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Pull and Push Factors That Influence a Student's Decision to Drop Out of School

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Walden University
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Abstract

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Monica Ruth Rouse

EdS, Western Illinois University, 2006

MS, Western Illinois University, 1996

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

The high school dropout rate in the United States has historically been and continues to remain a persistent concern. The dropout epidemic has primarily been studied through a quantitative lens focused on the final decision to dropout rather than the complex sequence of events that factor into the dropout decision. The purpose of this study was to explore the pull/push factors that influenced a student's decision to drop out of high school. In this qualitative study, attention was given to both understanding how students described their reasons for dropping out of school and identification of any factors that could have led them to remain in school and earn a diploma. The conceptual framework was based on pull/push factors related to students dropping out. Through a case study design, 10 participants, classified as dropouts by the selected research site, were interviewed about the influence of the push/pull factors of poverty, absence, and engagement in their decision to drop out of school. Data were analyzed through an iterative process wherein patterns were discerned appropriately. The findings support 4 central influences that serve as both pull and push factors in the decision to drop out: disinterest/disengagement, teacher connection, a sense of hopelessness, and an end to any desire to succeed in school. Furthermore, the findings support the development of school and district-wide identification and intervention programs that make relationships with students the foundation and guide educators and local policy makers in making decisions that support student success and increase the likelihood a student at risk for dropping out would remain in school and earn a high school diploma.

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Dedication

I dedicate this project to many of my teachers who helped nurture the love of learning that led me to this culminating point in my formal academic pursuits: Mrs. Hardy (Kindergarten), Mrs. Brown (first grade), Mrs. Haberle (second grade), Mrs. Selmi (third grade), Mrs. Downey (fourth grade), Mrs. Hinuebar (fifth grade), Mrs. Dillon (sixth grade), Mr. Chapman (seventh/eighth grade), Mrs. J. Thome and Mr. J. Newton (high school English), Mr. R. Deibert (high school social studies), and Mr. M. Baker and Mr. C. Lee (high school science).

I further dedicate this study to my husband and two adult children for their continued encouragement and support and reminders about the importance of this focus to the students who have dropped out.

Acknowledgments

It seems to go without saying that without the support of my family and friends, remaining committed to the journey of earning this degree would not, in all likelihood, have happened. There are so many life events that have attempted to thwart my efforts to finish my program of study. Each time a major event happened I stopped to reassess my decision to take this journey in the first place. A revelation I experienced on this journey is that I had nothing to prove to anyone, except myself. It was at this juncture that I realized a release of pressure and a different motivation to finish this journey. It is my fervent hope that the voices of the students contained in this research will be the impetus for further research that will continue to bridge the gap between theory and practice and continue to lower the dropout rate in this country. Every student has a story about what happened that caused him/her to leave school without a certification. Within each story are insights for bridging the gap. We must listen for the sake of our country's economic future.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Graduation and dropout rates in the United States have been a concern for decades (DePaoli, Balfanz, Bridgeland, Atwell, & Ingram, 2017). Between 1970 and 2002, graduation rates remained stagnant while the dropout statistics revealed that more than 1 million students dropped out of school each year during that same 30-year period (DePaoli et al., 2017). As recently as 2015, the status dropout rate hovered at 5.9%. This statistic represented the percentage of all people, ages 16 to 24 years, who were neither enrolled in school nor had they earned a high school diploma or equivalency credential, such as the general equivalency diploma (GED; Stark & Noel, 2015). In the fall of 2017, it was estimated that 4 million public school students would enroll in ninth grade, which means that approximately 236,000 of those same ninth graders would drop out of school before the end of that academic year (McFarland et al., 2017).

My purpose in this study was to gain an increased understanding about the factors that prompted students to drop out of high school and those factors that could have led to them remaining in school and earning their diploma. Although no one definitive reason exists for students dropping out of school, patterns for such a decision have emerged and point to a process of disengagement from school that occurs over many years and leads to early leaving. Engagement is thought to be a key variable in both the prediction and prevention of perpetuating the dropout epidemic (Landis & Reschly, 2013). Additional

critical factors that emerged as indicators of dropout include poverty and chronic absences (McConnell & Kubina, 2014; Schoenberger, 2012; Wexler, Pyle, & Fall, 2015).

For a shift to occur in these key variables, thereby discouraging further dropouts, there must be a clear understanding of how societal views about education and education policies converge (Al-Hattami & Al-Ahdal, 2014; Patil, 2012; Turkkahraman, 2012). This understanding can best be reached by hearing the views of those who made the decision to drop out and have experienced the consequences of such a decision. Because education has always been a means for preparing for the future, practitioners can benefit from the lessons learned from past practices and implement changes in practice that will positively affect the dropout rate. To the extent that education advances and strengthens the developmental abilities of individuals, groups, institutions, communities, and countries, it is important for practitioners to listen to the views of dropouts to continue to be a tool of individual and social transformation (Patil, 2012; Turkkahraman, 2012).

In this chapter, I focus on U.S. history of education concerning the purpose of tracking the nation's graduation rate. In addition, I highlight the distinction between graduation rate and dropout rate. I make this distinction in tandem with the emphasis on a consistent graduation tracking method to increase the accuracy of the dropout trajectory. I feature statistics regarding the disaggregation of data related to race and students with special needs. In this chapter, I also include a review of the problem statement, the research questions, and an in-depth examination of the conceptual framework supporting

this study. Information on the nature of the study, definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and the significance of the study complete this chapter.

Background

Although the history of education in the United States can be traced back prior to 1867, the history of education addressed in this chapter begins in 1867, when U.S. Congress established the national department of education charged with keeping statistics and facts that reflected the condition and progress of education in the states and surrounding territories (Snyder, 1993). It was in 1870 that the first condition and progress of education report reflected only 2% of all 17-year-olds had a secondary education (Snyder, 1993). Further, this same report indicated that 20% of the adult population was illiterate as well as 80% of the Black population (Snyder, 1993). The turn of the 21st century brought much change economically and socially in education and, in 1947, slightly more than half of all students completed high school (Ryan & Siebens, 2012). Formally, high school graduation became the norm in the 1950s, and the U.S. graduation rate peaked at 77% in 1969, shortly after the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965 (Ryan & Siebens, 2012). The graduation rate remained consistent until the 1980s when contemporary data became available on the nation's public schools.

The historical *Nation at Risk* report brought needed attention to educational reform at all levels, but an intense focus on high school students stemmed from data that reflected 13% of all 17-year-olds were functionally illiterate, with the figure as high as

40% for minority youth (Gardner, 1983). High school students were leaving school underprepared for postsecondary education or the work force. Graduation rates continued to decline throughout the 1980s and early 1990s until they stabilized at 66% in the latter part of that decade (Snyder, 1993). Gradual but steady improvements were reflected in the early decade of 2000, and the reauthorized ESEA transitioned into No Child Left Behind (NCLB; 2002). Graduation rates reached 69% in 2005, and by 2012, using a universal federal reporting formula, graduation rates were at 80%. Finally, in 2014, the United States reached a historical graduation rate of 82.3% (DePaoli, Balfanz, & Bridgeland, 2016). In 2015, NCLB was, again, reauthorized under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA; 2015).

Rising graduation rates represent progress among U.S. high school students. However, climbing graduation rates of this magnitude have come under scrutiny, and the possibility that schools have gotten creative about reporting their graduation rates has been suspect (Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2016). Also expressed were concerns about students being pushed out of school and encouraged to seek alternative methods, such as credit recovery programs that subscribe to a lower level of rigor, to earn a high school diploma (DePaoli et al., 2016). Data continue to reflect that a disproportionate number of students of color leave school early. In the United States, 22% of White students and 17% of Asian students dropped out of school in 2011, in stark contrast to 42% of Hispanic students, 43% of African American students, and 46% of Native American Indian students (American Psychological Association, 2012; Kena et al., 2016). An additional

subgroup that reflects lower graduation rates is low-income families in which a reported third of the nation's states graduated less than 70% of students from such families. Considering that 47% of the nation's 2014 graduating cohort came from low-income families this clearly highlights a problem that warrants further study (DePaoliet al., 2016). Furthermore, 33 states graduated less than 70% of students with disabilities (SWD), and less than 50% of these students graduated in six of those states. In 35 states, English language learners (ELLs) graduated at rates less than 70%, and seven of those states had ELL graduation rates less than 50%. Finally, a new subgroup to be measured under the new ESSA was the nation's homeless population, and historical evidence reflects this subgroup may have graduated the lowest percentage of students of any subgroup (DePaoli et al., 2016).

As the need to address the dropout crisis has evolved, graduation rates have become an element of study. Historically, inconsistent reporting of graduation rates led to unreliable data, and the introduction of the Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR) in 2010 was purposed to add consistency, accuracy, and integrity to the data (DePaoli et al., 2016). The ACGR for a district is established by identifying incoming ninth graders and then tracking them as a cohort as they progress, annually, through high school from grade level to grade level. This number is adjusted according to the addition or subtraction of students who transfer in or out of the cohort. The ACGR is the percentage of the students in the cohort who graduate within 4 years (McFarland et al., 2017). As of 2014, all states began using this formula to report data (DePaoli et al., 2016; Kena et al., 2016). This

formula supports the nation's commitment to raising the graduation rate by promoting accuracy and serving as the lens through which efforts are made to reduce the dropout rate. Furthermore, as the nation has committed to look closely at the graduation rate, a more thorough analysis has been made to identify and understand the gaps that have existed among students who identify with a racial minority, have a disability, are from a low socioeconomic status (SES), or are ELLs (Balfanz et al., 2014; DePaoli et al., 2016; McMurray, 2014; Rumberger, 2015).

Racially, although the dropout rates of Latino and African American students have declined since 2002, there has continued to be a differential of 11.4 and 18.0 percentage points between Latino and African American students and White and Asian students (Balfanz et al., 2014; Kena et al., 2016). This differential has been an important factor in light of the fact that, since 2001, Hispanic enrollments in public schools have been rising, African American enrollments have been steady, and White enrollments have been declining (Balfanz et al., 2014). One explanation for these data may rest with districts who have engaged zero tolerance policies to combat discipline challenges. Such policies have been suspected as having a disproportionate effect on minority students (Balfanz et al., 2014). The premise behind a zero-tolerance policy is to remove a student for disruptive behavior to deter others from like behavior and not only reduce disruptions but also improve the climate for other students (Balfanz et al., 2014). Historically, zero tolerance policy addressed the most disruptive student behavior, such as drug-related or violent behaviors. However, in more recent years, districts have exercised a more liberal

application of the zero-tolerance practice (Balfanz et al., 2014). With the explosion of suspensions as a primary disciplinary tool, roughly a 40% increase in as many years, disaggregating the data to study any link of suspensions to the dropout crisis may be a tool in reducing the dropout rate for minority students (Balfanz et al., 2014).

In addition, nearly two-thirds of U.S. states have shown student populations that are at least 40% low income (DePaoli et al., 2016; Kena et al., 2016). In 2012-2013, the ACGR for low-income students reached 73.3% (DePaoli et al., 2016). This is a significant statistic considering U.S. public schools became majority low income in 2013 at 51% (Balfanz et al., 2014).

Furthermore, as the population of ELLs in the United States has continued to rise providing help for these students has reflected a need for strong instructional supports (Balfanz et al., 2014). As with the ELL population, SWDs, who make up approximately 13% of all public education students, have experienced a low graduation rate at 61.9% (Balfanz et al., 2014). With the right supports, it has been estimated that approximately 85% to 90% of SWDs could meet regular diploma requirements (Balfanz et al., 2014).

Research in the last several decades has reflected studies identifying the factors that *push* students out of school as a result of adverse situations within the school environment that lead to consequences and, ultimately, student dropout. In addition, researchers have cited factors that *pull* students out of school system. Such factors are those that lie within the student and divert him or her from finishing school (Doll, Eslami, & Walters, 2013; Rumberger, 2015). Also confirmed through research is that the decision

to drop out of school is a gradual process that, despite the common indicators of poverty, chronic absence, and a lack of engagement, cannot be presented as a causal relationship (De Witte, Cabus, Thyssen, Groot, & Massen van den Brink, 2013). Further, these three observable indicators are interconnected to the point that studying them in isolation is sure to be met with challenges of a significant nature (De Witte et al., 2013). What has been documented has supported educational efforts to put into place practices that help reduce the dropout rate. What has not been thoroughly documented in research, however, is the insight from the students who, themselves, have dropped out of school. I found one study in which the researchers cited personal insights from students in regard to the pull/push factors that influenced their decision to drop out of school. Without such information to guide the practices of educators within the classroom, it seems inevitable that the dropout epidemic will persist. Students will continue to drop out, and educators will continue to miss opportunities to put targeted interventions in place that may reverse the direction toward dropout in which a student is headed.

Problem Statement

The district I selected for this study is one that has devoted much effort to address the dropout crisis. During the last 8 years, state education data reflected the research site's dropout data for Grades 7 to 12 to range from its lowest in 2014 to 2015 at 2.61% to its highest in 2011 to 2012 at 6.04%. The most recent data in 2017 to 2018 showed the district's dropout rate for all students to be 3.88% for Grades 7 to 12. In addition, disaggregated dropout data reflected special populations within the district that needed

attention included dropout rates for students with individual education plans (IEPs) at 17.4%, students on free/reduced lunch at 60.5%, English language learners at 5.56%, students identified as African American at 19%, and those students identified as Latino at 13.9% (Iowa Department of Education, 2018). This district's certified enrollment, Grades PK-12, was slightly more than 15,500 for the 2017-2018 school year. This district has, historically, served four individual communities: one large/main community and three outlying and significantly smaller communities. The district covers approximately 110 square miles. In addition, the district's financial experts maintain a budget of more than $200 million. This district employs more than 1,400 teachers. The diversity of the district includes 55.3% White, 19.1% Black/African American, 13.9% Hispanic, and 12.6% multiracial/other students (Iowa Department of Education, 2018).

In 2016, the research district put into place a teaching and learning plan that promoted high expectations for instructional practices that could translate into improvement in the graduation rate over the next 5 years. According to the 2017 teaching and learning plan for the research school district, the goals of the plan included teaching and learning supports for advancement in four major areas:

- Multitiered system of support for students (MTSS), which was intended to provide additional time and support to each child as needed to learn at high levels. This system addressed both the academic and behavioral needs of students.
- Standards-based assessment and reporting (SBAR), which is a system that depends on standards-based assessment and reporting in a clearly defined K-12

curriculum. This focused instructional efforts in the district on a demonstration of skills by students as opposed to the typical Carnegie unit of time still used by many districts.

- A unique plan that was relevant to district demographics and purposed providing instruction, resources, and support to aid students with social, emotional, and behavioral needs. This element of the plan focused on a schoolwide system of positive behavior supports, intended to increase student engagement, and the awareness of mental health issues in the district's respective schools.
- Instructional practices that focused on the growth and development of the teachers who served the district. The focus of this element was research-based best practices in instruction.

This same teaching and learning plan also set goals regarding the graduation dropout rate; the more specific goals included increasing the graduation rate in Years 4 and 5 by 1% each year as well as realizing a decrease in the dropout rate by 0.25% each year. Achieving both of these goals would ensure this district was in line with the state dropout rate of 2.5%. Further, this district set a goal to boast that 95% of all high school students would be on target for graduation by 2021.

Although my focus in this study was a single district, the dropout epidemic has been a national concern for decades in districts of all sizes across the United States (DePaoli et al., 2017). Because of the broad scope of the dropout problem, research abounds and can be used to guide efforts to further reduce the effects of this epidemic.

The plethora of research during the past several decades has enlightened educators and policymakers alike about the reason(s) students leave school early and fail to earn a diploma. As a result of research, policies that have pushed students out of school, such as zero-tolerance for specific disciplinary violations or requiring high-stakes testing to graduate, have been under a high level of scrutiny (Simson, 2014). A focus has been on supports that have been put in place to help struggling students succeed and stay in school. One such support strategy is response to intervention (RTI). RTI is a system constructed of three distinct levels or tiers designed to offer individualized support for students who have been identified as struggling either with learning or behavior challenges through a respective school process (Howell & Patton, 2013). Each stage of the RTI process, and there are three in total, offers more intensive supports (Howell & Patton, 2013). Another such strategy that has been implemented is check and connect. Check and connect is based on monitoring school performance, mentoring students, and advocating through personalized and individualized support services (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Research revealed that these strategies provide prime opportunities for interventions that can be implemented right in the classroom (Lamote, Speybroeck, Van Den Noortgate, & Van Damme, 2013).

Yet, the dropout crisis has continued, and the effects of school dropout have not been confined to educational institutions. These effects have extended beyond these institutions. Dropouts cost society billions of dollars in lost economic productivity, increased risk of health problems, a more apathetic civic attitude, a higher incarceration

rate, and immeasurable costs to future children (Fan & Wolters, 2014; Ricard & Pelletier, 2016; Schoenberger, 2012; Wilkins & Bost, 2016). Reducing the dropout rate through research continues to remain critical. The history of the United States reflects an educational crisis that has been studied in depth. However, what is missing from the research, specifically within the last 5 years, is any dialogue with the students who made the decision to drop out of school. The insights of these students, from their personal experiences, would allow for a deeper understanding of the reasons they chose to leave school early. This understanding would, in turn, aid schools in their efforts to support students in overcoming challenges and graduating.

Purpose of the Study

My purpose in this study was to gain an increased understanding about the factors that prompted students to drop out of school and factors that could have led to them remaining in school. This research is important to school leaders and policymakers because of the high accountability measures that rest on those entities through the recently reauthorized NCLB in 2002 to the ESSA Act in 2015. Educators in priority areas such as college and career readiness, interventions and student support for those who struggle, and performance on annual statewide assessments must give attention to the experiences of those students who dropped out of school. Identifying and understanding the antecedents to dropout may provide invaluable information in reducing the dropout rate (Burris & Roberts, 2012; Ekstrand, 2015).

Research Question

In alignment with the research problem and purpose, I posed the following research questions:

RQ1: How do students who have left school early describe their reasons for dropping out?

RQ2: What factors do students who have left school early identify that could have led to them staying in school and earning their high school diploma?

