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Developmental Assets Supporting High School Graduation Among African American Students

A dissertation

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership Policy And Analysis

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

by

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Keywords: At risk Youth, Best Practice, Developmental Assets, Interventions, Strategies

ABSTRACT

Developmental Assets Supporting High School Graduation Among African American Students

by

Randall Johnson

The focus of this study was individual and community assets and barriers that African American students living in disadvantaged low income communities encounter in their efforts to complete high school. The research questions were focused on understanding the high school experiences of students who graduated and of students who dropped out. The study was a comparison of the data collected from interviews of former students to the 15 interventions identified as most effective by the National Dropout Prevention Network (<http://dropoutprevention.org/effective-strategies/>).

Findings suggested that 6 of the 15 developmental assets were effective for enabling African American students to graduate from high school. These developmental assets were school-community collaboration, mentoring, family engagement, alternative schooling, after school opportunities, and active learning. The findings of this study may improve teaching and learning in K-12 schools and communities to increase graduation rates for minority students.

DEDICATION

First and foremost I like to thank, YAHWEH, the Creator; and, my Savior Jesus Christ for blessing me with the strength, opportunity, and ability to complete this work. I want to dedicate this work to my parents the late Weaver C. Johnson and Bessie Lee Johnson. They raised me to be God-fearing and taught me the value and importance of education. Also, I want to thank my wife to be, Jessica Hoyt, for her support and patience during these tough years of graduate school. Much love to my kids, Tyriq Bowens and Amya Johnson. Also, much love to my brothers, nieces, and nephews. Also, much love to all my family and community.

I want to say thank you to my committee members. Thanks to committee chair Dr. Virginia Foley for her teachings and support throughout my graduate studies. Also, thanks to Dr. Eric Glover for his wisdom and support with this work. Thanks to Dr. Arnold Nyarambi and Dr. John Boyd, Jr. for their support and guidance on this work. Thank you all for your wisdom, guidance, and availability to make this work complete.

Last, but not least, special thanks to all the participants for their contributions to this study.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.”

- Nelson Mandela

Students dropping out of high school have been a perennial problem. The highest dropout rates are among African American and other minority students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. In this study I attempted to identify and discuss developmental assets that may positively impact high school graduation rates. My interest in preventing high school dropouts is personal. I am an African American male who has seen a number of my friends, family, and community members drop out of school. Also, I have years of experience teaching at-risk youth in Special Education and Alternative School environments where many students dropped out.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to identify and evaluate the effectiveness of developmental assets that enable students to stay in and complete school through grade 12. Additionally this study identified factors in the lives of disadvantaged students from low-income families that enable them to overcome obstacles that interfered with their efforts to be successful in school.

Research Questions

The overarching question addressed in this study was: What individual qualities contribute to school success for African American students? The secondary research questions were:

- What were the educational experiences of students who graduated and of students who did not graduate from high school?
- What research identified developmental assets support individual students in completing a high school education?

Statement of Significance

Qualitative studies can provide detailed descriptions and analyses of particular practices, processes, or events. Some studies document happenings and other studies increase participants' own understanding of ways to improve a practice (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Findings of this study may be of value to students, policy makers, parents, and educators. It may provide guidance for helping to improve the practices of teaching and learning in K-12 schools to better develop student assets and increase graduation rates for high risk and minority students.

Scope of Study

Students are key informants regarding their own educational experience and dropout process. I interviewed 12 African American adults (One current student, five graduates, and six nongraduates) who attended schools in Buncombe County, North Carolina. I interviewed these former students to get a variety of different perspectives for a more in-depth understanding of the dropout process. Some of the participants received special education services and some participated in academically and intellectually gifted programs. The purpose of the interviews was to gain insight from the experiences of former students who either graduated or who dropped out of high school about their experiences in school.

Definition of Terms

Several terms used in this study are defined below:

- Best Practice: a method or technique that consistently provides results superior to other applied means; and, as improvements are discovered, “best practice” evolves to become better.
- Developmental Assets: are research identified individual qualities that influence young people’s development, helping them become caring, responsible, and productive adults (Search Institute, 2015).
- Effective: developmental assets that produce desired outcomes.
- Expelled: permanent removal from school with no services due to behavior problems (Aud, Kewal, Ramani, & Frohlich, 2011).
- Graduation: the successful completion of K-12 curriculum.
- Graduation Rate: the percent of high school graduates who complete K-12 curriculum and obtain a high school diploma.
- Intervention: an education program, product, practice, or policy aimed at improving student outcomes (Institute of Education Sciences, 2013).
- Status Dropout Rate: represents the percentage of civilian, noninstitutionalized, 16- to 24-year-olds who are not in high school and who have not earned a high school credential (either a diploma or an equivalency credential such as a General Educational Development [GED] certificate). The status dropout rate includes all dropouts (regardless of when they last attended school) as well as individuals who may have never attended

school in the United States, such as immigrants who did not complete a high school diploma in their home country (Aud et al., 2011).”

- Strategy: a process designed to achieve a specific goal or goals.
- Student Responsibility for Learning: when a student takes full responsibility for his or her academic achievement despite social and/or economic barriers.
- Suspended: high school student may be temporarily removed from regular school activities either in or out of school (Aud et al., 2011).

Delimitations

This study was delimited to current student and former students who either graduated or dropped out of high school within the past 5 to 20 years from schools in Buncombe County, North Carolina. Additionally, these students were all African Americans from low-income communities. Some of the participants received special education services and some were former students of the academically and intellectually gifted programs.

Limitations

The objective of this research was to gain an understanding of the perceptions of current student and former students who did and of those who did not graduate from high school about efforts that may have helped or hindered them in completing a high school education.

Participants attended the same public school or lived in the same county. The findings from the data are of the real experiences presented by the participants of the study. These findings may

not be representative of the experiences of individuals from other geographic areas or from other ethnic, social, and economic groups and cannot be generalized to other populations.

Overview of Study

This study consists of five chapters addressing the topic of dropout prevention. Chapter 1 includes an introduction, purpose of study, statement of significance, and research questions. In addition, it presents the scope of study, definition of terms, delimitations and limitations, and overview of study. Chapter 2 is the literature review section. It provides an examination of current literature pertaining to the selected topic. Chapter 3 is the methodology section. It describes the process of data collection, analysis, and reporting. Chapter 4 is the results section. It explains the findings of this research and describes the development process of this theoretical framework. Chapter 5 is the final chapter of this study. It summarizes the findings from Chapter 4 and provides researcher recommendations and conclusions.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are several credible sources available related to dropout prevention programs and developmental assets. However, I located little research outlining the perspectives of students or adults who have dropped out of high school. Most researchers studying the dropout problem have focused primarily on the at-risks students' characteristics, while neglecting their experiences (Fine, 1991; Kelly 1993). Wallen and Fraenkel (2001) suggested that educators critically analyze the experiences of students in these programs to not perpetuate the patterns that influence students to drop out. If not, educators will merely replicate the dysfunctional system that consistently loses about one in four students.

Public education can serve as a vehicle for socioeconomic mobility and a means for the preservation and advancement of humankind. The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (2013) stated that its mission is to build peace, erase poverty, and develop lasting intercultural dialogue by extending education worldwide. This mission statement aligns with current U. S. policy intent. President Barak Obama said, "If we want America to lead in the 21st century, nothing is more important than giving everyone the best education possible — from the day they start preschool to the day they start their career" (Education at the White House, 2013).

People of color, especially African American males, are commonly disadvantaged in schools. Prigmore (2013) said that in addition to the disparities in achievement levels and graduation rates, overrepresentation in disciplinary proceedings and special education classes contribute to the miseducation of African American males. Eighty-five percent of the African American students placed in special education programs are Black males (Prigmore, 2013). Many of the Black males who drop out of school received special education services.

