobility (Doll, Eslami, & Walters, 2013)

Push factors: Dropout factors that are school-related such as attendance and discipline (Doll, Eslami, & Walters, 2013)

Response to intervention: A multi-tiered process implemented to provide early support of and interventions based on the academic and behavioral needs of all students in efforts to curtail failure and ensure academic success (MDE, 2016c)

School disengagement: A factor of the dropout process (Renda & Villares, 2015) as a result of students disengaging from school, disconnecting from normal flow and expectations, putting forth less effort and interest, and losing commitment to school and graduating (Balfanz, Herzoz, & Mac Iver, 2007)

Teacher support teams (TST): A group of teachers and school leaders who come together to solve problems and provide student intervention (MDE, 2016c)

Significance of the Study

Dropping out of high school can have long-term consequences for students, families, communities, and society (McKee & Caldarella, 2016; Tas, Selvitopu, Bora, & Demirkaya, 2013). State-level data reflect troubling trends for key graduation subgroups,

such as minorities and students with disabilities ranking below 70% (DePaoli et al., 2016). Dockery (2012) suggested using instructional interventions that are focused on enhancing student achievement to help students focus on completing school. This study has implications for positive social change: It provides information for district-level policymakers, curriculum and instructional specialists, principals, teachers, and counselors to help them create or modify interventions that are designed to keep students in school and to increase their potential for more successful college or career outcomes.

Students in the CSD must meet Mississippi graduation requirements in order to obtain a standard high school diploma. These requirements include attaining a passing score on end-of-course standardized tests that are aligned with the state's curriculum frameworks or standards (Mississippi Department of Education [MDE], 2014) or obtaining a standard high school diploma through graduation options afforded in State Board Policy 3803. This study is significant because collecting adult perspectives on these factors from principals, teachers, and counselors in the CSD is expected to make it possible to plan curricular support, instructional engagement, and other co-curricular supports to help students choose to finish school. Zuilkowski, Jukes, and Dubek (2016) noted that there is limited research on the influence of academic achievement on primary-school dropout. Therefore, identifying and improving CICC factors has the potential to provide an original contribution of information that will allow the district to keep at-risk students engaged in classrooms and thus result in increased student achievement (Bronson, 2013). While there may be extra-school factors, this study focused on those

concerns over which the school has primary control. Given the negative impact on students, families, communities, and society when students drop out, it is important for the CSD to address factors contributing to dropping out.

The justification for studying this problem is echoed in existing literature. As presented in this study, a review of literature reflected that identifying specific academic factors prompting students to become disengaged and eventually dropping out is pivotal to deterring dropouts and is a national problem plaguing school districts (Adelman & Szekely, 2017; Kent et al., 2017; Sahin, Arseven, & Kilic, 2016; Zuilkowski et al., 2016). Mphale (2014) indicated that the dropout issue is a worldwide dilemma with school policies and practices affecting student performance and prompting dropping out. Adelman and Szekely (2017) echoed that issues with identifying underlying causes of students dropping out is also prevalent in Central and Latin America. Poor academic performance, which can be attributed to curricular and instructional practices, is a leading factor that results in students experiencing events such as absenteeism, disengagement, and behavior issues that can prompt dropping out (Kent et al., 2017; Mphale, 2014; Zuilkowski et al., 2016). In a quantitative study conducted by Kent et al. (2017), they noted that the literature and previous dropout studies highlight the fact that many variables must be considered to predict or identify at-risk students on the verge of dropping out. Dropping out due to academic-related issues is widespread; the academic-related factors that prompt students to drop out need to be identified.

Research Question

The qualitative research questions that guided this case study are related primarily to teaching and learning factors that influence students' decisions to drop out of high school in an urban school district in Mississippi. The conceptual framework identified several dropout theories that influence students to drop out; however, the research questions will focus only on the academic mediation theory, which addresses all dropout factors related to poor academic achievement in the CSD.

1. How do high school principals, teachers, and counselors in CSD identify and monitor at-risk students who are in danger of dropping out due to poor academic achievement?
2. What are high school principals, teachers, and counselors' perceptions of the effectiveness of the curricular, instructional, and/or co-curricular mediations/supports currently implemented or planned in CSD to address at-risk students' needs?
3. What do high school principals, teachers, and counselors perceive could be improved in CSD curriculum and instruction to further engage and encourage students to stay in school?
4. What co-curricular innovations do high school principals, teachers, and counselors perceive are needed in CSD to encourage students to stay in school?

Review of Literature

The purpose of this literature review was to provide a critical review of current (2013–2018), peer-reviewed research on CICC factors that contribute to student disengagement and dropping out of school and the prevention efforts aimed at deterring dropouts.

This literature review concentrates on the impact of curriculum and instruction in student-centered classrooms on the effectiveness of increasing student engagement, academic achievement, and decreasing or preventing dropouts. The strategy used to conduct this study included a thorough review of literature on high school dropouts, curriculum, instructional practices, and co-curricular activities. Searches were conducted using the following key terms: *dropouts, dropout rates, high school dropouts, dropout prevention, dropout recovery, dropout theories, high school graduates, graduation rates, student-centered teaching, learner-centered teaching, disengagement, student engagement, instructional strategies, curriculum development, extra-curricular activities,* and *co-curricular activities*. The following databases were used: ERIC, Academic Search Premier, Google Scholar, Education Research Complete, and Sage. The Mississippi Department of Education website and the local school district website were also searched.

Themes were identified in the literature connecting CICC factors to academic achievement and students dropping out: academic mediation theory (Battin-Pearson et

al., 2000), learner-centered teaching theories (Weimer, 2002, 2013), curricular, school connectedness through extracurricular activities, and learner-centered classrooms.

The Conceptual Framework

This study focused on the perceived influence of teaching and learning practices relative to curricular, instructional, co-curricular, and student-centered learning factors that may influence low academic achievement and students' decision to drop out of high school. Battin-Pearson et al. (2000) identified academic mediation, general deviance, deviant affiliation, poor family socialization, and structural strains as five theories considered as predictors influencing students to drop out. The conceptual framework that guided this study is based on the academic mediation theory with an added emphasis on student-centered learning, both supporting the purpose of this study to identify CICC factors influence on students' disengagement and dropping out of school.

The framework in Figure 1 depicts a student-centered learning environment and how the five theories of Battin-Pearson et al. (2000) related to the high school dropout epidemic uniquely contributes to the dropout phenomena. Deviant affiliation theory associates dropouts to their ability to bond with antisocial peers. Structure strains theory contributes dropouts to demographic factors such as gender, socioeconomic status, and race. General deviance theory suggests that deviant student behaviors contribute to dropout tendencies. Poor family socialization theory identifies a lack of high expectations from parents and/or a lack of parental education as a contributing factor for dropouts. Academic mediation attributes all dropout factors to poor academic achievement while

the other four theories contribute poor academic achievement to only some aspects of dropout.

Academic mediation differs from the other four theories in that the other theories are associated with dropping out only through how the theories affect poor academic achievement (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000). The high school dropout phenomena can be attributed to significant mediating factors of academic mediation such as excessive absences, learning disabilities, low socio-economic status, grade retention, disengaged from learning, and students who are incapable of passing state exit exams (Battin-Pearson et al, 2000; Ekstrand, 2015; Klapproth & Schaltz, 2013). According to Battin-Pearson et al. (2000), children who bond with the school system are more likely to attain high academic achievement, decreasing their likelihood of dropping out. Klapproth and Schaltz (2013) indicated that instruction differs in classrooms with low-socioeconomic and high socioeconomic statuses with teachers devoting less instructional time to academic skills in schools with low socioeconomic status. Motivation is another key factor leading to increased student achievement and early school leaving (Fan & Wolters, 2014; Parr & Bonitz, 2015; Tubin, 2015). Knesting-Lund, Reese, & Boody (2013) indicated that students who experience feelings of inadequacy and frustration as a result of decreased motivation ultimately drop out of school.

This study was designed to develop an understanding of how CICC factors and student-centered learning potentially influence student achievement and students' decision to drop out of school. The findings of Battin-Pearson et al. (2000) suggest that

student disengagement and dropping out is initiated by low academic achievement. Based on research identifying instructional approaches, curricular strategies, and co-curricular activities as factors contributing to low academic achievement, the theory of academic mediation is a precursor of dropping out and would be appropriate to frame this study (Doolen & Biddlecombe, 2014; Duckenfield & Reynolds, 2013; Fitzgerald et al., 2013; Kauble & Wise, 2015; Zuilkowski et al., 2016; Yeung, 2015). Academic mediation further substantiates the development of the research questions that seek to identify how teaching and learning practices contribute to low academic achievement.

One curricular approach that represents a noticeable shift in teaching methodology in the past 10 years is student-centered teaching (Tawalbeh & Alasmari, 2015; Virgin, 2014). The student-centered teaching approach shifted the focus in learning environments from teacher-centered instruction to learner-centered instruction (Bishop, Caston, & King, 2014; Edwards, 2015; Tawalbeh & Alasmari, 2015). Weimer (2013) attributed greater student achievement and increased teacher job satisfaction to the implementation of student-centered teaching. Student-centered teaching fosters students' abilities to make a connection between what is already known and what is being learned, resulting in students having a deeper understanding and becoming more autonomous, independent learners (Weimer, 2013). Student-centered instruction created a greater focus on active learning, which allows the learner to be more engaged in the learning process (Edwards, 2015; Janor et al., 2013; Virgin, 2014; Vogler & Carnes, 2014). Teaching that is student-centered engages students in curriculums that allow them to

learn while connecting their learning to relevant life experiences external to the classroom (Tawalbeh & Alasmari, 2015; Virgin, 2014).

Data analysis helped determine if principals, teachers, and counselors attribute teaching and learning practices to low academic achievement and dropouts. Research questions and probing questions were posed to capture perceptions of participants regarding curricular, instructional, co-curricular, and teaching and learning practices implemented or possibly need to be implemented to increase student achievement. Data were analyzed to determine if findings of the study corroborate or reject the principles of academic mediation and student-centered learning. The following section provides a review the current literature concerning curricular, instructional, co-curricular, and student-centered learning influences on student achievement.

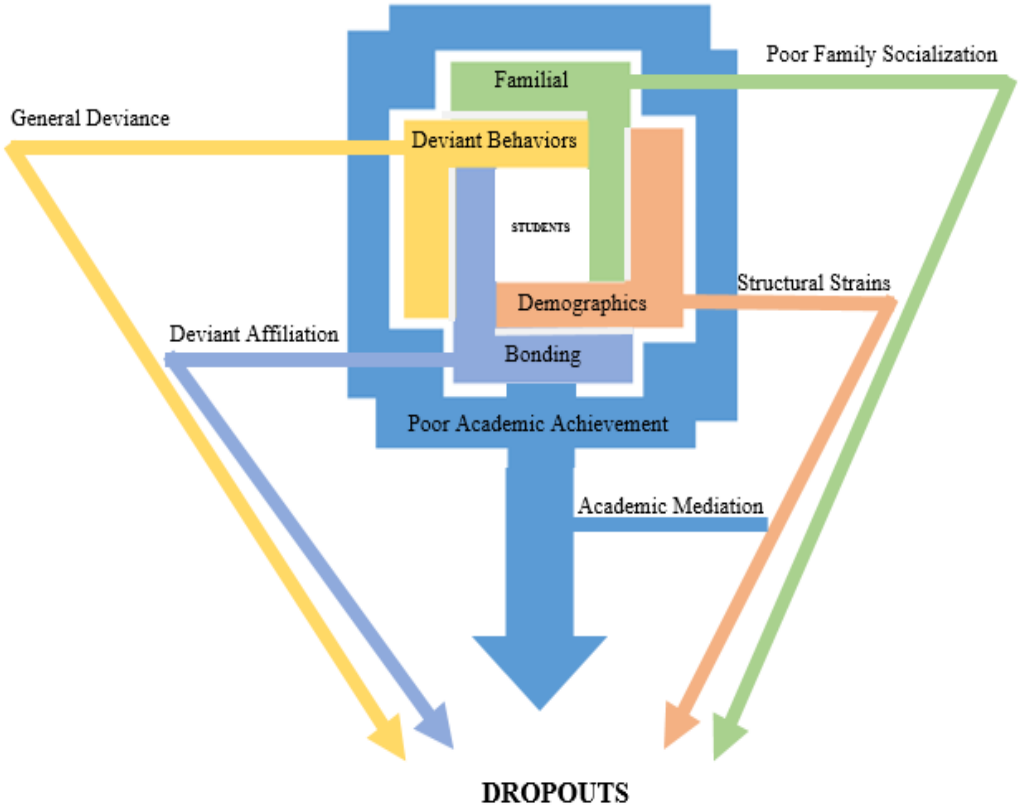

Figure 1. Five Factor Dropout Framework
A student-centered learning environment with students as the focal of an educational system and five theories that contribute to students dropping out of school. General deviance, poor family socialization, deviant affiliation, and structural strains uniquely contribute to dropouts while serving as contributing factors of poor academic achievement prompting students to drop out. Academic mediation attributes all dropout factors to academic-related factors.

Current Literature about Dropouts

All students who enter the education system do not exit as a high school graduate. Many students who experience issues transitioning to high school either drop out or exit without the proper skills to be successful which is especially true for students from urban school districts (Genao, 2015). Multiple research studies have attempted to identify factors contributing to dropouts and characteristics of individuals who dropped out of high school with numerous factors and identified characteristics (Adeleke & Ogunkola, 2013; Blount, 2012; Genao, 2015; Martinez, 2015; McKee & Caldarella, 2016; Tarusha, 2014). The ultimate goal of identifying who drops out and why is to gather data that will assist policymakers, educators, communities, and families to provide intervention and implement policies and programs that will curtail the dropout rate due to the problems dropouts present socially and individually (Genao, 2015; Landis & Reschly, 2013; Tarusha, 2014; Tas, Selvitopu, Bora, & Demirkaya; 2013; Zuilkowski, Jukes, & Dubeck, 2016).

A dropout is a student who withdraws from school prior to high school graduation as a culmination of the longer process of school disengagement (Carter, Reschly, Lovelace, Appleton, & Thompson, 2012; Doll, Eslami, & Walters, 2013; Henry, Knight, & Thornberry, 2012; Mahoney, 2014). A dropout is further defined as a student who is not a high school completer and is unsuccessful in receiving a diploma or certificate upon completion from secondary school within a specific period (Adeleke & Ogunkola, 2013; Lamote, Speybroeck, Noortgate, & Van Damme, 2013; Snyder & Dillow, 2015).

Mahoney (2014) conducted a mixed-methods study where the consequences of dropouts were viewed as staggering for the individual and the nation.

Regardless of the reason a student drops out, it is broadly agreed that the high school dropout phenomena is a complex, serious problem for the nation and poses a threat to education, school, and society (Adeleke & Ogunkola, 2013; Parr & Bonitz, 2015; Tarusha, 2014). The phenomena of dropping out creates economic, social, cultural, and political inequities for students (Farooq, 2013). Students in danger of dropping out are referred to as at-risk learners (Doll, Eslami & Walters, 2013; Genao, 2015; Martinez, 2015; Subedi & Howard, 2013). Many students drop out because they lack support and encouragement when needed (Tarusha, 2014). Because dropouts negatively impact society, it is imperative that at-risk students and factors contributing to their dropping out be identified prior to departure from the school system (Schoeneberger, 2012).

History of dropouts. America has long been dealing with the pandemonium resulting from high school dropouts who are exiting classrooms due to no single reason, yet with many repercussions. Tas et al. (2013) indicated that countries worldwide are experiencing severe dropout problems. Dropout research can be dated from the early 20th century pioneers until today (Doll et al., 2013). Table 2 below depicts national studies that were aimed at addressing high school dropouts according to Doll et al. (2013).

Table 2

National Studies Aimed at Decreasing Dropouts

Year	Study	Description
1955	Explorations in Equality of Opportunity Study (EEO:55)	The first national study, which sought to address dropouts.
1966	The National Longitudinal Survey of Young Women and Men (NLSY:66)	This study, called the National Longitudinal Survey of Labor Market Experiences, was the first to accurately represent minorities.
1972	The National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972 (NLS:72)	This study is considered to be the most well-known study in the United States.
1979	The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth Labor Market Experience	This study's aim was to identify who dropped out and why.
1980	The High School and Beyond Study (HSB:80)	This is the first of the studies that included both a cohort of seniors and actual dropouts.
1988	The National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88)	This study provided more comprehensive reasons of dropouts
2002	The Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS:2002)	This was the last nationally representative study conducted by NCES to identify dropout factors.

Dropout statistics and graduation rates. The number of students exiting high school without a diploma has created a preponderance of attention that seemingly overshadows those who are graduating. Fan and Wolters (2014) identified the high school dropout rate as one of the most prominent educational problems affecting society. Dropout and graduation rates are used as predictors of failure or success for school districts across the nation (Subedi & Howard, 2013). DePaoli, Bridgeland, and Balfanz

(2016) defined the dropout rate as the total number of students from all grades in a school or district who drop out in a given year, divided by the total enrolled in those grades (p. 89). In 2006, American high school dropout rates declined from 15% to 9% (Eskstrand, 2015, p. 471). Although there was a decrease in dropout rates, the education system remains plagued with academic failure and dropouts at the forefront of concerns.

Genao (2015) estimates a yearly high school dropout rate of over 1.2 million students. Dropout rates and academic failure vary across subgroups with 10% of boys, 8% of girls, 6% of Whites, 11% of Blacks, and 22% of Latin American students (Ekstrand, 2015). Genao (2015) indicated that Black and Latino student's academic performance is below White students. Dropouts are more prone to experience negative factors such as poor health, higher mortality rates, higher tax consumers, incarceration, lower incomes, and are higher percentage of welfare recipients than high school graduates (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Genao, 2015; Mphale, 2014; Tas et al., 2013). The high rates at which students are dropping out have lasting impacts on individuals, families, schools, and communities (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Genao, 2015; Subedi & Howard, 2013).

CSD is an urban, semi-diversely populated district that can benefit from decreases in its dropout rate and increased graduation rates. According to a 2014 Annual Report, the district enrolls approximately 30,000 students in 60 sites with 38 serving elementary grades, 13 serving middle grades, and 7 serving high school students. Being one of the largest school districts in Mississippi, according to the annual report, the

district serves approximate 97.24% African American, 1.02% White, and less than 2% of other minorities (Hispanic, Asian, Native American, and Pacific Islander). The Annual Report notes that approximately 90.8% of the students in CSD are from low-income families per free and reduced lunch eligibility. Historical data reflect African American, Hispanic, and low-poverty students as those with the highest dropout rates (Branson et al., 2013). CSD demographics reflect a troubling similarity with this data, furthering the need to address the district's dropout rate. The annual report indicates that the problems CSD students face due to the poverty level introduce many challenges in the classrooms. These challenges then become constraints and problems, which can result in decreased academic achievement. Genao (2015) noted that urban districts such as CSD could benefit from policy initiatives that may lead to increased graduation rates. Statistics across the Unites States reflect a catastrophe in high schools relative to dropout rates, and CSD is no exception to these statistics (Genao, 2015).

Current Population Survey (CPS) data are used to determine status and event dropout rates (Snyder & Dillow, 2015). The event dropout rate, reflected by CPS data, identify the percentage of students exiting high school before completing a formal education. Status dropout rates reflect cumulative data of all young adults within a specified age range (Snyder & Dillow, 2015). The status dropout rate includes all dropouts between the ages of 16 and 24 and is generally higher than the event rate because of the ages considered (Aud et al., 2013; Kena et al., 2014; Snyder and Dillow, 2015). While DePaoli et al. (2016) consider 10 – 15% a very high dropout rate, statistics

pertaining to dropout rates can be misleading due to the calculation of data with states using varying grades to calculate dropout rates.

Factors that influence dropouts. Considerable research has been conducted to address and identify factors associated with students dropping out of high school. These dropout factors, also labeled as risk factors, are defined as the events or student characteristics that are interrelated to dropping out (Blount, 2012; Knesting-Lund, Reese & Boody, 2013). McKee and Caldarella (2016) identified societal and academic-related factors as contributors to dropping out. Dropout factors include disengagement, absenteeism, academic failure, poor learning attitude, negative school climate, and non-participation in athletics (Adeleke & Ogunkola, 2013; Lamote, Speybroeck, Noortgage, & Van Damme, 2013; Wilkins & Bost, 2016; Yeung, 2015). Understanding who drops out and why is essential to identifying factors leading to students being unsuccessful in completing high school and is essential in assisting researchers to identify preventive measures to address the high school dropout phenomena (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Zuilkowski et al., 2016).

Fan and Wolters (2014) conducted a quantitative study using large-scale national data from an Educational Longitudinal Study where they compared students' enrollment and dropout status during the students last two years of high school to explore school motivation as a factor prompting students to drop out. Poor academic achievement has been shown to be a major contributor to students dropping out (Fan & Walters, 2014; Parr & Bonitz, 2015). Zuilkowski et al. (2016) indicated that students who perform

poorly academically have a greater chance of experiencing numerous events that may cause them to drop out. Zuilkowski et al. (2016) identified threats with the results being applicable in other situations due to the low number of former students they were able to locate and interview. To account for this limitation, Zuilkowski et al. (2016) interviewed a sample of students enrolled in the district and the student's parents. Oreski, Hajdin, and Klicek (2016) conducted a quantitative study where they utilized a questionnaire survey to capture data from a sample of 516 participants. Oreski et al. (2016) acknowledged that academic success and academic failure can be contributed to many factors, including demographic factors. Poor academic achievement is identified as a strong predictor of dropping out of school (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Parr & Bonitz, 2015; Zuilkowski et al., 2016).

A mixed-methods study conducted by Zuilkowski et al. (2016) yielded findings affirming that poor academic achievement resulted in other issues such as disengagement and disenfranchisement, which create other factors prompting students to drop out of school. Zuilkowski et al. (2016) attributed dropouts to specific limited factors while other researchers attributed academic success and high school dropouts to various factors (Adeleke & Ogunkola, 2013; Cavendish, 2013; Tarusha, 2014). Knesting-Lund et al. (2013) identified lack of extracurricular participation, curriculum irrelevant to students, and negative influence from peers as dominant dropout factors. Tas, Selvitopu, Bora and Demirkaya (2013) noted that distinguishing individual, social, and economic factors provoking dropouts is a difficult task.

Many factors contribute to high school dropouts. Factors including socioeconomic status (SES), grade retention, student engagement, low achievement, and parental involvement, relating to student and school characteristics correlate with high school completion (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Henry, Knight, & Thornberry, 2012; Tarusha, 2014). Characteristics prompting students to disengage or drop out of school stem from a very long list of factors (Tarusha, 2014). Academic or institutional factors are associated with school practices and the other group includes social or individual student factors (Adeleke & Ogunkola, 2013). Institutional or academic factors are referred to as internal, push, and contextual while individual or social factors are identified as external, family, and pull (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Doll, Eslami, & Walters, 2013; Fan & Wolters, 2014). Adeleke and Ogunkola (2013) indicated that most dropout-related studies focus on individual characteristics that contribute to students dropping out.