I used a qualitative research approach to address and explore the research questions. I implemented a basic case study, using personal interviews and inductive data analysis, to provide critical insights into the dropout problem. The research site was a large, urban school district in Iowa with a diverse population and an overall school enrollment of 17,500 in 2016-2017 (Iowa Department of Education, 2018). This number included a student population of 40.86% African American, Hispanic, Asian, and Multiracial students. The district's free and reduced population was 58.24%, and 14.54% of students received services for IEPs (Iowa Department of Education, 2018)

Conceptual Framework

According to Merriam (2009), a framework for a study draws upon the definitions, models, and themes of a particular literature base. Historically, the pioneering framework that has influenced continued studies on the dropout epidemic is classified as push/pull (Jordan, Lara, & McPartland, 1994). Push factors are those situations within the school environment that lead to consequences and, ultimately, to students dropping out.

Such factors might include zero tolerance policies, high stakes tests, overcrowded facilities, discipline policies, and lack of extracurricular activities (Carl, Richardson, Cheng, Kim, & Meyer, 2013; Doll et al., 2013; Rumberger, 2015). Pull factors are those that lie within the student and divert him or her from finishing school. Examples of pull factors may include teenage pregnancy, family finances, illness, and student mobility (Doll et al., 2013; Ohrtman & Preston, 2014; Rumberger, 2015).

This framework encourages the exploration of the dropout epidemic and invites the perspective of the dropouts, themselves, to be a central aspect of continued research while acting as an impetus for deeper exploration of the pull/push factors as antecedents to making the decision to drop out. In addition, through the integration of the established research and the insights of those who have dropped out, a new vision can be constructed that is focused on dropout prevention that is a direct result of a thorough understanding of the push/pull factors that influence a student's decision to drop out of school.

Nature of the Study

I selected a case study design for this research study. I chose this design, in large part, because of its tendency to focus on meaning and understanding of a process (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Patton, 2015). In addition, what made the case study an appropriate method of design for this study was its allowance of a focus on a particular research site and the study of a problem in real-life context. The practical historical challenges the research site has experienced with dropouts found this district searching for answers. Another element of the case study design that was instrumental in the

selection of this design was its ability to bring about new meaning. Merriam (2009) identified that an ability to seek new meaning as "heuristic" reflecting an approach to problem solving and discovery. The phenomenon of dropout and what the factors are in the decision to drop out warranted such an approach. My focus in this study was on the real-life experiences of students who dropped out of school before earning a high school diploma or equivalency credential. Individual interviews with former students, who dropped out of school from the designated research site were conducted. I used purposeful sampling as the primary method to select the participants. I interviewed each participant, and I transcribed and member-checked each interview. From that point, I coded the data.

Definitions

I defined the following terms for this study:

Adjusted cohort graduation rate (*ACGR*): A formula whereby each freshman class or cohort is tracked in the course of four years, from the start of the freshman year until the end of the fourth year, and graduates with a regular diploma. (Stark & Noel, 2015).

Dropout: A person, ages 16 to 24 years, who is neither enrolled in school nor has earned a high school diploma or equivalency credential (Kena et al., 2016; Stark & Noel, 2015).

Homelessness: Children for whom a fixed or regular residence is absent due to any number of reasons, including but not limited to economic hardship, loss of housing, or other emergency situation (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Poverty: A delineation by the U.S. Census Bureau whereby the total gross income of a family is less that the family's threshold (Kena et al., 2016).

Pull factors: Factors that lie within the student and divert him or her from finishing school (i.e., family needs, employment; Doll et al., 2013).

Push factors: Harmful practices that occur within the school environment and lead to consequences, ultimately resulting in dropout (i.e., attendance policies, zero-tolerance discipline policies; Doll et al., 2013).

Socioeconomic status (*SES*): An index composition of often equally weighted, standardized components, such as parents' education, father's occupation, family income, and household items. The ranges within this index include high, middle, and low and are based on weighted index distribution (Kena et al., 2016).

Assumptions

My first assumption in this study was that all participants would reveal the exact nature of their reasons for dropping out of school according to their recollection. In contrast, I also assumed that some of the participants may have been reticent to describe their reasons for dropping out of school because they did not wish to recall specifics that may have bordered on painful or traumatic. However, an extended assumption was that participants would be honest in their recollections to the extent possible. I assumed that

because the study was anchored in the real-life experiences of the participants, the outcome of the study would provide valuable information for the research site in framing future decisions regarding educational practices.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this study included individual, in-person, interviews with ten participants between the ages of 18 and 21 years who dropped out of school. The qualitative nature of this study, as well as the small sampling, was prohibitive to making any generalizations outside of the research site. The interview process included a conversation component with each participant and focused on questions related to the research study, whereby a discovery of the factors that influenced the interviewee's decision to drop out of school was made. The interview was a semistructured series of questions, and each interview was recorded to preserve everything that was said during the interview for transcript verification (Patton, 2015). Also, as suggested by Merriam (2009), any observation notes taken during the interview were immediately transcribed to insure the most accurate reflection possible.

Delimitations of this study included choices made by me, including the focus of the research itself. The research problem was selected because I placed a value on it above other problems that could also have had a high value. Additional delimitations included the choice of research location, participants, and the methodology that I used in the study.

Limitations

My purpose in this qualitative research was to focus on a smaller population to allow in-depth focus on the details shared by the participants. Because of this desire to study a small number of subjects of particular interest, a limitation was with sample size and the inability of such results to be generalized to a broader audience (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015). Time was an additional limitation of this research. Conducting individual interviews, coding, transcription, and analyzing data required an extensive amount of time (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015). Another limitation with the selected method of data collection involved the participant's reliance on memory about events that occurred in the past. Numerous life events may have altered an individual's recollection of the actual factors or depth of influence of factors in a decision to drop out of school, which posed a possible problem with reliability. Finally, because this study stemmed from a personal passion, researcher bias was considered as a possible limitation. Analysis and interpretation of data allowed for more latitude for subjectivity and personal bias to influence findings (Patton, 2015). These limitations could have influenced reporting objectivity in ways that could have influenced the study.

Significance

This study was significant on numerous levels. Practically, not only was the individual student negatively influenced by the decision to dropout, but also society as a whole was negatively affected. The economic and social losses that results from a single dropout has been undisputed and affects annual and lifetime earnings of the dropout as

well as lost revenue for society (Burris & Roberts, 2012; De Witte et al., 2013; Stark & Noel, 2015). In addition, dropouts are more likely to live less healthy lives (De Witte et al., 2013; Wilkins & Bost, 2016). Intellectually, the decision to dropout is made in the course of time (Messacar & Oreopoulos, 2013; Wexler et al., 2015). Finding possible causal factors may encourage the implementation of possible preventative measures, thereby shifting the likelihood that a student may be left to struggle for long periods. Such interventions and supports could encourage a different outcome (Wexler et al., 2015).

Summary

In this chapter, the background and history laid a strong foundation to introduce the need for this research study. Also targeted was the gap in practice delineated by information regarding the discrepancy in the graduation rates of students of color, students from poverty, and students with disabilities. This information reinforced the need for this study as the research focus was on how these factors influenced the research participants in their respective decision to drop out of school. The problem statement, the purpose statement, and the research questions provided the direction for this study. These sections were followed with the conceptual framework as well as the justification for the chosen selected case study methodology which supported the development of the study. The chapter also included definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitations, and the limitations of the study. Finally, the chapter concluded with a brief synopsis of the significance of the study which is an important aspect in consideration of the level of

social change that could be linked to this study. In the literature review in Chapter 2, I will provide extensive insight into the research regarding the dropout epidemic, including consistent pull/push factors that might serve as antecedents in a student's decision to drop out of school.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

To gain an understanding about the factors that influence a student's decision to drop out of school and those factors that may encourage dropouts to remain in school and earn a regular high school credential, I will provide a review of the literature. In this literature review, I will focus on the pull/push factors and the complexity and interconnectedness of these factors that may lead to a student making the decision to drop out of school. I cover the role of the following pull/push factors: poverty, chronic absenteeism, and motivation. This research is important to policymakers and school leaders because of the high accountability measures schools are subjected to as well as the negative consequences that befall both the student who drops out and society. These negative consequences include increased unemployment, increased crime rates, increased mental and physical health challenges, and the result of lower lifetime financial earnings of a student who drops out of school. In this chapter, I will encapsulate the process that I used to accomplish a thorough review of the literature, introduce the conceptual framework that provides the foundation for this study, review the literature as related to key concepts and variables, and suggest a gap between the literature and practice that I addressed in this study through the intended methodology in Chapter 3.

Literature Search Strategy

I began my exploration for research with a general Google Scholar search. I also explored individual databases with the education research comprehensive database on the

Walden University website. I searched Education Source and ERIC in addition to the multidisciplinary database of Sage Premier. I began the search process with the terms *high school dropout and indicators of dropping out* and further refined my search to seek peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2012 and 2017 in all searches. After a period of several weeks, I refined my timeline to resources between 2015 and 2017. Under doctoral resources, I explored a number of dissertations to help guide my process. In total, I was exposed to 186 articles that I previewed by either reading the abstract or skimming the entire article. In addition, various resources cited in these initial articles led me to explore 48 more articles. As I began to focus in on the primary indicators of dropout, I used leads from the research to support the target indicators in my project: *SES*, *attendance*, *school climate*, and *motivation*. After an extensive review of the research I winnowed my sources to the much smaller number peer-reviewed articles I believe to be the most reflective of a pattern of interdependence with the indicators of dropout amongst the nation's adolescents: *poverty*, *chronic absences*, and *student motivation*.

Conceptual Framework

The current research on dropout promotes a framework wherein a plethora of factors act as antecedents to pull or push students out of school (Carl et al., 2013; Doll et al., 2013; Lamote et al., 2013; Rumberger, 2015; Simson, 2014). These researchers promote that the decision of a student to drop out of school is based on factors called pull or push. This pull/push framework was introduced in 1994 by Jordan et al. Succinctly,

pushout describes factors wherein the agent is the school and elements regarding how the institution functions actually discourages students from staying in school (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011). Contrarily, *pull factors* are those for which the individual considers leaving school after assessing the gains and losses associated with his or her individual circumstances (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011). Ultimately, the decision to dropout is a complex one based on factors that are unique for each individual (Doll et al., 2013; Rumberger, 2015). The complexity of the dropout epidemic, itself, has been noted in seven separate longitudinal studies that reinforce the research on the pull/push framework. Between 1955 and 2002, these national studies were conducted by organizations such as Educational Testing Services, Bureau of Labor and Statistics, and the United States Department of Education. What was consistently shown in each of these longitudinal studies was that the dominant justification for the decision to drop out of school lay in the pull factors. As each of the last five studies was implemented, the complexity of the dropout decision was reinforced through the integration of questions that had not been previously considered, such as early versus late dropouts, school safety perceptions, and administrative and teacher perceptions (Doll et al., 2013).

These and other studies promoted the pull/push framework were rooted in two factors that were predictive in nature: individual and institutional (Rumberger, 2015). The individual framework promoted that the ownership of the decision to drop out was embedded in student attributes. The basic premise was that a student's values and attitudes affected behavior, and this interaction contributed to the decision, in time, to

leave school early (Rumberger, 2015). As an example, consider a student who withdrew from school based on experiences related to challenging academics which, in turn, led to a discouraged attitude which, in turn, led to skipping class which, in turn, led to the decision to drop out completely. This scenario was noted as a decision rooted in academic engagement (Doll et al., 2013; Lamote et al., 2013; Rumberger, 2015). In contrast, consider a student who did well in school but struggled with peers. Engagement with peers is a social aspect of the learning process and is frequently cited in the literature as an element in the decision to drop out (Doll et al., 2013; Lamote et al., 2013). An example of this situation might be a student who did well academically but, due to struggles fitting in or feeling accepted by peers, assessed the losses associated with dropping out to be less of a risk than remaining in school and, subsequently, dropped out. In essence, this student exercised school refusal behaviors that were a result of a change in attitude and, ultimately, a shift in a value (school was important but becomes unimportant).

Schools wield a great deal of influence over student achievement, and their influence has been connected to the dropout epidemic as an element that compromise a student's quest for academic and social achievement (Lamote et al., 2013; Rumberger, 2015; Simson, 2014; Van Eck, Johnson, Bettencourt, & Johnson, 2017). Although the institution, itself, cannot control any family dynamics or student background influences that may affect a student's changes for success in school, evidence supports that school factors that were within the scope of the institution's control were influential toward a

student's achievement. Consider school policies and practices. Although institutional policies are implemented to encourage effective school practices, such policies can act as an impetus for a student to make the decision to leave school early (Lamote et al., 2013; Rumberger, 2015; Simson, 2014). An example of an institutional policy or practice that leads to a voluntary departure of a student might be a student who found motivation to come to school through athletic programs, and as a result of budgetary concerns, the school cut such programs, thereby taking away that student's motivation for attending school. In contrast, a student may have been involuntarily pushed out of school and made the decision to drop out due to the implementation of repeated suspensions from school for minor disciplinary infractions.

Historically, the motivation that results in the decision to leave school early has been a complex combination of interwoven pull/push factors that influenced a student's decision to drop out of school over time. An examination of the existing research regarding dominant pull/push factors over several years reflected the increase in the complexity of the pull/push factors and documented the changing needs of students with time. It is the progression of the research that both solidifies the support for the pull/push framework and challenges future research specific to the experiences to the individual students to continue to explore the complexity of this educational challenge.

Because the nature of this research study focused on the individual experiences of each dropout, a case study approach seemed most logical. The case study provided an opportunity to study the participant as well as gain insights into the research site, as an

institution. Insights gained from each participant included information regarding the structure of the social institution, such as policies and practices that may have proven influential in the participant's decision-making process (i.e., attendance and discipline).

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

Although in the last decade the United States has seen a decline in the dropout rate across all races, for students with disabilities (SWDs), and for youth in low-income families, the loss of those who drop out continues to have implications that reach beyond the dropouts themselves. Identifying and studying the push and pull factors that become an impetus for dropout is imperative. Gaining an understanding of these factors would promote the creation of a purposeful set of actions that could be put in place that would continue to reduce the dropout rate in the United States. Such actions would not be limited to what the schools could do but what any society could and should do to support the education of all youth.

Pull/Push Factors

As I conducted the literature review, patterns emerged that revealed dominant pull and push factors as the impetus for dropout. Although these indicators were addressed as either pull or push in a respective source, it became clear that three primary factors could serve as both pull and push: socioeconomic status, attendance, and motivation/engagement. An additional pull factor that emerged as highly relevant in the decision to drop out of school was mental health challenges, and a push factor that warranted attention was identified as authoritative school climate.

Socioeconomic status (SES). Socioeconomic status (SES), at or below the poverty level, is a risk factor associated with dropping out of school. In fact, SES is considered one of the most salient predictors of high school dropout (Balfanz, 2013; Balfanz et al., 2014; Berkowitz, Moore, Astor, & Benbenishty, 2017; Burris & Roberts, 2012; Haan, Boon, Vermeiren, Hoeve, & de Jong, 2015; Kim, 2014; Lam, 2014; Petrick, 2014; Rendon, 2014). In the United States, more than 1 in 5 children below the age of 18 (nearly 16 million children) live in poverty (Jiang, Granja, & Koball, 2017). More specifically to those youth who are within the critical years of making the decision to drop out of school, 39% of these youth, ages 12-17, live in low-income families (Jiang et al., 2017). Ultimately, children from poverty are five times as likely not to graduate as middle-income families and six times as likely as higher-income youth (Stark & Noel, 2015). While living in poverty does not signify the educational outcome will be drop out, clearly the conditions significantly impact a student for drop out by acting as a pull factor.

Access to Resources as a Pull Factor of SES

Poverty can significantly affect a family's access to resources to foster learning opportunities that, in turn, can inhibit a child's cognitive ability. Such learning opportunities are referred to as cultural capital (Lam, 2014; Lavrijsen & Nicaise, 2015). A lack of resources that provide opportunities may include the absence of materials, such as basic school supplies or study space in the home (Lavrijsen & Nicaise, 2015). It may also include a lack of access to educational toys or the ability to take field trips, attend the

theater, visit the library, or go to a museum. Cultural capital stimulates a child's cognitive ability, and cognitive ability is the most prominent determinant of a child's educational expectations (Kim, 2014; Lam, 2014; Lavrijsen & Nicaise, 2015). Such culturally stimulating opportunities allow a child a chance at academic success comparable to his peers from higher socio-economic classes. When it comes to student achievement, access to money matters.

Cognitive Ability as a Pull Factor of SES

Because poverty is a factor in the development of a child's cognitive ability and because, in part, of access to resources that stimulate development, a child from poverty is likely to begin his educational journey at a disadvantage. Low-SES children have cognitive difficulties, including high levels of distractibility, challenges in monitoring the quality of their work, short attention spans, and difficulty generating new solutions to problems (Jensen, 2013). Because of this beginning deficit, children from poverty tend to have more limited vocabularies and less background knowledge as they age (Balfanz, 2013; Lam, 2014; Petrick, 2014). It seems logical that this dynamic would perpetuate a negative attitude toward school and, as the gap between peers widens, present as a risk factor for dropout.

Health as a Pull Factor of SES

Poverty can negatively affect children's health and well-being. The dynamic created by living conditions associated with poverty affects a child's birth weight, access to healthy and nutritional foods, access to appropriate medical and dental care, and access

to resources that support positive mental and behavioral health (Haan et al., 2015; Kim, 2014; Lam, 2014; Petrick, 2014; Ullucci & Howard, 2015). Currently, the two most prevalent chronic health challenges that children from poverty face includes asthma with an increase of 25.8% from 2012, and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) with an increase of 43.2% from 2012 (Pulcini, Zima, Kelleher, & Houtrow, 2017). These chronic health conditions may not, themselves, lead to increased absences from school. However, the lack of appropriate health care to treat these chronic conditions, often a consequence of living in poverty, might. Children who are not in school do not learn.

Poverty as a Push Factor

To view how poverty plays into the academic attainment of a child through only the pull of the family's role would be to negate the importance of the role of the school as a push factor in the success of a child from poverty. Berkowitz et al. (2017) purported that the school's role in predicting academic achievement of a student from poverty is as paramount as the family's role. The school's role must be one that fosters teacher attitudes and removes discriminatory institutional practices (Petrick, 2014). Such actions have the power to transform education for children from poverty.