Disproportionality of dropout rates for African American males is a major problem in the dropout crisis. The gap between African American and White dropouts has gotten closer in the past decade; however, disproportionality remains a concern. Amurao (2015) explained, “The Urgency of Now,” a report released by the Schott Foundation for Public Education, tracked the public school graduation rates of Black males since 2004. This 2012 report shows that although the graduation rate is closing the percentage gap among Black males and White (Non-Latino) and Latino males, it is not closing quickly enough. It is a factor that perpetuates limited academic and economic achievement.

At this rate it would take nearly 50 years for Black males to graduate at the same rate as white males,” said John H. Jackson, president and CEO of the Schott Foundation. “I don’t think the country can wait. I don’t think any parent or student can wait for half a century to have the same opportunities, education, jobs as their white male counterparts,” he continues (as cited in Amurao, 2015).

Slavin and Calderâon (2000) explained that a high school diploma is the minimum qualification for full participation in the US economy. Therefore, failure to graduate limits employment opportunity. Dropouts are four times more likely than high school graduates to be on welfare (Slavin & Calderâon, 2000).

Prigmore (2013) stated that educational institutions should address the low achievement of African American males and develop an understanding of the relationship between low educational attainment and incarceration. Educational systems are institutions that serve as structures of disenfranchisement for African American males. Poor academic performance is one of the most consistent high school dropout predictors whether measured through grades, test scores, or course failure (Prigmore, 2013). Hammond (2007) suggested that individual factors

such as their academic performance and engagement have been found to have a major impact on the likelihood that African American students would graduate. Prigmore (2013) concluded that despite the efforts of reform processes, the ability of public school systems to adequately serve black males is getting worse.

Characteristics of Problem

Dropping out of school is a national crisis and silent epidemic that impacts society as a whole. Over three million students drop out of high school annually, and 8,300 students drop out of high school each day (Statistic Brain, 2013). Low graduation rates are one of the most troubling concerns of education in the nation (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Salamat (2011) estimated that dropouts from the class of 2010 alone cost the U.S. more than \$337 billion in lost wages over the course of their lifetimes, an additional \$17 billion in health care costs, and \$8 billion each year in costs and lost revenue due to crime.

Beatty (2001) suggested the key to understanding dropout behavior, the factors that may influence it, and also the difficulties facing those who try to measure it is recognizing that dropping out of school is a process rather than an isolated event. In addition Beatty (2001) explained that characteristics common to the students most likely to drop out illustrate one of the keys to understanding the phenomenon.

Dropping out is a process that may begin in the early years of elementary school rather than an isolated event that occurs during the last few years of high school. The process has been described as one of gradual disengagement from school. Dynarski et al. (2008) explained that dropping out is not always or entirely a function of the attitudes, behaviors, and external environment of the students.

Hammond (2007) discussed dropout factories. According to Balfanz et al. (2013) a dropout factory is a high school in which 12th grade enrollment is 60% or less of ninth grade enrollment 3 years earlier. Students of color and students from low-income families, who make up the largest group of students in low graduation rate high schools, have benefited the most from the decline in dropout factories. However, Slavin and Calderâon (2000) suggested that even with the best preventive programs many students were at risk for dropping out, and many fail to reach their full potential.

The efforts to address the underachievement and backwards progression of Black Males in American society and the educational arena have been disconnected and uncoordinated (Prigmore, 2013). Backward progression can be recognized as a series of events such as limited economic advancement, unemployment, and recidivism resulting from lack of educational opportunities. Furthermore, Education Secretary Arne Duncan said that turning around our nation's lowest-performing schools is challenging work that requires everyone to play a part – including teachers, administrators, counselors, business leaders, the philanthropic sector, and community members (National Educators Association: The Opening Bell, 2013).

Why Do Students Drop Out?

There is substantial literature suggesting numerous reasons behind high school dropout rates. Some reports focus on the impact of poverty and class, some on racial inequities, and some on both. This section is a summary of the literature related to factors or reasons students do not complete high school.

My grandparents completed school in third and fifth grade before going to work on family farms in South Carolina as share croppers during the 1930s. This was common among African Americans throughout much of the post-Civil War south. However, in 2014 students continue to drop out but no longer are able to support families by working on farms.

Some of the current reasons for students to drop out of high school are lack of student accountability for individual efforts in the learning process, peer pressure, family economic conditions, and dysfunctional schools not providing the effective supports to students and faculty. Diyu (2001) said, “The principal work in controlling the drop-out rate will be done in schools. Schools must attract students, retain them, and enable them to study well. Education must consider the whole child (p.57).”

McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) explained that an increase in graduation requirements and rocky transitions from middle school to high school seem to comprise a majority of the reasons for students struggling, failing, and dropping out. Also, they suggested that states have been pressured to compete globally, therefore, raising their graduation requirements.

Suspensions and expulsions are other reasons leading to students dropping out of school. High school students may be suspended (temporarily removed from regular school activities either in or out of school) or expelled (permanently removed from school with no services) due to behavior problems. Patterns for expulsion rates were reported by sex and ethnicity. In 2007 male high school students were expelled twice the rate of female students. In addition, 10% of Black students had been expelled compare to 1% of White students (Aud et al., 2011).

Salamat (2011) explained that of students most at risk of dropping out; 87% qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, and more than 70% are Black or Hispanic. So, why has the dropout

rate among Latino and African American students remained so high? Slavin and Calder on (2000) suggested that family financial conditions are a factor because dropout rates are strongly correlated with parents' socioeconomic status. Beatty (2001) suggested that students from lower socioeconomic conditions are more likely to drop out of school than are those from more affluent conditions. Zimmerman and Levine (2010) stated that the number of American children experiencing poverty is alarming. Moreover, children in particular demographic groups experience higher poverty rates. For example in 2006 one third of Black and over one quarter of Hispanic children lived in poverty. Ravitch (2000) reported on the complexity that poverty brings to the dropout problem:

Urban education suffers from many problems, but worst among them is the spread of concentrated poverty, where multiple social ills converge. The correlates of poverty—poor health, inadequate housing, high crime rates, single parent families, substance abuse—create an environment in which heroic efforts are necessary to sustain hope and aspirations for the future. (p. 2)

Reasons students drop out of school can vary within the processes that begin in early childhood and gain momentum as students age. Additionally, Dynarski et al. (2008) explained that during the middle school years, students' interest in school and academic skills may begin to lag, so that by the time students' transition to high school, students who are at risk of dropping out may need intensive individual support or other supports to reengage them in the purpose of education.

Scope of Dropout Problem

Dropping out of school is not only an American problem. For example, the investigative unit of the World Bank Monetary Fund project went to a poor area of the Jiangxi province of China to analyze the problem and study countermeasures that might address this phenomenon (Diyu, 2001). Diyu suggested that the problem of dropouts is, in fact, a social problem and

should involve action at all levels of government in order to mobilize society's strength to achieve better results.

In the United States educators have addressed high dropout rates for some time. Despite millions of federal dollars invested in research on students at risk of dropping out of high school, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) estimated in November 2001 that over a half a million students left school before graduation in a 10-year period (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010).

Adams and Sparks (2013) provided very recent statistics regarding dropout rates. The "averaged freshman graduation rate" rose to 78.2% of public school students receiving a diploma in 2010, up from 75.5% the year before. In 2006, the rate was 73.4%, and in 2001 it was 71.7%. It is the highest graduation rate since 1970, when the figure reached 78.7%. The NCES analysis showed about 514,000 students in grades 9-12 dropped out in 2009-10. That was a decline from the previous year, when a 4.1% dropout rate was reported. States with the most severe dropout problems were Mississippi (7.4%) and Arizona (7.8%), while New Hampshire had just 1.2% of students quitting and Idaho 1.4%. Nationwide girls were less likely to drop out (2.9%) than boys (3.8%).

The report by NCES also breaks down data by race and ethnicity (Adams & Sparks, 2013). In 2009-10 the report showed Asian/Pacific Islander students had the highest graduation rate, 93.5%, followed by White students at 83%. It was 71.4% for Hispanic students, 69.1% for American Indian/ Alaska Native students, and 66.1% for Black students (Adams & Sparks, 2013). The achievement gap narrowed from 2006 to 2010 between Black and White and between Hispanic and White students. While graduation rates improved for all groups, Latino students experienced the largest gains of 10 percentage points.