Academic-related factors. Academic achievement of students is at the forefront of National, state, and local agendas with national mandates aimed at increasing students' academic achievement and lowering dropout rates (Cavendish, 2013). Ganai and Mir (2013) defined academic achievement as excellence in all classroom academic disciplines and co-curricular activities of well-adjusted individuals. Efforts are exerted on all levels to ensure students excel academically and are capable of exiting high school with a high school diploma (Oreski, Hajdin, & Klicek, 2016). Students' academic performance serves as a key indicator to a student dropping out (McKee & Caldarella, 2016).

Students encounter academic-related factors that could influence the decision to exit high school without a diploma (Doll et al., 2013). Low academic achievement and test scores, intensive curriculum, retentions, behavioral difficulties, low participation in extracurricular activities, disengagement, boring classes, school climate or structures, and loose academic policies are some school-related factors significantly contributing to the dropout problem (Branson et al., 2013; Heidi, Reeves, Corley, & Orpinas, 2012; Tarusha, 2014; Tas et al., 2013). Genao (2015) attributed attendance as a major role in the performance of students with absenteeism being identified with a significant association to achievement. Knesting-Lund et al. (2013) indicated that teachers consider dropout factors as causes beyond their control with some teachers reporting limited influence on students' dropout decisions. Ganai and Mir (2013) noted that students' learning outcomes are indicated by their academic achievement. Low academic achievement serves as one of several precursors to students dropping out as reported in studies conducted by Battin-Pearson et al. (2000); Tas et al. (2013); and Zuilkowski et al. (2016).

Individual-related factors. Factors beyond the control of educators have been identified as a precursor to students dropping out of school (Knesting-Lund et al., 2013). These include factors that students may face regularly and before entering the school setting such as family-related issues that lead to poor academic achievement and lack of motivation (Blount, 2012; Knesting-Lund et al., 2013; Moore & McArthur, 2014). Additional individual student factors contributing to dropping out include attitudes, high mobility, values, engagement, belongingness, lack of motivation, and participation

(Bowers & Sprott, 2012; Dockery, 2012; Fries, Carney, Blackman-Urteaga, & Savas, 2012; Moore & McArthur, 2014; Tas et al., 2013). According to Knesting-Lund et al. (2013), these factors may be too influential on students' decisions to drop out for the school to help make a difference. Another factor affecting academic achievement and identified as having a strong relationship to school dropout is absenteeism (Balkis, Arslan & Duru, 2016; Battin-Pearson et al., 2000). Balkis et al. (2016) indicated that there is a reciprocal process for academic achievement and absenteeism with both affecting the other and absenteeism of students being a predictable factor based on a students' previous academic performance.

Due to the number of factors external to the school system, educators must identify and develop an understanding of factors that contribute to students dropping out (Branson et al., 2013). Zuilkowski et al. (2016) identified gender and poverty as two statistically significant dropout risk factors. Zuilkowski et al. (2016) further indicated that factors outside the academic setting were likely increased for dropouts who performed poorly. Regardless of the type of factor, factors prompting students to drop out must be identified and addressed in order to curtail a predominant issue impacting individuals, families, and society.

Each of the five theories posed by Battin-Pearson et al. (2000) have unique factors that lead to students dropping out while collectively attributing dropouts to some aspect of poor academic performance. This qualitative study will focus on academic-related factors such as instructional practices, curricular designs, co-curricular activities, school

environment, school leaders, disengagement, and academic motivation that contribute to dropouts. As a result of the many factors prompting students to drop out, resulting in a significant number of dropouts leaving school before learning basic life skills, much attention has been given to developing prevention policies aimed at curtailing the number of students dropping out (Mphale, 2014). Developing programs and initiatives focused on factors related to dropouts can aid in decreasing the number of students dropping out.

Dropout Prevention and Intervention Efforts

Efforts to address factors contributing to the dropout dilemma remain at the forefront of the educational agenda. Steadman and Evans (2013) identified *A Nation at Risk*, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), and the Common Core State Standards as three major reform efforts within the past three decades that have contributed to reshaping the educational landscape and aimed at increasing student achievement. Addressing the dropout dilemma requires intensive reviews of learning environments, instructional practices, curriculums, co-curricular activities, educational policies, and teacher-student relationships. Identifying at-risk students early would allow educators to provide targeted interventions that should be directly focused on the improvement of academic achievement (Battin-Pearson, et al., 2000; McKee & Caldarella, 2016). Preventing dropouts at the school level will require collaboration between school administrators, counselors, teachers, and families (Tas et al., 2013). Factors outside the control of the school makes it difficult to develop prevention strategies that are effective (Wells, Gifford, Bai, & Corra, 2015). Ending the dropout

crisis will entail collaborative efforts between families, communities, and district and state policy makers (DePaoli, Bridgeland, & Balfanz, 2016).

Walsh, Lee-St. John, Raczek, and Foley (2015) utilized a quasi-experimental design to determine the effect of participating in an elementary school program on school dropout. Analyzing longitudinal data that were collected from a high-poverty, urban school districts' dataset, they made a determination that intervention must start as early as elementary school to prevent students from dropping out. Without pinpointing specific factors, Walsh et al. (2015) noted that there are varying internal and external school factors which contribute to dropouts and create a challenge in preventing students from dropping out. Developing a systematic support system for students that includes teachers and counselors is identified as one approach to curtailing dropouts. The difficulty in identifying specific dropout factors makes it imperative that a comprehensive approach or strategy is used to address dropouts. Renda and Villarres (2015) further agreed that reducing dropout rates and increasing graduation rates requires systemic and collaborative planning.

Dropout prevention requires timely implementation of appropriate interventions (Renda & Villarres, 2015). Designing preventive programs requires an understanding of how student achievement and dropouts will allow educators to identify students at risk of dropping out (Zuilkowski et al., 2016). The number of students at risk of dropping out can be reduced through the implementation of intervention and prevention strategies that must be long-term in order to be effective (Tarusha, 2014). Knesting-Lund, Reese, and

Boody (2013) suggested focusing more on the role of teachers as a preventive measure to increase graduates and assist students with thriving in the learning environment.

Based on the findings of a quantitative study conducted by Mphale (2014) where a questionnaire was used to capture participants opinions related to dropouts, student dropout can be attributed to many factors including poor academic performance and students' attitudes toward school. Mphale (2014) relied on study findings to recommend several approaches to aid in decreasing the number of students dropping out. Approaches Mphale (2014) recommended included developing collaborative efforts between parents, community, and teachers; actively engaging students in the learning process, developing student-friendly learning environments and motivation initiatives. Faridi, Bahri, and Nurmasitah (2016) conducted a descriptive qualitative study where they regarded participation in student-centered learning environments as an intervention strategy motivating students to engage in class discussions. Based on their findings, teacher-centered learning serves as a precursor to students' low participation in classrooms contributing to the theory and practice of students benefiting from student-centered classrooms (Faridi et al., 2016). In a literature review of dropout trends, prevention, and interventions, Ecker-Lyster and Niileksela (2016) identified many efforts that could aid in preventing or intervening with dropouts to include developing early warning systems, using projects to enhance academics, providing targeting interventions, and they also recommended utilizing the structure of learning environments to provide rigorous instruction for increased student engagement as a dropout intervention effort. With the

many prevention and intervention practices aimed at decreasing dropouts, keeping students as focal to this effort can aid in developing and implementing prevention and intervention measures.

Theory and Practice of Student-Centered Learning

How students learn is a fundamental and widely studied aspect of the educational process that impacts student achievement. Traditional instructor-centered classrooms where teachers are the medium of knowledge and leader of decisions are being shifted to student-centered classrooms where students are the center of learning (Ahmed, 2013; Brackenbury, 2012; Cubukcu, 2012; Faridi, Bahri, & Nurmasitah, 2016). Student-centered learning, also referred to as learner-centered, largely incorporates approaches of teaching that shift the instruction focus from how teachers teach to how students learn (Ahmed, 2013; Weimer, 2002, 2013). Student-centered classrooms embody principles where students take responsibility for their learning by being more interactive during the teaching and learning process (Faridi et al., 2016). Student-centered learning provides students more autonomy to decide what, how, and when to learn as well as an opportunity to construct their own learning experiences (Ahmed, 2013) creating more interest and engagement in their learning; thus, increasing student achievement (Doolen & Biddlecombe, 2014).

Learning environments in student-centered classrooms are unique from traditional classrooms and allow students to be actively engaged in their learning (Bishop, Caston, & King, 2014; Vogler & Carnes, 2014). Learner-centered instruction originated from the

pedagogy of constructivist learning theory (Burns, Pierson & Reddy, 2014). Student-centered classrooms support the tenets that actively involving secondary students with planning their education may increase academic achievement and chances of graduating (Cavendish, 2013). Learning environments entail many different aspects such as engagement, collaboration, instructional practices, curricular designs, and co-curricular activities that contribute to the academic success or failure of students. Instruction in student-centered learning environments embodies social and life skills instruction as well as academic skills instruction.

The work of Weimer (2013) emerged as central to the theory that teaching can be learner-centered. Weimer proposed the following characteristics of teaching that makes teaching learner-centered:

- Engaging students in the learning process
- Teaching students how to learn
- Encouraging student reflection
- Motivating students through shared power
- Encouraging collaboration

These teaching characteristics provide a definition of what Weimer (2013) considered to be learner-centered teaching as attributes central to the characteristics of learner-centered classrooms and keeping students engaged. Learner-centered environments are conducive for at-risk students by enabling increased student engagement and academic performance, the development of social and academic skills, and the development of independent

responsible learners (Bishop, Caston & King, 2014; Weimer, 2013). Bishop et al. (2014) reported several classroom benefits of open student-centered learning environments where an ideal learning environment would foster relationships between students and teachers and students and classmates. Utilizing learner-centered approaches to teaching and learning aids in the development of independent responsible learners and highlights the importance of creating learning opportunities that increase student achievement (Abdelmalak & Trespalacios, 2013). Learner-centered environments allow students the opportunity to decide (what they learn) course curriculum and (how they learn) instructional strategies (Abdelmalak & Trespalacios, 2013; Fernandes, Mesquita, Flores, & Lima, 2014; Virgin, 2014; Weimer, 2013). Allowing students to be involved in this decision-making process increases student engagement and academic performance prompting less students to drop out (Virgin, 2014).

Engagement. Keeping students engaged and actively involved in learning until they successfully complete school will require providing learning environments that engulf students in the learning process. Students who are disengaged from the learning process are less likely to be successful in school and ultimately drop out (Henry, Knight, & Thornberry, 2012; Klapproth & Schaltz, 2013; Renda & Villarres, 2015). Student engagement is a topic that has received attention in the educational arena within the past 3 decades (Carter, Reschly, Lovelace, Appleton, & Thompson, 2012). Renda and Villarres (2015) identified poor academic achievement and lack of student engagement as

risk factors contributing to school dropout. Klapproth and Schaltz (2013) further characterized students' lack of engagement as a predictor of school failure.

School engagement provides an early prediction of how class and school-level activities influence students to be attentive to their academics (Orthner, Jones-Sanpei, Akos, & Rose, 2013). Student engagement is often measured through academic achievement and specific student behaviors such as truancy, involvement in school programs or extracurricular activities, and disruptive behaviors (Rumberger & Roternund, 2012). Rumberger and Roternund (2012) noted that focused curriculum, parental involvement, and strong leadership are all elements comprising successful schools that promote student engagement. Henry, Knight, and Thornberry (2012) identified student engagement as a salient factor contributing to dropout decisions. A longitudinal study was conducted by Henry et al. (2012) where they identified the use of a disengagement warning index as a way to connect student disengagement to dropping out. Gaining an understanding of how early warning systems could possibly help prevent youths from consequences associated with school disengagement is essential to deterring dropouts.

The plethora of research on student engagement establishes relations between disengagement and various life outcomes contributing to the process of exiting school prior to graduation (Carter et al., 2012). Disengagement can be manifested through low academic achievement, absences, behaviors, and involvement. Disengagement resulting from poor achievement puts students on the path for dropping out (Zuilkowski et al.,

2016). Actively involving students with educational planning increases student engagement and the probability of those students graduating (Cavendish, 2013). Some schools have restructured learning environments and exploring other ways to increase student engagement (Wells, Gifford, Bai, & Corra, 2015; Wilkins & Bost, 2016). Restructuring classrooms is just one strategy schools are using to increase engagement.

Collaboration. Working collaboratively with others in the educational setting is a key aspect to success for students. Collaborative learning positively impacts students' academic achievement (Hatami, 2015; Kauble & Wise, 2015; Ingraham & Nuttall, 2016). Collaborative learning is one approach that leads to learner-centered instruction while working toward a common goal (Burns, Pierson, & Reddy, 2014; Doolen & Biddlecombe, 2014; Hatami, 2015). The shift towards collaborative learning, as with learner-centered classrooms, places students at the center of learning and requires teachers to shift their roles (Burns et al., 2014; Chen, 2015). Collaborative learning is an educational approach that places teachers as the facilitators of learning and can improve the learning process and learning outcomes (Astra, Wahyuni, & Nasbey, 2015; Faridi, Bahri, & Nurmasitah, 2016).

Collaboration involves everything that has to do with learning and is essential for students to become responsible for their own learning (Carpenter & Pease, 2013; Hatami, 2015). Collaboration is one of several characteristics of democratic learning environments that foster student independence, reciprocal teaching, problem solving, and infographic managing (Astra, Wahyuni, & Nasbey, 2015; Bagceci, 2013). Teachers can

promote collaborative learning in classrooms by carefully planning instruction, using materials that engage students, changing instructional and assessment techniques, and changing the teachers' role (Burns et al., 2014). A qualitative case study by Ingraham and Nuttall (2016) identified several methods of communication as mediums in which collaboration can occur. Collaboration can transform schools' culture while elevating student and teacher performance (Morgan, 2016). Carpenter and Pease (2013) indicated that students must acquire collaboration skills that enable them to continue learning on their own if their learning is to extend beyond the academic setting. Collaborative learning is an aspect of student-centered classrooms where students assume responsibility for their learning by learning to work with others (Burns et al., 2014). Collaboration is an essential tool in classrooms and schools.

Skills instruction. While teacher-centered instruction focuses mostly on preparing students to be academic successful, student-centered teaching covers skills instruction that are essential for the growth and development of the learner outside the academic realm. Due to curricular changes and American societal norms and demands on students to be successful in an ever-changing society, today's classrooms cover a myriad amount of skills to meet the needs of students (Griffith, Massey, & Atkinson, 2013). Findings of a mixed-methods study conducted by Zuilkowski et al. (2016) substantiated that school quality and instructional quality are key factors when addressing dropouts. Griffith et al. (2013) indicated that of the many decisions teachers are required to make each day, many of those decisions have to do with managing instruction in the classroom.

Research studies show that innovative teaching techniques result in improved learning and success of students (Doolen & Biddlecombe, 2014). Balanced instruction allows teachers to have more flexibility when making decisions about teaching (Griffith et al., 2013).

Instructional practices. Classroom instruction is a key factor in student-centered classrooms. Effective instruction is a key factor in meeting the academic needs of students (Adamson, & Lewis, 2017). Sangoleye and Kolawole (2016) identified instructional practices teachers use to aid students in becoming independent learners as instructional strategies. These instructional strategies could include role-playing and peer coaching, which have led to higher academic achievement and decreased school dropouts (Duckenfield & Reynolds, 2013). Faridi, Bahri, and Nurmasitah (2016) conducted a descriptive, qualitative study where they identified the change in the instructional strategy from teacher-centered to student-centered as a paradigm shift that is a major issue in the field of education. Students are more open to instructional practices that are learner-centered and allow them to be more engaged (Stefaniak & Tracey, 2015). Kauble and Wise (2015) conducted a mixed-methods study that included several models of instructional practices that have positive influences on student achievement, which included collaborative learning, project and inquiry based learning, and direct instruction. This type of instruction is secondary to instructional practices that engage students and build students' connections with school personnel (Duckenfield & Reynolds, 2013).

Zuilkowski et al. (2016) considered the quality of instruction as a key factor when addressing dropouts. Instructional approaches in student-centered classrooms promote student engagement by allowing group work and use of actual data and manipulatives instead of using textbooks (Faridi et al., 2016; Vogler & Carnes, 2014). Vogler and Carnes (2014) considered it to be more effective to utilize student-centered instructional strategies when teaching complex objectives. Vogler and Carnes (2014) viewed student-centered instruction as an opportunity for students to develop a connection between what they are learning and previous knowledge and experience, to develop critical thinking and higher-order skills. Weimer (2013) indicated that teachers in learner-centered classrooms prefer instructional strategies that promote a deeper understanding of concepts and learning that is not just memorized but actually lasts. Teachers should ensure the instructional approaches motivate students to be engaged in the learning process.

Curriculum designs. Many initiatives have been implemented to address curricular and schooling to ensure students are receiving the rigor and skills needed to be successful academically. Educators have focused on developing progressive school curriculums for decades (Kunkel, 2015). Schools curriculum, organization, and structures are possible contributing factors to students dropping out (McKee & Caldarella, 2016). Employer dissatisfaction with students who exit school has led to education being considered irrelevant, prompting a push for curricular changes (Dambudzo, 2015). Curriculum is identified as the content covered and the resources used to gather the

information used in classrooms for students' individual and social development (Griffith, Massey, & Atkinson, 2013; Manab, 2015). Previous research reflects a need for educators to identify and implement curricular strategies that improve student learning through encouragement and support and effectively communicating the content knowledge (Doolen & Biddlecombe, 2014; Pruekpramol & Sangpradit, 2016). According to Faridi et al. (2016), early curriculums that required students to rely on rote memorization lacked substance and is what Benken, Ramirez, Li, and Wetendorf (2015) considered a leading cause of students not being adequately prepared in schools.

Curriculum used by teachers is a crucial aspect influencing the implementation of student-centered learning and should be planned in a manner that lends to learner-centered teaching (Dambudzo, 2015; Faridi et al., 2016). Twenty-first century curriculum and instruction should serve as an avenue that prompts students to be responsible for their learning (Carpenter & Pease, 2013). Dambudzo (2015) further noted that teaching and learning appears more relevant when the curriculum is carefully planned. Griffith et al. (2013) research study identified that teaching decisions should not be influenced by the curriculum or standards but should be guided by needs of students. Curriculum is a notable component of the educational process and should reflect what students need to know to be successful beyond the academic setting.

Co-curricular activities. Several authors conducted studies in which they suggested positive connections between participation in extracurricular activities, academic achievement, and reduced dropouts, especially for urban youths (Abruzzo,

Lenis, Romero, Maser, & Morote, 2016; Fitzgerald et al., 2013; Mahoney, 2014; Yeung, 2015). Co-curricular activities, also referred to as extracurricular activities, play an important role in the educational process to support the success of learning (Kuhar & Sablijic, 2016; Kumar & Arockiasamy, 2012; Prianto, 2016). Prianto (2016) indicated that involvement in extracurricular activities, which extends beyond the realm of the normal school curriculum, allows students to engage in additional learning experiences that support student achievement. Kumar and Arockiasamy (2012) noted that having an imbalance between curricular and co-curricular activities does not permit the educational purpose to be realized.

Co-curricular activities, such as those that enhance and enrich the regular curriculum by providing students an opportunity to deepen their knowledge and develop various skills, are not developed through the regular curriculum (Kuhar & Sabljic, 2016; Kumar & Arockiasamy, 2012). Kuhar and Sabljic (2016) indicated that students' decisions to participate in extracurricular activities are voluntary which allows the student the opportunity of deciding to become actively involved with enhancing the educational process. Students who participate in activity programs develop character traits as self-discipline, self-confidence, and competition skills (Yeung, 2015). Kumar and Arockiasamy (2012) characterized co-curricular activities as being student-centered activities that are infused as part of the main curriculum in schools because of the many benefits resulting from being involved in such activities.

Involvement in extracurricular activities has varying impacts on the academic success and attitude of students (Prianto, 2016; Yeung, 2015). Students should be allowed time in school to be involved in extracurricular activities that increase student-centered learning and engagement (Cubukcu, 2012). Students engaged in extracurricular activities have higher levels of confidence, interpersonal skills, community awareness, and contributors to the workforce (Prianto, 2016). Extracurricular participation is a key factor for student development and increased academic achievement with participation becoming more important to students as they advance in school (Abruzzo, Lenis, Romero, Maser, & Morote, 2016).

Administrators' role. The role of school leaders has evolved over time to correspond with the needs of learners and school environments. Administrators serve a key leadership role in implementing practices and creating positive climates and effective schools that are necessary for academic achievement (Gunal & Demirtash, 2016). Hitt and Tucker (2016) indicated that school leader roles have changed from that of instructional leadership to shared instructional leadership to transformational leadership. The role of transformational leaders reflects how principals are expected to be change agents through collaborative efforts and motivation with regards to curriculum, instruction, and assessment (Hitt & Tucker, 2016).

School leaders are challenged with the move to more rigorous standards while ensuring teachers have the skills to adapt instructional strategies to increase student achievement (Kauble & Wise, 2015). Findings of a study conducted by Cavendish (2013)

reflect that school teachers, counselors, and administrators must serve in proactive roles of supporting students to complete high school. Rutledge, Cohen-Vogel, Osborne-Lampkin, and Roberts (2015) conducted a study that identified that high performing schools had leaders who followed learner-centered practices, verbalized their levels of expectations for students and implemented systemic efforts to personalize the students' learning experience. Caring adults having active roles in the lives of adolescents is possibly the most critical factor in helping students achieve academic success and ultimately graduating from high school (Ehrenreich, Reeves, Corley, & Orpinas, 2012).

According to Gunal and Demirtash (2016), school principals are responsible for ensuring teaching methods and strategies incorporated in classrooms lend to effective teaching and increased learning. They are responsible for developing, maintaining, and enriching safe and regular school environments that create feelings of value and motivate students; thereby, increasing academic achievement (Gunal & Demirtash, 2016). School administrators are also responsible for ensuring teachers know their students and are aware of how learning occurs best (Gunal & Demirtash, 2016). School leaders are the head of their instructional teams.

Teachers' role. Pruekpramool and Sangpradit (2016) indicated that teachers are essential to accomplishing the goal of teaching and learning. Knesting-Lund, Reese, and Boody (2013) theorized that not involving teachers can be problematic. Okland (2012) conducted a one-shot case study and reported that teachers are integral to the learning outcome of students. Iachini, Buettner, Anderson-Butcher, and Reno (2013) indicated

that teachers are generally the first adult to recognize students who are struggling or failing academically. Teachers' roles are to serve as the sole source of knowledge guiding the learning process while providing students the opportunity to acquire the knowledge through teacher-created activities (Abdelmalak & Trespalacios, 2013; Altun & Toy, 2015; Faridi, Bahri, & Nurmasitah, 2016; Okland, 2012). Teachers should understand the importance of having students actively involved in learning while allowing students the opportunity to learn on their own (Astra, Wahyuni, & Nasbey, 2015; Cubukcu, 2012).

Teachers are capable of improving student achievement and learning by working with students to change the learning environment (Okland, 2012). In order to do so, teachers much implement curriculum incorporating learner-centered learning and instructional strategies when planning (Dambudzo, 2015). Results of a study conducted by Cubukcu (2012) suggested that teachers should be afforded professional development (PD) that allow them to learn about student-centered learning. Weimer (2013) noted that teacher observations reveal that teachers continue to use lecture-focused strategies although teachers are aware of learner-centered teaching methods. Significant factors that teachers attributed to students dropping out of high school included absenteeism, behavioral problems at school, low academic achievement, and limited parental support (Knesting-Lund, Reese, & Boody, 2013). Although Knesting-Lund et al. (2013) used a small sample of about 96 teachers from a Midwestern school district, the results of their study increased the understanding of teachers' roles in dropout prevention.