Teacher Attitudes About Poverty

Attitudes within a school that students from poverty cannot or do not want to learn serves only to perpetuate a cycle of low expectations and failure. Emphasizing the label of poverty often leads teachers to make excuses for students and convince themselves of how unimportant and ineffectual their teaching is to a child living in

poverty (Ullucci & Howard, 2015). Furthermore, the establishment of low expectations by teachers has a direct influence over a child's academic performance (Lam, 2014). Ultimately, this is an example of institutional discrimination against children from poverty over which they have no control (Lam, 2014). The school will remain a push factor toward dropout for children from low SES until such a time that the institution considers how its teachers can serve as the mediating factor between the child and his/her academic achievement (Ullucci & Howard, 2015).

Institutional Discrimination and Poverty

Educators must strive to nurture a "class conscious" climate in their institutions to most successfully support the education of children from poverty (Ullucci & Howard, 2015). Such a climate involves delivery of quality professional development focused on how poverty does and does not affect learning and how a teacher's own preconceived notion about poverty impact instruction (Ullucci & Howard, 2015). Teacher understanding of such dynamics raises the likelihood that children of poverty will not be victimized by negative stereotypes (Berkowitz et al., 2017; Ullucci & Howard, 2015). Institutions should have well-articulated protocol in place that insure discrimination does not root itself in school practices (Ullucci & Howard, 2015). Practices that are implemented to eliminate discrimination within the institution promise to have an influence on all children, especially those from impoverished families.

Chronic Absenteeism

When a child is not in school, opportunities to learn and build skills are lost. In 2014 the total population of pre-K-12 public school enrollment was 50 million. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2016), in this same year, 1 in 7 (14%) of these students missed 3 weeks or more of school, totaling 98 million school days lost. Across the United States more than 500 districts reported that, in 2014, 30% or more of their students missed at least 3 weeks of school (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Chronic absenteeism is a key indicator of students likely to drop out of school (Balfanz, 2016; London, Sanchez, & Castrechini, 2016; McConnell & Kubina, 2014; Sahin, Arseven, & Kilic, 2016; Van Eck et al., 2017). Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing 10 or more days in any given school year for any reason and is higher in high school and the early elementary grades (Balfanz & Burns, 2012; Gottfried, 2014; Sprick, Alabiso, & Yore, 2015). Students who face chronic absenteeism tend to already face significant challenges and could benefit most from school, e.g., students who are highly mobile or homeless, low-income students, SWDs, and those who are involved in the juvenile justice system (Balfanz, 2016; Henderson, Hill, & Norton, 2014; London et al., 2016).

Mobility as a Pull Factor

The foundational element for success in school is daily attendance. For students with circumstances that pull them out of school, the intention of earning a diploma is often elusive. Mobility can be a result of voluntary (i.e., moving to a better home) and involuntary factors (i.e. getting evicted from a residence) and is a widespread problem

facing American schools (Haelermans & De Witte, 2015; Metzger, Fowler, Anderson, & Lindsay, 2015). In fact, the majority of all school-aged children make at least one school change over their educational careers that is a not the result of a promotion (Rumberger, 2015). Because there is no federal mandate to collect such data, mobility data must be estimated from a variety of data sources. The U.S. Census reported that "13.5% of U.S. school-aged children (5 to 17 years of age) changed residences between 2012 and 2013" (Rumberger, 2015, p. 5). Further research supports a consistent and severe effect on test scores and high school graduation as a result of absenteeism related to mobility (Rumberger, 2015). The fact that mobility puts youth at risk for dropping out of school is undisputed and should not be assumed to be less than a serious problem.

Homelessness as a Pull Factor

Homelessness has become a concern for the United States over the past two decades and can be a factor in the mobility of a family, and, thus, a factor in a child's ability to attend school. According the U.S. Department of Education's count on homeless children and the U.S. census data from 2013, 1 in every 30 children in the nation experiences homelessness every year, totaling 2.5 million children. The two major promoters of this number are the nation's high poverty rate and the lack of affordable housing (McKinley-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvement Act, 2001). A relationship is supported by research between the frequency of episodes of homelessness for children in primary school and a higher level of chronic absences for those same children in third grade (Balfanz, 2013; Fantuzzo, LeBoeuf, Brumley, & Perlman, 2013).

In addition, while the relationship between homelessness and educational outcomes is inconclusive, there is supportive research regarding the relationship between positive educational outcomes and attendance (Balfanz, 2016; Metzger et al., 2015). The relationship between homelessness and chronic absenteeism is one that has a myriad of consequences.

Prevalent Chronic Illnesses as Pull Factors

Children with chronic illnesses have an uphill battle when it comes to school attendance. Chronic illnesses, such as epilepsy and asthma, can cause a high degree of absenteeism that interferes with the quality of education of the child. Epilepsy is the most common neurological condition in children and, therefore, the most likely condition encountered by school professionals (Barnett & Gay, 2015). A child with epilepsy may experience unprovoked and recurrent seizures because of a change in cerebral functioning (Barnett & Gay, 2015). In 2015, 1.2% of the total U.S. population had active epilepsy. This equates to a total of approximately 3.4 million. When the data is disaggregated, this total represents 3 million adults and 470,000 children (Zack & Kabau, 2017). According the latest estimates, this 470,000 translates to about 6 in every 1,000 students (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017). In addition, uncontrolled asthma is an important leading cause of school absenteeism (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017; Pedersen, 2016). On average, children with asthma are absent from school 2 weeks across the academic year and require elevated medical services by school

nurses (Pedersen, 2016). These chronic illnesses are the most prevalent faced by all children regardless of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics.

Chronic Absenteeism as a Push Factor

Chronic absence was added as a metric by which to measure success with the recent reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act into Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA; 2015). Chronic absences are caused by a myriad of reasons, and to only focus on those that pull students out of school would be to disregard the role of the school in establishing its responsibility for the constructs that often push students out of school and into the status of dropout.

School Punishment as a Push Factor in Chronic Absenteeism

In public schools, it is common for issues of attendance to be discussed on a daily basis. Issues of absences are among the challenges that plague administration and teachers. To force students into compliance with attendance expectations, it is not uncommon for schools to implement policies that punish students for excessive absences (Gage, Sugai, Lunde, & DeLoreto, 2013). Often referred to as *kid catchers* such policies and practices can take the form of a removal of institutional support as students transition from one grade level to the next or inconsistent and unjust punishments, such as zero tolerance policies for discipline issues (Schoenberger, 2012; Van Eck et al., 2017). As a result of policies and practices that are highly punitive students become disengaged from the educational process, and this disengagement can result in elevated rates of absenteeism.

Zero-Tolerance in Philosophy and Practice

Zero-tolerance became a part of the public-school vocabulary in the mid-1980s. With the passage of the Drug Free School Act of 1986 and the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994, zero tolerance was integrated into education policy and was used as a philosophy that required the implementation of severe pre-determined consequences for student behaviors outside of the original intention of the zero-tolerance platform (Mallett, 2016; Monahan, VanDerhei, Bechtold, & Cauffman, 2014). The public schools used zero-tolerance as a method to address non-violent and superficial infractions, such as drug and alcohol infractions, insubordination infractions, and even chronic truancy issues (American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on School Health, 2013). As zero-tolerance became a common practice in schools, adverse and long-term effects came into focus.

Zero-Tolerance Effect

Disciplinary practices evolve over time and often seem to be dictated by the problem of the day. As school leaders search for a solution to a particular chronic problem, those initially thought to be effective often end up counterproductive to their original intent, especially for the population of students who need the most help (Gage et al., 2013). Zero tolerance is one of these actions that has, often unintended consequences. Once such unintended consequence is the fostering of a school climate that is authoritarian in nature and promotes a climate that is highly structured and demanding but not supportive (Jia, Konold, & Cornell, 2016; Monahan et al., 2014). Such a climate can produce educators with negative and intolerant attitudes toward students, advocate

the use of humiliation to deter unwanted behavior, employ excessive use of detentions, and harsher actions, such as of school suspension. These tactics actually encourage absenteeism because students wish to avoid punishment and the entities they believe are associated with the punishment (Ekstrand, 2015; Sahin et al., 2016). Such a climate is fertile ground for higher degrees of truancy and dropout rates (Cornell, Shukla, & Konold, 2015).

School-to-Prison Pipeline

Students who experienced out of school suspension and expulsion are 10 times more probable to drop out of school than students who have not been suspended or expelled (American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on School Health, 2013; Gottfried, 2014). In addition, a suspension or expulsion from school may increase the risk for contact with the juvenile justice system and, while it is clear a relationship exists between the two factors, it is unclear how such a relationship is established (Monahan et al., 2014). School districts and juvenile courts have entered into a collaborative relationship of which the overuse of the juvenile system to combat disciplinary challenges was unforeseen by either of these entities (Mallett, 2016). Evidence of this can be seen in school districts that have a resource officer as a constant presence in the halls, increased policing efforts through the use of security cameras and metal detectors and regular facility walk-throughs with drug-sniffing canines (Mallett, 2016). While policy makers do not intend to make decisions that harm children, the implementation of practices that create more restrictive environments impact the learning of children.

Motivation

A student's motivation, influenced by internal and external factors, may be a critical component in the choice to drop out of school. In part, because of the effects of such widespread influences, researchers suggest that explanations for why students drop out of high school that rely on only students' social backgrounds and academic behaviors without considering their attitudes and motivational beliefs are incomplete (Fan & Wolters, 2014; Khalkhali, Sharifi, & Nikyar, 2013; Moreira, et al., 2015; Ohrtman & Preston, 2014). Because school is an interactive process, engagement and motivation are often used in such a way as to present a relationship. Motivation increases engagement and vice versa (Debnam, Johnson, Waasdorp, & Bradshaw, 2014; Ricard & Pelletier, 2016).

Motivation as a Pull Factor

A student's belief in himself is relational to his motivation to accomplish expected academic outcomes. The stronger the belief in one's academic ability and a greater interest in academic activities, the greater the relationship between expectations of self and a successful outcome and the lesser the risk of dropping out (Fan & Wolters, 2014; Lamote et al., 2013; Ohrtman & Preston, 2014). Motivation is a multidimensional construct, however, that is comprised of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components thus presenting a constellation of factors that influence a student's decision to leave school early (Landis & Reschly, 2013). What motivates one student to leave school early may be of no influence on another student.

Motivation as a Push Factor

Relationships are an important element of functioning in life. Relationships are in everything we do, including school, and a poor relationship between a student and a teacher has been purported to influence the decision to drop out of school. Likewise, when students identified a relationship with a teacher as positive, they were more likely to persist (Kim, Chang, Singh, & Allen, 2015; McGrath & Van Bergen, 2015). In addition, people thrive in environments that feed drivers such as connectedness, competence, and autonomy (Ricard & Pelletier, 2016). School cultures that act in opposition to the cultivation of these drivers can encourage apathy and passively push students who perform lower academically, have lower attendance, and show lower rates of involvement, known as "quiet dropouts" out of school (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015). These risk factors are alterable and could be addressed with a school culture that was purposefully inclusive.

Constructs of Interest and Chosen Methodology

In this literature review the key constructs included the pull/push factors purported in the research to have the greatest influence on a student's decision to drop out of high school. The history of the research from which these pull/push factors were extrapolated progressively permeated the last 20 plus years of educational research, beginning in 1994. While no single pull/push factor, noted in the research was identified as a causal factor, it was clear from the research that those factors that were identified were interrelated to the point it is difficult to separate them. They provided a common

ground from which a greater understanding of the factors most likely to influence dropout could be gained. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), methodology refers to the logic and theoretical perspective of a research project as opposed to the methods, or specific technique, used to gather data. Through my examination of selected research studies, the research prior to 2010, focused more heavily on the variables linked to dropout and, though confirming the pull/push factors identified as the basis of my research, focused more on a multi-case study approach or a more global focus on common factors leading to dropout rather than dissecting the pull/push factors themselves. In addition, studies prior to 2010 focused on the indicators that often lead to dropout but continued to reinforce the idea of the application of a universal strategy to end the dropout epidemic. Bowers, Sprott, and Taff (2013) studied *dropout flags* which included 110 indicators and 36 studies. This quantitative study purposed to use such flags to guide schools in the development of prevention programs to address common dropout flags. Studies and reports prior to 2013 focused, heavily, on the students and their families' roles in the decision to drop out of school but did little to bring the role of the school to the picture. De Witte et al. (2013) provided insight through a review of the literature and noted the role of the school in the decision to leave school early in addition to the roles of students and families. The role of the school and its practices as an impetus for a student's decision to leave school early has brought a new perspective to the efforts to address the dropout epidemic. Research in most recent years has begun to bring into light the pivotal nature of the school and its practices and policies in a student's decision

to leave early. Most importantly, the literature, in most recent years, has brought definite form to the need to adapt practices for dropout prevention to the need of the specific community.

Summary and Conclusions

Education is one of the most important aspects of a productive society. To surmount the challenges presented to youth that can influence a student's decision to persist in school or dropout such as poverty, mobility, chronic absenteeism, and factors that affect engagement, an in-depth understanding of these challenges is imperative. In this chapter I uncovered the complex dynamics of pull/push factors and clearly indicated that no single risk factor can, in and of itself, predict dropout. There has been much research done in reference to the pull/push factors that influence a student's decision to drop out of school. What permeated the research was the idea that the decision to drop out is one that happens over time and is neither made in isolation nor without predictive indicators. What the research made clear was that schools, at a minimum, need to have warning systems in place to identify students who may be at risk for dropping out and implementing interventions to support struggling students. Interestingly, what the research also reflected was the same dominant pull/push factors present over years of studying dropouts. Patterns regarding motivation and engagement surfaced that specifically referenced the importance of the teacher-student relationship, patterns involving chronic absences of a student due to illness, student mobility, or harsh discipline policies were presented as an indicator, and low socioeconomic/poverty was

cited repeatedly as a primary risk factor of dropout. Further, the studies over the past decades in relationship to this topic have been primarily quantitative in nature and have focused on ascertaining information focused, heavily, on student factors and have not offered balanced insight into school factors. What is known in the field of research regarding this topic of historical importance is plentiful and supported without opposition. What is missing is information and insight from the dropouts, themselves. Without the personal insight from the dropout, what research will continue to show will remain consistent with what it has shown over several decades; the factors only. To address the dropout epidemic from a more specific and personal perspective, those who have made the decision to dropout must be a more focused aspect of research. Efforts to simply prevent students from dropping out without understanding the problem will continue to result in a system that continues to be reactionary to the dropout epidemic instead of proactive in reducing it. Chapter 3 will describe the methodology, the specific research design, and the approach. In addition, an explanation of instrumentation, data collection, data analysis, assumptions, limitations, and forms of protective measures for participants will be described.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The intent of this study was to explore, beyond a cursory level, the reasons students leave school early. Through research of the primary pull/push factors that have been identified as repeated themes for many years, the intended outcome was to combine this narrative research with the voices of students who chose to leave school early to learn more about how the pull/push factors affected their decision to drop out. Three research paradigms in education research are quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010). The selected research method was a case study because of its focus on gaining an understanding of how individuals construct their work and how they interpret their experiences and ascribe meaning to them (Merriam, 2009). In this chapter, a review of the research and design rationale will be presented as well as my role as the researcher, the elements that constitute the study's chosen methodology, the trustworthiness of the study, and ethical considerations.

Research Design and Rationale

The study's central phenomenon lent itself to qualitative research because the primary goal of this study was to better understand how participants made sense of their experiences (Merriam, 2009). Using this type of research, I have reported and elevated the insights of the participants, required an exploratory study of the setting first-hand, focused on a smaller number of people, and created multiple perspectives (Creswell, 2016). Under the umbrella of qualitative research were a plethora of approaches for

conducting such research (Merriam, 2009). I selected a case study as the research method for this study because I concentrated on a detailed examination of a specific topic and series of events within a controlled organization (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Merriam, 2009). Through this case study research, I recognized patterns, and developed themes to give meaning to the decision of each participant to drop out of school (Merriam, 2009).

In this qualitative design study, the primary instrument of data collection was the researcher (Merriam, 2009). This aspect was important in that opportunity was provided to study the nonverbal behaviors of the participant from a personal perspective. Rich description is a vital aspect that the case study approach encourages (Merriam, 2009). The use of the personal face-to-face interview allowed for the observation of nonverbal communication, and because each interview was audio-taped, excerpts from the interviews have contribute to the research. Inductive thinking has been at the core of this conceptual framework. Ultimately, my goal in this study has been to understand the points of view of the participants rather than to make a judgment based on objective data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In this manner, the results of the research stand to encourage change in practice and policy that, when enacted, can create richer opportunities and result in more positive outcomes for other students who are contemplating dropping out of school and, in turn, might be encouraged to remain and earn a regular high school credential.

Other Approaches Considered

Other qualitative research methods would not have provided the level of understanding needed for this study. Narrative research highlights the stories about the personal experiences of an individual, and because this study did not focus on one person, such a design choice was ill-fitted (Creswell, 2016). A phenomenological design was also inappropriate because the focus of this study was not on the experience of dropping out of school, in itself, but the pull/push factors that contributed to the choice to leave school early (Merriam, 2009). Another unsuitable method was ethnographic design. The focus on human social activity to the extent that a cultural pattern can be discerned was not the intent of the research (Merriam, 2009). Finally, to use a grounded theory design, I would have had to focus on generating a theory grounded in the data collected from a large number of participants (Merriam, 2009). This research supported neither the large pool of participants necessary nor the generation of a theory about the reasons students left school early. For this study, a small number of students who had dropped out of school were interviewed to gain insight into the pull/push factors that influenced their respective decision to drop out of school.

I did not consider a quantitative design for this study. Quantitative research is primarily concerned with determining a relationship between an independent and a dependent variable, and such a design would focus on numeric data and convergent reasoning (Lodico et al., 2010). This type of design tends to minimize the complexity of the interrelationship between push and pull factors. It is through divergent thinking that

information can be gained outside of what is already known, and that information allows for the highest degree of advancement regarding this research problem. To accomplish the primary purpose of gaining insight from individual students who had made the decision to drop out of school, a quantitative design was not appropriate.