Graduation rates increased in 2010 perhaps because of the initiative to break up big high schools with low graduation rates to create smaller schools (Adams & Sparks, 2013). In addition, ninth grade academies may have had an impact as well. In a conference call with reporters, NCES Commissioner Jack Buckley said it was difficult to identify the specific causes of the graduation rate increases; however, he speculated that a lack of jobs in a tough economy could be the reason that fewer students might have left high school early.

Zimmerman and Levine (2010) reported that approximately 7,000 students dropped out of high school each day with 1.2 million students not graduating on time. Some students may eventually complete a General Educational Development (GED) certificate or complete another high school equivalent. Zimmerman's analysis suggests high school dropouts face a tough labor market and are more likely to need government support and become entangled in the criminal justice system.

Meanwhile, of the students who do graduate high school, about two thirds subsequently enroll in higher education within 2 years, but there are huge disparities by income, race, ethnicity, and gender. Once arriving at a college or university, many of these students are not prepared for college level work, and over one third are therefore forced to first complete remedial or developmental courses before starting to accumulate credits towards postsecondary degree (Zimmerman & Levine, 2010).

Analysis of Developmental Assets

Somers, Owens, and Piliawsky (2009) estimated that dropouts may cost society a billion dollars for programs like unemployment, welfare, and crime prevention. The National Education Association (2013) reported that high school dropouts cost the nation \$1.8 billion in lost tax

revenue per year. Therefore, it would seem beneficial to society as a whole to have more graduates prepared to enter the workforce. There are numerous efforts to do so.

Research for developmental assets and strategies applicable to reduce high school dropout rates has been ongoing. The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (NDPCN) has identified 15 developmental assets that have had the most positive impact on the dropout phenomena. Each of these 15 developmental assets identified by the NDPCN has proven successful and has been adopted by several states as best practice. The idea is to apply each of the developmental assets individually or in combination for dropout prevention.

Currently, my home state agency, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NC DPI), has adopted and listed these developmental assets as best practice. These strategies have been implemented successfully at all education levels and environments throughout the nation (National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, 2013). Developmental assets are needed in secondary schools to increase the chances that students will stay in school, complete their high school degrees, and make a successful transition to postsecondary studies or to the work force (Slavin & Calderâon, 2000). The following pages will list, define, and discuss each of the most effective developmental assets identified by NDPCN.

School System Renewal Through Community Engagement

1. Systemic Renewal is a continuing process of evaluating goals and objectives related to school policies, practices, and organizational structures as they impact a diverse group of learners (North Carolina Department Public of Instruction, 2013, Best Practices). The purpose of school system renewal is to develop processes for continuous change and improvement as an ongoing effort to realign organizations goals to meet the needs of the system and community.

Systemic renewal is about continuous, critical inquiry into current practices, identifying innovations that might improve education, removing organizational barriers to that improvement, and providing a system structure that supports change.

The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (2013) found from a meta-analysis of comprehensive school reform models that robust reform can be expected to improve students' test scores. However, improvement does not occur rapidly because the strongest effects were seen in the fifth year of implementation. In addition, the research shows that the overall effects of reform are statistically significant and meaningful.

2. Community collaboration is a form of tremendous support for students. School-community collaboration is when all groups in a community provide collective support to the school: a strong infrastructure sustains a caring supportive environment where youth can thrive and achieve (North Carolina Department Public of Instruction, 2013). School-community collaboration occurs when groups or agencies come together to establish an educative community. The educative community is composed of a multitude of educating entities such as school, home, places of worship, the media, museums, libraries, community agencies, and businesses (National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, 2013). Some of the initiatives that involve partnering with the community are School-to-Work Programs, drug abuse prevention programs, after-school centers, and parental involvement programs.

In addition, professional learning communities (PLC) functioning in schools have been good for intra and inter school-community collaboration. The PLC has become widely heralded as the way for professional staff of schools to work for student benefits. The norms of collaboration and democratic process in decision making, as well as sharing power and authority, contribute to a culture in which staff grows in professionalism and efficacy (Hall & Hord, 2011).

In this community each individual member is responsible for his or her own actions, but the common good is uppermost (Hall & Hord, 2011). In schools where the professional staffs - administrators and teachers - are organized in learning communities an undeviating focus on student learning is achieved.

According to Kariuki (2008) establishing partnership with local industries, colleges, and universities is another major characteristic of strong school cultures to reduce dropout rates. Students need the support and help of the whole community. National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (NDPCN, 2013) explained that volunteers and funding are two major ways that communities support their schools. Some of the positive results found at full-service community-schools are improved reading and math performance, better attendance rates, a decrease in suspension rates, and a decrease in the dropout rate.

3. Creating a safe learning environment is an essential part of school renewal. It includes a comprehensive violence prevention plan, crisis management, and conflict resolution processes. In addition, the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (2013) suggested that when schools are a welcoming and accepting environment students are motivated to attend school. Once students arrive on school property they should feel safe and prepared for engaged learning, free from the stress of fear. A safe learning environment provides daily experiences at all grade levels that enhances positive social attitudes and effective interpersonal skills in all students (North Carolina Department Public of Instruction, 2013). Bully-free initiatives from school districts can reduce school violence and work as violence prevention.

Conflict resolution is a tool for schools to reduce teen violence in learning institutions. Programs have proven to be effective in reducing misbehavior, vandalism, and general delinquency. Students drop out of school for many reasons, but violence and conflict are

contributing factors to students dropping out of school (National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, 2013).

4. Some students have been pressured by school age bullies to leave school early. Thus, creating a safe learning environment is an essential component to producing high school graduates. National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (2013) suggested that it is important to create a school climate that does not tolerate bullying, intimidation, and terrorism. Students who are afraid have higher absences. Therefore, a safe learning environment is focused on academic achievement, maintaining high standards, fostering positive relationships between staff and students, and encouraging parental and community involvement.

Early Developmental Assets

5. Family engagement research consistently finds that family engagement has a direct, positive effect on children's achievement and is the most accurate predictor of a student's success in school (North Carolina Department Public of Instruction, 2013). Kariuki (2008) explained that promoting positive partnership with parents in the education of their children is one of five major characteristics that improved student performance, increased attendance, reduced dropout rates, and increased graduation rates. Smith (2001) suggested that research about parent involvement is clear. When parents are involved in their children's education, children excel. That is why more school leaders are focusing on boosting parent participation at both the school and district level. National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (2013) explained that some schools and teachers, however, have not made significant progress in reaching out to families.

The way children spent their time at home was the strongest predictor of school success. Home learning activities such as homework, reading, and using the dictionary were common

among high achievers (National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, 2013). A synthesis of research concluded that there is a positive relationship between family engagement and improved academic achievement. This is true across socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, and educational background factors for students of all ages.

Early Childhood Education

6. Early Childhood Education birth-to-5 developmental assets demonstrate that providing a child additional enrichment can enhance brain development. The most effective way to reduce the number of children who ultimately drop out is to provide the best possible classroom instruction from the beginning of their school experience through the primary grades (North Carolina Department Public of Instruction, 2013). Pre-K programs like Head Start and others have proven to be successful strategies to increase graduation rates, too. The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (2013) suggested that high-quality early childhood education has the greatest positive effect on children from lower socioeconomic status, children who are at risk because of other circumstances, and children with disabilities and special needs. The most effective way to reduce the number of children who ultimately drop out is to provide the best possible classroom instruction from the beginning of their school experience.

The Obama Administration has designated millions of dollars to assist with early education programs. The United States, Congress, Senate, Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (2008) included in their five recommendations funding for head start programs to address the national dropout crisis. Schechter (2013) reported, “Members of the group, Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, has released a report that shows quality early childhood education programs can reduce crime, noting that the group says the report shows that state and

federal early childhood programs could reduce Minnesota prison populations and cut prison spending by \$48 million annually” (para. 2). In addition, reports have been made of the group urging Congress to support President Obama’s Preschool for All program.