Counselors' role. School guidance counselors play a critical role in providing academic support to students (Rutledge, Cohen-Vogel, Osborne-Lampkin, & Roberts, 2015). It is imperative that students who are not performing well academically are identified before disengagement, and school counselors are in a major position to identify these students (Blount, 2012). School counselors can contribute to increasing student achievement and eliminating dropouts by helping students become engaged in the learning process (Renda & Villarres, 2016). Renda and Villarres (2016) used a sample of 197 ninth grade students who scored below grade-level proficiency on a state standardized reading test to evaluate the impact of a classroom program that was delivered by certified school counselors. Results of the study conducted by Renda and Villarres (2016) reflected how the implementation of evidence-based curriculums can allow counselors to make an influence on student achievement. Dockery (2012) noted that counselor's curriculum should include activities geared toward increasing student achievement and dropout prevention.

Blount (2012) noted that counselors are also responsible for students' personal and social well-being that Dockery indicated are factors associated with dropping out. Students' freshman year in high school demonstrates a decline in academic achievement and can be the most challenging, yet the most opportune time for counselors to identify warning signs and provide interventions and strategies that may prohibit students from dropping out (Blount, 2012; Carr & Galassi, 2012; Dockery, 2012; Renda & Villarres, 2016). Counselors must consistently monitor students' academic progress for early

identification of those at-risk in order to provide strategies that would prevent students from dropping out (Blount, 2012). They must identify dropout risk factors to employ appropriate strategies to limit the number of dropouts (Blount, 2012).

Changes within the education system have resulted in role-changes for school counselors (Dockery, 2012). Counselors can work with students to help students connect to the learning environment while being the voice of reason and advocating for students (Crawford & Valle, 2016). Carr and Galassi (2012) identified counselors' roles as being advocates for students as utmost importance in urban schools due to the dropout rates and achievement gaps being prominent in urban districts. Middle and high school counselors believe they have a primary role in contributing to the prevention of dropouts with advocacy and collaboration being two of the primary roles identified (Carr & Galassi, 2012). Although counselors have a high regard for students completing school, they feel that many of the factors contributing to students doing so is beyond their control (Carr & Galassi, 2012). School counselors can contribute to reducing the dropout rate by helping develop intervention programs that address factors contributing to dropping out (Balkis, Arslan & Duru, 2016). Counselors have an essential role in students' academics and can assist students with developing strong school-student partnerships (Crawford & Valle, 2016). Counselors bridge the connections between students and the classroom.

Students' role. Central to the focus of the learning process are the students who are part of the learning. Faridi, Bahri, and Nurmasitah (2016) identified students as passive recipients of information who become the main actor in the teaching and learning

process. Students have a crucial role in determining their academic success and should be responsible for their own learning (Carpenter & Pease, 2013). Students must realize the importance of their focus on education and the consequences of being engaged in school (Orthner, Jones-Sanpei, Akos, & Rose, 2013). Allowing students to be actively engaged and in control of their academic achievement and learning outcome is synonymous with student (learner)-centered teaching and active learning. Actively involving students in their learning helps them to construct knowledge (Cubukcu, 2012). Zuilkowski et al. (2016) conducted a mixed-methods study, where they suggested that if students make decisions to learn, they would not end up as dropouts. A function of the education system should entail teaching students' critical thinking skills, self-dependency, self-efficient, and self-regulation (Hatami, 2015).

Blount (2012) indicated that students are generally not aware of consequences of disengaging from school ultimately leading to dropping out. Poor academic achievement results in disengagement from the schooling process and leads students to activities that put them on the path to dropping out (Zuilkowski et al., 2016). Students do not quietly disengage from the learning process and immediately drop out but rather reveal signals early on such as low test scores, poor grades, behavior issues, truancy, and other indicators (Carr & Calassi, 2012). Students who are engaged in academics regularly attain academic success and graduate generally attend school, have low absences, complete classwork and homework, and participate in extracurricular activities (Wilkins & Bost, 2016). Students with lower absences from school are generally more engaged

and have higher academic achievement than frequently absent students (Balkis, Arslan, & Duru, 2016).

School engagement is a key indicator of students' academic success and depends on the amount of attention students commit to academics (Orthner, Jones-Sanpei, Akos, & Rose, 2013). Students who are disconnected from the class setting are identified as at-risk and tend to be less successful in school and identified as potential dropouts (Klapproth & Schaltz, 2013; Zuilkowski et al., 2016). Students who lack a sense of belonging and connectedness to the academic setting often connect through involvement in after-school activities and programs (Mahoney, 2014). The need for at-risk students to connect with the academic setting necessitate encouragement for at-risk students to participate in extracurricular activities (Wilkins & Bost, 2016). Allowing students more opportunities to respond in class settings and be involved in extracurricular activities increases engagement and academic achievement of students (Adamson & Lewis, 2017; Wilkins & Bost, 2016).

Implications

This study has implications for academic and social change. Creating student-centered learning environments can impact instructional strategies, curriculum decisions, and extracurricular offerings. Social change relative to teacher-student relationships impacts teachers' and students' roles in classrooms and attributes to more students graduating high school. Findings could impact the culture and environment of the district and its schools.

The development of a comprehensive professional development plan may assist with making changes for CSD. The plan may enable the district to benefit from knowledge about how CICC factors can impede or facilitate academic achievement. Understanding how student achievement is influenced by CICC factors can aid in making necessary changes to increase student achievement and reduce the number of students exiting school without a standard diploma. Exploring dropout factors that are both internal and external to the control of education leaders further allows the development and implementation of preventive measures to address those at risk. Providing principals, teachers, and counselors with an increased understanding of how CICC activities influence student achievement could create positive effects for students, the district, and the community. Providing this information could also result in an increased number of students graduating with a high school diploma and end the catastrophe of dropouts in United States high schools (Genao, 2015).

Students graduating with a diploma are more likely to have the skills to be successful in college or the workforce (Adeleke & Ogunkola, 2013). Students receiving diplomas could also improve the economy— more students would be working and fewer students would be receiving public assistance or in the criminal justice system. Increasing student achievement leads to an upturn in the number of students graduating which decreases the social, cultural, economic, and political imbalances of society (Farooq, 2013; Kim & Joo, 2013). Interviewing decision-makers of CICC aspects may provide insight into practices leading to improved student achievement and reduced dropouts.

Summary

The education system is comprised of many aspects that are essential to students' learning and development: They include instructional strategies, curricular approaches, co-curricular activities, and learning approaches. There are factors that contribute to the success of students completing school and factors that prohibit students from achieving academic success. CSD is faced with students dropping out of school and a subsequent need to identify CICC factors that may be influencing student engagement, student achievement, and students' decision to leave school early. This study investigated CICC practices that have an influence on student engagement and achievement and on the number of students dropping out. The study also attempted to identify if current practices entailed student-centered approaches to teaching and learning.

The review of literature focused on factors that attribute academic achievement and dropouts to CICC constructs (Doolen & Biddlecombe, 2014; Pruekpramol & Sangpradit, 2016). The literature review indicated that adequately engaging students in the academic process improves academic achievement and is important in getting students to stay in school (Lamote, Speybroeck, Noortgate, & Van Damme, 2013). Being able to engage students entails having sound instructional practices, curriculums designed to meet students' needs, and co-curricular activities that support academics (Yeung, 2015). Abdelmalak and Trespalacios (2013) suggested involving students in helping to design the curriculum to engage them and empower them to be independent learners. Low levels of student engagement in learning environments influence participation in

curricular and co-curricular activities and may result in increased truancy which in turn, results in lower academic achievement (Lamote et al., 2013; Mahoney, 2014).

Section 2 describes the research design and approach and the justification for choosing the design. Section 2 also describes the population and sample size and clarifies how participants were selected. An explanation of how the data were collected and analyzed is also given.

Section 2: The Methodology

Introduction

In section 2, I describe the methodology of this qualitative, descriptive case study. A qualitative design was selected to identify CICC factors that could be perceived as influencing students' disengagement and ultimate decision to drop out of high school in the CSD. I gathered data for this descriptive case study from a screening questionnaire, and by conducting interviews, making observations, and reviewing documents. The following research questions were the basis for developing interview questions for the principals, teachers, and counselors:

1. How do high school principals, teachers, and counselors in CSD identify and monitor at-risk students who are in danger of dropping out due to poor academic achievement?
2. What are high school principals, teachers, and counselors' perceptions of the effectiveness of the curricular, instructional, and/or co-curricular mediations/supports currently implemented or planned in CSD to address at-risk students' needs?
3. What do high school principals, teachers, and counselors perceive could be improved in CSD curriculum and instruction to further engage and encourage students to stay in school?

4. What co-curricular innovations do high school principals, teachers, and counselors perceive are needed in CSD to encourage students to stay in school?

A qualitative approach (Creswell, 2012; Yin, 2014) was appropriate to capture participants' perspectives about the perceived, potential influences of CICC factors on student engagement and the decision to drop out of school. I then reviewed public documents pertaining to instructional and curricular practices, identifying and assisting at-risk students, and dropout prevention efforts. Those selected as key informants were asked to participate in semi-structured interviews. Interview questions were open-ended and probing; they were used to gather in-depth experiences (Yin, 2014). I conducted observations of selected participants in their natural settings (Creswell, 2012, Yin, 2014). Data were analyzed and reported following a qualitative process (Creswell, 2012).

In this methodology section, I also detail why a qualitative case study was the appropriate research and design approach for this study. I describe how participants were selected using purposeful sampling and were selected to submit a screening questionnaire for selection to participate in one-on-one interviews. I explain how the relationship between the researcher and the participants was established and provide context as to how access was gained to the site and participants. Measures that were used to ensure participants are protected from harm are discussed. Instruments used for data collection are described as well as how data deriving from those instruments were analyzed to yield findings about how CICC factors influence student engagement and dropouts.

Qualitative Research Design and Approach

I used a qualitative research design to answer the research questions. A qualitative design is considered appropriate for this study because it provides an opportunity to explore perspectives of principals, teachers, and counselors regarding CICC factors perceived to be potentially influencing student achievement and dropouts (Creswell, 2012; Yin, 2014). This design allowed participant perspectives to be captured to create rich descriptions of data or thick descriptions to probe deeply into the problem (Creswell, 2012; Yin, 2014). Qualitative research practices substantiated data collected from the review to understand perspectives of participants and experiences of the problem (Creswell, 2012). In addition, a review of documents and observations served as sources used to corroborate findings. The research questions provided a foundation for this study, using a qualitative approach, which allowed for the exploration of the phenomenon with a focus on what and how questions (Khan, 2014b).

There are several qualitative research approaches including grounded theory, case study, ethnography, narrative, and phenomenology (Creswell, 2012). Each of these approaches is used in a different manner to draw data pertaining to a study and may overlap in data collection. After I carefully reviewed each approach, case study was considered more appropriate to address the research problem and questions for this study (Yin, 2014). A case study provides an opportunity to interact with participants in close proximity while capturing their perspectives to gain an understanding of factors influencing academic success (Yin, 2014). A qualitative case study allows you to

understand the complexity of a real-life phenomenon while gaining an understanding of other factors that are central to the phenomenon (Yin, 2014).

I concluded that a qualitative, descriptive case study was the appropriate design to capture perspectives of principals, teachers, and counselors on CICC factors influencing academic achievement and dropouts. Yin (2014) used three salient points to differentiate quantitative and qualitative research which validate why a qualitative design is best for this study. First, a qualitative study allowed me to explore the problem to gain a deep understanding of the problem which enabled thick, rich narrative data to be generated. Second, using a qualitative design allowed me to objectively view perceptions of the principals, teachers, and counselors. Third, a qualitative design enabled perceptions and responses to be analyzed until meaning emerged allowing knowledge about the problem to derive from the data. Finally, being able to triangulate across multiple data sources was advantageous when conducting the case study. A quantitative design was not the correct approach because it would not allow an explanation and clarification of the meanings related to different aspects of students' experiences relative to academic achievement and teaching and learning (Sanjari, Bahramnezhad, Fomani, Shoghi, & Cheraghi, 2014). A quantitative approach would not provide the opportunity to capture in-depth perspectives of principals, teachers, and counselors or to engage with the participants in their natural settings (Creswell, 2012).

Quantitative and mixed-methods designs can be used to examine issues; however, qualitative research provides detailed accounts of participants' behaviors and feelings and

in-depth accounts of human experiences (Khan, 2014a). The research questions must generate more than numerical data in order to gain an understanding (Merriam, 2009) of how principals, teachers, and counselors interpret their experiences relating to CICC approaches. Identifying how much or how many factors would not help gain an understanding of the research problem as would being able to identify how and why these factors have an influence (Yin, 2014).

Grounded theory would not suffice for this study because it entails the use of data to build a theory which is not the aim of this study (Khan, 2014b). This research was guided by the research questions and problem and not through an expected emerging theory. Ethnography focuses on describing and interpreting a cultural group within the district or schools and not a sample of the population (Khan, 2014b). Using this approach would provide data on factors influencing a specific group but not a representation of factors influencing all students. A narrative approach is similar to case study; however, narrative research entails the chronological sequencing of events to explore the life of an individual which does not necessary occur in case studies (Khan, 2014b). Phenomenology research is conducted over a long period to allow patterns and relationships of meaning to develop to understand the essence of an experience, but this study was limited in time with the identification of themes being the objective of the study (Khan, 2014b).

This research design used a descriptive case study of an urban school district where the dropout rate of high school students exceeds the state and national dropout

rates. Descriptive case study has the characteristics of the appropriate approach to develop an in-depth description and analysis of a case or cases (Yin, 2013). A descriptive case study, as defined by Merriam (2009), is ensued when seeking description and explanation. Yin (2014) added that the methodology of case study research is an empirical inquiry that allows phenomenon to be investigated within its natural setting especially when there are no clear boundaries of the phenomenon. The descriptive qualitative case study was suited for this research because it allowed for descriptions and explanations of perceived potential influences of instructional, curricular, and co-curricular factors on student achievement and dropouts. Similar qualitative case studies can be found throughout the field of education (Merriam, 2009).

The interviews, observations, and documents were the tools I used for collecting data for this case study. Key to capturing this data were the individuals who serve in roles that allow them to understand at-risk students, student disengagement, and student dropouts. This case study allowed me to select a group of principals, teachers, and counselors to be purposefully sampled to capture individual perspectives regarding the phenomena. Selection of those individuals and their involvement in this study, along with details of the data collection tools, is elaborated in the remainder of this section.

Participants

Participants of the study included two principals, five teachers, and two counselors from five of seven high schools in the district. I used purposeful sampling to select participants (Creswell, 2012; Yin, 2014). The selected educators serve in key roles

that would allow them to understand if and how student achievement and dropouts are influenced by CICC factors. Creswell (2012) indicated that this type of sampling process allows participants to be purposefully selected to gain a better understanding of what is being researched or studied. The principals, teachers, and counselors were also conveniently located in the district (Creswell, 2012). Sampling is a process that allowed information to be gathered about the experiences of all principals, teachers, and counselors in the district from those who are selected as participants (Khan, 2014b). Purposeful sampling allowed key informants or individuals who have specific knowledge regarding the CICC aspects of the district to be selected for participation in this study (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010). Criteria used to select participants included the following:

- A member of the districts' Dropout Prevention Team
- A member of the Curriculum Team
- Employed in the district for the past five years or more
- Served in the capacity of a principal, teacher, or counselor of one of the high schools within the past two years
- Identified as being a key informant based on responses to questionnaire questions and potential to inform theory development

Purposeful sampling provided a sample to deeply investigate, discover, and understand how low academic achievement, disengagement, and dropouts are influenced by instructional, curricular, and co-curricular factors (Merriam, 2009). Participants were

selected and interviewed until data saturation was reached. Data saturation was reached when no new information was provided from participants or the themes became overly redundant (Creswell, 2012; Khan, 2014a). The teams represented are comprised of either administrators, principals, teachers, curriculum specialists, counselors, and other staff from across the district. The composition of each team varies with no set number or representation from each group. The Dropout Prevention Team reflects representation from all schools and district-level staff across the district with no set number representing a school or group. The Literacy Team was comprised of district and school-level staff who provided instructional support for at-risk students in the district. The curriculum team includes lead teachers representing specific contents at the elementary, middle, and high school levels in addition to a curriculum director.

The sample size of 10 was based on the study being a qualitative study and not quantitative (Khan, 2014b). Creswell (2012) stated that using a sample of 10 could be a reasonable size as qualitative research is more about quality than quantity. I purposefully selected a target of 10 participants to participate in the study. Participants are from the second largest and only urban school district in Mississippi and represent five of the districts' seven high schools.

Procedures for Gaining Access to Participants

I worked with a gatekeeper to gain access to participants in the district. Gatekeepers are individuals at sites who provide permission to use the site for study (Brink & Benschop, 2014; Creswell, 2012). Gatekeepers may also identify prospective

participants who could serve as key informants (Brink & Benschop, 2014). The Director of Accountability and Research in CSD served as the initial point of contact for obtaining entry to the district. Following contact with the Accountability and Research Director, I was provided a letter detailing the specifics for gaining entry and the requirements for being able to conduct research in the district.

After permission was granted from Walden's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to begin data collection, I obtained the school district's form from the district and provided to the Chief of Staff in the district's Office of Accountability and Research. In addition to the submission of the district form, I provided full disclosure of the purpose of the study. Upon receiving approval from the Chief of Staff to conduct the study within the district, I contacted the district's gatekeeper and requested the names of the individuals serving on the district Dropout Prevention, Literacy Planning, and Curriculum Teams. The gatekeeper granted approval to contact anyone in the district I deemed appropriate to provide the requested data.

I obtained a copy of the district directory from the district website. A review of the directory allowed me to identify the individuals who provide oversight of the districts' dropout prevention team and curriculum teams. Through further contact with district personnel, it was resolved that the districts' literacy team, which was a group of literacy coaches no longer existed, however, those roles were embedded in the roles of the curriculum specialists. The individual who provided oversight of the dropout prevention team granted approval to contact the building-level principals to identify

individuals who serve on the dropout prevention team, which was now a team at the school-level and no longer a district-level team. Due to the absence of the individual who provides oversight of the curriculum team, during the research period, guidance was provided to also identify the curriculum/instructional specialist through the building-level principals.

District staff declined to provide school email addresses of the principals due to confidentiality. The school's directory was accessed from the website and used to obtain the principals' email addresses. I made initial contact with each principal via email. I then sent each principal an email detailing the purpose of the communication and request to enter their building. The email further included a request to obtain the email addresses of those individuals in their buildings who serve on the school's dropout prevention team and the subject area teachers. Of the seven principals who were sent the e-mail, only one responded initially. A follow-up e-mail was sent to the remaining principals, which resulted in no response. Attempts were then made to contact the remaining six principals via phone. With no responses to the initial phone attempts, another attempt and then other phone attempts were made to contact each principal via phone. After the many phone attempts yielded no response, unscheduled visits were made to each school. The face-to-face visits resulted in contact with five of the six remaining principals. One principal never responded to the e-mails, calls, or school visit. During one visit, the principal declined to participate in the study and did not allow any of the staff at that school to

participate. Data collection ensued using screening questionnaires, document reviews, interviews, and classroom observations.

Screening participants. Efforts were made to provide all individuals serving on the Dropout Prevention and Curriculum Teams a two-part screening questionnaire either in person or via e-mail. I provided the individuals the questionnaire in isolation of the Chief of Staff. Information from the questionnaire was only used for screening to purposefully identify potential participants. No information from the questionnaire was used as data to generate the study findings. I evaluated the returned questionnaire to ensure individuals met the criteria established for participation.

Individuals who did not meet the criteria as key informants were eliminated as a potential participant. Those meeting the criteria questionnaires were sorted into three categories based on their roles as principals, teachers, and counselors. I purposefully selected a minimum of 10 individuals to participate in the descriptive case study, based on the criteria established for participation and to ensure as much representation of the seven high schools in the district. Using their school e-mails, as each participant identified on the questionnaire, I contacted and notified participants of selection to participate in the study and sent an informed consent form as an e-mail attachment. Participants' selection was kept strictly confidential and not disclosed to anyone.

Establishing a Researcher-Participant Relationship

Being a former limited service teacher nearly 19 years ago and parent of children previously attending the district established a past affiliation for me with the district.

However, many of the individuals I was in contact with while serving as a limited service teacher, and during my children's enrollment, have left the district and may not serve as potential participants. It will be necessary for me to establish a positive rapport with individuals I must interact with during the study. To help establish a positive researcher-participant relationship I started each interview by formally introducing myself and explaining the purpose of the research. The Informed Consent Form was also discussed with each participant following introductions. Participants' willingness to participate in the study was acknowledged and they were informed of the opportunity to review a summary of the findings using the member check form in Appendix F. A casual conversation ensued by asking participants to discuss what they consider an at-risk student and their knowledge of dropouts in the district. Participants were informed that their selection was based on their responses to the screening questionnaires and their roles and potential ability to contribute to the study findings. Interviews ended by thanking participants for agreeing to take part in the research and reminding them of their rights to withdraw at any time.

Direct contact with participants during the interview process served as an opportunity for me to further establish feelings of trust and mutual respect. Sanjari, Bahramnezhad, Fomani, Shoghi, and Cheraghi (2014) indicated that researchers should consider the impact on participants and the researcher due to it being possibly unavoidable for participants and researchers to establish some sort of personal relationship. Participants' willingness to share trustworthy knowledge regarding a

phenomenon is critical to a study which requires the researcher to be highly dependent on being able to entice participants to share this information (Raheim et al., 2016). I ensured that an authoritative atmosphere was not created; whereby, my role as the researcher or the participants' roles were of greater importance than the other (Raheim et al., 2016). I created the atmosphere by using my attitude, demeanor, openness, and disposition to set the tone to create a feeling of closeness with the participants.

Protection of Participants' Rights

Being transparent with research participants is a key task for researchers. Obtaining informed consent from participants is one ethical concern for protecting participants that must be considered when conducting qualitative research and occurred at the onset of participants committing to participate in the study (Merriam, 2009; Sanjari, Bahramnezhad, Fomani, Shoghi, & Cheraghi, 2014). Informed consent involves clarifying for participants the nature of the study, participants' roles, research objective, and use of results (Sanjari, et al., 2014). I contacted individuals who were selected for interviews via e-mail. Using their school e-mail addresses, I e-mailed each potential participant the consent form, along with the screening questionnaire to complete and return to me before participants could engage in interviews. The questionnaire provided an opportunity for participants to indicate if further communication should be through their school e-mail address or personal e-mail address. In the e-mail, I asked participants to return the completed questionnaire and informed consent form to me using my personal e-mail address within three to five days of receipt. I also provided a copy of the

informed consent form to participants at the onset of the interview for discussion of the research purpose. Participants were informed of their rights, including the right to withdraw from the study at any time without obligations or penalty (Creswell, 2012; Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010). I protected participant rights by clarifying the purpose of the study and discussing procedures and potential benefits and risks involved with participating in the study (Lodico, et al., 2010).