Role of the Researcher

I work for the Iowa Department of Education as a consultant with Iowa Learning Online. I have held this position since July of 2016. Iowa Learning Online is the state of Iowa's service for districts within the state that cannot offer certain legally required courses at the secondary level. Many districts use Iowa Learning Online to offer courses for which they are unable to secure a teacher, such as upper level science or certain world languages. My role is to provide a meaningful orientation and coaching experience for teachers new to Iowa Learning Online so that the time it takes for new hires to reach acceptable productivity is minimal. In addition, I review alignment of the vendor courses that Iowa Learning Online has purchased to Iowa's state standards, looking for gaps in content. Finally, I am a part of an instructional design team that creates content to close the gaps to ensure vendor content is aligned with Iowa standards. My current position is removed from any specific contact with school districts. Prior to this position, I was a high school principal and middle school principal for 12 and 3 years, respectively, of small rural schools in eastern Iowa. I began my teaching career, in 1992, in a community in Illinois where I taught high school English.

In the district in which I spent a decade as high school principal the K to 12 population was approximately 700 students. This district's dropout rate remained consistent at just below 3% in a span of several years. While serving in the high school principal position for this district, I became alarmed with the number of students who chose to leave school early, and I became increasingly aware that the decision to dropout was a gradual process that often started in middle school. This progressive realization about and the understanding of the dropout epidemic led me, as a high school principal, to review the enrollment of my district's resident and open enrolled populations to better understand my own district's dropout profile.

More than 90% of my district's open enrollment came from the district selected as the research site for this study. With a student population of approximately 4,500 students distributed among three high schools, and one alternative program, the research site historically served a large percentage of high at-risk students in the alternative program. This research site's alternative program was repurposed in 2014 to address the district's dropout crisis through a more proactive approach. Through the repurposing efforts, a fourth high school was conceived at which each of the students was accepted after a lengthy application and interview process. This process has kept the enrollment in this nontraditional school at fewer than 300 students in any given school year. The research site's efforts to implement practices to address their dropout crisis coupled with a tight desegregation policy, resulted in student enrollment into my district's high school to

decline. Ironically, the dropout rate of my district's high school did not decline in tandem.

My role as a researcher, throughout the entire research study, was to balance my professional responsibilities with my biases. My role was not to make judgments about people or programs but to collect data, study that data, and better understand the reasons students leave school early. In addition, as a researcher, I have an academic responsibility to promote inquiry within my professional field. To provide information that may benefit the overall good of education is a service responsibility that is at the center of my selected profession. Research that contributes to my academic field may result in social change that is purposeful and transformational.

In the selection of this district as the basis of my research, I did so on the history and current practices of the district. I have no personal relationship with the district nor will I with the participants selected for the study. My professional relationship with the district has been in the capacity of my role as a former principal of a district that received students from the research site on an open enrollment basis. This lack of personal investment in the district and/or the participants has encouraged a higher level of integrity for both the study and my role as the researcher, thereby reducing any potential bias or imbalance of power during the research process.

Methodology

Participant Selection

To gain access to the participants, I first communicated with the intended research district's graduation support and at-risk specialist and superintendent. Representatives of this research site verbally confirmed their support of this study in exchange for access to the results of the research to continue to improve services to their students. The results that I provided to the research site's district staff did not reveal any participant names or confidential information. Representatives at the research further agreed to allow research to be conducted based on individuals who were classified as dropouts. I obtained written consent from the district's superintendent to conduct this study.

Participants for the study were recruited, upon approval of the Walden University IRB process (Approval No. 001-612-312-1210), through a purposeful sampling technique. A purposeful sampling technique is the deliberate selection of participants because of the insightful information they can provide to this study (Martella, Nelson, Morgan, & Marchand-Martella, 2013; Robinson, 2014). A representative from the research site agreed to send out informational/consent letters regarding the research study, on my behalf and at my expense, to a pool of candidates who had dropped out of school from the designated research site and were between the ages of 18 to 21. The first 15 respondents were to be selected for the study. This designated age range equated to a shorter time separation from school and encouraged the collection of more reliable interview data as the passage of time can influence recollection of facts and

circumstances. According to Robinson (2014), interviews that have an idiographic aim seek a smaller sample size to capture the essence of their circumstances. A final sample of participants was to be narrowed to a group of 10-15 for this research study. This number allowed for information-rich cases (Merriam, 2009; Robinson, 2014). The final number of 10 participants will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4, also, accommodated for a reasonable amount of time to gather personal information about the participant, plan and conduct the face-to-face, individual, personal interview, and code and analyze the data thoroughly and accurately.

The possibility of participant withdrawal from the study was present at all stages of the study and was considered at each stage of the interview process (Hadidi, Lindquist, Treat-Jacobson, & Swanson, 2013). Since it was highly plausible that participant withdrawal would be linked to any number of personal reasons, it was important that each participant understood the value his or her insight would bring to the study (Hadidi et al., 2013). To lessen the likelihood that a participant would desire to withdraw from this study, I distributed a gift card for $10.00 to each participant who participated in the interview. As per Hadidi et al. (2013), if a participant chose to withdraw from the study, efforts would have been committed to gain insight into the reasons for the withdrawal with the intention of using such information to alter practices in this or future studies. No participant chose to withdraw from the study; no need for a complete destruction of their data occurred. At no time was there a need to attempt to deter participants from dropping

out of the study, so no preventative measures that supported the retention of participants were implemented.

Instrumentation

Because this study was qualitative, the data collected were based on individual interviews conducted with participants who had formally dropped out of the research site and were not enrolled in any other district at the time of this research. The primary instrument used to collect student data was a personal interview. The interview protocol consisted of demographic questions and open-ended questions specifically related to the research topic (see Appendix). The demographic questions (Questions 1-6) were used to collect basic demographic data. The purpose of these questions was to ascertain specifics regarding common characteristics of the participant population. The questions referenced information such as: age, ethnic origin, highest level of high school completed, marital status, employment status, and household income (Fink, 2013). Three foundational concepts were the common denominator in the open-ended interview questions: questions ascertained what led each participant to drop out of school, a focus on the decision-making process the participant experienced while trying to make the decision to drop out of school and what, if anything, the school could have done to persuade the participant not to drop out /leave. The purpose of the three foundational premises was to act as a guide as the interview progressed and to help ascertain possible themes during the data analysis.

The delineated interview questions were designed to collect data that were likely to reveal insight into the factors that led the student to drop out of school. These questions (Questions 7-18) were borrowed from Colbert (2017). Although I sought and received permission to use the questions, because the questions were available though open access permission was not needed. Colbert's study was a phenomenological study on the perspectives of African American males. Colbert focused on the males' educational experiences during high school and the effects of those experiences on their decisions to drop out of school. The questions were appropriate as the impetus in both this research study and Colbert's research study was the development of a deeper understanding of how life experiences influenced a participant's decision-making. The interview questions were adjusted, minimally, with permission, and for reasons appropriate for this study.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

The intended method of selection was guided by the research site's representative's efforts to identify students who met the initial qualifier for the study: the participant had to be classified as a current dropout. From that point, participants were selected based on the age range specification of 18 to 21. This range limited the amount of time participants had been disconnected from school to between two and five years to, ideally, encourage the greatest possibility of accurate recall of the events that led to their decision to drop out. The representatives from the research site agreed to send letters regarding the study to all students who had dropped out and were within the specified age

range. This letter of introduction informed the participant of the purpose of the study and included my contact information. I had planned to accept the first 15 respondents for the study and secure a signed consent at the time of the interview. If I did not hear from any or enough participants, the research site agreed to help me with a second attempt to secure participants 2 weeks after the initial letter was sent. To encourage as much participation as well as the highest level of comfort possible, the participant was allowed to select the location for the interview. There was a room designated at the central office of the district at the heart of this study, but this room was only to serve in such a capacity if requested by a participant. Interviews were scheduled to the extent possible to fully accommodate the participant.

Once the participants were selected and interviews were scheduled, the process of data collection began. It was intended that data were to be collected one time per participant, at the actual interview meeting. Each interview was intended to last approximately 60 minutes. I asked the questions in numerical order and prepared myself to be consistent across all interviews regarding the way in which each question was asked so as to not encourage or discourage any type of response. Each participant was given the questions at the start of the interview for reference. Interviews were recorded via audio and I took minimal handwritten notes. No participant needed to stop the interview before its completion, so no interview needed to be rescheduled and/or continued. In addition, no participant withdrew from the research process.

Following the complete interview, I uploaded the interview recording to an external transcription site, Rev.com, and within 48 hours of the completion of the interview, each transcript was available for participant review. The turn-around time for this review was reasonable and encouraged accurate reflection of the interview by the participant. Each participant had 2 weeks to complete a review of and member check the transcript. Transcripts were made available to each participant in a number of formats, including hard copy, electronic copy, and as an audio file. Use of these different formats helped minimize any member checking traps (Carlson, 2010). Additional precautions were implemented to encourage each participant to review the transcript in the manner most likely to ascertain their true voice and included the opportunity for the participant to meet with me to read the transcript in completion (Carlson, 2010). Communication occurred via the most conducive venue for the participant at all times during the research study. This open and convenient communication with participants allowed me to fill in any gaps within the actual process of data collection or with the data itself (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Carlson, 2010). Each participant was given a gift card at the start of the interview so to alleviate any sense of coercion that may have been experienced by the participant. No follow up interviews or contact were planned for this study. Furthermore, in a written summation once I completed data analysis, I shared a sample of my initial findings, regarding emerging themes and patters, with all of the participants to encourage this as an additional venue for member checking.

Data Analysis Plan

Qualitative data analysis is an iterative process that occurs through the data collection process in an ongoing manner (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015). Further, it promotes a detailed description of the participant or setting (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015). This study allowed me the ability to ascertain information regarding the decision-making process of students through the use of the personal interview. The use of the interview to collect data has several advantages, namely being providing information that could not be observed directly as well as allowing me to control and direct the particular lines of questioning during the interview (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Merriam, 2009). While interviews have limitations that include the bias of the participants' experiences and memories, variability in the ability of different participants to articulately answer responses, and the effect of the researcher's presence on participants' responses (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Merriam, 2009), this type of method to collect data was appropriate for this research study as it allowed for exploration, in more depth, of the research questions: how did students who left school early describe their reasons for dropping out, and what were the factors that could have led these students to stay in school and earn that high school diploma? Specifically, Questions 9, 13, 15, and 16 focused on how students described their reasons for dropping out of school. Using Questions 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, and 14 I explored information regarding the factors that could have led the dropout to remain in school. Questions 17 and 18 were applicable to both research questions.

Constructing a thematic analysis consists of five steps, according to Yin (2014): compile, dissemble, reassemble, interpret, and conclude. While each step in this process was completed for each individual transcript, a constant state of comparison was exercised as themes were recognized. As referenced by Ryan and Bernard (2003) each transcript was read through in its entirety and common phrases or words were highlighted. It was through this search for topics that surfaced repeatedly that themes were solidified. Once the compile and dissemble stages was completed, it was important to begin to reassemble a picture by parsing out specific elements of the interviews that reflected themes. At this stage it was most important to discover as many themes as possible (Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

Trustworthiness

Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are important elements used to substantiate trustworthiness with this research. The collection and analysis of data were primary factors in establishing trustworthiness of the entire study. Credibility or internal validity relied on my ability to use subjective reasoning and logic rather than following a set of procedures (Martella et al., 2013). In this study I used member checking to establish credibility. Transferability or external validity has been viewed similarly by both qualitative and quantitative researchers (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). While the goal is to attempt to generalize results from the research to other people in other setting across time, in qualitative research studies, generalizations may occur more locally (Elo et al., 2014; Martella et al., 2013). In this research study,

generalizations were more local in nature to encourage generalizability of results. Because there are no statistical methods that can be used to achieve external validity in a qualitative study, the research site administrators will determine the best use of the results of this study and how the results may be of benefit to the stakeholders they serve (Martella et al., 2013).

Dependability, or the stability of the data over time and under different conditions focuses on the researcher's accurate description of the participants and their circumstances regarding the research questions (Elo et al., 2014). This element is what encourages transferability of the results to other contexts in appropriate situations (Martella et al., 2013). Because there is no specific recommended population sample for qualitative research studies, the purpose of the study and the research questions guided the selection of participants (Elo et al., 2014). To increase the confirmability of this research study, the strategy of reflexivity was used. Reflexivity is the practice of self-reflection done continually throughout each stage of the research process (Darawsheh, 2014). This process encouraged me to assess feelings and perceptions about the study and the findings that emerged. Reflexivity is a tool that can be used to limit bias and control subjectivity (Darawsheh, 2014; Martella et al., 2013) and can also be used to establish credibility. Additional information will be included in Chapter 4.

Ethical Procedures

Researchers must uphold the highest standards of professional practice and take responsibility for each stage of the research process (Martella et al., 2013). Because of

the focus of this research study and because the participants were over the age of 18, the parameters for ethical behavior required that participants were fully aware of the nature of this study and any dangers and/or obligations associated with the study and signed a consent form that confirmed they were a voluntary participant (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In addition, participants were exposed to minimal risk physically, mentally, and emotionally (Merriam, 2009). Due to the direct questioning of each individual participant, assurance of confidentiality and anonymity was paramount. Informed consent was garnered by each participant upon acceptance into the study. Participants were assigned a number that acted as their unique identifier, only known by me. Audio recording of the interviews were completed with each tape-recording given a number that corresponded with the participant. During the interview process, all data were stored in a locked filing cabinet in my home where it has remained throughout the study. A third party, Rev.com, was used to transcribe the audio tapings. The verbatim transcript was shared with the respective participant for their review. A letter of confidentiality from the third-party service was secured as additional protection for the participants prior to any disclosure of data. Upon analysis of each transcript, the audiotape was destroyed. As noted previously, no participant withdrew from the study. A primary role as researcher was not to force participation or compel any specific responses throughout the interview process. This was accomplished because of the attention to ethical parameters.

Summary

This chapter detailed the rationale for the selection of the case study as the intended data collection tool as well as the justification for rejection of other options. The role of the researcher was explained. In-depth explanation of the selection of participants, data collection, document analysis, and data analysis procedures were noted. Finally, I explored ethical aspects of this study including trustworthiness elements and protection of participants. The findings of this study are presented in Chapter 4. The data are reported in narrative form to give life to the decision-making process of each participant.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

I designed this study to explore, beyond a cursory level, the reasons students that leave school early. Through research of the primary pull/push factors that have been identified as repeated themes for many years, the intended outcome was to supplement the existing research with the voices of students who chose to leave school early to learn more about how the pull/push factors influenced their decision to drop out. The two research questions that provided the foundation of this study include:

RQ1: How do students who have left school early describe their reasons for dropping out?

RQ2: What factors do students who have left school early identify that could have led to them staying in school and earning their high school diploma?

In this chapter, I will provide a description of the interview participants, the data collection process, the analysis, and the thematic results. In addition, I will present evidence of the trustworthiness of the results. The chapter will conclude with a connection of the results of the study to the two research questions.

Setting

The setting for the interviews was, primarily, at a public location selected by the participant. Although a local public library was suggested by a member of my research committee as the most neutral location for the interview, some participants selected a public location based on their respective schedule needs. I interviewed five participants at

a local coffee shop nearest their home or work, three participants at local bookstores, and two participants at their respective homes. In each case, participants selected the location in which each was most comfortable. Further, the public locations chosen, and the times of the interviews held in these public locations offered an atmosphere that was relatively quiet and allowed for open and clear communication during the interview process.

The 10 study participants included eight who were 18 years old and two who were 19 years of age. All 10 participants were Caucasian. Of the 10 participants, six were female. All of the participants were employed in either a part-time or full-time capacity. Of the 10 participants, eight made less than $10,000 per year and two indicated earning only between $15 and $20 last year. Regarding residence, seven of the participants lived at home with a parent, two lived with a partner, and one lived with grandparents. None of the participants had ever been married. Figures 1 and 2 represent the grade in which the student dropped out and the identified primary reason for dropping out. Specifically, regarding the grade at which the participant dropped out, five of the candidates completed all or a portion of Grade 12, three completed all or a portion of Grade 11, and two completed their entire Grade 9 school year and chose not to return to high school for Grade 10.

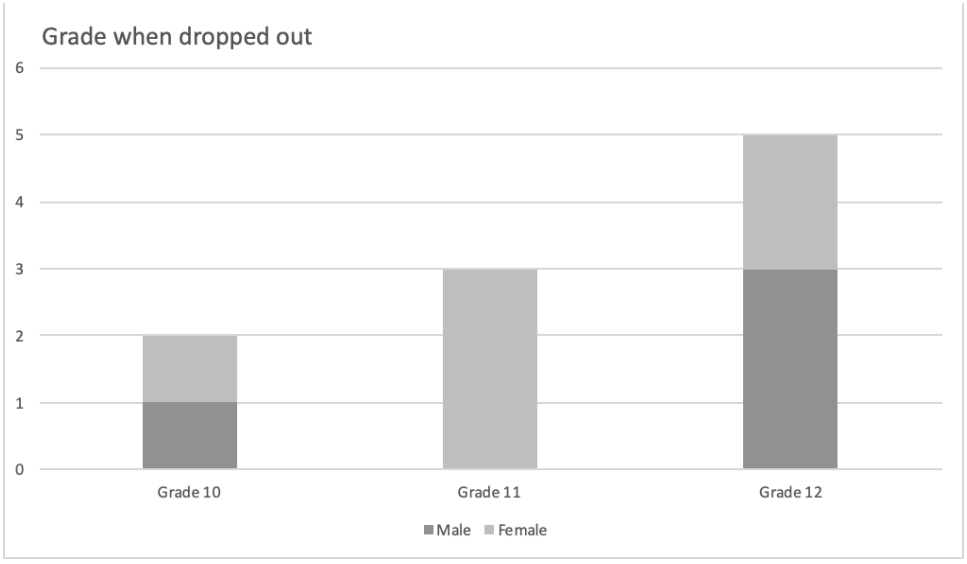

Figure 1. Graphical representation of the number and percentage of participants for the grade level at which they dropped out of school.