The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (2013) found that research demonstrated early childhood education as definitely a good investment. One of the most significant findings to emerge from research on dropouts is that early identification is vital to effective prevention. Although we tend to think of students dropping out during their last years of high school, many are lost long before that.

7. Early literacy developmental assets are to help low-achieving students improve their reading and writing skills to establish the necessary foundation for effective learning in all other subjects (North Carolina Department Public of Instruction, 2013). It is better to intervene early and provide the necessary services to prevent students from developing a pattern of failure. NDPCN (2013) encourages parents and early caregivers to read daily to babies and toddlers. Even after children begin school it is important for parents to stay involved. More than half of all fourth graders who are eligible for the free lunch program fail to read at the basic achievement level needed for academic success.

The school-to-prison pipeline describes the intersection of the K-12 education and the juvenile justice system resulting from a failure of schools to meet the academic and social needs of at-risk students (Prigmore, 2013). In addition, NDPCN (2013) found that many at-risk students read below grade level, which contributes to their lack of academic achievement. Low literacy levels show a strong positive correlation with poverty, crime, and unemployment. Literacy is vital for the workforce because it creates opportunity for literate workers to earn higher income to support themselves and families. It is possible that the prison population would

decrease because more people would qualify for jobs. In addition, there would be fewer dropouts because more students would have successful school experiences due to increased reading skills. At-risk children are in critical need of effective instruction in the early years in order to develop effective reading and writing skills to be eligible for high school graduation and quality employment.

Basic Core Strategies

8. Mentoring is a one-to-one caring, supportive relationship between a mentor and a mentee that is based on trust. Tutoring, also a one-to-one activity is focused on academics and is an effective practice when addressing specific needs such as reading, writing, or math competencies (North Carolina Department Public of Instruction, 2013, Best Practices). NDPCN (2013) explains that two-parent families, extended family, or the closely knit neighborhoods of years past are not as prevalent today to offer the support and guidance that youth need. In addition, mentoring is understood to be an effective strategy for working with youth in at risk situations and in need of role models and a positive support system. Mentoring has been a practiced art of developing and maintaining positive and helpful human relationships for hundreds of years by nearly every culture (NDPCN, 2013).

General Collin Powell and his wife Alma Powell started a program with other organizations called Americas Promise Alliance to increase our nation's graduation rates. Several studies have confirmed the positive outcomes for mentoring and tutoring developmental assets. This alliance has proven to be effective with many different youth groups but has been extremely effective with youth in at-risk situations (NDPCN, 2013). Americas Promise Alliance brings together young people with adult mentors for appropriate support to graduate high school.

Johnson (2006) suggested that mentoring provided at-risk students with a positive and influential adult in their lives, thus helping students becoming more enthusiastic about school. The mentor is simply a wise and trusted friend with a commitment to provide guidance and support for the mentee to develop fullest potential based on vision for the future (NDPCN, 2013).

NDPCN (2013) found that mentors have the power and influence to change the negative cycles of students and their families. Mentoring is clearly an effective strategy for encouraging students to complete school. It serves as a powerful human force in a school, community, or state that can change the vision, health, or the economic base of the community.

9. Service-learning connects meaningful community service experiences with academic learning. This teaching and learning method promotes personal and social growth, career development, and civic responsibility and can be a powerful vehicle for effective school reform at all grade levels (North Carolina Department Public of Instruction, 2013).

Middle school students, in particular, benefit from service-learning activities. Students have the opportunity to work as a team, build their self-esteem and self-efficacy, and collaborate with positive adult role models (NDPCN, 2013). NDPCN explained that service-learning can transform schools into places of active learning and connect people and programs in the community, therefore, encouraging students to become excited about the opportunity to serve others while helping themselves at the same time.

NDPCN (2013) found that service-learning enriches the lives of at-risk students. It is a teaching methodology providing developmental opportunities that promote personal, social, and intellectual growth as well as civic responsibility and career exploration. Most students have

needs in each of these areas that must be met if they are to make a successful transition from childhood to adulthood.

10. Alternative schooling provides potential dropouts a variety of options that can lead to graduation, with programs paying special attention to the student's individual needs, social needs, and academic requirements for a high school diploma (North Carolina Department Public of Instruction, 2013). It was not unusual in the 1950s and 1960s for school districts to have an alternative school; however, alternative schools of that time period were mostly designed to serve students who had already dropped out of the regular school. Today smaller classroom settings and more individual attention at alternative schools are beneficial for potential dropouts. NDPCN (2013) explained that alternative schooling opportunities were needed to accommodate the educational needs of students because current school systems, and particularly traditional high schools, can no longer serve the needs of students and their family lifestyles common in the 1990s.

NDPCN (2013) described alternative schools as inside the system serving special population such as students with unique learning interests or disabilities, teenage parents, potential dropouts, violent individuals, or court-adjudicated youths and those in juvenile detention systems. However, some oppose the concept of alternative schools or programs. Wallen and Fraenkel (2001) found that researchers criticize alternative programs on several fronts. They claim the programs serve as dumping grounds for unwanted behavior problem students, especially minority students. However, even if an alternative school is a dumping ground, it can still provide the supports needed for at-risk students. The following statement supports this view.

Every student can learn! And every student should have the opportunity to learn and to achieve a quality of life they desire based on their educational efforts and achievements. If every school board member, school administrator, teacher, parent, community and business leader believes that statement, then alternative schooling is not an option in America—it is an absolute requirement in every community (NDPCN, 2013, “Alternative Schooling,” para. 2).

In addition, the most common form of alternative schools serving youth in at-risk environments are designed to be part of a school district's comprehensive dropout prevention program (NDPCN, 2013). With appropriate funding and leadership, alternative schools can be very beneficial. NDPCN suggested that alternative placement does meet various student and family needs. Also, alternative schooling offers to school and community leaders the opportunity to fulfill their legal responsibility to provide equal access to education for all students.

11. Many schools provide after-school and summer enhancement programs that eliminate information loss and inspire interest in a variety of areas. Such experiences are especially important for students at risk of school failure because these programs fill the afternoon "gap time" with constructive and engaging activities (North Carolina Department Public of Instruction, 2013). After-school opportunities have positive effects on academic success and social behavior and provide other opportunities for enrichment for at risk-students (NDPCN, 2013). It is good for students to be involved in sports and constructive activities during after school hours because it is during these afternoon hours when parents are working and students have the most time unsupervised.

NDPCN (2013) explained that parents are at work and children are left unsupervised after school and during summer months. In addition, most crimes are committed by students during the week from 3:00-7:00 p.m. Students who are positively engaged during these time periods are

less likely to engage in high risk behaviors that might result in unwanted pregnancy or negative incidents with law enforcement agencies.

Summer enrichment programs help students retain what they have learned during the school year. These productive summer hours are beneficial to students academically and socially. It is also a time when students can work on skill deficits overlooked during a busy school year in preparation for tests. Thus, constructive supervised time during after school hours and summer vacation are good for gifted and at-risk students. Participating students demonstrated increased achievement, regular attendance, good behavior, and a reduction in grade retention. Students also showed improved social skills and behavior that resulted in fewer disciplinary incidents at school and fewer suspensions (NDPCN, 2013).

Making the Most of Instruction

12. Professional Development for teachers who work with youth at high risk of academic failure need to feel supported and have an avenue by which they can continue to develop skills techniques and learn about innovative strategies (North Carolina Department Public of Instruction, 2013). Professional Development (PD) for teaching strategies, learning strategies, and classroom management is very beneficial for teachers working with students at risk for dropping out of school. NDPCN (2013) suggested that school districts have professional development for their teachers. The problem is that very few of these activities are effective in changing teaching practices and most professional development is fragmented and short-term and rarely focused on curriculum for students. Professional development is a valuable tool in improving teacher competency.