Maintaining privacy and confidentiality was an essential aspect for me to conduct this study. Privacy and confidentiality are two other ethical concerns that must be considered when conducting qualitative research (Sanjari, Bahramnezhad, Fomani, Shoghi, & Cheraghi (2014). Maintaining privacy started with developing questionnaire questions that prohibited the solicitation of private information that does not support the research questions. Confidential questionnaires limited the amount of demographic information that could reveal the identity of participants (Lodici, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2006). Teachers not wishing to volunteer for interviewing provided no identifying information and were confidential. Those wishing to volunteer provided contact information on the questionnaire, but I kept their identity, and assigned a pseudonym to prevent their identity from being disclosed.

I conducted collection of questionnaires in a manner that ensured participants remained nameless. I assigned actual names of participants, schools, and the district unique codes or pseudonyms in order to maintain confidentiality. No other identifying information about participants such as exact titles and school sites are disclosed.

Interviews took place in a mutually agreed upon location at the sites. I kept participant responses to interview questions confidential to help protect the participants' identity. All information pertaining to the study that would identify participants or schools were kept on a password protected desktop computer and file protected hard drive. Comments which might disclose location or identity of participants are written in my voice and terminology to avoid identification of participants.

Data Collection

Data for this study derived from multiple sources including: document reviews, participant interviews, and participant observations. Using multiple data sources added to the credibility of research (Yin, 2013). Data collection did not begin until after approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB; Approval No. 12-28-17-0364563) and permission from the district's Chief of Staff over Research and Accountability. A qualitative data collection procedure ensued using a screening questionnaire, document reviews, interviews, and participant observations (Merriam, 2009). Multiple sources of data are suggested to permit specifics of the case to emerge (Creswell, 2012, Yin 2013). Sanjari, Bahramnezhad, Fomani, Shoghi, and Cheraghi (2014) indicated that identifying the data that will be collected and how this data will be used in advance of conducting a study is a key factor for researchers conducting qualitative studies. I collected data using a sequential data collection approach, which Sanjari et al. (2014) noted should be clearly defined.

Documents

Data collection consisted of gathering published documents pertaining to teaching and learning practices in the district such as: CICC policies and procedures, school improvement plans, dropout prevention plans, executive summaries, annual reports with statistical data, prevention and intervention efforts, and other documents relative to academic achievement of students. I analyzed the district's dropout prevention plan and other documents to gather information pertaining to how student academic achievement is addressed and mechanisms for deterring dropouts. I also collected state-level documents such as the State's Dropout Prevention Plan, Curriculum Frameworks, and state standards impacting instruction and curriculum in the district.

Questionnaire

I used a screening questionnaire to capture participants' relevant demographic information and assist with screening and selected participants. Since no questionnaire existed to gather the information specific to this district, I developed a questionnaire. The questionnaire was used to collect demographic data to aid in selecting participants who met the established criteria (Mphale, 2014). The questionnaire was reviewed by five educators who serve in the Curriculum and Instruction department at the Mississippi Community College Board (MCCB) to review the questionnaire for content and face validity. The MCCB staff was apprised of study participants criteria and purpose of the study to aid in their review of the questionnaire. I disseminated the questionnaires to staff serving on the districts' Dropout Prevention and Curriculum Teams. Those serving in the

capacity of a principal, teacher, or counselor who met the criteria above were invited to participate in interviews.

Interviews

Another data collection method consisted of semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with selected principals, teachers, and counselors. Interviews served as the main source of data in answering the research questions while capturing participant perspectives regarding CICC factors influencing student achievement and dropouts (Creswell, 2012; Yin, 2014). Yin (2014) noted that interviews could serve as an ideal source of case studies where open-ended conversations occur with key informants. I developed interview protocols (Appendices B, C, and D) that were used for each group of participants to aid in answering the research questions.

Using the framework, information from the literature review, and the study's focus aided in the development of the interview protocols. I developed the interview protocols to capture enough information to gain an understanding of the research problem. The interview protocols also assisted with staying focused on the research problem while gathering information from the participants. To ensure consistent data were collected from each group, the topics were the same for all participants. Creswell (2012) noted that interviews will allow a researcher to probe deeper for answers.

I scheduled 30-40 minutes interviews away from the school building, if possible. All interviews took place inside the school buildings either in classrooms, offices, or conference rooms at the preference of the participants. I asked each participant to

participate in one face-to-face interview with an e-mail follow-up to clarify the interpretation of their feedback. The interviews were recorded using a mini-digital recorder to allow the researcher to focus on the conversation without trying to capture succinct notes during the interview. As the researcher, I transcribed the notes following each interview. Participants were to be contacted via e-mail if clarification was required or additional information was needed. Interview recordings were recorded on transcription tape as a backup to the digital recorder. The tapes and digital recorder are locked in a cabinet at my home along with notes and other documents used for the study.

Observations

I conducted observations of selected teachers in their classrooms to observe participants' behavior in their physical setting (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). An observation instrument (Appendix E) developed using guidelines by Lodico, Spaulding, and Voegtle (2010) was used to record information regarding the observation and to make notes on what was observed. The instrument entailed specifics about the observation such as date, time, location, length of observation, and pseudonym of participant. Descriptive notes entailed what was happening in the setting. Reflective notes include my personal thoughts and feelings of broad ideas and themes that were observed with attention to avoiding interjecting personal biases (Creswell, 2012; Yin, 2014). Participant observations can help answer research questions that are descriptive by allowing nonverbal expressions of the participants, processes, and culture to be captured during interviews (Merriam, 2009).

I also observed teachers' in their classrooms to discern whether instruction was student-centered or teacher-centered to capture data to verify and support data collected during interviews. I produced an observation protocol shown in Appendix E and used the protocol to document and collect data from the case-study participants as well as the engagement of learners. A minimum of three observations lasting no longer than 20-30 minutes were conducted to avoid being intrusive. During interviews, participants were asked if they would be willing to participate in observations. Of those agreeing, three teachers were purposefully selected for observations. Classroom observations were used to capture evidence of how students are influenced through curricular implementation, instructional strategies, and co-curricular activities. I took field notes during the observations to describe the physical settings, student interactions with adults, climate, and other study-related activities. The observational protocol was vetted through peers to ensure the effectiveness of the data being captured. Throughout the study, I kept a research journal that contains field notes from participant observations, interview details that could not have been captured on the digital recorder, feedback from my research committee, and ideas that arose as I was not directly working on the study.

Sufficiency of Data Collection

Participants were selected to share perspectives that were used to answer the research questions. I considered data collection sufficient when data saturation was reached. To answer the research questions, I collected data through interviews and analyzed repeatedly until no new data emerged or data saturation was reached (Khan,

2014a; Khan, 2014b; Yin, 2014). I then used probing questions to elicit relevant data regarding the phenomena. Leko (2014) validated that it can be effective and economical to conduct interviews and observations with only a few key informants and possibly unachievable with large samples. Utilizing a few participants allowed for more depth in valuable information versus capturing a wide range of information that doesn't support the research questions or address the problem (Leko, 2014). I selected a sample of 10 participants. As the number of participants increase, the probability of providing an in-depth analysis diminishes (Creswell, 2012). I gathered information from participants until the information became repetitive and no new information emerged that contributed to answering the research questions (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). Using this process helped ensure all essential data were gathered.

System for Tracking Data

I audio-recorded the interviews to ensure that the actual comments of participants were captured and to give the participants full attention during the interviews. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym that was used as data were collected (Creswell, 2012). Immediately following each interview, I used a journal to document key points and other behaviors observed during the interview. I immediately transcribed notes from the interviews using Word.

Role of the Researcher

I explained to the participants that my role would be strictly as a researcher and the data collected would be for the purposes of my study. According to Leko (2014),

when researchers clarify their roles and viewpoints regarding their study, this clarification adds credibility to the study. In my current role as the Assistant Director of Assessment for the Mississippi Community College Board, I have no interaction with or oversight of anyone in the local school district. My former role as Logistics and Operations Officer for the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) required no oversight of any staff in the district nor required me to have direct involvement with the school district. Prior to serving as the Logistics Officer for MDE, I served as the Director of Testing. Serving as the Director of testing required some interaction with the local school district as with all other 142 school districts throughout Mississippi. As the Director of Testing, I had no supervisory oversight of school personnel. My responsibilities in that role mainly required me to work with the district test coordinator of each school district as a state liaison but in no supervisory capacity. The district test coordinator of the local school district has served in that capacity since before my serving as the Director of Testing and currently serves in that capacity. He does not meet the criteria for serving as a participant in this study.

I have been working with statewide assessments for nearly 13 years with over 25 years of experience in educational settings. Having served as an instructor, school counselor, student activities chair, curriculum committee member, tutoring program director, certified parent leader, and in many other educational roles, I have gained valuable knowledge of practices related to teaching and learning, student engagement, and dropouts. My role as a researcher was clearly detached from my professional role as I

created a balance between the two. It was my intent to develop a working relationship with the study participants in order to judiciously carry out the study. As a researcher, I conducted myself in a professional demeanor respecting the sensitivity, time, and ethics of the participants. I focused on the study while putting aside personal biases and opinions. I ensured participants that my role was to collect data for my doctoral studies without creating harm for them. My role in the district was that of a limited-service teacher more than 20 years ago with no supervisory capacity and my current position at the community college board requires me to have no contact with the district nor serve in a supervisory capacity.

Data Analysis

I used a qualitative approach to collect, transcribe, and analyze data to address the identified problem and research questions. I analyzed data from document reviews, interviews, and observations to discover findings. Qualitative data analysis is a process that allows collected data to be organized in a manner that brings meaning to the data (Creswell, 2012). The analysis process followed an inductive reasoning method (Yin, 2014) to generate, gather, and record data. This inductive reasoning process entailed organizing, transcribing, analyzing, and interpreting the data to discover meanings (Yin, 2014). Stake (1995) classified data analysis as a process of separating something and then assigning meaning to the individual parts. I used a sequential method to analyze and code data immediately following the collection of the screening questionnaires. Data on the screening questionnaires were recorded in an Excel spreadsheet to review and identify

those who met the established criteria with yellow representing those eligible and red representing those who were ineligible for participation. I assigned each potential participant a pseudonym and sorted by the school of employment. For example, the teachers were identified as Teacher 1, Teacher 2, Teacher 3, and Teacher 4.

I used Microsoft Word to initially transcribe interview transcripts and classroom observations. I then reviewed the transcribed data against the recordings and original notes to confirm accuracy of transcription. Once I completed reading the data and clarifying accuracy of transcribed notes, I copied the interview data into Excel with the responses for each interview question copied into one column for coding. Having the responses per interview question in one column allowed for easy identification of similar words and phrases. This process also allowed use of the search tool to identify similar words and phrases across interview questions. As the words and phrases were identified, I coded similar words and phrases using different colored text for each group of words or phrases.

I conducted text segment coding as I reviewed district documents to identify key words and phrases that were like those resulting from an analysis of the interview transcripts and observation notes. I used the Find tool to find words on a page in each portable document format of the documents to search for and then highlight similar words and phrases. I continued using thematic analysis to review the coded words and phrases. Having the text in different colors helped me identify themes that were emerging. As the words and phrases were reviewed over and over I adjusted the font

color to identify similarity of text. I categorized the initial 43 codes from the interviews, observations, and documents listed (Appendix G) into four themes. While there were slight variations in the codes that emerged, there were common themes that emerged from the interviews, observations, and document reviews. As I identified similar words and phrases, the words and phrases were added to a table I created in Word (Appendix G). Table 3 lists the themes that were identified.

Table 3

Summary of Themes

Theme	Description
1	Mentoring/mentorship and support and guidance for the students
2	Collaboration amongst all stakeholders (those external and internal to the learning environment)
3	PD for teachers that includes training focused on more than developing lesson plan and centers on developing student-centered classrooms
4	Positive interactions with students that develop and enhance relationships and communication

The use of technology was essential in the data collection and analysis processes. I used school e-mail addresses for initial contact with the district-level administrators, principals, teachers, and counselors. I used a micro-cassette for the initial recording of interviews and a transcription recorder to re-record the interviews for transcribing. I used Microsoft Office software for transcribing interview and observation notes, tracking e-mails, returned questionnaires, sorting interview and observation notes, and identifying and color-coding emerging words and phrases. I collected and recorded data using a sequential process.

I conducted classroom observations in a manner to ensure the observations were not invasive or disrupting to the learning environment. The observation details were discussed with each teacher following the interviews. I informed the teachers that there would be no interaction with them nor the students during the observations. The teachers agreed to allow me to enter the classrooms prior to the students arriving to avoid the students being distracted by my entrance. However, each believed it would be beneficial to limit distractions by acknowledging my presence to the students. One principal even announced over the intercom that a visitor from the state department was in the building. He felt this would limit distractions in the classrooms I visited for observations. I informed the teachers that I would quietly exit the classrooms after 30 minutes of observation, and each teacher agreed that they would continue with instruction in a manner to prevent my exiting from becoming a topic of discussion or distraction.

Prior to and during the data analysis process, I perused the districts' website to gather documents that would assist with gaining knowledge about the district as related to dropouts, instruction, curriculum, and extracurricular activities. Stake (1995) considers document reviews as a process as important as conducting interviews and observations. Stake further noted that document reviews can serve as substitutes to account for activity that could not be observed directly or emanated from interviews. There were several documents I accessed and reviewed from the public domain. I did not collect or review any documents that are not publicly accessible.

Documents

I used documents as another source of data for this study. The documents were valuable in providing information to help understand the phenomena and corroborate findings from interviews and observations (Creswell, 2012). Documents are ready for analysis and require no transcription (Creswell, 2012). I conducted an analysis of documents to gather support of interview questions and responses. I conducted the review of documents parallel to the interview and observation processes. The district's website serves as a repository of information that was pertinent to this study and the findings of the study.

There were several documents essential to the study that I accessed from the district's website and reviewed to gain a deeper knowledge regarding the phenomena and to assist in corroborate findings from the interviews and observations. As I reviewed the documents, key facts pertaining to the study were highlighted for further review and analysis. Due to recent changes in the district, each school is currently developing a dropout prevention plan; however, due to the plans being a work in progress, no school level plan was provided or accessible from the website. I accessed and reviewed the districts' *Dropout Prevention Plan for 2013-2016*. In addition, I reviewed board briefs, the *Dropout Prevention Policy*, the *Instructional Management Plan*, the *Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports Focus Plan*, a board policy pertaining to extra-curricular activities, a board policy addressing dropout prevention, and the *Student Handbook*. I reviewed these documents to identify policies and practices implemented in

the district that would address the research questions. In addition, the Mississippi Department of Education's website was useful in gathering demographic data, dropout and graduation rate data, and other reports, such as the District's Report Card, that reflected how the district compared with other districts in the state.

Screening Questionnaires

At the onset of the study, I captured data through a screening questionnaire and analyzed it for identifying key informants who were willing to serve as interview participants. I screened demographic to identify participants who met the criteria of being employed in the district for five or more years and served in the role of a principal, teacher, or counselor at one of the high schools for the past two years.

Following approval from the district administrator to contact the principals, I sent e-mails to the main principal of each high school. The e-mails detailed the nature of the study as annotated in the participant invitation letter, included the informed consent form, the invitation letter to submit the questionnaire, and the screening questionnaire. The attempts resulted in five of the seven principals returning the questionnaires and informed consent forms with approval to contact their counselors and subject area teachers. I used the district's directory and website to identify and access the e-mail addresses for the school counselors and teachers. I sent e-mails to each potential participant using the school e-mail address to detail the nature of the study, along with attachments of the screening questionnaire and informed consent form.

I used an Excel spreadsheet to track those who were sent an e-mail and those who returned the completed screening questionnaire and the signed informed consent form. I then organized the questionnaires into three stacks for principals, teachers, and counselors. Then I organized the stacks of questionnaires into five stacks to represent the five schools from which forms were received. I then placed the questionnaires in order using the last names and coded each questionnaire as principal 1, principal 2, and principal 3 until each questionnaire was coded. Potential participants were given the option of electing their own pseudonym; however, some elected not; therefore, numeric coding was used as the pseudonym for consistency. I reviewed the questionnaires to identify those who met the criteria for participation. The selected participants must have worked in the district for at least five years and served in the capacity of a principal, teacher, or counselor for two years.

All five of the principals were eligible for participation. Eleven of the 18 teachers were eligible, and six of the seven counselors were eligible for participation. Table 4 depicts the representation of the actual participants per school. I used the pseudonyms (coding) of each potential individual, along with the school represented to randomly select three principals, five teachers, and two counselors to invite to participate in interviews. The selection process was conducted to ensure representation of each of the five high schools represented. I then e-mailed the selected individuals and notified them of their selection to participate in interviews. All selected individuals initially agreed to participate in the study. One principal later declined due to prevailing scheduling

conflicts or district demands. Using contact information provided on the screening questionnaires, I contacted individuals to schedule interviews.

Table 4

Participant Representation

School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4	School 5
Principal 1	Teacher 2	Principal 2	Teacher 4	Teacher 5
Teacher 3	Counselor 2	Teacher 1		
Counselor 1				

Interviews

The main source of data derived from interviews. I structured interviews to capture participants' perspectives of CICC factors that affect dropouts in their schools and district. Interview protocols (Appendixes B, C, and D) were used to guide the interviews. There was a difference in the number of interview questions for the principal, teachers, and counselor; however, all were asked the same questions. Interviews were planned to last 30–45 minutes; however, only one of the interviews lasted for more than 30 minutes with the others averaging about 22 minutes. All interviews were conducted in the school buildings with some taking place in classrooms during planning periods, some in conference rooms, and others in offices.

I used an Olympus Digital Voice Recorder to record the interviews. Using a recorder to capture interviews allowed me an opportunity to capture the full context of the interviews for later transcription without having to hand record the interviews which

could have resulted in inaccurate or incomplete notes of all spoken words (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2014). To ensure an additional copy of the interviews would be available in case something happened to the recording on the voice recorder, I transferred the interview recordings to a desktop computer. Using the digital recorder, the interviews were also recorded onto a mini-cassette. The mini-cassette recordings were used for ease of transcription using a Panasonic Microcassette Transcriber with a foot pedal that allowed ease of rewind for playback.

This phase of data analysis entailed listening to the recorded interviews. This phase continued until I used Word to transcribe all interview recordings. All notes were typed even if the responses were not directly related to the research questions. Then I used the initial microcassette recording to ensure the transcriptions were accurately captured. To confirm the accuracy of the transcribed interview comments, I played the taped interviews until confirmation of what was transcribed reflected what was recorded. I read the Word transcription as the interview recordings were replayed using the microcassette transcriber and would occasionally change a word that was initially transcribed. Each interview protocol saved in Word was used as the template for transcribing the interviews and made it easier for transcription. With the questions already being in the Word protocol, I was able to easily determine where to start typing from the recordings following the introduction of each question during the actual interview. I read and reread each participants' responses to familiarize myself with the

responses gaining an in-depth knowledge of the responses and to visually associate the response with the participant for later transcription and narratives.

I categorized and coded interview data for further analysis (Creswell, 2012). The interview questions were divided into four categories: dropouts, at-risk students, curricular and instructional practices, and co-curricular practices, and each category was aligned to one of the four research questions. I used text segment coding, which involves using words and phrases to correlate sentences and paragraphs and NVivo coding, which includes coding of participants' exact words to analyze interview data (Creswell, 2012). Then I used thematic coding to review color-coded groups of words and phrases.

I copied the interview responses into an Excel document with each of the interview questions serving as a column heading. This format allowed the responses of each participant to be aligned in one column which made for ease of identifying similar words or phrases. After I transferred the responses, each response was read and reread to identify key words or phrases. As I identified the key words or phrases in a response, I used a different colored font to distinguish the identified words or phrases. This process of reducing larger chunks was completed for each of the interview questions (Yin, 2014). Then I used the Excel search tool search the entire document for the same or key word or terminology in other questions. As the phrase or terminology was identified in other responses, I color-coded those words or phrases. This process was repeated until all responses were read with key words or phrases identified and color-coded. Each word or phrase that was identified was color-coded using a different color for similar occurrences.

Using the filter feature in Excel, I selected the color-coded words and phrases and then copied the text into another sheet in the Excel document with each colored phrase being copied in one column. Using an inductive approach, codes and themes were not specified a priori but were identified during the transcription of the raw data (Creswell, 2012; Finfgeld-Connett, 2014). While there are many techniques to code and display data to identify themes, researchers must use a method that make connections with the data meaningful to them and the reader (Creswell, 2012). I created and coded subcategories of each research question with a different color. Creswell (2012) and Yin (2014) asserted that as data are analyzed, subthemes will emerge.

As I analyzed the data, five categories emerged. Following further analysis of the data, four themes started to emerge: mentoring/ mentorship, PD, collaboration, and positive interactions. Although Creswell indicates that five to seven themes would be sufficient for discussion of study findings, the similarity of the data would be redundant if identified as individual themes (2012). Words and phrases like support for the students, more interaction with the students, being available for students were included with the themes for positive interactions and mentoring/mentorship. I printed the notes for further analysis and categorizing to combine the interview and observation data with the corresponding research question. A matrix was used to note patterns and themes that continued to emerge. Subcategories of the colored notes were marked with different shades of the same color. This refinement process continued until I completely categorized all notes.

Observations

I used observations to serve as another data collection tool for triangulation and to further identify instructional practices that may contribute to students dropping out in the district. During the interviews, I asked participating teachers if they would commit to observations being conducted of their classrooms during an instructional period. I then used an observation protocol to capture descriptive and reflective field notes. I conducted classroom observations in three classrooms during instructional periods. I used the observation protocol (Appendix E) to record detailed descriptions of the setting, participants' behaviors, and occurring activities as well as reflective notes (Creswell, 2012, Lodico, et al., 2010).

Four of the five teachers interviewed agreed to have classroom observations conducted. Dates and class periods for observations were determined prior to my leaving from conducting the interviews. One instructor declined being observed. Prior to me selecting the three instructors to observe, one instructor called to indicate that a school event was scheduled the date which the observation was planned. The three observations were completed in different high schools across the district to ensure a representative sample of the schools in the district. The observations were scheduled to last 20-30 minutes. Two observations lasted 30 minutes, and one lasted 20 minutes due to a disruption in the hall, and the teacher left the classroom to help address the hallway disturbance.

Observations are used as a collection instrument to assist with corroborating findings (Yin, 2014). The focus of the observations was to record instructional strategies, classroom environments, student engagement, and student-teacher interactions. I used the observation protocol to record who was being observed, the date and time of the observation, length of the observation, and descriptive and reflective notes. I transcribed notes immediately following the observations while the accounts were still vivid to ensure accounts were captured accurately (Stake, 1995). I transcribed descriptive and reflective notes from the participant observations using Word and then analyzed the notes to support data collected from the interviews. I then copied the notes into an Excel spreadsheet with each focus (instructional strategies, classroom environments, student engagement, and student-teacher interactions) as a column heading.

I used coding strategies to analyze the notes. I read the notes from each observation individually to highlight key words or phrases. I conducted open coding of observation data. As similar words or phrases were identified, it was color-coded using the highlight tool. Each word or phrase identified was color-coded using a different color per word or phrase. Similar codes emerged that emerged from the analysis of interview transcripts with new codes emerging as well. I reread and analyzed the words and phrases to identify themes. While coding the classroom observations, I determined that instructional strategies reflected, in some instances, teacher-centered learning environments and some reflected student-centered, but more of, teacher-centered learning environments. Subthemes that emerged during the analysis of the observation notes and

through thematic analysis were grouped with themes emerging from interviews. Themes common to those that emerged from the interview data, emerged from the observation data.