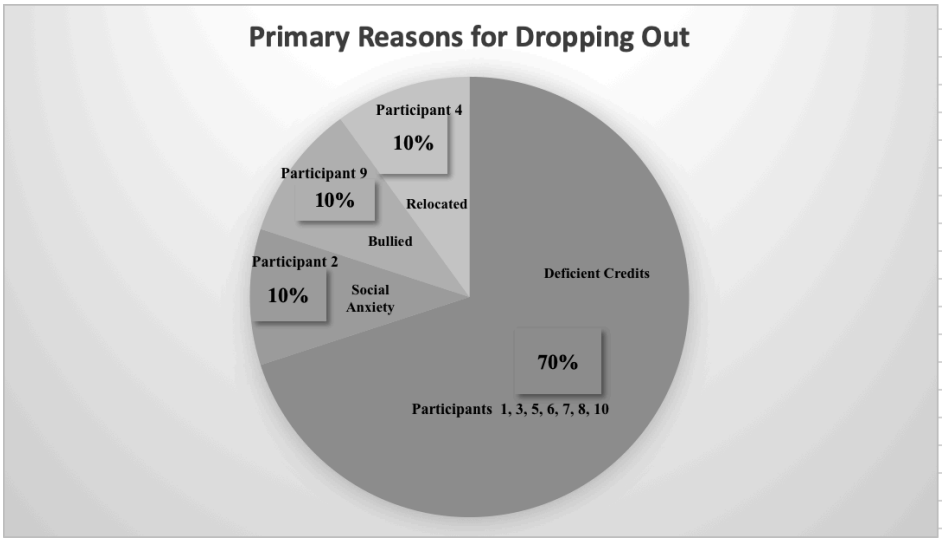

Figure 2. Identified primary reason each participant dropped out, although there were many participants who identified secondary reasons among these categories.

What is most astonishing about these figures is that not only did five participants complete Grade 11 and begin Grade 12, three of the five finished both semesters of Grade

12 before making the final decision to drop out. All three of these participants were within three credits of successful completion.

Data Collection

Immediately after securing IRB approval, I worked with the research site representative to send out invitational letters about the study. In total, the representatives at the research site sent out 48 letters of invitation to prospective participants who met the age range criteria for this study. Initially, 33 letters of invite were sent during the second week in July 2018. The deadline for interested participants to contact me was July 28. After the deadline date had passed, 10 participants were to have been selected, at random, from the pool of candidates invited. This initial deadline garnered only two participants of the 10 needed for this study so I established a second deadline, August 10, to allow for additional time in the recruitment process. An additional letter of invitation was sent by the district's representative to another group of 15 possible participants on or approximately August 1. That second deadline yielded a total of five additional candidates, making the total of the sample needed seven of the 10.

At the encouragement of my committee chair, I began interviews with the seven participants. Although I did not have the 10 participants, the concern was that any delay to begin interviews could have resulted in a participant who had previously agreed to participate becoming unable or unwilling to fulfill the initial commitment. At the conclusion of the first interview the participant disclosed, without prompting from me, the name of another person who may be interested in participating in this study. This

opened the door for snowball sampling, which I had not intended to use but proved to be fruitful in efforts to secure the final three participants. Snowball sampling is a type of recruitment strategy used when potential participants are hard to find (Merriam, 2009). Research participants help recruit other research participants (Merriam, 2009). Three of the participants knew of additional participants that met the criteria of the study and gave my information to those individuals. Each individual, then, reached out to hear more about the study. I was able to secure the remaining three participants through snowball sampling. Each person who contacted me was scheduled for an interview.

During the data collection process, I anticipated an hour for each of the 10 individual interviews. The average interview time was 45 minutes. I tape recorded each interview in full and asked the demographic questions in the same order. The open-ended questions followed the same format and I asked follow-up questions as appropriate. Upon completion of the interview, I uploaded the recording to Rev.com for transcription. All transcripts were returned to me within 24 hours. I sent a full and complete electronic transcript to each of the 10 participants for him or her to complete a transcript review as a way to verify accuracy and correct any errors as suggested by Hagens, Dobrow, and Chafe (2009). Upon return of a transcript, requested within 72 hours, any and all changes were to be made. In total, four of the 10 participants returned feedback to me, all in electronic form, and simply indicated that there were no suggestions for changes; not even in instances where the transcript reflected inaudible elements or incomplete sentences or thoughts. Because no participant, of the four who did respond to my

invitation to review the transcript, offered any suggestions for revisions or edits, I did not find the interviewee transcript review an element for additional insight into the results of this study. I did, however, find it a valuable element in promoting the priority of protecting confidentiality and the trust between the participant and me.

In addition, Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, and Walter (2016) identified various forms of member checking, beyond the transcript review to promote greater trustworthiness of the data. Because I had already shared the verbatim transcript, I used a more interpretative approach in an attempt to further encourage confirmation, verification, and modification of my interpretation. I randomly selected six of the 10 participants with whom to use this additional strategy. Each of the six participants received my written interpretation of their respective interview, electronically. Within 72 hours, the participant and I engaged in a dialogue via telephone to review any concerns, inaccuracies, or additions to my interpretation. In addition, the participant and I discussed the use of possible specific information or illustrative quotes I was considering. I used the insight gained from one conversation to build on the next conversation. Overall, although this second element of the process did not increase the overall level of trustworthiness of a participant's data, the engagement of the participant did allow for reflection and the addition of any new data. As this element of the process was completed, I found neither any variations in the data collection plan from what was outlined in the previous chapter nor any unusual circumstances during the data collection process. Each participant interview was executed as planned.

Data Analysis

I found that the preparation work before I began the data analysis was as important as the actual analysis of the data. The sheer quantity of data created from transcripts and field notes (even in a small amount) was rather dense. The data analysis process involved a review of the transcripts of each interview, coding, creating concept maps, and developing word clouds. To prepare data for analysis, I used the transcription site. I opened each interview and, using the tools available, I was able to highlight elements in the respective transcript and take notes in a space provided. Upon completion of my review, I downloaded the document and was able to see my notes and highlights. In addition, I was able to return to the audio-recording of the interview and verify information if I questioned any aspect of the interview or wished to listen for any emotions or undertones of the participant. This method allowed me to exact more meaningful data from each interview as preparation for the analysis.

As I became familiar with the data, I determined the codes most appropriate to my analysis were those of narrative codes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). These codes supported the structure of the interview itself. From the progression of the questions, participants' responses began to tell a story or a narrative about their lives. It was through the coding process, I was able to identify salient features of the data. Rather than assign predetermined codes, I allowed codes to surface through the data analysis process. The codes used for this analysis process included: engaging environment (EE), feeling connected (FC), teacher support (TS), teacher connection (TC), desire to succeed (DS),

and extra help (EH). In the process of making a transition from coding to recognizing themes, I started to identify how codes could be merged together. What I discovered is that I transitioned from a manifest analysis of the content to a latent analysis of the content. Initially, in the review of each transcript and subsequent development of each concept map I described what the participant said and recorded specifics about each participant's behavior/actions as they occurred. This process is called manifest analysis. As I continued the transcript review and created a concept map for each participant, I began to transition to more of a latent analysis of the content; one that extends to an interpretative level of data whereby I sought meaning of the text (Bengtsson, 2016). In the process of this search for meaning, I strove to remain true to the text in an effort to achieve a level of trustworthiness about the data.

Furthermore, because I am a visual learner, I was challenged to find a technique to put the data into a visual format which would enable me to see a picture on a single page of the important aspects of each interview as well as reflect on the research questions. I did a general search on the idea of using concept mapping in qualitative research and located numerous articles, many peer-reviewed, that validated the use of mapping as a way to analyze qualitative data. Because of the quantity of data in need of analysis in qualitative research, concept mapping allows the data to be reduced and more effectively managed without sacrificing any embedded meaning. Further, the use of concept maps reflects a level of transparency which increases the trustworthiness of the analysis (Tattersall, Powell, Stroud, & Pringle, 2011; Wheeldon & Ahlberg, 2017;

Wheeldon & Faubert, 2009). From experience, concepts maps are commonly used to frame a project, but using the concept map to reduce the data and analyze themes was an important element in my ability to extrapolate meaning from the data. Concept mapping as a method of collecting and analyzing data is considered to be aligned with constructivist philosophy and can be used at various phases of the research process, including data collection, analysis, and presentation (Conceicao, Samuel, & Biniecki, 2017).

Initially, I used concept mapping to reduce the quantity of data from each interview. Each individual transcript was a minimum of 12 pages, and I did not want to risk losing any rich insights because of the sheer quantity of the data within the interview. Concept mapping allowed me to preserve all meaning through my ability to see the interconnections within and across the data through the visual representation. I used an online template to manage the data of interviewees identified as Participants 1 and 4. The creation of each computer-created concept map consumed a 2-hour period of time and, to maintain a constant flow of thought, each map was created in full once I began its construction. I specifically created a concept map based on the relationship between concepts. Figure 3 shows the concept map for Participant 1.

Participant #1: Male, 18, White, Single, Grade 11, FT Work (10-20K)				
Describe overall school experience.	Describe relationships w/peers in school.	Describe the good things about school.	Describe the major reasons you dropped out.	Describe what may have helped you stay in school and graduate.
Talkative	Positive	Friends	Short credits	IEP continued
School was easy in elementary	Large group of friends	FFA	Embarrassed	Someone helped me figure it out
Had an IEP; was hard	Fit in well	Science teacher	Brother dropped out; he's fine	Not have to retake whole class
Did well in class	Friends with boys and girls		Could work and make money	Someone to believe I could do it

Figure 3. Participant 1's condensed computer-created concept map. IEP = individual education plan; FFA= Future Farmers of America.

This concept map reflects major interview questions along the top of the figure and individual talking points that extend vertically from each interview question. Each talking point represents the major data point at the focus of the participant's response. The star at the bottom center of the figure represents a significant traumatic event identified by the participant as having an influence on his or her life more so than any other. While there is no cause and effect element in this qualitative study, each participant reflected a major life event that influenced attitude and decision making more than any other. I did not want to omit this life experience from their unique respective concept map even though

this event did not seem to influence the decision to drop out of school. I will address this point further in Chapter 5.

Because of the time commitment required to generate a computer-created concept maps for Participants 1 and 4, I created a concept map by hand for the interview for Participant 5 as a way to determine if technology was inhibiting my progress in the timely analysis of the data. I found that I could create a hand-constructed concept map in just over one hour. Therefore, concept maps from interviews with Participants 2, 3, and 5-10 were drawn out by hand. While each concept map looked a bit different because of the unique experiences of each participant, there were numerous similarities. As I developed each concept map, these commonalities became evident and were used to create a concept map that represented these connections across all individual interviews (Figures 4, 5, & 6) as related to each research question. What I discovered is that the transcript provided insight into the way the participant thought in a more sequential manner (i.e., first this happened; then that happened), but the concept maps I created illuminated the connections between the participants' thoughts and emotions. Each concept map supported my efforts to find connections among the experiences of each participant, recognize patterns in the data, and code the data.

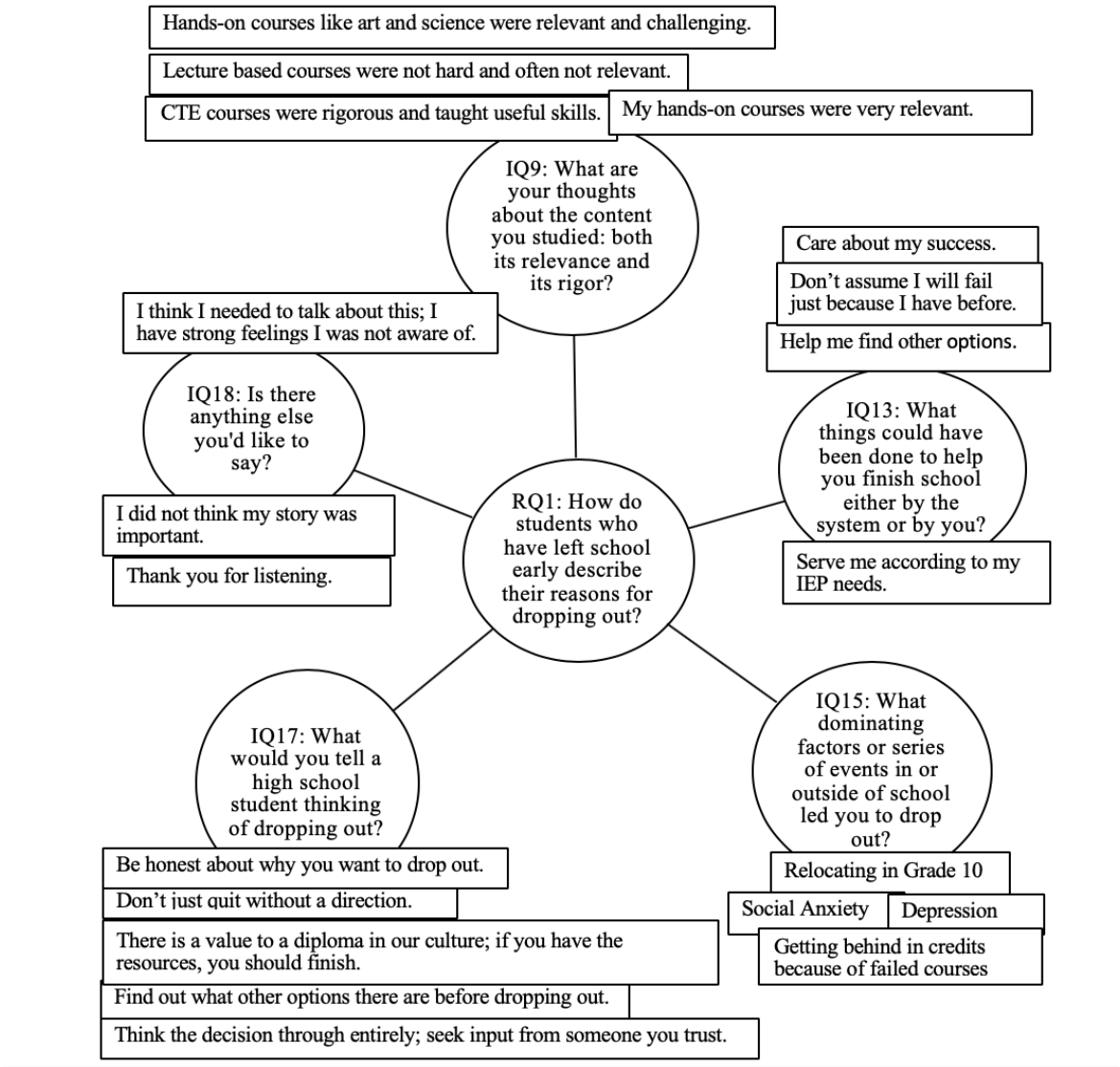

Figure 4. Comprehensive concept map created for interview questions directly related to RQ1. CTE = career & technical education; IEP = individual education plan; IQ = interview question; RQ = research question.

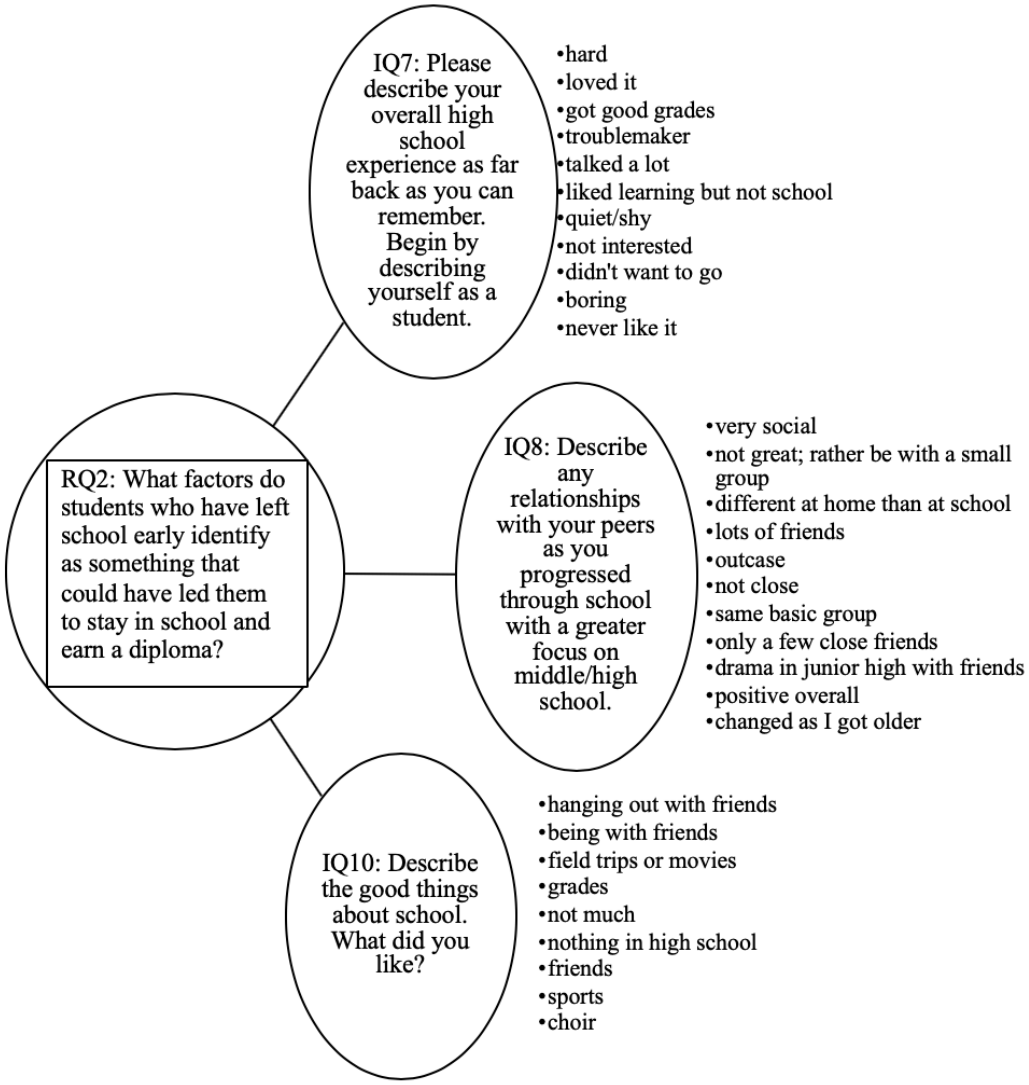

Figure 5. Comprehensive concept map created for IQ 7, 8, and 10 related to RQ2. IQ = interview question; RQ = research question.