Funding for teacher training is another recommendation from a government hearing about strategically addressing the dropout crisis (United States Congress, Senate, and Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, 2008). It is important for teachers to be equipped with the appropriate professional skills and funding to meet the needs of all students, especially those at risk of quitting school. NDPCN (2013) made a strong argument for quality professional development by stating that each dollar spent on improving teachers' qualifications nets greater gains in student learning than any other use of an education dollar.

13. For example, the NDPCN (2013) supports professional development that enables teachers to improve their students' active learning. Students find new and creative ways to solve problems, achieve success, and become lifelong learners when educators show them that there are different ways to learn. Regular education and special education teachers can coteach and collaborate on best ways to serve students in the classroom. NDPCN suggested that active learning in the classroom allows students to take responsibility for their own learning and, teachers become facilitators rather than repositories of knowledge. Progress monitoring or curriculum based measurement (CBM) is an effective intervention for actively measuring the effectiveness of learning and teaching strategies. Once CBM is applied systematically by teachers, then students can actively participate in the monitoring of their own progress, and increase personal learning experiences.

There are a variety of active learning teaching strategies: cooperative learning, learning styles theory, multiple intelligences theory, and project-based learning (NDPCN, 2013). Teachers work to accommodate learning styles of their students and to get students actively engaged in meaningful assignments. NDPCN found that research has shown that not everyone learns in the same way. In addition, NDPCN explained that some students are visual learners and

others are auditory learners. While some students are kinesthetic learners, other learners prefer to work alone, or in small groups. At-risk students often struggle to learn in a traditional classroom setting; however, in classrooms where multiple intelligences are accommodated at-risk students have the opportunity to succeed.

Providing knowledge and experiences in using educational technology is another area for improving opportunities for at-risk students. It offers some of the best opportunities for delivering instruction to engage students in authentic learning, addressing multiple intelligences, and adapting to students' learning styles (North Carolina Department Public of Instruction, 2013, Best Practices). NDPCN (2013) found that educational technology is needed for a variety of reasons. It provides an alternative method of learning for those who struggle to learn using traditional methods. Technology can be used to address multiple intelligences and also to provide authentic learning experiences for students. It helps to prepare students for the workforce.

There are many types of educational technology and many ways to define it. In recent years educational technology has come to mean computers (NDPCN, 2013). Online learning programs have become a useful technology tool for supporting at risk-youth. Special reading programs and on-line credit recovery programs for at-risk high school students are very effective in retaining potential dropouts. Internet technology allows for more real world learning experiences. NDPCN (2013) suggested that full potential of educational technology has yet to be realized in schools. In addition, it was noted that educators are moving from viewing technology as simple automation to technology as a vehicle for exploration and creation.

In addition, with technology applications students can learn at their pace, use multiple intelligences, and engage in meaningful learning more frequently. Computers can expand the educational horizons for teachers and students; and, with technology training and support for

teachers and students, the full potential of instructional technology can be realized (NDPCN, 2013).

Nagel (2013) found that “technology-driven” education programs in prisons are as effective as teacher-led programs and each program has led to significant reduction in repeat criminal offenses and increased employment opportunities for prisoners upon release. In addition, Nagel (2013) explained that computer-assisted instruction is self-paced or can be led by a tutor, which ultimately reduce education budget costs. Nagel based his conclusion on the findings of a meta-analysis sponsored by US Department of Education (ED), funded by Department of Juvenile Justice (DOJ), and conducted by the RAND Corp. However, NDPCN (2013) found that some schools struggle to find the funding necessary to keep up with technological advances. In addition, NDPCN suggested more studies need to be conducted because the effectiveness of technology has mixed results.

14. An individualized instructional program for each student allows for flexibility in teaching methods and motivational strategies to consider these individual differences (North Carolina Department Public of Instruction, 2013). Special education students have individualized education plans (IEP) and regular education students have access to personal education plans (PEP), thus allowing them to participate in the construction of an educational plan to meet their educational needs. NDPCN (2013) explained that each child is unique and individualized programs can increase student success.

Alternative schools for at-risk students that include individualized plans can best serve potential dropout students. Students who participate in the planning and have appropriate school and family support are more apt to graduate because they have more accountability for their learning. NDPCN (2013) found that individualized instruction provides the opportunity for

students to learn at their own pace, in their own way, and be successful in due time. At-risk students who would probably drop out of school end up completing high school; thus, alternative schools have found individualized instruction encouraging to at-risk students.

15. A quality Career and Technology Education (CTE) program and a related guidance program are essential for all students. School-to-work programs recognize that youth need specific skills to prepare them to measure up to the larger demands of today's workplace (North Carolina Department Public of Instruction, 2013). Students who participate in apprenticeships and internships are more likely to stay in school and graduate. From these work related experiences, students can make the connection between school and the work place. NDPCN (2013) found that the School-to-Work (STW) Act of 1994 has had a major impact on career education in schools and that resources are available to fund initiatives that make the transition from school to the workforce smoother for students. Approximately 81% of at-risk students wanted more "real-world learning," such as teachers better explaining how education can lead to a good job (Barack, 2006).

Schools and community colleges are moving from the old model of vocational education to the new model of school-to-work programs. The new model seeks to integrate academic and career-based skills and, thus, raise academic standards for all students (NDPCN, 2013). With CTE programs students have more learning opportunities inside and outside of the classroom relating to real world experiences, thus reducing dropout rates and increasing graduation rates.

Dynarski et al. (2008) suggested that society as a whole would benefit by helping students complete high school. Some students may or may not be cognizant of the long-term consequences such as lower paying jobs, higher rates of poverty, and increased incidents in the penal system. Also, the economic consequences of dropping out are continuing to get worse as

employment opportunities for high school dropouts are reduced; thus, they have increased chances of going to prison or becoming more dependent on government assistance.

Summary

Overall, the literature reviewed for this study discusses the belief that there are effective developmental assets and strategies to prevent students from dropping out of high school despite socioeconomic conditions that disadvantage them. Some stakeholders may agree based on the current information available that appropriate funding, innovative programs, and valuable relationships are a focus in the right direction for addressing the national and international dropout problems.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODS

The purpose of this study was to identify and evaluate the effectiveness of developmental assets that enable students to stay in and complete school through grade 12. This was a study developed from a phenomenological perspective. Phenomenology attempts to understand the lived experiences of research participants as they see and understand them. The purpose of a phenomenological study is to describe and interpret the experiences of participants regarding a particular event in order to understand the participants' meanings as ascribed to that event (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

This was a descriptive explanatory study and its purpose was to identify relationships influencing a phenomenon. This type of study can be useful for educators and state policy makers in planning and executing dropout prevention strategies. In addition, parents and parent teacher organizations may benefit from this study. Groenewald (2004) stated, "The aim of the researcher is to describe as accurately as possible the phenomenon, refraining from any pre given framework, but remaining true to the facts (pp.5)."

Research Design

Groenewald (2004) described phenomenology as a qualitative framework founded on the belief that objects in the external world exist independently. To arrive at conclusions with certainty requires ignoring anything outside of immediate experience. Therefore, individual realities are treated as pure 'phenomena' and the only absolute data from where to begin. This study was designed to obtain the perceptions of 12 individuals who graduated or scheduled to

graduate or dropped out of school between the years 1994 to 2015. My goal was to present their individual perceptions so that we may better understand their realities.

High school graduates and dropouts in Western Carolina area were located and interviewed to discover why they did complete or didn't complete school and what, if any, developmental assets might have enabled each of them to have had a successful high school educational experience. Twelve former students who did and who did not complete high school were selected to participate in this research to better understand how students experience school. Participants were former students that attended one or two of the many high schools in the Western Carolina region. Participants were contacted by visiting and canvassing neighborhoods for high school graduates and dropouts. The snowball effect took place as participants began to volunteer, wanting to be a part of this study.

Interviews

Data were gathered from individual interviews with recruited volunteer participants. There were 12 interviews completed for this study. The researcher is African American, a male member of the region from which study participants were recruited. Although previous informal conversations with potential subjects have revealed reluctance to speak on the topic, others have been enthusiastic and willing to share their school experiences. In order to protect the identity and confidentiality of the participants, pseudonyms were used for their names and schools attended.