Establishing Credibility

I conducted triangulation and member checking to ensure results of the study are considered credible and accurate. Triangulation of data sources, member checking, external auditor, and peer debriefing are several ways to ensure validity and credibility (Creswell, 2012; Leko, 2014; Yin, 2014). Triangulation is further a process whereby researchers use several data sources in different combinations across time to corroborate findings and enables researchers to achieve broader and generally better results (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Leko, 2014). Yin (2013) identified four types of triangulation and indicated that case studies can be strengthened through data source and methods triangulation. Triangulation further entails comparing and cross-checking the varying sources of data to confirm information (Creswell, 2012; Yin, 2014).

Being able to triangulate across multiple data sources is advantageous when conducting a case study. I transcribed, analyzed, and coded interview and observation data to identify emergent themes. Triangulation was achieved by comparing the transcriptions and themes from the semi-structured interviews with principals, teachers, and counselors to descriptive and reflective notes from classroom observations, and data from a review of documents such as the dropout prevention plan and instructional management plan. I reviewed the key words and phrases in the interview transcripts to

determine if the same or similar words were observed in the observation notes. I also conducted a search of the interview transcripts to identify key terms that resulted from a review of the observation notes. This cross-checking was conducted to identify exact and similar words and phrases in the transcription of interview and observation notes. The interviews served as the main data source while the classroom observations and document reviews helped corroborate the findings and confirm the themes.

I also conducted member checking to corroborate the credibility of the findings. Through member checking, participants were allowed an opportunity to review the interpretations of the data findings to ensure accuracy of the interpretations based on the data they provided (Creswell, 2012). I e-mailed the participants a two-page summary of the findings to confirm the accuracy and interpretation of their data. I provided participants my personal e-mail and asked to provide feedback or comments. Member checking did not result in any changes or edits to the findings.

Discussion of Findings

There were four research questions guiding this study that focused on identifying how the district identifies and addresses at-risk students and provides interventions before students become disengaged and drop out. The three interview protocols (Appendixes B, C, and D) I developed was used to capture rich, thick descriptions of data that would assist in answering the research questions to identify how to resolve the identified issue in the district (Creswell, 2012; Yin, 2014). The interview protocols had the same or similar questions but also contained questions specific for the principals, teachers, and

counselors. The district is facing a dilemma with students dropping out of high school with a subsequent need to identify CICC factors that principals, teachers, and counselors perceive may be influencing students' decision to leave school early. Using the data from the interview questions to answer the research questions will provide perspectives from the voices of those in the district to assist with addressing the problem overshadowing the district (Creswell, 2012).

Research Question 1

The first research question (RQ1) sought to capture how at-risk students who were in danger of dropping out due to poor academic achievement are identified and monitored. The interview questions from the dropout category on the interview protocols were used to capture data to address RQ1. Subthemes that emerged from these interview questions were grouped into the following themes: mentoring/mentorship (with support and guidance for students), and positive interactions with students that foster relationships and communication. Principal 1 stated that, the district utilizes a systems approach called the multi-tiered system of support for identifying and engaging at-risk students." Counselor 1 also discussed how the tier system is used in the school.

Counselor 1 indicated that "all students begin on Tier 1 with advancement to Tier 2 for students who get in trouble here and there, and then advances to Tier 3 with more frequent disciplinary issues." Principal 4 discussed how the schools dropout prevention team is instrumental in identifying and monitoring at-risk students. Teacher 2 expressed concerns that "those in charge of monitoring and tracking the students should be held

accountable for doing so," Teacher 2 stated that she becomes more involved with the students by conducting interviews with each student at the beginning of each semester. Teacher 5 further noted that "I get to know each student on a personal level and know what the goals are after high school.

Research Question 2

The purpose of the second research question (RQ2) was to capture the effectiveness of curricular, instructional, and/or co-curricular supports in addressing at-risk students' needs. The interview questions from the at-risk category on the interview protocols were used to generate data to address RQ2. Subthemes that emerged from these interview questions were grouped into one major theme: collaboration and teamwork. Responses to questions in the at-risk category were centered more around the lack of involvement of principals, teachers, and counselors in developing the curriculum or having full autonomy regarding instructional strategies. Principal 4 stated that she would, "restrict the amount of assessments administered to students to allow more time for instruction and involvement in co-curricular activities,"

Counselor 1 indicated that, "we [counselors] do not have anything to do with the curriculum and instruction but do work with teachers on behavioral and attendance issues that impact the learning environment." When asked what she would change to support at-risk students, Teacher 1 stated that "more hands-on instructional strategies, more interactions with students, and more real-life examples would be beneficial for students in danger of dropping out." Several of the participants expressed that greater

collaboration between state-level and school-level personnel in developing the curriculum and planning co-curricular activities would be advantageous for the students.

Research Question 3

The third research question (RQ3) sought to capture perceived improvements needed in curriculum and instruction to further engage and encourage students to stay in school. The interview questions from the curricular and instruction category on the interview protocols were used to capture perspectives to address RQ3. Subthemes that emerged from the interview questions in the curricular and instruction category were grouped into collaboration and teamwork. All participants expressed that the curriculum was developed at the state level and was mandated for implementation. Several teachers expressed that they can utilize additional resources to supplement the curriculum; however, had to follow the state-developed curriculum. Lesson plans had to be developed centered around the benchmarks. Teacher 2 stated that teachers who instruct elective courses have more autonomy with utilizing resources and instructional strategies.

Teacher 2 further noted that, “if you teach state-tested subject area courses, you had little to no control over what you teach and to some degree, the instructional strategy is dictated.” Teacher 4 expressed the need for “PD that help teachers fully understand and implement district expectations regarding creating student-centered classrooms and professional learning communities.” Counselor 1 also expressed concerns of PD where the “principals, teachers, counselors, and coaches are on the same page regarding testing

requirements, graduation requirements and other academic aspects that exceed the classroom."

Research Question 4

The last research question (RQ4) sought to capture the co-curricular changes that are perceived to encourage students to stay in school. The interview questions from the co-curricular category on the interview protocols were used to gather data to address RQ4. Through analysis and coding subthemes that emerged were grouped into the following major themes: mentoring/mentorship and provide support and guidance for students, collaboration and teamwork (amongst those essential to the success of students such as teachers, counselors, coaches, parents, and others who can have an impact on the students), Teacher 5 expressed that the positive interactions that some coaches and teachers have with their students "entice students to want to come to school and be successful." Teacher 5 further noted that "all students should have the opportunity to participate in co-curricular activities whether those be academic support activities or clubs and sports that are considered extra-curricular activities." Counselor 2 stated that "involvement in the co-curricular should be used as incentives for at-risk students." Counselor 2 indicated that "all students should be required to participate in at least on co-curricular activity because research shows that the more students are involved in extra-curricular activities, the more successful they are academically."

Overview of Themes

Data from the interview transcripts, observation notes, and document reviews were analyzed to identify emergent themes. Interview questions were categorized into four headings: dropouts, at-risk students, curricular and instructional strategies, and co-curricular activities to correspond to the four research questions. Text segment coding, which involves using words and phrases to correlate sentences and paragraphs and in vivo coding, which includes coding of participants' exact words were used for data analysis (Creswell, 2012). Using thematic analysis, major themes were identified and then categorized based on the association to the research questions.

Theme 1: Mentoring/Mentorship (Support and Guidance)

This theme emerged from interviews with each of the participants in response to several of the interview questions. Some participants viewed mentoring as being a vital factor in preventing or deterring dropouts. One principal and one teacher were very adamant about the use of mentoring as a key factor in addressing dropouts in the entire district. One of the schools has implemented a mentoring program that Teacher 3 considers to be, "the best thing yet to build relationships with the students and to identify those students who do not have that one person they can go to when needed." Counselor 1 stated:

> It is my role as a counselor to connect with each student, not just those assigned to me but any that I can provide assistance, and I should be able to serve in the

capacity where students are open and not reluctant to confide in me, and I should be able to mentor students and provide guidance to get them on track.

Teacher 4 stated her belief that, “the teacher has to understand that each student comes with different issues and this is where that student is and to build a relationship with the student that would allow dropping out to not occur.” Teacher 4 further stated that, “it’s the teachers’ responsibility to reach out to the student because the student probably won’t reach out or may not be able to reach out.” Teacher 3 indicated that teachers can support at-risk students because, “they should be able to mentor students and willing to offer that one-on-one if the students need the help.” Teacher 3 further stated that, “Most of the time the students probably won’t open up to you, so you have to be willing to talk to them until they open up and you have to let them know that you are there for them.” Principal 2 commented that principals can influence the dropout by, “monitoring students, having a relationship with the students, creating opportunities to support the students beyond the classroom, and meeting the individual needs of the students.”

One thing that stood out during the observation was during an engaged class discussion and another student walked in the classroom and retrieved some papers from the top of a file cabinet and walked out the classroom as calmly as he entered. The teacher paused as the student exited the door and the teacher asked, to no one in particular, “Didn’t he just get some paper off that cabinet?” There were responses from students; however, the teacher proceeded with the class discussion, with a positive

comment of saying, “Well, at least he’s getting his work turned in, and I won’t mess with his system.” There were a few more comments, and the class continued with very minimal disruption. It was obvious the teacher recognized the system that was working for the student and was willing to support this non-routine process if the student was benefiting from the process. Principal 2 stated:

> It is critical that we provide all the students support and, not just those who appear to be or have been labeled as being at risk, because we may miss the main student who is in need of support and guidance.

Teacher 4 expressed the need for teachers and coaches to “support the counselors because there are far too many students at the school for the counselors to effectively address their needs.” Teacher 2 stated that, “those in charge of identifying and following up on the students identified as being at risk should be held accountable for doing their jobs in order to provide the needed support and intervention as needed when needed.” The comments of the teachers were reflective as they engaged and had side-bar and open conversations with students during the observations.

Theme 2: Collaboration

Essential to the success of a school or district is the collaboration amongst those who comprise the system. According to Ingraham and Nuttall (2016) it is not rare to consider collaboration as a factor that is important to the success of students and further suggests that more knowledge is possible through collaboration. Principal 2 expressed

belief that it would take a collaborative effort from those within and outside the school to influence students and address dropouts. Principal 2 stated:

> Partnerships with those who live in the area and with those who have any connection with the student are essential for the overall development and well-being of students, especially those at risk. Because learning is transferred from the community aspect back to the school and vice versa, that's why I consider co-curricular as our community engagement with our students inside the school.

Principal 1 indicated:

> Real issues with our dropouts are not necessary with the school but more of societal issues that need to be addressed by all especially those at the legislative level. The parent needs to be more involved to ensure that the student is studying when they go home to keep those academics up.

As with Teacher 3, Principal 4 also agreed that the coaches are essential in the dropout process. Principal 4 noted that, "It is important that the coach allows certain hours for those students and to coordinate with teachers to provide tutorials." Teacher 3 stated that, "Coaches can be very instrumental in the success of the students because most students are in school for the co-curricular activities and the coaches have a greater impact on the students than teachers in most cases,"

Counselor 2 commented that collaboration is essential between counselors, teachers, coaches, parents, and students. She expressed that "a counselor can bring so

much to the table because they are aware of issues from the home that impacts academic achievement." Counselor 2 stated:

> I believe in the old adage that it takes a village to raise a child; therefore, if there is frequent and necessary communication between the teachers, counselors, coaches, parents, and students, there is a greater chance to save those students at risk of dropping out.

Teacher 4 expressed that "Teachers who are familiar with the content should have some input in curriculum and that should be a collaborative effort between those in the district office, teachers, and a voice from the students about the curriculum."

Teacher 1 stated that if she can change one thing to support at-risk students, it would be to, "require parents of those students who have been identified by teachers and school personnel to come forward and support the school even if that mean involving the law if they won't come." Teacher 5 stated:

> Teachers really don't know why students are losing interest and dropping out, but counselor might which means that the teachers and counselors should work more closely together and have the coaches involved so everyone is aware of a child potentially on the verge of dropping out.

While visiting a classroom at one of the high schools, an interventionist visited the classroom and asked the teacher to send all senior students to the gymnasium for meeting with the students to discuss graduation readiness. This brief interruption was essential for the students and the teacher informed the students that he would "catch them

up" on the work they would be miss during the class period. Generally, this type of classroom disruption is seen as a hindrance to instruction because it causes the instructor to repeat what was taught. Several times during the observations, classrooms were interrupted including times when students spoke with the instructor, intercom calls for students being dismissed, or teachers leaving the class to assist with disruptions in the hall. Being amendable to repeat instruction, assist with issues outside the classroom, or other aspects that reflect a culture of teamwork is what Ingraham and Nuttall (2016) identified as the collaboration that exceeds teachers' collaboration and extends to collaboration between parents, support staff, and administrators.

Theme 3: Professional Development

Professional development of educators is considered a key factor in effecting change in the learning environment. Wieczorek (2017) indicated that collaboration is one of two of the most effective ways to ensure sustained PD improvement. Mitchell (2017) indicated that educational settings can realize greater levels of student engagement and achievement when collective efficacy among educators are practiced. Principal 1 stated that, "PD is critically important in impacting the dropout rate because it gives the teachers the knowledge and tools they need to reach the students because the students are at different levels."

> According to Principal 1, it is important that my teachers are trained and received PD and know how to unpack those strategies they have to teach and to make sure

that we are using evidence-based strategies and best practices to reach our students. Teacher 1 also indicated:

> I strongly believe in PD and think that PD should not be done in isolation based on your role but provided where all district staff is at the table to hear the same issues our students are facing to allow us to learn how to collectively address the needs of our students"

Teacher 1 envisioned one thing that could bring about change in the district to deter dropouts:

> Make PD available for teachers that incorporate more than just the normal related to curriculum, instruction, and state assessments but more of a focus on the issues that impact the classroom such as suicide prevention, bullying, how to mentor a student, how to identify at-risk students, and more topics that would be relevant in helping keep kids in school.

Improving educational practice through PD is a means to improving student achievement. The importance of high quality PD is evident through the mandates of the NCLB Act, which requires PD opportunities and programs that are developed to include extensive teachers, principals, parents, and school administrators' participation.

Theme 4: Positive Interactions

Principal 2 stated that "Interaction with students is key to deterring behavioral issues, which ultimately impact academic performance." She further noted that "interaction should not take place just when the students are being disciplined but before

any intervention is necessary." Teacher 3 suggested that "one-on-one mentoring will provide the interaction that students need to steer clear of potential issues that could prevent them from being successful academically." Counselor 1 stated that "providing support and guidance to students increases opportunity for teachers and coaches to engage with students and have the interactions that foster respect."

There was open dialogue and discussions occurring in each classroom observed. The interaction between the teacher and students was of respect and classroom management. The environment in all the observed classrooms were warm and inviting. The teachers interacted with the students by offering encouragement to participate in discussions, walking around the classroom and reviewing student work as they completed classroom assignments, smiling and offering praise and recognition during discussions. The students were engaged in each classroom and openly participated in classroom discussions.

Teacher 3 reflected more of a personal interaction with her students as evident with many of the students hugging her as they exited the classroom. This classroom had a small pillow-like sofa in the center of the classroom. The teacher stated that, "I use this area when I am getting to know my students and conducting one-on-one interviews with my students at the beginning of each semester." The students openly joked in a respectful manner with one of the teachers as he used the internet to supplement the classroom instruction. Teachers were patient when students were responding during open dialogue and appeared interested in the opinions shared by the students. Feedback was provided

with examples, thought-provoking questions and comments, and correction as needed. Overall, the interactions observed between the teachers and students were of a respectful manner.

Findings of the study were related to the conceptual framework of Battin-Pearson et al. (2000) and learner-centered teaching of Weimer (2013). Dropouts are related to academic constructs that impact student achievement (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000) and non-learner-centered environments (Weimer, 2013). The findings reflected a need for building cohesive learning communities, forging collaborative relationships, providing guidance and support for students, being more engaged with students, and providing effective and targeted PD for educators.

Research Question 1 asked, "How do principals, teachers, and counselors in CSD identify and monitor at-risk students who are in danger of dropping out due to poor academic achievement?" To answer this question, interview questions were posed related to identification, engagement, and monitoring of at-risk students. The identification of at-risk students is a systemic process that is done through a tier system process. Principals, teachers, and counselors shared that through mentoring and having positive interactions with students that foster relationships and communication, at-risk students can be continuously monitored and engaged in the learning environment.

Research Question 2 asked, "What are principals, teachers, and counselors' perceptions of the effectiveness of the curricular, instructional, and/or co-curricular mediations/supports currently implemented or planned in CSD to address at-risk

students' needs?" Perspectives were captured through interview questions related to curricular and instructional practices that are developed to target at-risk students. Overall, the consensus was that curricular and instructional decisions were done in isolation of those at the school level. There is a set curriculum for the entire state that is developed by the state and mandated for use in school districts. Instructional strategies are decided at the district level without much buy-in from teachers and counselors. The perceptions of the principals, teachers, and counselors were that there should be more input on decision-making related to the curriculum, instructional strategies, and co-curricular decisions. They felt these would be more effective, especially instructional strategies, if they were collaboratively involved in the decision-making.

Research Question 3 asked, "What do principals, teachers, and counselors perceive could be improved in CSD curriculum and instruction to further engage and encourage students to stay in school?" Perspectives were captured through interview questions about who decides and develops the curriculum and how instruction is designed. It is the perspectives of the principals, teachers, and counselors, that involvement of all educators in determining the standards and guidelines for implementation would lead to a more diverse curriculum and instructional approaches. Through collaboration, differentiation of instruction and curriculum, greater flexibility for teachers to determine instructional approaches, and students' input in curricular could be achieved.

Research Question 4 asked, “What co-curricular innovations do principals, teachers, and counselors perceive are needed in CSD to encourage students to stay in school?” Interview questions addressing this question were used to capture information about what participants considered co-curricular activities and the use of co-curricular activities in the district. A major transformation related to co-curricular was involvement of teachers as mentors, more involvement of parents, coaches becoming more involved with academics, and less restrictions for allowing at-risk students’ participation.

Study findings supported the development of a comprehensive PD plan for administrators, teachers, counselors, and parents. The workshops will be focused on increasing efficacy for administrators, teachers, counselors, parents, and community partners to bring about a change in the learning environment. Through the development of collaborative relationships, school leaders can create a culture of learning that brings together the voices of all stakeholders to realize a rigorous effort of helping students attain academic success.

Discrepant Cases

One strategy I employed while analyzing the data was to identify or factor in discrepant or disconfirming data. When analyzing interview and observation notes, no outliers or conclusions that would not be consistent with other study findings or that would alter the findings of the study were identified. Merriam (2009) indicated that researchers should look for data that may conflict with the study findings. I did not note any evidence of discrepant cases or adverse findings.

Data Validation

Data validation is crucial for establishing the accuracy and validity of the research findings. Researchers understand the importance of being accurate in interpretation and findings (Stake, 1995). Findings of case studies are believed to be more accurate and convincing if the findings are derived from multiple sources of information (Leko, 2014; Yin, 2014). Creswell (2012) further noted that conducting member checks is another way of validating findings. Following the transcription of the interviews and data analysis, I e-mailed a summary of the findings to the participants to confirm accuracy. Using the Member Check Form (Appendix F), the participants had an opportunity to review the findings and provide feedback, corrections, or edits (Stake, 1995). This process was used for the respondent to validate the interpretation of participant feedback (Merriam, 2009).

There were no edits made or requested from the review of the findings. Triangulation provides an opportunity to establish an accurate meaning of accounts by having more than one source to base that meaning (Stake, 1995). I used emergent themes resulting from interviews with the principals, teachers, and counselors, and classroom observations as a cross-reference to strengthen the findings of this study. I also used data from document reviews to corroborate the findings and add validity. Data derived from the interviews were the main data collection source; however, classroom observations and document reviews validated the emerging themes.

Project Description

I analyzed the results of the research study to determine how best to address the problem of students dropping out in the district with no identified specific CICC factors that influence those dropouts. An analysis of the interview and observation data led to the emergence of several themes: mentoring/ mentorship, PD, collaboration, interactions, and support and guidance, which were summarized into four overarching themes: collaboration, mentoring, PD and positive interactions. Based on an analysis of the data, a logical project would be the development of a comprehensive PD plan designed based on best practices and current research. In the plan, I will provide recommendations of practices and processes the district can implement throughout the year or over a course of two to five years to address the concerns as voiced by the interview participants or identified through observations.

The district is experiencing dropouts at a rate that is above the state and national rates (MDE, 2016a; NCES, 2018). During data analysis, I discerned that there are several factors that could be addressed in the district that may be contributing to the dropouts. Being able to identify, provide mentors, and interact more with at-risk students were key factors that participants felt could help curtail disengagement and students dropping out. All participants stated that PD is offered in the district; however, intimated that the PD was not targeted to address the needs of the district related to identifying or addressing at risk students nor in building collaborative, sustainable relationships.

A comprehensive PD plan will provide for more than just sit and talk sessions, which are generally not considered the best approach for imparting knowledge. The plan will serve as a mechanism for building system capacity by using the themes identified through data analysis to serve as the guide for identifying and planning the targeted goals of the PD plan.

Conclusion

I designed this descriptive, qualitative case study to address a prevailing problem in the CSD with students dropping out of high school and a subsequent need to identify CICC activities that principals, teachers, and counselors perceive may be influencing students' decisions to drop out. To gain an understanding of this phenomena, I conducted interviews with those who are considered key informants or close to the issue, and classroom observations were conducted. The use of a screening questionnaire, interviews, and observations as data collection tools informed the direction of the study as a qualitative case study, which was the appropriate research design to address the local problem and research questions. In Section 2, I presented the methodology of the study detailing the rationale for the study design and approach; participant selection; procedures for data collection, data analysis, and credibility of findings.

I used a sequential data collection process, which included reviewing published district documents, administering a screening questionnaire, conducting semistructured interviews, and classroom observations. Data collection involved a representative sample from five of the seven high schools participating in the study. Three principals, five

teachers, and two counselors shared their perspectives to help gain insight on the phenomena. Three of the five teachers interviewed also allowed observations of their classrooms. I transcribed, analyzed, coded, and interpreted interview and observation data to identify emergent themes. Then I triangulated findings from the interviews with data from the classroom observations and document reviews to validate the credibility and accuracy of the findings. I used member checking to ensure the findings reflected accurate accounts of the participants. Then I used the findings of the study to develop a comprehensive PD plan.

Section 3 is an outline of the project that I developed to address the findings of the study. This section includes a rationale for the selected project, a review of literature with the supporting framework, a description of the project, and the evaluation tool for measuring the effectiveness of the plan. The subsequent project in Appendix A is a comprehensive PD plan. The project will focus on building system capacity for increased student achievement through a PD plan focused on factors essential for the growth and advancement of the district.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

Professional development (PD) is considered a key mechanism for effecting change in many fields, especially education. It is a process that should be ongoing and designed to increase the competency of participants. PD tops the list of pressing and challenging issues facing education today (Bissonnette & Caprino, 2014). NCLB mandates states to provide high-quality PD for teachers, yet NCLB fails to identify factors contributing to PD or provide specific guidelines for accomplishing this task (Bissonnette & Caprino, 2014; Green & Allen, 2015).