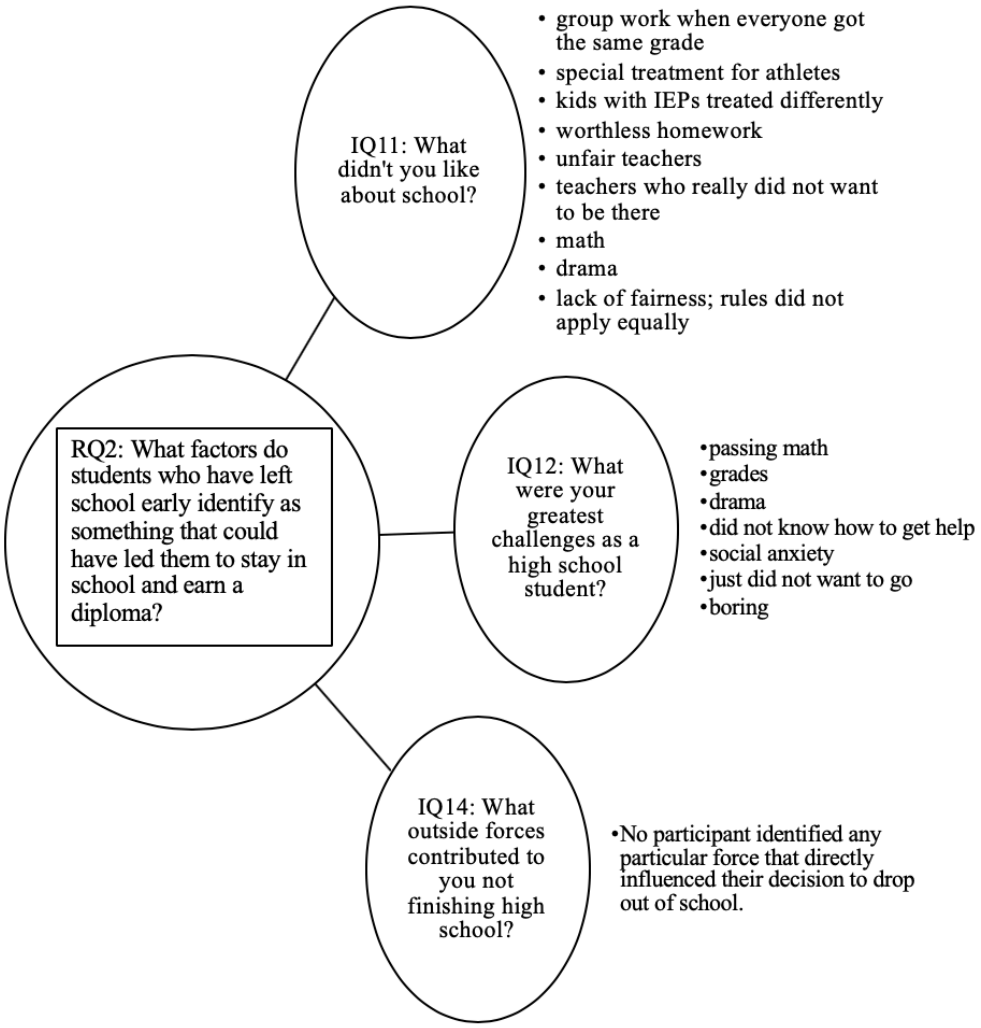

Figure 6. Comprehensive concept map created for IQ 11, 12, and 14 related to RQ2. IQ = interview question; RQ = research question.

Finally, to establish the four themes (disengagement/disinterest in school, teacher connection, sense of hopelessness, and desire to succeed), I documented concrete words/phrases representing codes, applied more general categories that captured the essence of what was being communicated by participants and identified a theme that

represented the categories as a whole. See Figure 7 for progression from general data codes to more specific categorical labels to Theme 2.

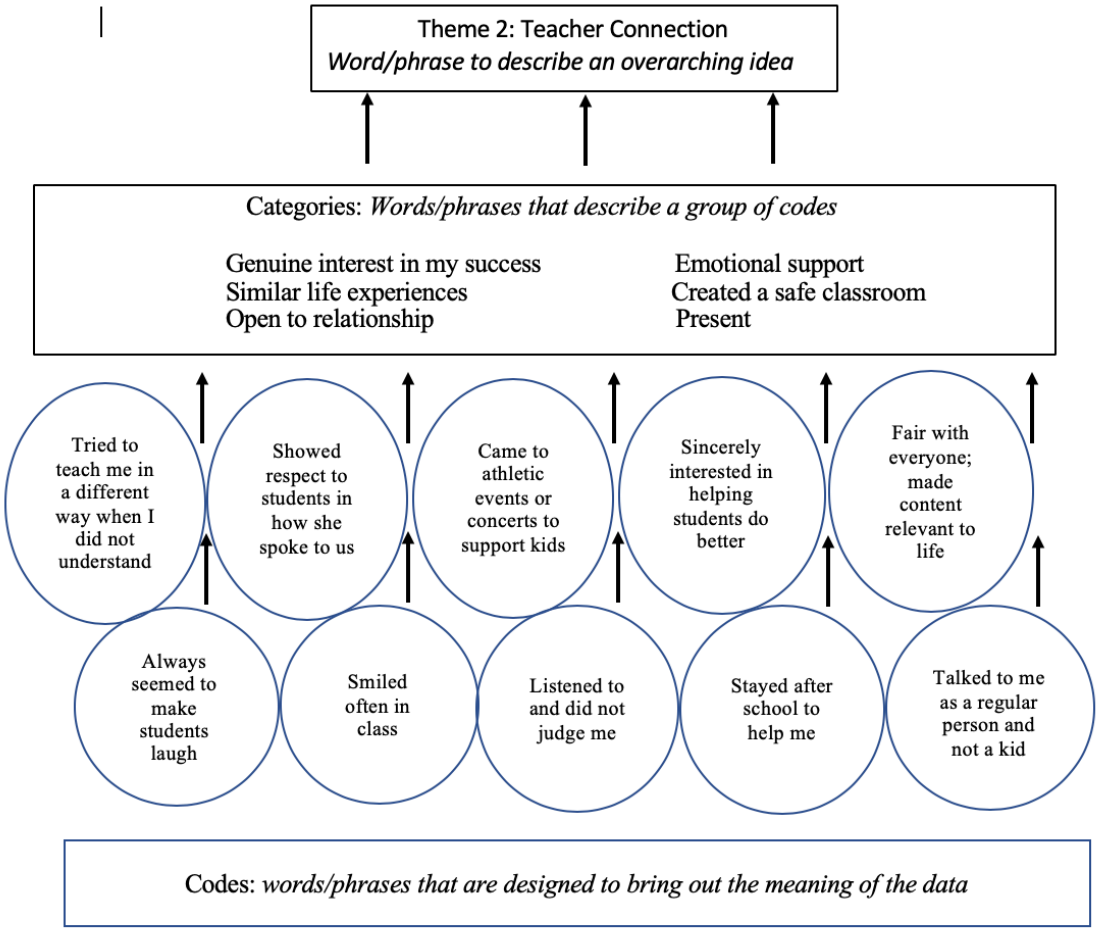

Figure 7. Progression from general data codes to more specific categorical labels to a single overarching theme.

Another strategy I used to analyze text and create an opportunity of deeper understanding was to make a word cloud. This strategy allowed me to type into a word document each time a word was used by a participant. The more frequent a word was used, the larger and bolder it showed up on the visual. The cloud, then, allowed me to see

patterns in word frequency both among individual participants and the group as a whole. I discuss this strategy in greater detail in the Results section.

Upon completion of the analysis of the data, while I had not discovered a discrepancy between participants that offered a contradiction to a particular interview question, a discrepancy did surface in that a pull/push factor I was certain I would find, based on the literature review as well as the profile of the research site, was not validated in any interview. The pull/push factor of poverty did not present itself as an element of influence for any participant. According to the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP; 2018), in Iowa, when the total gross income of a family was reported at a maximum of $24,339 annually, for a family of four in which there were two children under the age of 18, the family was considered to be living in poverty. In none of the 10 interviews conducted did a participant either directly or indirectly suggest their family lived in a state of poverty at any time during their educational journey. However, it is likely that every one of the 10 participants were a part of a family that could have been classified as low-income. Low income, as per the NCCP, again in Iowa, reflected that in 2018, 36% of Iowa's children lived in families that made a maximum of $48, 678 annually. Only 14% of Iowa's children, aged 6 and older lived in poverty as compared to 35% of that same group of children who lived in low-income households (NCCP, 2018). Because poverty was not determined to be an element of influence for any participant in the decision to drop out of school, I did not consider it damaging to the overall integrity of the data collected or the results presented for this study.

Results

As pull/push influences began to materialize, I was able to formulate a mental construct of the school and life experiences of each participant. The results emerged from the voices of the students who chose to drop out of school. While I identified many similarities between the experiences of the participants, I did note some distinct differences. As a result, four themes emerged (see Table 1).

Table 1

Emerging Themes as Related to Each Research Question

Themes	Research questions
Disengagement/disinterest in school	RQ1 & RQ2
Teacher connection	RQ1 & RQ2
Sense of hopelessness	RQ1 & RQ2
Desire to succeed	RQ1 & RQ2

Theme 1: Disengagement/Disinterest in School

Disengagement/disinterest in school was the first theme to emerge, which acted as both a pull and push factor and was related to both research questions. Seven of the 10 participants did not like school at any time during their educational journey. Even from primary school, these participants felt disconnected from the institution of school. Evidence of this theme presented itself as I asked a particular interview question. Early in the interview, I asked each participant to respond to the question, “As you think back on your education, what kind of a student were you?” This question solicited much dialogue. Participant 7 indicated, “I didn’t like school a lot, even in elementary school.” Similarly, Participant 6 “was never really a fan of school, but I liked science.” Participants 3, 5, 8,

and 9 used the phrase, “I never liked school.” Interestingly, of these same participants who identified they did not enjoy school, five answered differently when I asked the question, “Do you enjoy learning?” Each one of them indicated learning could be “fun” (Participants 3, 6, and 9), “worthwhile” (Participant 5), or “important” (Participant 8). In addition, in response to this same question, 6 of the 10 participants associated the kind of student they were with a behavior characteristic rather than anything academic related. Participant 9 indicated, “I didn’t really get into a lot of trouble.” Participant 7 identified as “kind of an outcast”, and Participant 5 referred to herself as “shy”. Participant 1 indicated she always “talked a lot”. Other participants were more suggestive about their behavior when describing how they remembered themselves as students, using adjectives such as lazy, troublemaker, isolated, and very active in class (up and down a lot).

The connection between behavior and academics intrigued me as I had not realized how early in the educational journey, students, themselves, recognize some correlation between academic success and behavior. The way they each described themselves as students directly related to an exhibited behavior of some kind. Participants understood what acceptable and unacceptable behavior was in the classroom. At some point, they seemed to identify their misbehavior as a pull factor because their misbehavior garnered negative attention from the teacher. The more negative attention they received from their unacceptable behavior, the more they disengaged from the environment, psychologically. Within a short period of time, even the participants with age-appropriate misbehaviors seemed to feel disconnected. What I interpreted from the

entire group of participants was that they allowed their behavior, in their beginning years, to label them as a learner for their entire educational journey. Negative behavior meant a less than capable learner, even for those two identified as gifted. I am certain that, although I posed the question about learning in an effort to encourage the distinction from the institutional element of education, students did not differentiate between them; they were synonymous terms. I wondered how this early frame of reference influenced a student's motivation to succeed and belief in one's self-efficacy.

Relationship of Theme 1 to RQ1 and RQ2

Theme 1, disengagement/disinterest in school, was evident through both the question of what factors influenced students to drop out of school and what factors may have led them to remain in school and earn a diploma. As is reflected in the literature review, disinterest and disengagement are factors that influence a student's decision to drop out of school and are factors that could be addressed within the school setting that may influence a student's desire to remain in school. This connection between the two elements of disinterest and disengagement reinforced that disengagement is not a linear process. While the participants were able to note that their problem behaviors, albeit minor or even age-appropriate, did not present as a direct influence on their decision to drop out of school, they also did not believe the behavior could be discounted as having an indirect influence. In other words, the misbehavior may have stopped as they progressed through school, but the disinterest in and disengagement from school continued.

What the participants clearly expressed was the connection between interest and engagement as related to the physical and psychological environment of school. Several participants weaved remarks in the interview that were related to the physical structure of the upper grades. Participants 1, 3, 5, and 6 made specific remarks about the "restrictiveness of school". When asked to clarify, responses centered around the military structure of the classroom. Specifically, these students liked classrooms that were arranged in a circle or small pods rather than rows of desks that seemed to serve as a primary classroom management tool. Participant 3 spoke of a middle school teacher who used small pods of four students each to facilitate collaborative discussion and problem solving in math class. In opposition, Participant 6 spoke of a teacher at the high school level whose room was set up in military style rows for lecture-based instruction; opportunities to engage with other students was a rare occurrence. The physical and psychological elements of the learning structure seemed to go hand-in-hand. Participants 2 and 4, who were identified as talented and gifted, reached a point wherein theirs and the school's interests did not coincide. The students wanted more opportunity for creativity and more autonomy to explore their strengths as advanced learners. Unfortunately, for the teachers in middle and high school, advanced translated into additional work and creativity to an element that teachers tried to quantify and assign a grade. Even though it remained clear that all participants wanted to earn their high school diploma and believed they could have, had they remained in school, their ability to understand the purpose of school and their desire to learn for the sake of learning was never achieved.

Theme 2: Teacher Connection

The theme of teacher connection materialized as a pull and push factor and related to both research questions. Each participant was asked to describe the good or positive things about school. Participants noted both the social element of school and at least one positive connection with a teacher (TC). When I prompted participants to elaborate on what made that particular teacher a good part about school, without fail, each participant noted how much that teacher cared (about him/her). Participant 1 noted the relationship connection he had with a math teacher over farming and how that connection seemed to be bridge to the actual math content. A shop teacher was referred to as "an upbeat person who joked a lot and made it clear that he wanted our shop experience to be positive; he loved his job and his class really was a great part of my day" (Participant 3). Another participant (6), referred to a guidance counselor as a person who "helped me with my family when my dad died; she seemed to be able to relate to losing someone and she just let me know I was welcome in her office." Participant 10 noted a high school teacher,

> knew how to connect to the students personally through the content; in a class called Death and Dying he used his own experience with the death of someone close to him to help us understand the content as well as the emotional experience of losing someone. He helped us use that frustration and grief as a door to writing something meaningful.

This participant indicated he held this teacher in high regard because he allowed students an inside look at his own personal life.

One of most powerful testimonies to the power of the positive teacher-student relationship came through in how Participant 9 described her art instructor. Participant 9 stated,

> The only place I felt safe and comfortable was in my art class because I had the most amazing art teacher ever. Still to this day he is one of my number one supports. He listened and understood mental health, and no one else in that school seemed to. I could go to him crying and he would understand. I could tell him I was having a panic attack but could not identify what caused it, and he made it seem like that was okay that I could not identify what caused the panic attack. He was just so supportive and nonjudgmental. And he would not judge me on what my art was. My art was my outlet. I remember that during one class period, I was trying to draw with a crayon. That seemed simple, but I could not do it. He spent the entire class period helping me learn the technique to drawing with a crayon. That's how much he cared.

This participant's emotional safety was paramount to her art teacher, and while he was unable to take away her problems, for the time she was in his classroom, she knew she was cared about and respected.

A connection with an elementary teacher was noted by Participant 5, "I had a hard time understanding what I read so my (science) teacher would sit with me and help me after school on a regular basis; even if the reading was not in science." All participants were quick to recognize those teachers who cared as ones who talked to them in an adult

manner in high school; treated them like adults even when they (the participants) were being disciplined, smiled at them, showed up at a game or a concert to watch, or just noticed something about the participant and commented positively about that something.

As I heard similar words/phrases being used to describe a positive connection, I created a word cloud to reflect the terms I heard the most to represent the importance of a connection to a teacher. The adjective in the center of the cloud is the one used most often by the participants to describe the teacher with whom they made the greatest connection. The bigger the adjective, the more often this word was used by participants (see Figure 8). This visual encourages a more succinct way of displaying data other than the traditional tables/graphs form or excessive pages of text. This cloud depicts the importance of having a teacher at school with whom the participants connected. The connection/relationship students and teachers have is a clear theme of my research as well as that found in the literature review earlier in this process.

Figure 8. Word cloud generated from all participants' descriptions of a teacher they made a connection with while in school.

Contrarily, participants shared about a teacher with whom they did not have a positive relationship. "Over winter break I broke both my wrists… I could not type well at all…the teacher would not move my final deadline or allow me another way to complete the project" (Participant 1). Another participant told of a teacher who "lost papers often and tell us students that we never turned the paper in; we knew it was not our fault, but she basically called us liars" (Participant 4). The power of the teacher-student relationship became clear early and was diffused throughout all interviews. Two participants (Participants 2 and 8) noted how often teachers would answer their questions with questions. They both stressed how they did not appreciate how that teaching strategy "made them feel stupid" even though both participants seemed to understand the purpose of the teacher's method of instruction.

Relationship of Theme 2 to RQ1 and RQ2

The theme of teacher connection (TC) was relevant to both research questions. Specifically, TC was not only important in supporting the interests of the participants but also in helping foster some basic internal desire or motivation to succeed in that teacher's course. All participants stressed that their internal motivation was positively influenced when the relationship they had with a teacher was positive and a mutually respectful. Not one participant who failed a particular course in high school did so with a teacher with whom the participant had a connection. In fact, no participant blamed an individual teacher for their decision to drop out, but they made it very clear how the positive relationships encouraged them to persevere in effort and attendance in courses taught by teachers with whom they did not have a positive relationship.