At the beginning of each interview the purpose of the research was explained, along with the researcher's obligation to present the participants' views accurately, and each participant was asked to sign a letter of consent (See Appendix C). The informed consent highlighted

participants' rights to withdraw at any time during the interview and right to confidentiality in all data collected or my interpretation. Participants were informed that their signature acknowledges voluntary participation for this study. Time was allotted to allow volunteers to comprehend the significance of their signing the informed consent and to decide if they wanted to continue participating in the study.

Before each interview I obtained written and oral permission to record and to take notes during the interview process. To make the most of interview time I explained each participant's right to refuse to answer any question and the right to withdraw participation without any penalty and without any cause. Participants were also notified that they have the right to withdraw from participation in the study at any time. In addition, they were informed that any recorded information gathered prior to discontinuance would be immediately discarded. All research participants were given pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

Research Methods

Participants for this study were purposely selected. Purposeful sampling focuses on selecting information rich cases whose study illuminates the questions under study (Patton, 2002). One of the several strategies for purposefully selecting participants is extreme or deviant case sampling. Patton (2002) suggested that the purpose of extreme or deviant (Outlier) sampling is learning from unusual manifestations of the phenomenon of interest, for example outstanding successes/notable failures; top of the class/ dropouts; exotic events; crises. I started collecting data purposefully and it changed to the snowball effect as participants began asking to participate. Participants were high school graduates and dropouts recruited from the local communities of Western North Carolina region. The selection criteria for this study were (A.)

inclusion of male and female, (B.) graduate and nongraduate, (C.) experiences from former students who attended at least one year of high school before dropping out, and (D.) people with and without disabilities.

Interview Process

Many of the participants attended the same public school or live in the same community. To gain a more holistic view of educational experiences from high school dropouts, I created a set of interview questions that encouraged them to openly and honestly share the story of their experiences. The objective was to gain the perspective of high school graduates and dropouts.

Interviews were recorded for reliability and accuracy. Having participants feel comfortable and welcomed allows interviews to flow smoothly. Questions were given to each participant prior to the interview, and probing techniques were used to gain more accuracy, depth, and clarity. In addition, prior to each interview participants were informed that I may have follow-up questions to improve my understanding of their experience.

Participants were asked to select the interview setting where they feel most comfortable to speak on potentially sensitive issues concerning their personal educational experience. Interviews averaged 45-60 minutes in length depending on participant responses and comfort levels. Interviews were recorded in places chosen by volunteering participants. Some interviews were in the home and others in private areas of public settings.

Ethical Protocol

Ethical considerations are extremely important in the process of completing credible and valid qualitative research. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) suggested that qualitative research is more likely to be personally intrusive than quantitative research. Thus, ethical guidelines

include policies regarding informed consent, avoiding deceptive practices, confidentiality, anonymity, privacy, and caring.

To follow through with credible ethical considerations, I also used an Ethical Issues Checklist (Patton, 2002) to support my effort to maintain a strong ethical foundation (Appendix B). Each of the 10 points from the checklist was referenced by the researcher to address ethical concerns. Participants were treated with the utmost respect in regards to ethical and legal issues. Their shared educational experiences are highly appreciated and well protected for benefit of each participant and credibility of this research.

Each participant was assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and power to discard any recorded data at any time during this research. Ethical guidelines by McMillan and Schumacher (2010) and ethical issues checklist by Patton (2002) were successfully used to address ethical considerations in research design, data collections, and analysis.

Data Collection and Analysis

The analysis of data in this study was guided by the processes and methodology of Clark Moustakas's phenomenological research model introduced by Patton (2002). The data for the analysis were collected from individual, in-depth, unstructured interviews based on the work of McMillan and Schumacher (2010). Therefore, the researcher must have good communication skills. McMillan and Schumacher suggested that because of the heavy reliance on this single method of data collection, it is very important for the researcher to be skilled at interviewing. On the one hand, some structure is required to stay on topic, but the researcher also needs considerable skill in listening, prompting when appropriate, encouraging participants to reflect,

expand, and elaborate on their remembrances of experience. The researcher has carefully followed these recommendations as described in the following paragraphs.

Participants were interviewed and collected data were analyzed by applying Moustakas's (1994) model of processes and methodology. Interviews were conducted in a 1-2-hour time frame, depending upon participant responses. Also, each interview was digitally recorded, and memos were used for additional researcher notes and observations.

Phenomenological analysis according to Moustakas's model (1994) is epoche. Moustakas pointed out that "Husserl called the freedom from suppositions the epoche, a Greek word meaning to stay away from or abstain (pp.85)." Patton (2002), also, wrote, "Epoche is a process that the researcher engages in to remove, or at least become aware of, prejudices, viewpoints or assumptions regarding the phenomenon under investigation (pp.485)." Consequently, I have had to make conscious and deliberate efforts to free myself of any expectations, bias, any prejudgments, and focus primarily on the accuracy of gathered data. To do so I used only the data that were digitally recorded.

The second step is phenomenological reduction. This is a series of steps that begins with bracketing the topic or research question. This is where the researcher (1) locates within the story or experience key phrases and statements that speak directly to the phenomenon in question, (2) interprets meanings as an informed reader, (3) obtains the participants' interpretations of these phrases if possible, (4) inspects these meanings for what they reveal about the essential, recurring features of the phenomenon being studied, and (5) offers a tentative statement, or definition, of the phenomenon in terms of essential recurring features (Patton, 2002).

Thirdly, the bracketed data were horizontalized. Horizontalization is where all data had equal value. The data are spread out for examination, with all elements and perspectives having

equal weight (Patton, 2002). Then, data were organized into meaningful clusters for the delimitation process. According to Moustakas (1994) delimited horizons or meanings are horizons that stand out as invariant qualities of the experience. Additionally, Patton (2002) suggested that delimitation is a process whereby irrelevant, repetitive, or overlapping data are eliminated. The researcher then identifies the invariant themes within the data in order to perform an “imaginative variation” on each theme (Patton, 2002). Moustakas (1994) explained imaginative variation as varying possible meanings, and to vary perspectives of the phenomenon from different vantage points such as opposite meanings and various roles. Thus, themes are identified and categorized accordingly.

A final step is the synthesis of composite textural and composite structural descriptions. Patton (2002) suggested the final step requires an integration of the composite textual and composite structural descriptions, providing a synthesis of the meanings and essences of the experience.

Reliability, Validity, and Credibility

Reliability, validity, and credibility are essential in qualitative research. Readers need to know how reliable the researcher was, how valid were the methods, and how credible were the findings.

To ensure subjectivity and navigation of bias, the researcher used a digital recorder to collect raw data. Within coding of the data analysis, the focus was shifted to accuracy of raw data and their reliability. Then, the data were categorized and put into general themes to further ensure less subjectivity and a minimization of bias. The researcher used qualitative techniques to help overcome any bias. Additionally, this research project committee should have been able to detect any bias.

In order to address these issues of reliability, validity, and credibility the researcher used three strategies. They are mechanically recording the data, member checking, and participant review. Each strategy was designed to provide truthfulness and accuracy. The researcher used an audio voice recorder and wrote researcher memo notes for each interview to ensure reliability of instruments and accuracy of recorded data. In addition, the researcher conducted member checking by reviewing the transcript and findings with participants. Member checking-provided guidance for ensuring accuracy during data analysis. Finally, participant review assisted in ensuring accuracy of presentation after the researcher synthesized interviews. Participants reviewed and edited any information they deemed inaccurate, confirming the true representation of their experiences.