The purpose of this descriptive case study was to identify CICC factors that prompted students to drop out. Based on the findings of this case study, I developed a comprehensive PD plan to address the needs of the district. The development of the plan was guided by the themes that emerged during data analysis: mentoring, collaboration, PD, and positive interaction. The project was developed with a focus on collaborative professional learning with strategies aimed at increasing awareness of at-risk students through a flexible blended-learning approach.

In Section 3, I describe the premise for a comprehensive PD plan, the project, the project goals, a rationale for the selected plan, implications for social change, and the evaluation tool for measuring the effectiveness of the plan. Further, a literature review that guided the development of the project is discussed, along with an adult learning theory derived from the literature review. This section also describes implementation, a

timetable, potential resources and existing supports, potential barriers, and roles and responsibilities. The project resulting from the study is discussed in Appendix A.

Project Description and Goals

The project deriving from the findings of this study is a comprehensive PD plan focused on the needs of the district through collaborative professional learning. I structured the plan to cover specific topics with follow-up activities throughout each academic year. Deficits addressed in a Corrective Action Plan submitted to the state department from the district will be the focus of the plan. In addition, the plan will address topics that the research participants voiced as being key to cultivating a climate and culture that would enhance the learning environment and address the needs of at-risk students. The plan encompasses learner-centered best practices and research-based strategies that are essential for effective PD through increased professional learning.

The overall goal of the plan is to empower schools' leaders to create a team culture and climate that is conducive to increasing student achievement and reducing the number of students dropping out of high school. The aim of the program is to augment the current PD with a plan that incorporates all stakeholders. Administrators, teachers, counselors, support staff, parents, and identified community partners will engage in PD sessions which address varying topics that are essential for sustained growth of the district.

Rationale

A preponderance of the change occurring in education is resulting from successful PD and collaborative leadership. PD is considered an essential component of a paradigm shift in today's learning environments. Not only does PD afford those receiving the PD an opportunity for growth and learning, it allows the students to benefit from those receiving the PD.

When teachers are provided PD, the classroom learning environment is enriched (Asmari, 2016; Hilton et al., 2015). However, when all educational leaders are engaged in collaborative professional learning opportunities, the entire learning environment has the opportunity for sustained growth and development. When teachers and other educational leaders engage in PD together, there is an opportunity to foster knowledge and share information, exchange ideas and perspectives, and develop a team culture.

This comprehensive plan resulted from the findings that emerged from the interviews, observations, and document reviews. The plan addresses issues relative to mentoring students, creating positive interactions with students, the need for targeted PD that is more than just sit and go, and greater collaboration in decision-making and providing services for students. Developing a project centered on PD is ideal to address the needs of the district as shared through those who participated in the study. Although using PD to effect change in the education arena is not a new concept, the use of a comprehensive PD plan will provide more than the routine PD trainings. The plan is an attempt to use PD as a collaborative learning tool for building system capacity.

Review of Literature

The purpose of this section is to provide a scholarly literature review of current research on the use of PD coupled with collaborative learning to bring about change in the learning environment. Sustained PD and collaborative learning were found in the literature as a means of cultivating a climate and culture conducive to increasing student learning and decreasing dropouts.

Strategy Used for Searching the Literature

The literature review combined a focus of utilizing PD and collaborative leadership to increase student achievement and decrease the number of students dropping out. This literature review reflects that continuing PD is essential for building capacity to improve knowledge and practice (Hilton et al, 2015). The strategy used to conduct this literature review included a thorough review of literature related to school climates, PD, and collaborative leadership. Key terms used in searches related to PD were *andragogy, collaborative leadership, collaborative professional learning, professional development, school leadership, collaboration, mentoring, shared leadership, adult learners, adult learning theories, effective professional development, standards of professional learning, and learning communities*. Additional key terms used in searches were *learner-centered teaching, instructional strategies, active engagement, active learning, standards-based curricula, differentiated instruction, blending learning, and assessing at risk-students*. Several database including ERIC, Sage, and Academic Search Premier were used to locate peer-reviewed articles published within the past 5 years. A review of the literature

resulted in identified themes relating PD and leadership to student achievement and dropouts. Identified themes included collaborative leadership, ineffective leadership, effective leadership, engagement of adult learners, motivating adult learners, and learner-centered approaches of adult learners.

Learning Theory

Throughout history, it is often indicated that everyone can learn. It is the method and capacity for learning that differs. The adult learning theory, andragogy, posed by Malcom Knowles was used to guide the development of this project. The andragogy theory can be defined as a study of factors related to teaching and learning that enables adult learners to reach their full humaneness potential (Knowles, 2011). It is a transactional model depicting a system of alternative sets of assumptions addressing learning characteristics (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005). Andragogy focuses on adult education and is based on the following precepts that adults:

- have a need to know why they should learn something,
- understand they are responsible for their own decisions and lives,
- enter the education realm with more and varied experiences than children,
- have a readiness to learn what is essential to deal with real-life situations, and
- are more driven by internal motivators than external motivators.

According to Knowles et al. (2005), andragogy is an enhancement to the efforts to create a conceptual framework of adult learning.

Knowles, et al. (2005) defined adult education as a process that allows learners to gain awareness of and evaluate their experiences. Further, Knowles (2011) identifies adult learning as being problem-based and collaborative. According to Knowles (2011), adult learners respond to growth and learning when external motivators are present. Adult learning, according to Knowles et al. (2014), should encourage learners to learn more. When adult learners have some buy-in and input in the learning process, they are more prone to being actively engaged in the process. (Knowles, 2011). Knowles et al. (2014) further noted that a motivating factor of adults is to make their own decisions relative to learning.

In relation to this study, that would entail the academic success of students or decreased dropout in the district. His view of andragogy identifies adult learners as being self-directed, free, and growth-minded (Knowles, 2011). The theory of andragogy further assumes that student motivation is key to getting students to participate in classrooms (Knowles, 2005). The premise of adult learning is to transfer the knowledge to the practices in the classroom for increased student performance.

Collaborative Learning

Educating students is a practice synonymous to the adage, it takes a village to raise a child. Yet, often, teachers were generally charged with the responsibility of educating students. Collaborative school leadership is a focus on strategic system-wide approaches targeted at increased school improvement and student achievement and shared among all learning community members (Delgado, 2014). Collaborative

leadership in terms of PD is when the PD is teacher-led, differentiated to meet the needs of all educators, and not designed as one-size fits-all and top-down (Bissonnette & Caprino, 2014). Data from a study conducted by Hilton et al (2015) suggested that allowing school leaders and teachers to co-participate in PD would enable them to share perspectives resulting in an increased awareness of each other's thoughts and feelings. McGee and Nutakki (2017) noted that teachers benefit from being involved in collaborative learning opportunities of school teams. Almuhammadi (2017) noted that through collaboration, teachers are encouraged to change their roles from transferring knowledge to serving as facilitators which results in more student engagement in the learning process.

Hilton et al. (2015) noted that the creation of professional learning communities (PLCs) is required for sustainable professional learning. Green and Allen (2105) classified PLCs as a strategy that is used to promote intense teamwork. They further noted that PLCs allow groups to engage collaboratively to improve instruction and achievement. This further entails the development of a school-wide culture of collaborative expectations (Hilton et al., 2015). According to Bissonnette and Caprino (2014), teacher involvement in PD allows them to evolve as collaborators who are more connected to their colleagues, administrators, and the school district. Parise and Spillane (2010, as cited in McGee & Nutakki, 2017), indicated that teachers' collaborative engagement in discussions with colleagues resulted in changes in teaching practice. Bissonnette and Caprino further noted that school administrators are essential in

supporting teachers to create climates conducive to collaboration. Mansoor and Akhtar (2015) noted that school leaders are inept in effectively engaging parents and community partners in the education process.

Effective Professional Development

Professional development (PD) for increased student achievement was generally focused on building teachers' capacity to promote student learning; however, research has expanded PD to include principals, administrators, and others essential to student learning. Effective PD incorporates the vision, goals, and mission of the district; provides opportunities for shared ideas; cultivates collaborative relationships; and leads to increased system capacity. Wieczorek (2017) considered PD as being effective when it is collaborative due to teachers directing and leading the process.

High-quality, effective PD should be sustained, content focused, situated contextually, centered on teachers, research-based, intensive, and involves active learning (Bissonnette & Caprino, 2014; Green & Allen, 2015; McGee & Nutakki, 2017). Wieczorek (2017) indicated that NCLB is a driving force dictating how PD is being developed, implemented, and coordinated for teachers and principals. Wieczorek further noted that the way the PD is planned and implemented has an effect on students' learning outcomes.

Almuhammadi (2017) identified content, context, and process as three concepts essential for effective PD. According to Almuhammadi (2017), the content is the knowledge that is imparted during PDs, the context refers to the environment the PD is

offered, and the process is how the PD is presented. These three categories incorporate the 12 standards adopted by the National Standards Development Council (NSDC). The NSDC (2010), which is now referred to as Learning Forward, provides quality standards that educators and professional developers can use as a guide to creating effective PDs. Green and Allen (2015) outlines those 12 standards as shown in Table 5.

Table 5

National Standards Development Council Standards

Standard	Category	Staff development that improves the learning of students
Standard 1	Learning Communities	allows adults to engage as learning communities with goals aligned to those of the school and district.
Standard 2	Leadership	requires school leaders with the necessary skills to guide instructional improvement continuously.
Standard 3	Resources	requires resources for continuous adult learning and collaboration.
Standard 4	Data-driven	uses disaggregated student data as a means to identify adult learning priorities and for continuous improvement.
Standard 5	Evaluation	uses more than one resource to effect change and determine the effectiveness of the changes.
Standard 6	Research-based	focuses on the use of research-based strategies to improve student learning.
Standard 7	Designs and Strategies	uses effective learning strategies to achieve the desired results.
Standard 8	Learning	incorporates the knowledge of human development.
Standard 9	Collaboration skills	requires effective collaboration amongst educators.
Standard 10	Equity	creates a balanced learning environment that reflects high student expectations and appreciation of students.
Standard 11	Quality Teaching	equips teachers with the necessary skills, knowledge, and fortitude to vary instruction to maximize performance results.
Standard 12	Family Involvement	requires school leaders to be effective in engaging parents and other stakeholders in the learning process

The findings of a qualitative study conducted by Hilton et al. (2015) suggested that school leaders and teachers both perceived that allowing school leaders and teachers to participate in professional learning programs together would allow them to develop a school-wide culture, share knowledge, incorporate collaboration, and be exposed to new perspectives. Gulamhussein (2013) identified the use of workshop methods for delivering PD as being a key barrier for the effectiveness of PD. Gulamhussein stated that workshops are passive, does not regard teachers as learners, and does not rely on teachers' prior knowledge.

Planning effective PDs is critical to achieve the desired goals (Almuhammadi, 2017). When PD is successful, it can lead to increased student learning and student achievement (Hilton et al., 2015; Yigit & Bagceci, 2017). With effective school leadership being identified as the key that drives change in the learning environment, it is essential that those in leadership roles are included in PD. When that leadership is shared, it can result in collaborative school leadership that can lead to increased student achievement and school improvement.

Ineffective Professional Development

Professional development (PD) is a process that allows participants to engage in meaningful discussions, activities, and projects that provides opportunity for growth. When PD is considered ineffective, it is characterized as being fragmented, lack implementation, and lack teacher-centeredness (Bissonnette & Caprino, 2014). According to Almuhammadi (2017) ineffective PD programs are structured as one-size-

fits all sessions and are not effective in achieving the goals of the PD. Although NCLB required the implementation of measures to provide effective PD, according to Green and Allen (2015), many consider the pressures of NCLB creates more ineffective PD rather than contributing to high-quality PD.

Green and Allen indicated the NCLB mandates resulted in an increase for reading, mathematics, and science teachers' PD while there was a decrease in the PD of social studies teachers. Bissonnette and Caprino (2014) echoed that PD does not receive the required attention unless the goal is to improve student test scores.

Active Engagement of Adult Learners

As many schools and districts in the United States focus on the paradigm of 21st century learning, it is imperative that teachers develop an understanding of what is a 21st century learner and how to engage and interact with those learners. Active engagement is representative of adult learners' time and energy invested in educational-related activities (McDonough, 2014). Adults are more apt to become actively engaged in learning when they have a voice and some control in the learning process and when the curriculum is targeted to meet their individual needs (Knowles, 2011). When adult learners do not feel they have some control over their learning, they are less likely to fully engage in the learning process (McDonough, 2014). According to Mansoor and Akhtar (2015), teachers should be actively engaged in improving their professional skills to effect change in the learning environments.

Teachers must embrace that self-efficacy is important to continue to be effective in the classroom and self-efficacy comes from being actively engaged learners. In a quantitative casual-comparative study conducted by Green and Allen (2015), they indicated that policy makers and experts consider engaging teachers in PD as an effective measure for improving student achievement. Results of a study conducted by McGee and Nutakki (2017) to investigate the impact level of PD on teachers' practices identified that the level of involvement in PD is a prediction of changes in teaching practices.

Active learning as identified by McGee and Nutakki (2017) entails four components: planning instruction, providing professional presentations, conducting peer observations, and engaging in collaborative discussions. A finding of the study conducted by Almuhammadi (2017) identified active learning as a component of PD reflected a direct correlation between teacher knowledge and increased instructional practices. Teachers who are actively engaged in trainings and PD can acquire the skills essential for fulfilling their duties and assuming roles as school leaders (Mansoor & Akhtar, 2015).

Learner-Centered Approaches of Adult Learners

Adult learners, as with student learners, require certain criteria to be met to effectively engage in the learning process. McDonough (2014) stated that the engagement of adult learners in the learning process is dependent on the connection between their lives and the learning. According to Shi (2017), the needs and interests of adult learners should be taken into consideration when planning PD to ensure needs and expectations are addressed. The use of learner-centered approaches encourages adult learners to

construct their meaning of the information being delivered (McDonough, 2014). The adult learning theory supports using self-learning as encouragement to utilize learner-centered curriculum strategies (Almuhammadi, 2017). According to McDonough, adult learners require opportunities to partake in decision-making to direct their own learning (2014).

Implementation and Timetable

The project is a comprehensive PD plan aimed at increasing teaching and learning practices through the development of professional learning communities. The project (Appendix A) will include three days of collaborative engagement of adults using learner-centered practices to identify and discuss strategies to build system capacity in identifying, monitoring, and addressing needs of at-risk learners. Following the three-day PD training, there will be follow-up evaluations that will occur throughout the year with links to webinars and other identified trainings for sustained learning opportunities.

Potential Resources and Existing Supports

Having the necessary resources and supports to implement the three-day PD is essential to the success of the plan. There are 450 targeted administrators, principals, teachers, counselors, parents, and community partners in the district. One major resource is that I will serve as the organizer and facilitator of the sessions. I have been planning and conducting best-practices workshops and boot camps for school administrators, teachers, and other district staff in the state for over 14 years. My knowledge of organizing and planning sessions for large groups of educators and my understanding of

the findings of the study as gathered through the interviews, observations, and document reviews will help develop a professional learning opportunity that meets the identified needs of the district.

Another resource is that the districts' yearly schedule allocates days for required staff development; therefore, time to conduct the PD would not be an issue. With approval of the districts' PD director, this PD opportunity can be used in place of one the district normally provides. The district also has facilities with ample space for conducting the trainings. The available facilities have enough rooms to accommodate the format of the sessions with group sessions and concurrent breakout sessions. Another resource is that central office staff can possibly help coordinate the efforts in organizing and planning the trainings. Other resources such as technology needs are readily available in the district as well as qualified professionals who can conduct the sessions to build system capacity and promote a team culture.

Potential Barriers

Current PD opportunities are designed as sit-and-go sessions. PD is provided, and everyone is expected to gain knowledge for self-efficacy and incorporate the knowledge gained into their practice. There is generally little to no follow-up or collective reflection of what is required to identify and implement the newly learning knowledge. A potential barrier for fully implementing the comprehensive PD plan is dedicated time for reflection, evaluation, and commitment to the follow-up webinars. Even if district administrators are open to implementing the comprehensive plan as the districts' yearly

PD, the plan will require committed time following the PD to reflect on what was effective and what needs to be incorporated into practices of teaching and learning to bring about the desired results. Additionally, time would be required to review and determine what should be incorporated from the evaluations.

Other factors that may pose barriers include resistance to change, inconsistent administrative policies, lack of parental support, political interference, and community issues. Frequent administrator turnover, district transformation, constant reorganization of staff, and top-heavy administrative oversight may create barriers to the districts' ability to benefit from the comprehensive PD plan. In addition, the sustained fiscal crisis in the district may prevent the district from continuous evaluation and follow-up sessions as planned for effective implementation of the plan.

Roles and Responsibilities

Ensuring the plan would be successful entailed delineating the roles of all stakeholders to include myself, students, parents, teachers, counselors, principals, and community partners. As the researcher, my role was to develop the comprehensive PD plan and ensure all constituents understood the goal and objective of the plan. In developing the plan, I saw my role as being instrumental in incorporating all stakeholders who could effect change in the district. My responsibility was to identify an issue confronting the district, determine what was causing the issue, and develop a plan to address the issue.

A review of district data reflected that an issue the district was facing was low academic achievement, which culminated in students dropping out of high school without a diploma. My role was then to collect and analyze data to identify what was prompting students to perform poorly and eventually drop out of school. Based on the findings of data collection and analysis, my role was to develop a plan with the increased success of the students as the driving force and over-arching goal of the plan. As the plan was being developed, each aspect or component had to be pivotal in addressing the culture and climate of the learning environment. This entailed each group understanding that within them belies some leadership responsibility for ensuring the success of the plan.

Project Evaluation Plan

The project evaluation process will start by reviewing feedback captured on the attendees' surveys. This formative part of the process will help capture data from the surveys to determine the perceived effectiveness of the PD and to gauge the need for areas of continued PD throughout the year. The evaluation reviews will be conducted immediately following the three-day session to ensure there is ample time to implement follow-up sessions as needed throughout the year. Follow-up will include conducting an online survey, small focus groups within and across schools, and open forums.

A summative evaluation will be conducted at the end of the year to determine the effect of the continuous PD. Part of the evaluation will include monitoring parent attendance at the Parent/Teacher Association meetings, the district fall meeting, Parents for Public Schools Lunch Bunch meetings, Parent/Teacher Conferences, and quarterly

parent surveys. Effectiveness of the PD for school staff will also be conducted at the end of the year through student surveys to determine if the students distinguished a change in the learning environment. Evaluations from community partners will be reviewed to capture their input on how the session geared for them could help them be more engaged in the learning process.

The PD will be structured to engage all stakeholders who are responsible for the education of students in the district. The overall goal of the PD is to determine whether collaborative leadership is effective in cultivating the culture and climate to increase student achievement and decrease dropouts. Additional goals would be to create a culture of collaborative learning where teachers are the central focus of the PD and foster inter-professional collaboration where students become the central focus of the overall team.

The project evaluation will be an ongoing effort to allow ample time to monitor and determine the effectiveness of the plan. The stability of the plan will be affected by many variables internal and external to the schools' control. It would take time to monitor and determine how each variable impacts the effectiveness of the plan. As time progresses, there may be factors that dictate a need to change or make adjustments.

Project Implications, Including Social Change

Findings from this study provide a rationale that leadership in isolation is not efficient to bring about change in the learning environment. This research confirms that effective PD of all educators in the school setting can serve as a catalyst for changing the culture and climate in the district resulting in increased student achievement. Research

findings further reflect that sustained, collaborative, coherent, and content-focused PD can be essential in serving as a tool for addressing dropouts in the district (McGee & Nutakki, 2017; Wieczorek, 2017). Addressing school improvement and practices that impact student achievement without effective PD can prove to be an ineffective task.

Local Community

The dropout rate of students in the local school district exceeds that of the state and the national dropout rate. Identifying specific academic-related factors in the district that are prompting students to drop out of school will allow the district to address one of the many issues impacting student achievement in the district. The development of a comprehensive PD plan can be beneficial in assisting the district with addressing its dropout dilemma. Reducing the number of students dropping out reduces the negative impact on the community.

Further, increasing student achievement allows the opportunity for more students to complete high school and become citizens of the community who are in a better position to give back and help the community thrive. Negative repercussions from non-graduates will diminish in the community as fewer individuals would be reliant on the system for assistance, engaged in criminal activity, jobless, unable to attend higher education, and unable to give back. This project can provide educational leaders with strategies to create professional learning opportunities that lead to increased student achievement.

Larger Context

The dropout epidemic is far-reaching and extends beyond the boundaries of the local school district. Identifying strategies that can be instrumental in addressing dropouts and curtailing the dropout rate can reap astounding outcomes that aid in diminishing the negative repercussions impacting society because of students dropping out. Increased PD can potentially lead to significant changes in teaching and learning practices (McGee & Nutakki, 2017).

This study can contribute to the body of knowledge pertaining to quality PD, including how collaboration, active learning, learner-centered strategies, and andragogy can be used as approaches for effective PD. Study findings can further serve as a context for school leaders to gain insight and knowledge essential for developing high quality professional learning opportunities (Green & Allen, 2015). Results of the project evaluations can provide administrators information to improve programs in schools, districts, and communities leading to increased teacher effectiveness with subsequent increases in school achievement.

Conclusion

The overall goal of this project is to increase student achievement and decrease the number of students dropping out of high school by providing a model of collaborative leadership for all stakeholders involved in the education of students. The project was developed with adult learning theory tenets and active engagement strategies utilized to contribute to the success of the PD sessions. In Section 3, I described the project,

provided a theory to frame the project, and a review of literature to substantiate the development of a comprehensive PD plan. In Section 4, I described the strengths and limitations of the project; self-analyses; recommendations for alternative approaches; and implications, applications, and directions for future research.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusion

Introduction

Section 4 summarizes the study by providing the strengths, limitations, and recommendations of the project. Section 4 then provides an overview of my role as a scholar, project developer, practitioner, and how leadership can be effective in bring about change. Section 4 culminates by providing a reflection on the work, implications, applications, and direction for future research.

Project Strengths and Limitations

This project reflects both strengths and limitations that are indicative of being internal and external to the control of the school district. One strength of this project is that findings from the research study and current literature were used to develop the project. Another strength of the project is that three methods were used for data collection and the resulting themes from the interviews, observations, and document reviews reflected similar needs for effecting change in the district.

Having data from varying sources, especially the voices of those in the district, helped structure and plan the PD to better meet the needs of the students, parents, school district, and community. This multiple source of data (Creswell, 2012) led to findings that guided the direction of the project and the project topics that are beneficial for those attending the training. Providing workshops that are relevant to the needs of the participants may lead to increased collaboration, increased school function attendance, and buy-in in school efforts.

Governmental policies and regulations often dictate specific variables that impact student learning. Academic-related factors are identified as one of the prevailing factors prompting students to become disengaged and eventually drop out (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Kauble & Wise, 2015; Yeung, 2015; Zuilkowski et al., 2016). Academic-related factors that were identified through a review of documents and as voiced during the interviews are the legislative mandates for state testing and the impact of testing on students not graduating. Addressing these academic-related factors can pose both strengths and limitations for the study. One limitation is that PD cannot exclude the mandate for state testing; however, workshops addressing how to effectively read, analyze, and use the data can be beneficial to parents and school staff attending the sessions.