Theme 3: Sense of Hopelessness

The most telling data point, and subsequent development of a theme, came from dialogue that did not have a direct or specific question as its impetus. I believe it was through this dialogue, the first research question highlighting how students describe their reasons for dropping out crystalized. There was really only one ultimate reason: a sense of hopelessness due to both pull and push influences. Each of the participants claimed, emphatically, that their desire was to remain in school and earn the diploma. Without fail, every participant understood the value of an education and wanted to graduate from high school and earn their diploma. In a synthesis of the data, the phrase "no other option" was used by every participant. Participants were emphatic about their disappointment when

they, either through direct or indirect dialogue, heard those words. Upon exploration of this insight, the hesitant tone in their voices as well as other nonverbals (shrugging of shoulders, lack of eye contact at this time in the interview, or even a louder voice volume), the phrase "no other option" embodied the same meaning to each participant but a different emotional response from each participant.

"No other option" meant failure, a lack of needed credits to graduate with a diploma without spending more time repeating a course that had been failed. For Participants 1, 3, 5, 6, and 10, who each needed five or less credits to get the diploma, this meant repeating a course in its entirety. Repeating a course could have been accomplished through summer school, replacing a desired course for a required course in an upcoming term, or paying for a correspondence course through a cooperating institution. Specifically, for Participants 1, 6, and 10, "no other option" meant the embarrassment of returning to school as a 5th-year senior for another semester and repeating entire classes that had been failed in that one additional term, regardless of the margin by which that class had been failed. Interestingly, making up credits also meant these participants would have to fill their schedule with additional courses that were not needed just to have a complete, full-day, schedule.

For Participant 3, who needed to make up five credits, "no other option" meant graduating with her sister's class if she wanted to be recognized in the graduation ceremony. This participant actually voiced that she would rather be embarrassed by telling people she did not graduate than to tell people she graduated in the same class as

her sister. For Participants 2 and 4, who were advanced students intellectually, “no other option” meant they could not “get on” with their lives and go to college because they felt forced to comply with the traditional educational path. Participants 5, 7, and 8 felt that, regardless of the number of credits by which they were deficient, they had no motivation to return to school because they were confident that they would “just fail” again and did not wish to endure that experience again. Participant 9 had dropped out for issues related to bullying and indicated she would not return to school because she did not feel safe.

Interestingly, none of the participants, self-admittedly, were from impoverished backgrounds, had any chronic attendance issues prior to dropping out, or had experienced anything other than occasional minor classroom discipline consequences. All participants were involved in at least one activity up to the start of high school career (i.e., choir, sports, drama), and none of the participants experienced consistent failure in elementary or middle school, and all had a peer group in which they felt valued, even if that peer group was only two other students.

Relationship of Theme 3 to RQ1 and RQ2

The sense of hopelessness was the one impetus that finalized each participant’s decision to drop out of school. Regardless of the similarities among or differences between participants, they each reached a point wherein their desire to finish school did not supersede the risk of a continued sense of failure if they remained in school. This sense of hopelessness was a powerful lens through which to view another’s experiences. Each participant expressed a sense of hopelessness about a system that could not or

would not figure out how to reach them in their current circumstances. Ultimately, while no participant wanted to drop out of school and was, in certain instances, encouraged to do so, the final decision was his or her own. They were not expelled or removed as a result of any disciplinary action. This sense of hopelessness was intimately related to the final theme: desire to succeed.

Theme 4: Desire to Succeed

To achieve a goal is at the heart of a person's desire to succeed (DS), which was the fourth theme. The participants in this research study wanted to succeed. Success, as they testified, meant finishing high school and earning a diploma. As the participants discussed the academic failures they endured, the importance of connection with a teacher they did or did not experience, the restrictions of the system for acceleration or remediation, the feeling of isolation from the social culture of the school, and a gradual loss of hope, they became dropouts, first psychologically and then physically. The most profound insight regarding this theme came from Participant 7. I posed a question about when she first started thinking about dropping out. Participant 7 stated,

> I honestly did not think about dropping out. It was never my decision. Literally, the counselor pulled me into her office and told me that my only option was to get my GED, and she gave me paperwork. My goal was not to drop out of school.

Participants 1, 3, 5, 6, 8, and 10, while not as articulate, confirmed a similar final meeting with an authority figure at school. Participants 2, 4, and 9 had not experienced the academic failures of the other participants, and the decision to drop out was made in

concert with an authority figure in the home. No participant just went home one day after school and decided on his or her own not to return to school. Each participant relayed, without exception, a pivotal conversation that proved the final impetus to the decision to drop out. The sense of hopelessness experienced by every participant was the deciding element that was perceived to have removed their own control over their ability to make a decision regarding remaining in or leaving school. This revelation that success would not come was what I believe associated this pull/push influence most intimately with the second research question.

Relationship of Theme 4 to RQ1 and RQ2

Participants wanted to remain in school, but their sense of hopelessness led them to disconnect and drop out. The hopelessness was related to a culmination of events they perceived pushed them out of school and negatively influenced their desire to succeed. The loss of a desire to succeed and the sense of hopelessness they could not escape became an unbreakable cycle. While both elements were seemingly equal forces that resulted in the decision to drop out, the sense of hopelessness was perpetuated by the inability to find consistent success.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness of this study is shown through the elements of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The provision of convincing evidence that the data in this study is worthy of attention is the backbone of trustworthiness (Elo et al., 2014). In this study, establishing a foundation of credibility started in the preparation

stage with a determination of the instrument to be used to collect data in the most effective and efficient way to target the research questions that drove this study. Further, the element of credibility continued through the data collection stage with the selection of the sampling strategy (Elo et al., 2014; Merriam, 2009). Initial efforts to recruit participants failed to produce the quantity of volunteers from which I could select the 10 needed to interview. As I completed the interviews with the participants I had secured, a number of them offered the names and contact information of additional persons who may be interested and eligible to participant in this study. Because I did not solicit additional participants as a part of the individual interviews, this information led to snowball sampling, which I believed to be quite suitable in light of the challenges I was facing in the recruitment process. This sampling strategy allowed me to maintain the objective credibility intended during the recruitment process (Elo et al., 2014).

In addition, credibility was an important element in the selection, sequencing, and presentation of the interview questions (Elo et al., 2014; Merriam, 2009). The process of recording the interviews and taking field notes were included as elements of prioritizing credibility (Merriam, 2009). The employment of a third-party transcription service was specifically done to ensure a higher level of integrity, thereby, promoting data that can be trusted. These data collection steps ensured that any of my own biases that could have occurred during the interview process or the transcription of the data were minimized. Finally, a time of reflection after each interview to assess my own actions was completed. I kept a journal of my self-analysis of each interview, using a checklist to determine if my

intended level of objectivity and my realized level of objectivity were aligned. This process of reflexivity encouraged a higher level of transparency in the reporting of the data (Darawsheh, 2014).

Once the data were collected, another step in the process of establishing credibility was member checking. This opportunity allowed the participants to review their individual transcript and confirm that the information was both honest and accurate (Birt et al., 2016). While the number of participants who actually made any changes or edits to their respective transcript was low, this step offered a higher level of assurance that the information shared in the individual interview was credible. It was at this time in the process data organization and analysis became the focus. Because I implemented both latent and manifest analysis, I was careful not to over interpret the data which also strengthened the credibility of the data (Bengtsson, 2016). Finally, as I began to look for meaning in the data, the concept-mapping strategy helped me keep my focus on the research questions and parse out large amounts of rich data through the creation of visual supports (Conceicao et al., 2017).

A second element of trustworthiness in this qualitative study was dependability. Upon completion of the analysis of the data, reporting the data became the focus, and the target was to ensure that there was an alignment between what I found and the data I collected. Dependable analysis of the data would increase the likelihood that if another researcher studied my data, that person's findings would parallel my own (Elo et al., 2014). Initially, ensuring dependability began at the inception of the study itself.

Consistency throughout each stage of the research process increased the dependability of the results. In addition, communicating strategically and clearly became key in obtaining a high level of dependability. I used illustrations to show the results when appropriate, which offered additional insight into the data and strengthened the dependability of the results.

A third element of trustworthiness is transferability. In any qualitative study, transferability is dependent upon the judgment of the person studying the data reported, not the researcher (Elo et al., 2014). In this study, connections were made between the participants and their societal and cultural contexts. For this reason, details about the interview were important, such as where the interviews occurred. To some extent, this study's results could be applied to others in similar situations, but because the participants in this study were unique individuals with experiences that cannot be fully duplicated, broad generalizations are not possible nor encouraged.

The final element of trustworthiness is confirmability (Elo et al., 2014). Reporting the experiences of each participant in the way that most objectively gives voice to their decision to drop out of school was the backbone of securing a high level of confirmability. The participants shaped this study. Through the process of reflecting on my own biases as a researcher, considering how my personal experience in education may enhance or impede the research process at each stage, and understanding how each step of the research process interlaced with the whole of the process I was able to make

decisions during the process that secured a level of confirmability to support the trustworthiness of this study.

Summary

The findings from the data analysis in this qualitative study supported the primary research questions: how do students who have left school early describe their reasons for dropping out, and what factors do students who have left school early identify that could have led them to stay in school and earn their diploma? The implementation of this qualitative study offered me the opportunity to listen to the personal experiences of students who had made the decision to drop out. Findings that addressed the research questions included four themes that proved to be common among all of the study's participants: disengagement/disinterest in school, teacher connection, sense of hopelessness, and a desire to succeed. Each theme served as both a pull and push factor in the final decision to drop out. In addition, the four themes are not to be viewed in isolation but rather as closely related and often woven together. All participants offered examples that confirmed the interconnectedness among the themes as related to both research questions.

All participants indicated an understanding of the difference between school as an institution and a desire to learn, yet the common perception among all participants was that the type of student they were, from the beginning, was directly related to their behavior rather than any ability to learn. This focus on behavior rather than an ability to learn for those participants, negatively affected their interest of and engagement in

school. This negative association acted as a domino because it set in motion a pattern of thinking that followed these students as they progressed through school. Unfortunately, as they aged and the behaviors that were problematic in younger grades became under control, their disinterest in school had solidified, disengagement continued, and multiple academic failures ensued. This path toward dropout was accelerated by a lack of positive affiliation with teachers.

All participants reflected the desire for a positive relationship with their teachers. The teachers that participants most remembered were those who placed importance on both the relationship and academic success. The participants expressed a distinct disconnect in their ability to comprehend how a teacher who does not know them as a person can help them learn. All participants emphasized the shift in the focus of teachers as they progressed through the system. At the elementary level, all participants perceived that teachers cared for them as individuals. By the time participants got to high school, that perception had shifted in so much that all participants believed many teachers stepped away from the relationship element and focused on the content. Once the relationship element was perceived by the participants as a low priority, the final two themes of a sense of hopelessness and a final decision to give up on the desire to succeed and graduate became a reality.

The data confirmed what the literature review purported. The decision to drop out of school has continued to be a process; a process that, as evidenced through the experiences of the participants in this study, takes many years. Despite the unique and

individual challenges that serve as pull/push factors in any individual student's decision to leave school early, there are structures and measures that can be implemented within each school district that can encourage students to remain in school and earn a high school diploma. These elements are the focus of Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

In this qualitative case study, I provided specific information regarding the pull/push factors that influenced students to drop out of school. Historically, a plethora of research has supported the pull/push framework. However, little attention has been afforded to the personal experiences of those who have dropped out as explained in their own words (Knesting-Lund, Reese, & Boody, 2013). I focused my research efforts on a school district with an historically high dropout rate, but which has taken great strides in the past 5 years to reduce the dropout rate through the implementation of K-12 district-wide services. In addition, I chose to go directly to students who dropped out of schools in this district to listen to their experiences. The participants in this study confirmed four themes that expanded upon the historical research and provided insight into the importance of continued efforts to implement dropout prevention strategies with fidelity: disinterest/disengagement in school, teacher connection, a sense of hopelessness, and a complete loss of any desire to succeed. In this chapter, I will discuss the interpretation of the findings, any limitations of the study, my recommendations as a result of the study, and the implications for social change as a result of my study.

Interpretation of the Findings

In the literature review, I discussed three factors, consistently present and interactive historically, that were instrumental in the decision of students to leave school early: poverty, chronic absence, and motivation. The findings of this study did not support the element of poverty as a factor in any of the participant's decision to drop out

of school as suggested (Balfanz et al., 2014; Berkowitz et al., 2017; Haan et al., 2015; Petrick, 2014). However, this study did confirm both chronic absence and motivation to be factors in a student's decision to drop out of school (Fan & Wolters, 2014; Kim et al., 2015; Moreira et al., 2015; Ohrtman & Preston, 2014; Ricard & Pelletier, 2016). Aligned with the two confirmed historical elements, I identified four interconnected themes in the analysis of the data: (a) disinterest/disengagement in school, (b) teacher connection, (c) sense of hopelessness, and (d) desire to succeed. Each theme provided insight to both research questions as they were analyzed and interpreted in the context of the pull/push conceptual framework and the prior research.

Interpretation of the Findings in the Context of the Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study was based on the pull/push theory developed by Jordan, Lara, and McPartland in the mid-1990s. This theoretical base advanced the idea that factors that influenced a student's decision to leave school early were classified as either pull, factors wherein the impetus to drop out was in the control of the student or push, factors wherein the locus of control was outside of the student (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; Doll et al., 2013). The results of this study were consistent with this theory in so much that each participant identified factors that influenced their decision to drop out of school that aligned with the two groupings of factors: pull and push. In addition, consistent with the conceptual framework was the confirmation that the process of dropping out was the culmination of a lengthy process that involved complex and numerous factors. Finally, the conceptual framework was confirmed in that the

participants in this study identified an intimate relationship between pull and push influences.

Interpretation of the Findings in the Context of the Prior Research

My research highlighted more intensively than the research that framed this study was the relationship between the pull and push factors as participants progressed through school and ultimately made the decision to leave early. With regard to the research that framed this study, I did not consider pull and push factors in isolation of one another. For example, the longitudinal study by Doll et al. (2013) promoted the difference between pull and push factors as the origination of the agency and did not cross-categorize any factor (poor health was a pull factor only or poor grades was a push factor only). Through the process of the interviews, it was clear that pull/push factors can and did act as both as opposed to one or the other.

Theme 1: Disinterest/disengagement. What emerged as a finding from the interviews was that disinterest/disengagement in school was the initial theme that seemed to be the foundation upon which the other themes were formed. Participants reflected behaviors and attitudes in elementary school that may have not required specific intervention at that time but did present as indicators for future educational obstacles, including a lack of interest in school, lack of academic effort, lack of a connection to a peer group, inability to manage age-appropriate behaviors, learning challenges (diagnosed or undiagnosed), and mental health challenges (e.g., ADD/ADHD, social anxiety, depression).

Disinterest/disengagement in school is a challenge that can be attributed to events both in and out of the school institution; thus, both a pull and push factor of motivation. The research confirms that a student's engagement is influenced by the constructs established in the classroom which translates to the fact that teachers are responsible for providing a classroom context that fosters active engagement and encourages interest (Fan & Wolters, 2014; Khalkhali et al., 2013; Lamote et al., 2013; Landis & Reschly, 2013; Moreira et al., 2015; Ohrtman & Preston, 2014). As an extension to this initial research, in a classroom where the teacher established a learning climate of high expectations and accepted a level of responsibility for a student's success, students tended to be more challenged and supported. The research confirmed the role of the teacher as an impetus to remain in school (Kim et al., 2015; Landis & Reschly, 2013; Moreira et al., 2015), which promoted the second theme: teacher connection.

Theme 2: Teacher connection. In this research study, the participants each recounted challenges of motivation in the classroom related to a lack of rigor and/or relevance of the content which was exacerbated by a relationship with the teacher wherein the student perceived the teacher to be insincere and nonsupportive. Such a classroom climate discouraged the active engagement of the participant and any interest in the activities in the classroom. The poor relationship between the teacher and student resulted in the participant experiencing ongoing academic and social frustration which, in turn, perpetuated a feeling of disconnect. This cycle, although relatively quiescent at the elementary level for all participants, proved influential in the decision of each participant

to physically drop out of school once the age of compulsory education was no longer a factor to be considered. This finding reflected the importance of the student-teacher connection in the development and promotion of the student's belief that he or she can succeed (Fan & Wolters, 2014; Kim et al., 2015; McGrath & Van Bergen, 2015; Wilkins & Bost, 2016). It became clear throughout the interviews that the development of a student's self-efficacy was the heart of the relationship between the teacher and the student. The absence of this important relationship seemed to perpetuate a sense of hopelessness in all of the participants in this study, that became the third theme.

Theme 3: Sense of hopelessness. A sense of hopelessness did not present as obvious for any of the participants early in their respective educational journeys. Rather, this sense of hopelessness evolved in the course of several years and manifested itself through various characteristics such as apathy, misbehavior, truancy, course failure, and even disassociation from friend groups. Such a sense of hopelessness for the participants in this study was exacerbated by their own mental health struggles with depression and anxiety caused by mediating events in their lives that were not related to school (i.e., parental divorce, death of a loved one). As confirmed in the initial research, mental health was noted as an indirect factor in so much that it supported the cultivation of a student's negative self-perception of their academic competence (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Ohrtman & Preston, 2014). The self-efficacy theory, as presented in the first theme supports that engagement in all forms: cognitive, behavioral, and emotional act interdependently of one another in contributing to a student's ability to overcome

challenges in school that could negatively influence one's ability to maintain a needed level of hopefulness and determination (Kim et al., 2015; McGrath & Van Bergen, 2015; Wilkins & Bost, 2016). Once a sense of hopelessness became part of each of the participant's mindset in this study, their desire to succeed in school was completely unrecoverable.

Theme 4: Loss of a desire to succeed. This fourth theme was what each participant indicated occurred immediately before the decision to dropout was finalized; when they each capitulated to the realization there was no hope to graduate. Each participant had failed multiple courses that set them behind their same-aged peers toward graduation. Each participant had experienced multiple negative relationships with teachers and had been enrolled in courses they deemed boring, not relevant, and/or unchallenging. Each participant had experienced conversations with school counselors, teachers, and administration that perpetuated a sense of hopelessness. Despite the fact that not one participant expressed a desire to quit, each one did. In fact, each participant expressed a sense that they had no other option. Each participant, then, became a victim to their inefficacious thought pattern.