The interviewees are members of my community with similar cultural values and some of the same educational experiences from the local public schools. We lived in similar neighborhoods, attended the same grade schools, and shared many comparable familial experiences. Thus, the researcher was able to provide sensitive and empathetic understanding that someone from another background might not be able to accomplish. In the attempt to neutralize any bias I used qualitative techniques that synthesized data into categories and themes that accurately represented participant experiences.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS OF DATA

The purpose of this study was to identify and evaluate the effectiveness of developmental assets that enable students to complete the K-12 education curriculum and graduate from high school. Secondly, the purpose was to generate a theoretical framework that helps identify factors in the lives of disadvantaged students from low-income families that enable them to overcome obstacles that interfere with school success. Accordingly, the data from this study provided answers to the research questions seeking to identify effective K-12 developmental assets, gained understanding of developmental assets from the school experience of African American students from Western North Carolina, and identified other graduation influencing factors.

This chapter contains an analysis of data using the information collected from 12 interviews. Follow-up questions were asked for a better understanding of the K-12 school experience in most cases. The interviews were conducted in communities of Buncombe County, North Carolina.

Participants

Purposeful sampling was used to select participants for this study. Participants by definition were African American from low income families and disadvantaged communities who attended K-12 schools in the Western North Carolina area. In addition, participant ages in this study ranged from 18 to 39 which provided data over a 20-year span. Four of 12 participants' ages ranged from 18 to 24. In addition, six of 12 participants' ages ranged from 25 to 32. The other two participants' were 33 and 39. To ensure confidentiality pseudonyms were used in place of actual names and schools attended.

Twelve African American adults consented to participate in this study. There were four female and eight male participants. One participant was a high school senior scheduled for graduation, five participants were high school graduates, and the other six were dropouts. There were three of the six dropouts who earned General Education Diplomas (GED) at some point after leaving high school. Nine of 12 participants attended traditional high school. Two of 12 participants attended an alternative school; and, one of 12 participants received his GED while incarcerated in the North Carolina Department of Corrections. A brief description is provided for each participant, including educational and career status at the time of the interview.

Precious, 24, is a female who graduated from a traditional high school. While in high school she took honors classes and was a part of the academic intellectual gifted (AIG) program. She went on to complete a 2-year diploma program at the local community college earning her professional license in Cosmetology.

John, 25, is a male who dropped out of high school in the 10th grade. He is from a single parent family that lived in a low income community. Currently he is unemployed and undecided about career choices; however, he is involved in his children's lives.

Lamont, 29, is a male who was arrested and served time in the North Carolina Department of Corrections. Before serving time in prison he attended the county alternative school. He was unable to complete high school because of the arrest at the end of the 12th grade year; however, he earned his G.E.D. while incarcerated.

Jimmy, 27, is a male who graduated from high school and played 2 years of college sports. He completed high school but left college before graduating. Currently, he is working at a local company and providing for his family.

Wayne, 22, is a male who graduated from a local alternative school. He struggled to complete high school, yet he finished. He spoke a great deal about the desire to learn and to succeed in a school environment where he felt unsupported. Currently, he is working for a temporary agency and spends time with his child.

Gloria, 28, is a female who dropped out of high school at the age of 16. Years later she went on to earn her GED and earned her Certified Nurses Assistants license. Currently, she is working and taking care of her family.

Joe, 39, is a male who dropped out of high school in the 11th grade. He received services from the Exceptional Children education program. He expressed the desire to learn but felt unsupported by the educators at his school. Currently he does not have any high school or general education diploma, yet he works and takes care of his family.

Braeden, 28, is a male who dropped out of high school in the 10th grade to support himself. He is from a single parent family that endured economic hardship. Currently, he does not have any diploma and remains unemployed.

Woodrow, 38, is a male who was expelled from high school his 12th grade year. He is from a middle class single parent family. He went to the alternative school after being expelled from traditional high school. He dropped out of the alternative school to earn his GED. Currently, he is working and taking classes at the area community college.

Rosa, 19, is a female in the final semester of the 12th grade. Her plans are to graduate and to attend the local community college. She was raised in a single parent household by her grandmother and experienced financial difficulties. Currently she is a high school senior scheduled for graduation within the next two months, and prepared for her first year of community college.

Judy, 18, is a female and recent high school graduate. She is from a single parent household that experienced financial hardship. Currently she is working and trying to enroll in the local community college.

Robert, 27, is a male who graduated high school and attended 2 years of a 4-year university. He is from a middle class family where both parents lived in the home. Currently he is working for a local business.

Table 1 shows participants' demographic information.

Table 1.
Participant's Demographic Information

Name	Gender	Age	School Type	Educational Attainment
Precious	Female	24	Traditional	2 Year Community College Diploma
John	Male	25	Traditional	10 th Grade Dropout
Lamont	Male	29	Nontraditional	12 th Grade Dropout / G.E.D.
Jimmy	Male	27	Traditional	Two years of College
Wayne	Male	22	Alternative School	High School Diploma
Gloria	Female	28	Traditional	11 th Grade Dropout / G.E.D.
Joe	Male	39	Traditional	12 th Grade Dropout
Braeden	Male	28	Traditional	10 th Grade Dropout
Woodrow	Male	38	Alternative School	12 th Grade Dropout/ G.E.D.
Rosa	Female	19	Traditional	Current 12 th Grader
Judy	Female	18	Traditional	High School Diploma
Robert	Male	27	Traditional	High School Diploma

1. Traditional School- Four -year public high school.
2. Alternative School- Four-year public high school designated for at risk youth.
3. Nontraditional - G.E.D. option for K-12 dropouts and incarcerated inmates.

Interview Data

This section presents a summary of the data collected in each of the individual interviews. Also included are specific statements relative to the interview questions made by each participant.

Interview Question 1

What is the last grade level you attended?

Each of the 12 participants was enrolled and attended a traditional K-12 high school for at least 2 years. All participants completed the ninth grade at a traditional public high school. There were 2 of the 12 participants who responded that the last grade they attended was the 10th grade. There were 4 of the 12 participants who responded that the last grade they attended while in high school was the 11th grade. Six of the 12 participants responded that the last grade they attended while in high school was the 12th grade. There were six participants who responded they had attended the 12th grade and five participants graduated from high school. There was one participant a 12th grader scheduled for graduation.

Interview Question 2

What was your family economic status when you were in grade school?

Each of the participants responded in a different way that described their family economic conditions while in high school. Participants who graduated and scheduled to graduate explained:

Precious explained, “My grandma lived with us because my mom worked all the time. My mom made sure we had everything”. Jimmy responded “We had middle-class income.” Wayne had described economic hardship for his family. “We needed help. There was lack of support I could see by the clothes I used to wear. It definitely was a struggle with sports and stuff that I played and things I was in need of. My parents could only do so much. They wanted to help me and wanted me to have things.” Rosa was another participant, scheduled to graduate, explained her family economic status as difficult. She stated, “We were blessed, but not rich. We had difficult times.” Another participant Judy responded, “We were a middle class family, but things did get hard for us.” Robert responded in a similar way. He said, “I would say we were probably middle class. I had everything I could ask for. We were pretty much blessed. Both parents wanted what was best for me and my brothers.”

Participants who dropped out explained:

John simply stated, “We were average”. Lamont explained, “Under 50,000. It was a household of three, but my sister went to college. So, it was two of us in the house. My dad did not live in the home.” Gloria added, “It was rough and we struggled. We were having problems. Dad worked and was taking care of everything”. Joe explained his family economic status similarly, “We were not wealthy, but we were not broke either. We were in the middle. My dad

was a truck driver and my mama was doing nursing. We had what we needed to be taken care of but didn't have everything. When we asked for something they would try to make it happen."

Braeden also explained, "We were not wealthy; we were not poor, so I guess you can say we were middle class. I was worrying about clothing and house support, doing what I had to do to survive. It was more of financial thing, like not being able to get the things you need. It was not anybody to provide but you. I needed clothes to wear and food to eat. I didn't have provider."

Woodrow provided a similar response. He responded, "It was middle class single parent household, because I lived with my mother. My father dropped out of school, but he did well for himself."

Interview Question 3

What did your parents think about school and education?

Participants responded in a similar fashion about the parents' feelings towards school and education. Participants who graduated and scheduled to graduate explained the following.