Providing workshops that address topics identified through data collection will show stakeholders (parents, community partners, and district staff) how to make the connection between the curriculum, instruction, assessments, and assessment results. This can prove to be a strength beneficial in improving the learning environment, school culture, and student outcome. Many parents and educators do not fully understand the connection between the four variables and the impact of each on student achievement. For parents and community partners, there may be a total disconnect between the variables, especially the curriculum and analysis of data. Educators will know about how each of the variables connect based on their roles in the school.

Project strengths for parents include the knowledge and connection the parents can walk away with from attending the workshops. A limitation of the project is maximizing participation of parents and community partners. Parent/Teacher Association meetings and scheduled district-wide Parent/Teacher Conferences reflect limited parental involvement, especially at the high school level. Conducting the workshops throughout the day during required school hours will maximize staff participation; however, may limit parental participation for many reasons, even if there is an interest to attend. Many parents may not be able to take off from their jobs or may have younger, non-school age children at home with no babysitter.

Having the community partners involved in the workshops can pose both strengths and limitations. Active participation in the workshops may not be possible for some community partners due to the nature of their jobs. However, providing the community partners copies of the study summary and project goals may be essential in having the community partners support the project financially, which may be a limitation of the district.

Another limitation was the sample size of the study. The selected population consisted of the seven high schools in the district. Principals, teachers, and counselors from only five of the schools participated in the study. Of the seven schools, the anticipated sample consisted of three principals, five teachers, and two counselors. The goal of the study was to provide an interpretation of the findings to allow readers to use the information and transfer it for the benefit of students at all the schools in the district.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

PD is an essential component of educators' growth and development. PD should be consistent, and there are many approaches for addressing professional growth of educators. One alternative approach would be to embed professional learning opportunities in the schedule throughout the school year. A specific amount of PD should be required yearly for all staff. Some of the PD can be mandatory and some can be self-directed if the required trainings are covered. If enough data are not captured through the proposed evaluation methods, conducting a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis may prove more beneficial for the district.

One alternative approach would be to consider the problem impacting the district as being related to personal factors beyond the control of the school. The study would then focus of non-academic factors that students perceive prompt them to drop out of school. An alternative solution would be to work with the district to identify and locate former dropouts and capture their perspectives as to non-academic related factors that prompted them to drop out. Once these dropout-related factors are identified, a plan can be proposed to address the factors. Another possible approach is to capture the perspectives of parents as to why students are dropping out. Through semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and document reviews, data could be captured to identify academic and non-academic factors parents perceive prompt students to drop out.

Scholarship

I have always been an advocate for education and believe the lack of a good quality education can have impacts on the ability of an individual to be a productive citizen in society. While I understand there are jobs that individuals may be successful in without an education in that area, those with an education have a far greater advantage of securing a job. Likewise, the quality of the education is very much dependent on the individuals and system providing the education. A system that lacks a visionary leader, unskilled educators, limited resources, disconnect from the needs of the students and community, lack of collaboration, and poorly planned curricular and instructional strategies is a system that is not capable of fully meeting the needs of the learners.

Being able to ensure students are afforded a quality education and are not dropping out of school without an ample education is a passion of mine. I am eager to be able to contribute to the literature of research that addresses how school systems can efficiently increase student achievement and deter students from dropping out. I have had the opportunity of working with students with disabilities who are identified as a population with a high dropout rate. One thing I learned from teaching in special education classrooms and serving as the board president of an organization that supports families with students with disabilities is that if afforded the right accommodations and support, those students could be successful academically.

In my former role as the director of testing over state standardized assessment, I was privileged to data from the state's high school exit exams. In analyzing the data and

assisting with developing graduation options for students who could not successfully pass the assessments to meet graduation requirements, I saw the impact of not being able to pass the exams on graduation and dropout rates across the state. Also, part of my role was to provide best practices workshops and boot camps for teachers and administrators across the state with both geared toward helping participants understand how to relate to students, work collaboratively in meeting the goals of their district, and how to use the assessment data to effect change in their districts.

The overall purpose of these sessions was to equip the teachers and administrators with skills that were essential in helping their students be successful on the state assessments and in school. Another role I had was providing remediation sessions across the state for the students who could not pass the assessments. These sessions entailed not only providing content-related remediation but also best practices strategies for taking assessments.

In addition, if I must say so, I think the most beneficial sessions I conducted were those at Parent/Teacher Association (PTA) meetings. Conducting training at the PTA meetings provided an opportunity for parents, community partners, and school staff to engage in the discussions and learn from each other what was necessary to bring about change in the district. Of most important, it provided an opportunity for teachers and administrators to learn with their parents and gain a better understanding of the lack of knowledge their parents had in regards to state testing requirements; the connection

between curriculum, instruction, assessment, and data; graduation options, and other factors that impact the learning environment.

As a developer of the assessments and facilitator of these trainings, I was able to gain from a birds-eye view the necessary changes, impacts, and constraints to incorporate in the trainings and use when developing assessments. Through the trainings and sessions, I was able to capture the perspectives of the administrators, teachers, parents, and students which was an essential part of planning the assessments, structuring the ongoing training sessions, providing feedback to the districts, and effecting systemic change across the state. Of all the trainings and sessions, I was privileged, I think the most beneficial one for me was the one in which I participated through the Parents for Public Schools Leadership Institute (PLS).

The Parents for Public Schools Leadership Institute (PLS) not only taught me how to be more engaged in the school system as a parent but also taught me how to engage other parents and how to engage the community and schools. Of all the years I served on PTA boards, I never learned how to bring together the schools' vision and the parents and students needs as much as I did from participating in the Institute. The engagement with the school I was assigned allowed me to work with the school to develop a brochure. The brochure I developed in collaboration with the district focused on state graduation requirements and was used by the school as one of the many resources available to parents and other stakeholders.

Conducting this study and developing the project afforded me an opportunity to further hone my skills to improve as a scholar. Conducting this study also allowed me to research current best practices related to providing PD opportunities and building collaborative teams or learning communities. I have gained additional insight that may prove beneficial as I continue the path of contributing to the field of education and making a difference in the lives of others.

My current role allows me to have an even greater impact on social change. I am now responsible for providing training and certification opportunities for community college-level instructors and overseeing the procurement and development of national certifications for college-level students. A move to utilizing national credentials as a measure of technical skill attainment is a new system-wide initiative for the community colleges in the state, and I am charged with leading the initiative. Scholarship enables social change, and this role will enable me to bring about social change on a level that is new for our community colleges and the state.

Project Development

Project development can be a tedious yet rewarding task. There are varying internal and external variables that must be considered when planning projects. One key factor to consider when developing a project is the anticipated outcome. The outcome is also what drives and dictates the direction of the project development. In developing projects, I prefer spending the necessary time to plan the project and consider everything that will impact the implementation and outcomes. I incorporate the theory of the five

P's: proper planning prevents poor performance during the planning stage to direct the process. One thing I have learned during my experience of project development is that some things are beyond your control and regardless of how much planning took place, there are always opportunities for roadblocks, setbacks, detours, and sometimes a completely different direction for the project.

My interest in developing a comprehensive PD plan grew out of need to address the problem identified in the district, study findings, and an approach method to address the problem as reflected in a review of current literature. There are many and varied reasons students are dropping out of high school; however, the focus of this study is on the academic-related curricula, instructional, and co-curricular factors. Through study findings, I identified one prevailing impact on students dropping out: the development, collaboration, and interaction of individuals who are part of the learning process. Therefore, I decided to develop a project to address how improvement of the individuals in the learning environment could result in increased student achievement and fewer students dropping out. The development of this project will help me provide a course of action the district can use to address a prevailing issue.

Leadership and Change

There has long been the debate of whether leaders are born or made. Regardless of which, continuous PD is a prerequisite to sharpen and develop the characteristics an effective leader must possess. School leaders, charged with leading school districts to success, are sometimes ill-prepared for this role. School leaders are charged with being

strong enough to promote teacher growth and to develop professional learning communities (Hilton et al., 2015).

Effective school leaders must also possess the skills and attributes essential for employing strategies and creating climates that support teachers' growth and improves practice. Leaders must be well abreast of current trends and factors impacting teaching and learning and must be able to move with the many changes impacting the educational landscape. School systems evolve in part to the many federal and state mandates that govern the operation of the system. An effective leader ensures that federal, state, and district guidelines are implemented and adhered to for the success of the students.

Reflection on the Importance of the Work

Being able to determine factors that lead to the identified problem in the district is instrumental in identifying strategies to address the problem. The development of a comprehensive PD plan was identified as one way for the district to address its prevailing problem of students dropping out of school. Addressing the problem resulted in addressing the growth and PD of those who have an impact on making changes. It is important for individuals who provide learning opportunities for student to be afforded opportunities for growth and learning themselves to position them to impart knowledge in students (Asmari, 2016).

Having served in leadership roles in education for over 20 years, I understand the importance of having the necessary skills essential for being effective in leading others. As a leader, I never wanted to have an island mentality in that I stood alone in making

decisions. I believe in shared or distributed leadership and know that collective ideas and decisions bring together the voices that are important to address needs. I also believe that to be an effective leader, I must know and understand the roles of those working with me.

For a school leader to be effective in cultivating a climate of professional learners, the leader must know what is necessary and how to prepare teachers to be effective in their roles. This further requires school leaders to know what students need to be successful learners. It is essential that leaders engage in professional learning opportunities to be effective and to provide professional learning opportunities for teachers for their effectiveness.

Analysis of Self as a Scholar

I have always believed that learning is a lifelong process. I do not think anyone is incapable of learning; however, it is my opinion, and as reflected in literature, we all just learn differently. As I reflect on my doctoral journey, I know that my reasons for entering the doctoral program at Walden University was self-actualization and self-efficacy. What I also know is that my reasons were not in a selfish mindset but realization that to be able to contribute more in my field of work, education, I must develop me for the benefit of others. At the time of starting my doctoral journey, I was working with student assessments on a large scale and was required to lead content staff who were responsible for knowing the state curriculum. I also was responsible for leading large groups of teachers in serving on committees that determined how the assessment items were developed would impact their teaching and classrooms. Therefore, I knew that I needed

to gain more knowledge and develop as a scholar in different education areas to be successful.

As I embarked on the doctoral journey, there were several challenges I knew I had to contemplate. Being a single mother, finances, time, the ability to focus at home, aging parents who were not near, personal medical battles, and just having the support needed for such a commitment were all at the forefront of my mind. Initially, I felt that it would be difficult to get through an online program; however, at the time I decided to enroll in the doctoral program, studying online offered the flexibility I needed due to me working full-time and being a single mother of three children whose academics I was heavily immersed.

While I knew I had the computer skills to be successful, oddly, the hardest part of this journey for me was the beginning when I had to submit the initial discussion post. For some strange reason, there grew a fear of me even getting on the computer, and I had a panic attack each time I attempted to log into the computer. It is my resolve that the fear was not being in an online course but submitting the discussion posts seemed more like public speaking, which I am not fond of doing. It took me nearly two weeks and some stern, yet passionate, encouragement from a former supervisor who also thought it odd that getting on the computer was difficult for me due to my technology skillset. Once I succumbed that initial shock of being enrolled in the doctoral program and having to submit open discussion posts, I was able to be engaged in my coursework and the discussions.

My ability to focus at home increased as I developed into an online scholar. Time never seemed to be on my side but was a critical element to me being successful as a scholar. I realized that just as I had learned to manage my time in other aspects of my life, this was a moment that time management would be crucial. I learned that I could not direct my attention to my studies while fulfilling my role as a mother or trying to engage in other activities. Therefore, I learned to take care of everything that required my attention in the evenings after work and then in the stillness of the night when the phone would not be ringing or the children seeking my attention, I was able to focus on my studies. Even progressing as an online scholar, in the stillness of the night, I learned that having the television on for whatever reason, provided me the limited background noise I needed to focus.

Perseverance was key to me developing as a scholar. I faced some difficult moments personally and as a student during my doctoral journey. My zeal and passion for positioning myself to benefit others was the drive that kept me on the road to completion. Difficult moments increased my tenacity and highlighted my reasons for self-improvement. There were times that I felt like giving up and questioned my ability to complete the program or my reasons for being in the program? Yes, but knowing that my ability to struggle through and finish amid the roadblocks, setbacks, disappointments, and heartbreaks spoke volume to my children and others who knew what I endured while completing my studies about my commitment to lifelong learning and to completing what I start. Even now as I try to incorporate time for a part-time job to finish paying for my

studies, I know it will be difficult and yet another deterrent to completion, but I have come too far to give in because of yet another roadblock.

Having a support system is key to the smallest endeavor one may take. As a doctoral student, the nature of the process demands having a system of support. There were times along my doctoral journey that the support echoed loudly and then there were times, more often, that I felt like a loner without anyone even knowing the task I was trying to accomplish. The wave of support waxed and waned amongst family, friends, co-workers, and even my professors. I relent to the still voices that throughout life has told me that I can accomplish whatever I attempt to do and esteem the support from my current professors and small circle of those who understand why I have not given up thus far.

Analysis of Self as a Practitioner

Often on my doctoral journey, I have been asked if I think it is worth it. My reply is an unequivocally yes because I feel the investment in growing me to be an expert in what I do is worth the time, money, and commitment. Although my actual career started out in business, I have always considered myself an educator and believed that having a quality education was essential to success in life. My parents had a limited education background but knew the importance of their children having an education. It was not an option for me to miss school or even think about cutting classes, being disruptive at school, or putting anything before my learning. Having instilled in me early on, the importance of getting an education, I did not see education as an option but a necessity.

My compassion for education grew out of my somewhat miseducation. I quickly realized in high school that some of my academic struggles were related to the fact that I did not attain all the skills in elementary and middle school to be successful in high school. This in short was not due to my inability to learn the skills but more so a lack of instructors in some areas and how the school system accounted for this shortage in total disregard for the education of the students. Going through high school and college, I deemed that my education was more than about my commitment to learning but also the commitment of those in the seat providing the education. I once shared with a college professor that I was in one of the many seats in the classroom and not behind the desk because at that moment, I lacked what it took to stand behind the desk.

In learning my role in education, at the time of being a learner, I know I must learn all there is to be effective as a learner. Likewise, as an educator, I know I must be equipped with the knowledge and skills to impart learning into others. Having been on both sides of education as a learner and educator, I know both entails a mutual respect for the other. Both require a commitment to either attaining or providing a quality education dependent on life-long learning. Through my work in assessment, I learned that making learning relevant makes it meaningful and being able to relate to the learning makes the rigor of it easy. As an educator, it is my responsibility to make the connection between the relevancy and meaning.

My desire to improve the education system of the small district in which I was educated drove my passion to pursue a degree in education administration. My

opportunity to make an impact on education for every district in the state led me down a different path from returning to that district. As an education practitioner, I have had the privilege of working in diverse capacities in education. The combination of my experiences has granted me an opportunity to have a greater understanding of how lives are impacted by having an education or the lack thereof. As a practitioner, I will embody what I have learned through being a learner and educator to continue to make a positive impact for other learners and educators.

Analysis of Self as a Project Developer

An effective project requires ample planning, re-planning, purpose, direction, and expected outcomes. It can be a challenge and sometimes and overwhelming challenge to plan when many variables must be considered and taken into consideration. My experience in planning projects have led me to the assumption that it is beneficial to spend more time up front planning than it is to reworking a plan that is turning out to be ineffective. If it takes a day or two to fully plan a project that could eliminate the need to redirect efforts.

The ease of developing the project was knowing the purpose, which was to increase student achievement in the district through professional learning. However, considering the diverse group of learners that were part of the PD created a challenge, as well as disparities of adult learners. Another factor that contributed to my being able to plan the project is my current and former experiences in planning staff retreats, administrator boot camps, best practices workshops for teachers and administrators,

training and certification opportunities for instructors, teacher committees comprised of over 300 teachers, and serving on major educational projects myself.

In developing the project, I wanted to ensure the project derived from the needs of the district as voiced through the interviews and projected in classroom observations and document reviews. The project can possibly serve as a catalyst for change if planned and implemented effectively. The project is grounded in best practices and former research. While PD is not new to the district, the project is designed to incorporate new data that emerged from conducting the study with current research findings and my knowledge of planning professional learning opportunities. The project incorporates research strategies for fully engaging adult learners in the process, building cohesive teams, and making the process learner-centered.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

This study focused on identifying specific academic-related factors prompting students to drop out of high school. Perspectives of those who participated in interviews reflected that current PD in the district is not targeted to meet the needs of teachers and should be designed to involve teachers in the PD planning, have the PD centered on teachers, and have sessions where all participants are engaged in the PD collectively. The project developed to address the findings of the study was a comprehensive PD plan. The project raises questions regarding effective and ineffective PD, collaborative learning, and adult learning. If the PD plan incorporated this approach, the perspectives were such that student learning and achievement would be increased.

Future research could expound upon this project by focusing more attention on contextual factors of PD. It could address how the district can approach PD when faced with varying constraints (being able to maximize attendance of parents and community partners, identifying adequate time in the school schedule for school staff to attend a three-day training, and being able to capture enough information through evaluations to adequately plan future PD opportunities). Building capacity and collaboration were identified in previous studies as being the two most effective measures for sustainable improvement of PD. While NCLB mandates some type of PD be provided for school staff, especially teachers, it does not dictate the specifics related to the implementation of the PD.

Further research might also investigate flexible ways of delivering PD to engage all participants. There should also be some type of advance training or PD that focuses on building principals and administrators' abilities to cultivate a team of professional learning. The current PD and that proposed through this project, if implemented, should be evaluated to determine if the PD is effective in not only improving instruction but enabling the district to build sustainable professional learning communities. The district may incorporate different strategies to determine the effectiveness of the PD. Conducting SWOT analyses may prove beneficial in allowing the district to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to any PD plan prior to and after implementation. In addition, there could be a longitudinal study conducted in the district to gauge the impact of the PD on student outcome.

Conclusion

Identifying constraints impeding students from being successful academically is at the forefront of education agendas. The need to address this issue echoes in the volume of students who are exiting high school without a high school diploma. School districts must become even more aggressive and strategic in planning ways to address the dropout dilemma. As the issues evolve that prompt students to drop out so should the strategies used to identify and address students at-risk of dropping out. While it may be beyond the schools' control or resources to address some of the non-academic related factors prompting students to drop out, schools can work collaboratively with external resources to address the many needs presented by students.

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Appendix A: Professional Learning Project

Introduction

Results of findings gathered from semistructured interviews with principals, teachers, and counselors; classroom observations; and document reviews guided the direction of this project. Staff employed in the seven high schools in the district who have worked in the district for at least five years and served in the capacity of a principal, teacher, or counselor for at least two years shared their perspectives of factors relating to curricula, instruction, and co-curricular that impact students' decisions to drop out of school. A review of findings reflected that the district may benefit from greater collaboration amongst adults, consistent and sustained professional learning, and mentoring and increased interaction with students.

The premise of the project is further defined by a literature review of current research addressing adult learners, effective professional development, and collaboration. The project will entail a three-day institute where stakeholders converge to share knowledge and learn how best to address the needs of the students for increased learning. My role will be to serve as a facilitator responsible for implementing the project.

Purpose

The purpose of the project is to provide a professional learning opportunity to allow the district to identify and assist students at risk of dropping out of school. This project was designed to address dropouts by increasing teaching and learning through the following:

- engaging stakeholders in conversations about CICC strategies that can be implemented to identify and support at-risk students and deter dropouts
- identifying constraints and academic-related impacts on student success
- utilizing professional development and collaboration to build system capacity
- instituting a system-wide mentoring program for high school students
- being pro-active in addressing the needs of teachers in increasing learning opportunities

The project will serve as a deliberate approach to help the district rethink how student learning might be improved through curricular, instructional and co-curricular changes.

Goals and Objectives

The overall goal of the teaching and learning institute is to develop a comprehensive professional learning community where administrators, teachers, counselors, parents, and community partners engage to increase knowledge, attitudes, and skills essential for developing a culture of learning. The underlying goal is to increase academic achievement through the enhancement of teaching skills and abilities using research-based strategies. Additionally, the objective of the institute is to create a cohesive learning community that fosters collaboration, engagement, and input from all stakeholders. The institute will be designed to provide strategies that will enable the district to meet the needs of all learners with strategies for identifying and supporting at-risk learners. Sessions will be designed to offer strategies for serving effective mentors

for students, cultivating positive interactions, fostering collaboration and teamwork, and providing research-based practices.

Targeted Audience

The institute has been developed to include a range of individuals including high school teachers, administrators, and counselors; parents; and community partners who are engaged in the school reform challenges daily. These groups work closely with the schools, should know practices that will have a positive impact on student learning, and are able to contribute their ideas for the growth of the students and district. Their collaborative efforts should lead to professional fulfilment; thereby, increasing student achievement (DuFour & Reason, 2015). Participation in the institute should lead to increased collaboration and increased knowledge that will enable these groups to be more active in the learning of students in the district.