Although there were no identified simple solutions to the dropout crisis, elements of critical importance were highlighted by each participant, and those elements provided insight into the importance of maintaining student interest/engagement, creating a positive student-teacher connection, and supporting a high level of self-efficacy in so much that students experience a renewed sense of hope as well as a continued desire to

succeed. Ironically, these four themes present what Freeman and Simonsen (2015) called "alterable risk factors" (p. 206) or risk factors that can be influenced. What presented itself as of most importance in this study was the interdependence of the themes and how viewing them as unrelated may be silently perpetuating the dropout epidemic.

Limitations of the Study

The purpose of this case study research was to explore the experiences of participants who made the decision to leave school before earning a diploma. Within this study, limitations presented throughout various stages including modifications that had to be made during the recruitment process, an absence of participants identified from low SES, and the participant's inability to articulate actions or strategies that may have been done that would have encouraged them to remain in school.

To begin with, the selected recruitment method did not materialize the desired number of interested participants from which to randomly select a pool of volunteers as intended due to an initial lack of respondents. I had to implement a snowball sampling strategy to procure the desired number of participants. In addition, all 10 participants were Caucasian. This was a limitation in so much that ethnic diversity would have provided more rich data from which to verify themes. Once the interviews commenced, another limitation presented itself in that no participant identified as from low SES, a primary indicator of risk for drop out in the literature review (Berkowitz et al., 2017; Kim, 2014; Lam, 2014; Lavrijsen & Nicaise, 2015; Ullucci & Howard, 2015). Because low SES was such a prevalent factor in the research, a question surfaced about the

saturation of the data, more for meaning than for codes. According to Fusch and Ness (2015), a failure to reach data saturation negatively affects the quality of the research, specifically regarding content validity. Because saturation of data could have been obtained with the number of interviews secured for this study, there was no initial concern for saturation. In addition, during data collection, there was a level of redundancy reached regarding the introduction of new data and codes which also indicated that saturation of themes had occurred (Hennick, Kaiser, & Marconi, 2017). However, since saturation is more about the depth of the data and not the numbers from which the data came, the question must be posed about whether the depth of saturation was reached with such a prevalent factor in historical research absent from my study. Ultimately, I am confident the data collection and coding processes were completed with integrity and present reliable and valid results, based on the purpose of this study. I am equally as confident that rich data analysis has provided meaningful insight into the questions that provided the foundation for this research.

Interestingly, in the first chapter, I identified perceived limitations that did not materialize as such at any time during the research process. First, I perceived the time required to complete the data collection process as a potential limiting factor because of the amount of time required to transcribe and code data, conduct a member check, and analyze the data. Nothing about the selected design of the study or the methodology with which the study was conducted presented as limiting. With the use of a third-party transcription site as well as the use of concept maps that helped me organize and envision

my data, the time commitment was manageable. In addition, I did have concerns about my bias as a researcher because of my passion for this research focus. Because I stuck to the intended interview questions, used a third-party transcriber, and analyzed the data without manipulation, I am confident researcher bias did not prove to be a limitation of this study. Finally, I had identified a participant's time away from school as an element that may have inhibited accurate recall of the factors that influenced the decision to drop out of school, thereby limiting the validity and reliability of the results. Since all 10 participants were dropouts within the last two years, accurate recall of events did not present as an inhibitor. However, I did question how insightful their responses could have been to the second research question about any factors that may have influenced their decision to remain in school. To provide insight into this research question would have required time for reflection that may have been less likely to occur in only an 8 to 24-month period of time. This lack of time for reflection became clear as each participant struggled to think of something that could have been done that may have influenced them to remain in school.

Recommendations for Further Research

The overarching purpose of this research study was to better understand the pull and push factors that influenced a student's decision to drop out of school. In recognizing the limitations of this study, I am confident this research provides valuable insight to educational institutions that can help them support efforts that positively influence the dropout rate within their school districts. Historically, there has been evidence of a

relationship between students living, economically, at a low SES or poverty levels (Balfanz, 2013; Berkowitz et al., 2017; Haan et al., 2015; Kim, 2014; Stark & Noel, 2015). Because no participant in my research study identified as having been from a family categorized as low SES or of poverty, the historical research on this pull/push factor cannot be confirmed with my study. Further examination, specifically, with participants of low SES or poverty would prove insightful, especially for the research site highlighted in this study because of the current 60.5% free/reduced lunch population in the district. In addition, all participants in this study were within 24 months of having dropped out of school. Further investigation allowing an extended time frame between the final act of dropping out and reflecting on such a choice could provide information that would guide educators in making perspicacious decisions.

Recommendations for Practice

The primary goal of this study was to better understand the pull/push factors which influence a student's decision to drop out of school as well as identify what, if anything, might have been done to encourage that student to remain in school and earn a high school diploma. The insights gained from the interviews fostered recommendations that advocate for further study in the development of early warning systems to identify those most at risk for dropping out, professional development that provides insight into the importance of the student-teacher connection and the various ways positive and caring relationships can be developed to help promote a learning environment that is grounded in the individual needs of the student

Early-Warning Systems

It is not uncommon for a school district to espouse the details of an early-warning system in place within their district that provides insight into those students most at risk for dropping out of school. In fact, districts, as a state-level expectation at all grade levels, track basic data such as daily attendance, behavior infractions, course performance, and students who may receive interventions as a result of poor course performance. Because of the availability of such data, early-warning systems have been studied since early in 2000s, and numerous reports have been generated touting the benefits of such systems. Such systems encourage the use of various data points to act as signals that a student's chances of graduating are low. The most common predicators that a student's chances of graduating are in jeopardy include attendance, behavior, and course performance (Corrin, Sepanik, Rosen, & Shane, 2016)

As recent as 2017, a report was generated that focused on a particular system called the Early Warning Intervention and Monitoring System (EWIMS; Faria et al., 2017). This report emphasized data that supported that EWIMS reduced the percentage of students with risk indicators related specifically to chronic absence and course failure (Faria et al., 2017). This study provided firm information that the use of an early-warning system can provide positive results and is a viable system for supporting students who are chronically absent or who fail multiple courses. While these two indicators are more concrete, behavior is a more subjective indicator in so much that behaviors can be caused

by any number of circumstances. With all indicator criteria, it is important to establish a threshold of risk (Davis, Herzog, & Legters, 2013).

For the two objective indicators (attendance and course failures), a numerical threshold is logical. For example, a reasonable attendance threshold might be 10% of days absent as measured in the first 30 days of a term. Course performance might specifically focus on failing a math and/or an English course at the upper grade levels, but at the lower grade levels course performance could focus on the development of a skill as measured by a report card at the end of each term. To quantify behavior, it would be logical to use a threshold of days suspended during a specific period of time; however, caution must be exercised because, often times, suspensions are a result of a negative student-teacher relationship (Davis et al., 2013). A better way to collect data regarding behavior may be to gather comments from multiple teachers about a student. Finally, not all three indicators need be present for a student to be identified as exhibiting behavior that may put graduation in jeopardy.

An obvious challenge to school districts choosing to use an EWIMS is fidelity regarding implementation rather than development of such a system (Faria et al., 2017; Frazelle & Nagel, 2015; Mac Iver, 2013). This particular challenge can be met with strategic and ongoing professional development that addresses the importance of stable data indicators as well as the process of collecting and analyzing that data to make informed decisions. Such a learning opportunity would be expected for school personnel responsible for accessing the data and interpreting its meaning, including administrators,

teachers, associates, and administrative assistants. Training might include a team approach in effective data collection methods and/or training staff to recognize risk factor subgroups (Frazelle & Nagel, 2015). The primary function of all professional development would be to support staff in carrying out the primary function of the early-warning system: to alert the stakeholders in a respective student's education if that student falls off course and needs support (Faria et al., 2017; Frazelle & Nagel, 2015). Because it is possible to predict a student's likelihood of dropping out, a critical element of a successful EWIMS is a system-wide acceptance of responsibility for collecting accurate data and using such data in a timely manner to organize and implement interventions for the student who reflects one or more of the indicators.

EWIMS are often considered foundational to the successful implementation of a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) as EWIMS are more diagnostic in nature and act as a screening protocol (Frazelle & Nagel, 2015). The research site did identify a MTSS in their teaching and learning plan to support a student's academic and behavioral needs. A comprehensive MTSS can lead efforts to respond to the identified student's individual needs to help that student get back on a successful educational path (Goodman, 2017). Often, the focus of a MTSS is two-fold: a single academic content area and an element of behavior. However, MTSS is more of an overarching framework of intervention that is focused on the whole child (Goodman, 2017). Given that the district's teaching and learning plan cites, specifically, the use of MTSS as opposed to an EWIMS,

which MTSS would then address, the concern for the district would be that a vital component of the screening process is absent from their plan.

Focus on the Student-Teacher Relationships Through Advisory Programs

In addition to the recommendation that EWIMS be developed and implemented with fidelity in a district, a focus on the relationship between teacher and student is critical in the prevention of drop outs. As supported by Knesting-Lund et al. (2013), while students seem to recognize the importance of the teacher's role in dropout prevention, it is unclear if teachers not only recognize but also understand their influence with regard to a student's persistence to graduate. Evidenced through the dialogues with all participants in this study, the importance of the relationship between teacher and student was clearly articulated in so much that each participant recognized the positive influence of a teacher they remembered fondly as well as a teacher that was not remembered in such a light.

It was clear from the participants that teachers have an influence on a student's educational experience and may have the ability to help students persist in graduating if teachers recognize and understand the role they play in the process. There is a direct relationship between how students perform and what teachers do; thereby promoting the importance of the need to foster relationships between students and teachers (Cook, Faulkner, & Howell, 2016; Harbour, Evanovich, Sweigart, & Hughes, 2015; Uslu & Gizir, 2017). To help students understand that education is about the whole student and to underscore the importance of the psychological, social, and emotional aspects of

education, teachers need ongoing and focused professional development on the application of strategies that have been proven to positively influence student success in the classroom, namely the creation and implementation of an advisory program (Cook et al., 2016; Hamedani & Darling-Hammond, 2015; Harbour et al., 2015; Schaefer, Malu, & Yoon, 2016).

The concept and practice of an advisory program has roots in the middle school movement that began in 1963 (Schaefer et al., 2016). Advisory was one of the four fundamental elements of the middle school concept and was created in response to the unique social and emotional needs of the adolescent. Its primary purpose was to focus on the cultivation of the relationship between the teacher and the student and address the social emotional elements of learning with access to at least one adult on a daily basis, consistently, that is able to develop a personal relationship with a student based on a consistent and structured approach to understanding the developmental needs of adolescents at the middle school age (Hamedani & Darling-Hammond, 2015; Schaefer et al., 2016). Social and emotional learning (SEL) has gained increased attention in recent years because, in part, to school shootings like Marjory Stoneman Douglas Highschool in Florida, Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut, and Santa Fe High School in Texas as well as public massacres such as the one at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando and the one at Route 91 Harvest Music Festival in Nevada. While the implementation of an advisory program will not equate to an end to such harm to others and/or to self, an advisory program integrated into the educational experience in an effort to better serve

the whole child could be an opportunity to keep SEL front and center by cultivating strong relationships and establishing a respectful school climate that dictates a school's culture (Hamedani & Darling-Hammond, 2015; Uslu & Gizir, 2017) .

The foundational element of an advisory program is to provide an adult advocate for every child, through whom a child can feel comfortable exploring relevant issues of adolescence and young adulthood, such as peer pressure, family issues, decision-making, and healthy living (Cook et al., 2016). Typically, advisory time is scheduled into the regular school day and in a consistent location. Curriculum is a necessary element in a successful advisory period in so much that instruction in SEL provides the structured opportunity for students to develop insight about themselves and recognize their interdependence with others (Hamedani & Darling-Hammond, 2015).

Because success is an ever-emerging state for each individual student, there is no finality to the development of a positive relationship between student and teacher. The focus of educational institutions has been for so long on the quantitative data, especially on the common core, that this narrow focus has, arguably, supplanted the need for educators to recognize and nurture the competencies of creativity and creative problem solving which are often cultivated by the positive relationship between student and teacher (Cook et al., 2016). Nagel Middle School in Cincinnati, Ohio is an example of a school where the administrators and teachers have accepted the responsibility for the SEL of its students. Opened in 1999, this school's vision was to serve its 1,300 seventh and eighth grade students converging from six elementary schools through the creation of a

learning environment that met the specific needs of the young adolescents it served (Cook et al., 2016). This school's efforts have been recognized both nationally and in the state of Ohio as a school to watch because of its "positive trajectory in academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, social equity, and organizational structure" (Cook et al., 2016, p. 4). A focus area for Nagel Middle School is teacher skills, attitudes, and behaviors that are required to make daily decisions in support of students. The premise of their service is to focus on the core effective practices of the developmental spectrum, teacher professional behaviors and dispositions, and organizational structures (Cook et al., 2016). These elements overlap with relationship at the core. While Nagel Middle School reflected the core practices of a middle school, the same structure could apply to any grade span. The example provided could act as an impetus for dialogue about how to support the whole unique child cognitively, socially, morally, and physically within their context with the ultimate goal being the healthy and positive relationships for the student, beginning with the one with the teacher.

Implications

The purpose of this research was to understand the pull/push factors that influenced a student's decision to drop out of school. The insights gained from this research are relevant to all stakeholders who are responsible for direct or indirect support of any student's education: teachers, school administrators, local policy-makers, parents, and society as a whole. Specifically, for all educators and policy-makers, this research continues to bring attention to the dropout epidemic. The research, has historically,

reflected consistent and determined efforts by educators to reduce the dropout rate by identifying factors that most readily put a student at risk, such as poverty, a lack of engagement or interest, and chronic absences and providing interventions to help abate those factors. This research confirmed that the final act of dropping out is the culmination of years of missed opportunities to intervene and change the trajectory of a student headed for dropout. What this research project clarified was that the implementation of strategies without a deep understanding of the whole child will yield limited results. The decision to drop out starts years before it is finalized. The integration of a well-structured and clearly articulated early warning system and advisory program, that makes relationships with students its foundation, can guide educators and local policy-makers in making decisions for students that support a complete K-12 education, culminating in the receipt of a diploma.

Education is instrumental in sustaining both individual and societal improvement (Turkkahraman, 2012). Historically, education has been an effective means for improving democracy through an increased knowledge-base (Lavrijsen & Nicaise, 2015; Petrick, 2014; Turkkahraman, 2012). When a student drops out of school, there is an anticipated cost associated with a loss of productive workers and the earnings those workers would have generated. In addition, dropouts are more likely to end up incarcerated, experience more high cost health consequences, and access social services to a greater extent than those have earned a high school diploma (Balfanz et al., 2014). Researchers purport that the total cost of a single dropout to society is over $1 million, depending on if that

dropout transitions to a life of crime and drug use (Balfanz et al., 2014). The cost to society for a dropout can be quantified to an extent, but the hidden costs cannot be overlooked. Dropping out of high school has been known to breed a sense of hopelessness for the individual (Petrick, 2014). Ultimately, education's role in the development of society is inarguable. Education builds and strengthens capacity in individuals, groups, institutions, communities, and countries (Turkkahraman, 2012). Because of the extensive and devasting effect the decision to dropout has on the whole social system, it is imperative any educational reform be coordinated with social and economic reforms (Lavrijsen & Nicaise, 2015). Further, understanding how academic engagement, chronic absence, and SES influence a student's decision to drop out of school is imperative in leading to school improvement efforts integrated at local, state, and national levels.

From the historical context and the literature review through the interview process and recommendations for further study, the passion that drove this study was rooted in the hope that its contents and insights would spur ongoing dialogue between students at risk for dropping out and those who serve them. The goal, of course, from this dialogue would be the implementation of supports that help students remain in school and earn a high school diploma, thereby, reducing the dropout rate. The two recommendations detailed researched practices that have had positive effects on students and are proactive in nature. These two recommendations, an early warning system and a structured advisory program, focus on the whole student. I am confident that such an intentional

focus on the whole student, planned and implemented with fidelity, would allow schools to identify appropriate services for students who are at risk for drop out and change the trajectory of their futures.

Conclusion

Education is one of the main factors that allow people to grow and develop as individuals. Education, historically, has been at the core for advancement of any country, and governments spend substantial money on educational efforts. Education has played an important part of the modernization of the industrialized world. The number of dropouts, daily, in today's society, is staggering and should be unacceptable to every person. Efforts to reduce the dropout epidemic have been a topic of educational conversation for decades, and while the dropout rate in the United States has declined over the past decade, to spend too much time in celebration of this accomplishment would be to risk an attitude of complacency, thereby allowing another student to drop out of school. In as much as schools and states take pride in their graduation rates, those same schools and states should be touting the reduction of their respective dropout rates and celebrating that accomplishment.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

Participant #_____

Demographic Questions

1. What is your current age?
2. How would you classify your ethnic origin?
    a. White
    b. Black or African American
    c. Hispanic or Latino
    d. Asian or Asian American
    e. Native American/American Indian/Alaska Native
    f. Pacific Islander
    g. Other
3. Which of the following best describes you?
    a. Married
    b. Living with a partner
    c. Divorced
    d. Separated
    e. Widowed
    f. Never been married
4. What is your current employment status?
    a. Actively employed

b. Not currently employed but actively seeking employment

c. Not currently employed and not actively seeking employment

5. What was your level of income in 2017 before taxes?

    a. Less than $10,000

    b. $10,000-$20,000

    c. $30,000-$40,000

    d. $40,000-$50,000

    e. over $50,000

6. What was the highest level of high school you completed in full before dropping out?

    a. 9th grade

    b. 10th grade

    c. 11th grade

Research Focused Questions

7. Please describe your overall school experiences for as far back as you can remember? Begin with describing yourself as a student.
8. Describe any relationships with your peers as you progress through school with a greater focus on junior high and high school relationships.
9. What are your thoughts and feelings about the content or subject matter you studied in high school? To what extent was the content rigorous and relevant for you?

10. Describe the good things about school?
11. What didn't you like about school?
12. What were your greatest challenges as a high school student?
13. What things could have been done to help you finish school, by the school system or by yourself?
14. What outside forces contributed to you not finishing high school?
15. What dominating factors or series of events, in or outside of school, led you to leave high school?
16. What do you think may have made a difference and led to you staying in school?
17. What would you tell a high school student thinking about dropping out?
18. Is there anything else you would like to say or add at this time?