Project Design and Timeline

The three-day teaching and learning institute will encompass the tenets of Knowles (2011) whereas, adult learning is being problem-based and collaborative. The institute will be designed with a focus on addressing the identified problem through collaboration. This will be an active learning professional development opportunity with hands-on, interactive sessions focusing on effective teaching and learning practices. The timetable for the institute is as follows:

Professional Development Institute

Agenda

Agenda: Day 1	
8:00 am – 8:30 am	**Registration, Coffee, and Networking**
8:30 am – 9:30 am	Opening General Session by district superintendent
9:30 am – 9:45 am	Breakout Sessions • Going Beyond Academics: Reaching At-Risk Students through Extracurricular Activities • Learning for Increased Learning
9:45 am - 10:00 pm	**Break**
11:30 am – 1:00 pm	***Luncheon with Speaker –** Collaborative Conversations that Work
1:00 p.m. - 2:00 pm	Breakout Sessions • Shining a Spotlight on At-risk Students • Leading for Change
2:00 pm - 3:00 pm	Breakout Sessions • Integrating Professional Development in Your Daily Schedule • How we Did it Together
3:00 pm – 3:15 pm	**Break**
3:15 pm - 4:15 pm	Individual Group Meetings: Forging Relationships that Work (Administrators, Teachers, Counselors, Parents, and Community Leaders)
6:00 pm – 7:30 pm	***Evening Meal with Speaker** – Creating an Effective Learning Community: From Isolation to Collaboration

Agenda: Day 2	
8:00 am – 8:30 am	**Sign-in, Coffee, and Networking**
8:30 am – 10:00 am	Breakout Sessions • Lead and I will Follow: Mentoring for Change • Turning the Tide
10:00 am – 10:15 am	**Break**
10:15 am – 11:45 am	Breakout Sessions • Building positive Relationships with Students • Alignment of Curricula, Instruction, and Assessment
11:45 am – 1:15 pm	***Lunch and Learn –** Engaging all Stakeholders in Learning through Effective Leadership
1:15 pm - 2:15 pm	Breakout Sessions • Developing student-centered curricula • Providing an Effective Instructional Program
2:15 pm - 3:15 pm	Breakout Sessions • Making Meaning of Student Assessments in the 21st Century • Developing a Culture of Increased Learning
3:15 pm – 3:30 pm	**Break**
3:30 pm - 4:30 pm	Individual Group Meetings: Assessment Data is More than Numbers (Administrators, Teachers, Counselors, Parents, and Community Leaders)

Agenda: Day 3	
8:00 am – 8:30 am	**Sign-in, Coffee, and Networking**
8:30 am – 10:00 am	Breakout Sessions • Understanding Academic Attainment of At-risk Students • Transferring Professional Learning into Student Achievement
10:00 am – 10:15 am	**Break**
10:15 am – 11:45 am	Breakout Sessions • It is More than Academics that Matters • Using Data to Make Instructional Decisions
11:45 am - 1:00 pm	***Lunch and Learn –** Engaging Stakeholders in Understanding Curricula and Assessments to Improve Instruction
1:00 am – 2:30 pm	Breakout Sessions • How Student-centered are Instructional Practice • School Culture: Impact on Learning
2:30 pm - 3:45 pm	**Reflection and Evaluations**

The agendas for the luncheons and evening meal with a speaker will be as follows:

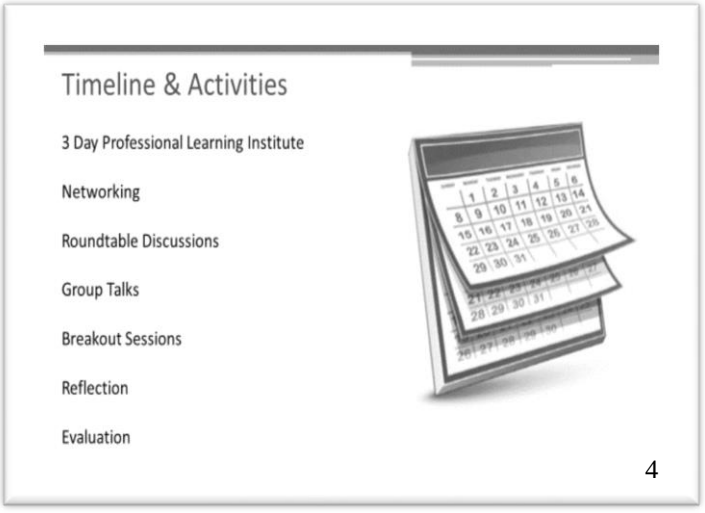
Welcome
Blessing of meal
Meal
Introduction of speaker
Speaker presentation
Door prizes
Closing comments

Materials and Equipment

The following materials and equipment will be needed to conduct the institute:

- Sign-in sheets
- Name tags
- PowerPoint presentations
- Agendas
- Handouts
- Laptop
- Projector
- Screen

PowerPoint Presentation



Purpose

This 3-day institute was designed to provide a professional learning opportunity to allow the district to build system capacity by engaging in a collaborative, learner-centered activities. The institute will serve as a deliberate approach to help the district rethink how student learning might be improved through curricular, instructional, and co-curricular changes.

5

Rationale

When teachers are provided professional development, the classroom learning environment is enriched. However, when all educational leaders are engaged in collaborative professional learning opportunities, the entire learning environment has the opportunity for sustained growth and development. When teachers and other educational leaders engage in professional development together, there is an opportunity for fostering knowledge and sharing information, exchange of ideas and perspectives, and the development of a team culture.

6

Goals

Empower school leaders to create a team culture and climate conducive to increase student achievement and reduce dropouts

Augment the current professional development with a plan that incorporates all stakeholders in professional development

Engage stakeholders in professional development sessions that address varying topics essential for sustained growth of the district

7

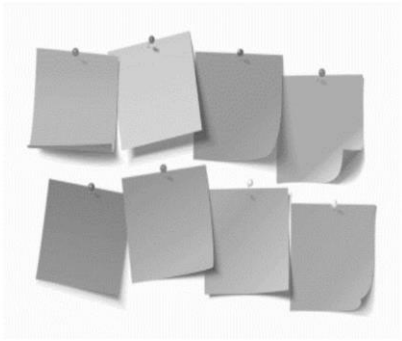
Strategy for Achieving Goals

- Active Learning for Adults
- Collaborative Learning
- Active Engagement of Adult Learners
- Learner-Centered Approaches of Adult Learners

8

Parking Lot

Please write questions, comments, and concerns that you would like to have addressed on a post-it and place on the board to be addressed during the group sessions and reflections.



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Day 1 Activities

Registration, Coffee, and Networking
Opening General Session
Breakout Session
Break
Luncheon with Speaker
Breakout Session
Breakout Session
Break
Individual Group Meetings
Evening Meal with Speaker

10

Day 1 Breakout Sessions

- Going Beyond Academics: Reaching At-Risk Students through Extracurricular Activities
- Learning for Increased Learning
- Shining a Spotlight on At-risk Students
- Leading for Change
- Integrating Professional Development in Your Daily Schedule
- How we Did it Together

11

Group Work: Day 1

Forging Relationships that Work

- Work with your group to develop recommendations for developing a professional learning community.
  - Identify goals
  - Determine timelines
  - Select levels of stakeholder involvement
  - Present an overview of your recommendations

12

Professional Learning

- that improves the learning of all students requires resources to support adult learning and collaboration (Learning Forward, 2011)
- involves all stakeholders sharing values and beliefs (Bernhardt, 2015)
- entails the who (professional) – those in the school or district and the why (learning) – the purpose of enhancing and extending learning for students (Lindsey et al., 2009)

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Professional Learning Standards: Guide for Achieving Learning

Standard	Category	
Standard 1	Learning Communities	allows adults to engage as learning communities with goals aligned to those of the school and district
Standard 2	Leadership	requires school leaders with the necessary skills to guide instructional improvement continuously
Standard 3	Resources	requires resources for continuous adult learning and collaboration
Standard 4	Data-driven	uses disaggregated student data as a means to identify adult learning priorities and for continuous improvement
Standard 5	Evaluation	uses more than one resource to effect change and determine the effectiveness of the changes
Standard 6	Research-based	focuses on the use of research-based strategies to improve student learning

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Professional Learning Standards: Guide for Achieving Learning

Standard	Category	
Standard 7	Designs & Strategies	uses effective learning strategies to achieve the desired results
Standard 8	Learning	incorporates the knowledge of human development
Standard 9	Collaboration Skills	requires effective collaboration amongst educators
Standard 10	Equity	creates a balanced learning environment that reflects high student expectations and appreciation of students
Standard 11	Quality Teaching	equips teachers with the necessary skills, knowledge, and fortitude to vary instruction to maximize performance results
Standard 12	Family Involvement	requires effective engagement of parents and other stakeholders in the learning process

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Professional Learning Communities

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School Culture Impact

17

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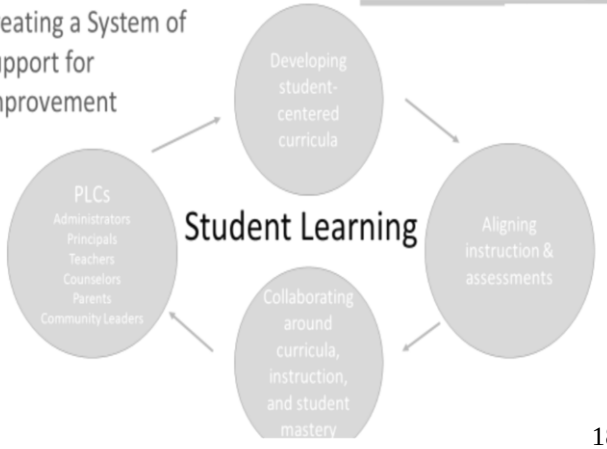
Creating a System of Support for Improvement



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Day 2

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Day 2 Activities

Sign-in, Coffee, and Networking
Breakout Session
Break
Breakout Session
Luncheon and Learn
Breakout Session
Breakout Session
Break
Individual Group Meetings

21

Day 2 Breakout Sessions

- Lead and I will Follow: Mentoring for Change
- Turning the Tide
- Building positive Relationships with Students
- Alignment of Curricula, Instruction, and Assessment
- Developing student-centered curricula
- Providing an Effective Instructional Program
- Making Meaning of Student Assessments in the 21st Century
- Developing a Culture of Increased Learning

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Develop a Culture of Collaboration

- Build trust and respect
- Foster a listening environment
- Develop a supportive atmosphere
- Provide frequent engagement opportunities
- Increase parental and community involvement
- Create a student-centered learning environment
- Collect and monitor feedback for continuous improvement

23

Increasing adult engagement and collaboration will result in improved policies and efforts to enhance academic outcomes.

Agree or Disagree	Supporting argument
Final thoughts	Opposing argument

24

Group Work: Day 2

Assessment Data is More than Numbers

- Roundtable discussions
  - Determine the overall purpose of data
  - How to read data
  - Using data to determine instructional strategies

25

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Day 3

27

Day 3 Activities

Sign-in, Coffee, and Networking
Breakout Session
Break
Breakout Session
Lunch and Learn
Breakout Session
Reflection and Evaluations

28

Day 3 Breakout Sessions

- Understanding Academic Attainment of At-risk Students
- Transferring Professional Learning into Student Achievement
- It is More than Academics that Matters
- Using Data to Make Instructional Decisions
- How Student-centered are Instructional Practice
- School Culture: Impact on Learning

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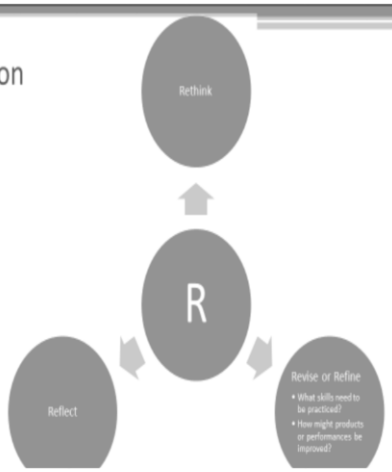
Reflection



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Starting with the End in Mind

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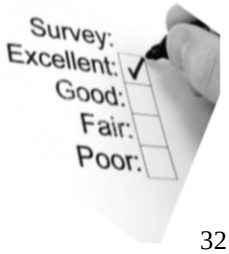
Evaluation

- The evaluation you have been provided is to help us with the following:
  - determine if the institute was beneficial for you
  - assess the amount of information you learned, and
  - identify future needs



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Together Our Students Succeed

It's a TOSS

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Evaluation

The project evaluation is an essential component to the ongoing development and success of teaching and learning practices in the district. The key factor in developing the evaluation plan is including the right questions to inform decisions based on the evaluation. The instrument used to gauge the effectiveness of the three-day professional development institute will include a questionnaire with open-ended and Likert-scale questions. Data from the evaluation will be used to identify and plan additional professional learning opportunities.

Year-Long Support

The success of the project is dependent on the sustainability of the support and follow-up throughout the year. To ensure professional learning is engrained as part of the culture of the district, opportunities for professional learning should be embedded in the schedule throughout the school year. To prevent disruption of the learning environment, professional development opportunities can be provided as webinars, web-based trainings, share and pair, reading materials, e-mail coaching/mentoring, conference calls, videotapes, and school blogs. For instructional staff, follow-up to either professional opportunity can occur during planning periods on a rotating basis. Lessons-learned and takeaways could then be compiled and shared in one group setting minimizing the out-of-classroom time and time away from administrative tasks for counselors, principals, and administrators. These professional learning opportunities can be coordinated by the districts' office of professional development.

In addition, parents and community partners can engage in similar or the same professional opportunities. Links can be provided for web-based professional learning opportunities that would keep parents and community partners engaged. PTA meetings and parent conferences already scheduled throughout the district can be used as avenues to further reach parents and provide professional learning opportunities. Town hall meetings and district forums can be additional mediums for getting information to educators, parents, and community partners. Board meetings can be used to provide updates regarding district initiatives and the district website can be used to help promote professional learning opportunities.

Conclusion

The professional development institute was designed to enhance student learning by creating a culture of cohesiveness built on the tenets of andragogy. The development of the institute was based on several factors: collaborative learning, effective and ineffective PD, active engagement, and learner-centered approaches of adults. Participants will engage in professional learning opportunities collectively and as groups with targeted learning objectives. The project can serve as a tool to assist the district with transforming into a culture of professional learning for increased student achievement and decreased dropouts.

Professional Learning Evaluation

The purpose of this evaluation is to capture feedback regarding your involvement in the three-day professional development institute.

Directions: Using the scale below, indicate how you would rate each of the following:

0 = N/A **1** = Strongly agree **2** = Agree **3** = Disagree **4** = Strongly Disagree	
	Scale Number
1. The professional learning institute met my expectations.	
2. Goals were clearly identified and met.	
3. The material was well organized, well presented, and	
4. Information shared was beneficial to me or can be used in my capacity in the learning process.	
5. The presenter was knowledgeable of the content presented.	
6. The sessions were engaging and offered opportunity for questions.	
7. Handouts were provided and supported the presentations.	

1. How would you describe your take-away from participating in the professional learning opportunity?

2. What do you consider was most effective about the workshop?

3. What do you consider least effective about the workshop?

4 Provide suggestions for future professional development topics.

Appendix B: Principals' Interview Protocol

Interviewee:	
Interviewer:	Kimberly S. Jones
Date of Interview:	
Time of Interview:	
Location of Interview:	
Description of Study:	A qualitative case study of principals, teachers, and counselors Perceptions of Curricular, Instructional, and Co-curricular Factors Influencing Students' Dropping Out

You are being requested to participate in a research case study to capture Perceptions of Perceptions of Curricular, Instructional, and Co-curricular Factors Influencing Students' Dropping Out. You were selected to participate in this study due to your familiarity and knowledge of curricular and instructional strategies and co-curricular activities in the district.

The purpose of this research is to capture thick descriptions of information pertaining to academic-related factors prompting students to drop out of Cuponia School District. You will be asked to discuss interventions and supports aimed at keeping at-risk students engaged in the learning process.

Interview questions are designed to elicit relevant information that is unique to Cuponia School District regarding identification of and supports for at-risk students, use of curricular and instructional strategies to increase academic achievement, and co-curricular activities that supplement academics. You will be asked to provide information pertaining to specific academic processes without discussing students specifically by name or sharing information that cannot be publicly disclosed.

Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary, and you may decide to withdraw at any time. There will be no compensation for participating and no penalty for choosing to withdraw. If you have your signed copy of the informed consent that was previously provided, you may give it to me now. If you did not bring it with you, please take a moment to review this copy and sign if you are willing to participate as an interviewee in the study.

Per your agreement, I will audio record the interview. Your identity will remain unanimous and your comments will be confidential. You will be provided an opportunity to review my transcription and provide follow-up feedback.

Dropouts

1. What aspects of teaching and learning do you think contribute to students dropping out?

2. How do you think principals can influence the dropout rate?

At-risk Students

1. How do you identify and engage at-risk students?

2. As a school principal, describe how you feel about at-risk students participating in co-curricular activities.

3. What do you think can be done from an administrative level to engage and support at-risk students?

Curricular and Instructional Strategies

1. Describe the involvement of school principals in the determining curricular and instructional strategies.

2. What, if anything, would you change about the curricular and instructional strategies implemented in the local school district?

3. Think of students you know who have dropped out of the district. What effect did the curriculum or instructional strategies have on students' decisions to drop out of school?

Co-curricular Activities

1. What do you consider as co-curricular activities, and do you think these activities have an impact on student achievement? Why or why not?

2. Do you think students who are more involved in co-curricular activities are less prone to dropping out? Why or why not?

3. What are your views of at-risk students participating in co-curricular activities?

If you can change two things to support at-risk students in the district, what would those two things be and how and why would these changes be effective in supporting this student group?

Your insight and participation are greatly appreciated. Thank you!

Appendix C: Teachers' Interview Protocol

Interviewee:	
Interviewer:	Kimberly S. Jones
Date of Interview:	
Time of Interview:	
Location of Interview:	
Description of Study:	A qualitative case study of principals, teachers, and counselors Perceptions of Curricular, Instructional, and Co-curricular Factors Influencing Students' Dropping Out

You are being requested to participate in a research case study to capture Perceptions of Perceptions of Curricular, Instructional, and Co-curricular Factors Influencing Students' Dropping Out. You were selected to participate in this study due to your familiarity and knowledge of curricular and instructional strategies and co-curricular activities in the district.

The purpose of this research is to capture thick descriptions of information pertaining to academic-related factors prompting students to drop out of Cuponia School District. You will be asked to discuss interventions and supports aimed at keeping at-risk students engaged in the learning process.

Interview questions are designed to elicit relevant information that is unique to Cuponia School District regarding identification of and supports for at-risk students, use of curricular and instructional strategies to increase academic achievement, and co-curricular activities that supplement academics. You will be asked to provide information pertaining to specific academic processes without discussing students specifically by name or sharing information that cannot be publicly disclosed.

Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary, and you may decide to withdraw at any time. There will be no compensation for participating and no penalty for choosing to withdraw.
If you have your signed copy of the informed consent that was previously provided, you may give it to me now. If you did not bring it with you, please take a moment to review this copy and sign if you are willing to participate as an interviewee in the study.

Per your agreement, I will audio record the interview. Your identity will remain unanimous and your comments will be confidential. You will be provided an opportunity to review my transcription and provide follow-up feedback.

Dropouts

1. What curricular and instructional practices do you think contribute to students dropping out?

2. How do you think teachers can influence the dropout rate?

At-risk Students

1. What type of activities do you incorporate in your classroom to engage at-risk students?

2. As a teacher, describe how you feel about at-risk students participating in co-curricular activities.

3. What do you think teachers can do to engage and support at-risk students?

Curricular and Instructional Strategies

1. What is your involvement in the determining curricular and instructional strategies?

2. What, if anything, would you change about the curricular and instructional strategies implemented in the local school district?

3. Think of students you know who have dropped out of the district. What effect did the curriculum or instructional strategies have on students' decisions to drop out?

Co-curricular Activities

1. What do you consider as co-curricular activities and do you think these activities have an impact on student achievement? Why or why not?

2. Describe the differences, if any, that you see in academic performance of students involved in co-curricular activities versus those who are not involved.

3. Do you think students who are more involved in co-curricular activities are less prone to dropping out? Why or why not?

4. What are your views of at-risk students participating in co-curricular activities?

If you can change two things to support at-risk students in the district, what would those two things be and how and why would these changes be effective in supporting this student group?

Your insight and participation are greatly appreciated. Thank you!

Appendix D: Counselors' Interview Protocol

Interviewee:	
Interviewer:	Kimberly S. Jones
Date of Interview:	
Time of Interview:	
Location of Interview:	
Description of Study:	A qualitative case study of principals, teachers, and counselors Perceptions of Curricular, Instructional, and Co-curricular Factors Influencing Students' Dropping Out

You are being requested to participate in a research case study to capture Perceptions of Perceptions of Curricular, Instructional, and Co-curricular Factors Influencing Students' Dropping Out. You were selected to participate in this study due to your familiarity and knowledge of curricular and instructional strategies and co-curricular activities in the district.

The purpose of this research is to capture thick descriptions of information pertaining to academic-related factors prompting students to drop out of Cuponia School District. You will be asked to discuss interventions and supports aimed at keeping at-risk students engaged in the learning process.

Interview questions are designed to elicit relevant information that is unique to Cuponia School District regarding identification of and supports for at-risk students, use of curricular and instructional strategies to increase academic achievement, and co-curricular activities that supplement academics. You will be asked to provide information pertaining to specific academic processes without discussing students specifically by name or sharing information that cannot be publicly disclosed.

Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary, and you may decide to withdraw at any time. There will be no compensation for participating and no penalty for choosing to withdraw.
If you have your signed copy of the informed consent that was previously provided, you may give it to me now. If you did not bring it with you, please take a moment to review this copy and sign if you are willing to participate as an interviewee in the study.

Per your agreement, I will audio record the interview. Your identity will remain unanimous and your comments will be confidential. You will be provided an opportunity to review my transcription and provide follow-up feedback.

Dropouts

1. What factors internal and external to the learning environment do you think contribute to students dropping out?

2. How do you think school counselors can influence the dropout rate?

At-risk Students

1. What is your role in identifying and engaging at-risk students?

2. What do you think can be done as a school counselor in engaging at-risk students?

Curricular and Instructional Strategies

1. Describe the involvement of school counselors in the determining curricular and instructional strategies.

2. What effect did the curriculum or instructional strategies have on students' decisions to drop out of school?

Co-curricular Activities

1. What do you consider as co-curricular activities, and do you think co-curricular activities have an impact on student achievement? Why or why not?

2. Do you think students who are more involved in co-curricular activities are less prone to dropping out? Why or why not?

3. What are your views of at-risk students participating in co-curricular activities?

If you can change two things to support at-risk students in the district, what would those two things be and how and why would these changes be effective in supporting this student group?

Your insight and participation are greatly appreciated. Thank you!

Appendix E: Observation Protocol

Observation Checklist

- Are there academic support opportunities available during the school day such as learning labs?
- Are there academic support opportunities available before or after school within the school building such tutoring or mentoring programs?
- Is there any information or literature publicly displayed in the office area or other area that signifies that counseling services are available or being provided?
- Are principals visibly interacting with students before classes, in the hallways, or at public events?
- How are desks and tables arranged in the classrooms?
- Did students appear to talk less and listen more to the instructor in classrooms?
- Are the classrooms often noisy and busy?
- Do the students appear to be engaged in classroom activities?

Participant (pseudonym)

Setting (pseudonym)

Observer/Role:

Date and Time of Observation:

Length of Observation:

Descriptive Notes	**Reflective Notes**

Student's comments or behavior will not be included as part of the observations.

Appendix F: Member Check Form

Date

Dear_____,

Your participation as an interviewee in the qualitative study to discern curricular, instructional, and co-curricular factors that may influence students' decisions to drop out was appreciative and insightful. Enclosed you will find a brief synopsis of the findings of the study based on an analysis of the comments captured from your interview and/or classroom observation. Please review and confirm that the findings accurately reflect a summation of your input. E-mail me at _____ or call me at _____ should you desire to add, modify, or delete anything. Also notify me if there are questions or concerns regarding the findings.

Thank you for participating in this case study.

Sincerely,

Kimberly S. Jones

Appendix G: Identified Codes

Interview Codes	Observation Codes	Document Review Codes
More involvement from counselors	Using best practices in classrooms	Build relationships with students
Teachers need to learn to unpack strategies	Open teacher/student conversations	Involve students and parents in learning process
Get to know my students by learning their names and goals	Smiling and offering praise and recognition during discussions	Regular collaboration with principals to improve instruction
Offer students one-on-one help	Student/teacher engagement	Non-student centered instructional strategies
Non-role dependent professional development	Students dependency on teachers	All stakeholders are partners
Provide professional development beyond the routine PD topics	Necessary classroom interruptions	Involve parents in developing student interventions
Targeted professional development	Provide guidance to students	Interactions with students is key to deterring behavioral issues
Greet students	Hugging students	Collaboration amongst all stakeholders
Connect with students	Inviting classrooms	Create personalized learning environments
Garnering support of coaches	Teacher lead discussions	Collaboration between school board, school leaders, and community
Use evidence-based strategies	Respect for teachers	Collaborative work between central office staff and other community constituents
Have positive Interactions with students	Respect for students	Provide individual support for students
Support students		Parents are invited to take part in the collaborative planning process of Teacher Support Teams
Provide positive reinforcements		Ongoing professional development that reflects research-based principles

Reach out to students
Monitor students
Trained instructors who are sensitive to the needs of students

Note: Mentoring/Mentorship, Collaboration and Teamwork, Professional Development, and Positive Interactions