Precious stated that both her parents felt that high school graduation and education was important. Another participant, Jimmy, answered "School was very important to my parents. They wanted me to graduate and to get more education." Wayne followed up by stating, "Education was very important to my parents; however, they were not as serious as finding me help. Yes, the push was there! The sit down and work; I did not have that. They were very supportive and pushed me to complete school." Rosa who is scheduled to graduate responded, "They feel like I should get an education to better myself, to go to college and to be successful." Judy added, "Both of my parents pushed me, and told me education was very important. They said to just graduate and continue all your education because you go need it." Robert responded

that his parents felt school was a way to better yourself. Especially, as I became a man to my parents education was important. These responses are indicative of the valued importance of school and education from the perspective of African American parents.

Participants who dropped out explained the following.

John explained that both his parents took education real seriously. Gloria added, “My parents expected me to graduate and they wanted me to graduate because school was important to them.” The expectations for high school graduation indicated the feelings parents had towards school and education. Joe responded, “My parents’ feelings were high about education because they would not let us come home with failing grades (Fs). We could not bring home Ds. And a D grade was just like an F grade; it was like skating by. While growing up Mama thought we were all going to graduate.” Braeden responded that his parents felt school was important and a big factor in life. Woodrow said his parents felt education was a tool he needed to survive and to live a decent life.

Interview Question 4

What were your parents’ highest levels of education?

Ten of 12 participants responded that their parents had completed high school. One participant had a parent to drop out of the eighth grade. Woodrow who dropped out responded that his father had dropped out of school; however, his mother had a little bit of college education. Joe who dropped out added, “My daddy graduated, but my mama did not graduate from high school because she got pregnant and had my brother.” The other 10 participant, six graduates and four nongraduates, responses were consistent with one another, stating that both parents had completed high school and had received high school diplomas.

Interview Question 5

What did you like about school?

Participant responses varied according to individual experiences and circumstances. All 12 participants did have something they liked about school that ranged from subject content matter to interpersonal relationships. Participants who graduated and were scheduled to graduate explained the following.

Precious responded that she liked getting out and seeing her friends at school. Also, she liked having somewhere to go and having people to talk to everyday. Additionally, she liked English and history classes. Others responded in a similar way. Jimmy added that he liked science and sports. Another participant, Wayne, provided a more in-depth response about what he liked about school. He responded, "I liked the food, because I knew I could eat. School was more interesting for me when I had someone to help me. When there was a teacher that was interested in me and a teacher that made you understand what you were learning about. They would teach you how to get correct answers; that was when school was fun. When a teacher makes you understand and makes it fun; so, now you understand and want to compete with other students." Another participant had different experiences that influenced her likes about school. Rosa who is scheduled to graduate added that she liked her friends and teachers. Robert responded, "I was big on sports in high school. You know how high school was; everyday was different. I kind of looked forward to going to school. I was big on English, and I was into reading, too."

Participants who dropped out explained the following.

John said that he like science and social studies. Lamont stated, “I liked the people and activities. I really liked academics as far as that was concerned. I took and made it fun!” Gloria responded, “It was okay because I had issues with other students. It was hard for me to focus, but I toughed it out. I did good in school, though.” Joe added, “It was not too much I liked about school. I liked learning; but, I liked to learn my own way.” Braeden responded, “I liked the interaction and sports; thinking I can get somewhere.” Again the responses varied according to individual experiences. Woodrow responded that he liked the general stuff like girls and good grades when he got them; the social status of it all.

Interview Question 6

What did you dislike about school the most?

The responses for this interview question varied because of the unique individual experiences. Some of the participants had similar responses about what they disliked while in school. Precious who graduated responded that she did not like math because she struggled in that area. Also, John who dropped out added that he disliked math.

Other participants shared similar responses about what they disliked about school. Lamont who dropped out responded that he disliked having to be at school and not being able to come or go as he wanted. He also disliked having to get up every morning. Robert who graduated added that he disliked going to school; getting up and going. He said, “Once I got to school it was a cakewalk from there”. Jimmy who graduated stated, “I disliked getting up early, but I had fun at school.”

Another participant shared a unique response about what he disliked about school. Wayne who graduated said, “I most disliked about school is teachers would not make you want

to come to school. They started to shut that down because of dress codes. The key is coming to school and wear what you want. Teachers put you down. I had to change clothes, so I was late to class. Don't immediately write him up, if he came to class. You sit him down individually and let him know. Teachers should not just immediately write him up. That allowed kids to say F--- school, I won't go!"

A few participants shared a unique response about interpersonal relationships that they disliked about school. Gloria who dropped out responded, "I did not like being seen as outcast and not having a lot of friends. There was nobody to talk to about what I was going through. I did not have anybody around me so I was by myself. I was a loner." Another participant responded about the interpersonal interaction with teachers as a dislike about school. Woodrow who dropped out explained, "I disliked having a bad teacher; one that I did not get along with." He added that, "I did not get along with the teacher because I did not like her views." Another participant, Rosa who is scheduled to graduate, responded that she disliked staying in class all day and disliked the long hours listening to teachers talk. She added that she disliked the drama with girls. Judy who graduated stated, "I did not like the school counselors, because I think they really did not care. They were not being there like they supposed to." She explained, "Now I look back, I would've stayed. The colleges I wanted to go to, you have to have a GPA minimum of 2.5. I did not know what mine was at the time. The counselor contacted me and asked me if I wanted to graduate early. I said yes because I was ready to leave school. I did not like being there anymore, but she could have talked me into staying to get my GPA up."

Interview Question 7

Did you feel as if teachers and administrators genuinely cared about students?

Participant responses about caring educators varied according to individual experiences. There were 9 of 12 participants who felt that their teachers and administrators did care about students and academic development. Robert who graduated explained, “I say they did care; I don’t think you would be a teacher if you did not love what you are doing. Educators have to care about kids and want them to do better.” Judy who graduated responded, “Some teachers would help you if you were failing because they cared. They would help you and give you extra things to do in order pull D up to C to pass, or if a student had to pull F to a D. Yes, they were supportive.” Rosa who is scheduled to graduate added, “Some teachers do care; at least I feel like they do. They actually care and they want to help you.” John who dropped out responded, “Yes, I think teachers and administrators cared, it was just my fault, I messed up.”

There were two participants who felt that their teachers and administrators did not care about students and academic development. Wayne who graduated responded, “Teachers don’t care; they don’t even care.” Joe who dropped out explained, “I didn’t have anybody. There was no guide to say you can do this. There were counselors, but there was nobody that said you can do this; don’t give up.”

Interview Question 8

Can you remember any dropout prevention programs at your school? If so, what can you tell me about them?

There were two participants who did recall some knowledge of specific dropout prevention programs when they attended high school. One participant of 12 did participate in a

college prep program designed to prepare African American students for attending college.

Precious who graduated explained, “I was in the program called CCP. It was a college prep program, and I was in it from ninth through 12th grade. The teacher prepared us to go to college. He would bring in tutors, and they came to help us. We would work on things, and he would help us the closer we got to graduation. He helped us with filling out scholarships; things I did not know how to do, and my parents did not know how to do. I was getting it all from that class.”

Other participants discussed additional programs that were instrumental in impacting graduation rates. John who dropped out responded, “The afterschool program was helpful. It was like a study method or class study. It helped you with anything that you were kind of down on. You could try to catch up on your work and learn work ethics.” Jimmy who graduated added that his school had a program called Middle College. Lamont who dropped out responded, “No, I cannot think of any programs unless you consider the Alternative school, because it was helpful to me.”

Some other participants who dropped out were not aware that they were a part of any dropout prevention programs. Gloria responded, “Not to my knowledge, I did not know. They had those meetings for getting funding. Also, they had motivational speakers but no specific classes or no sessions to attend to keep students from dropping out.” Joe added that he did not know of any programs for college. He said, “There was not any college programs’ trying to advance you, or that was going to teach you everything needed to be done, like with ROTC programs.” Woodrow explained, “It probably was a lot of dropout prevention programs, but I had no desire to dropout.”

Another participant Rosa, a 12th grader scheduled to graduate, responded that she was not aware of any dropout programs. Also, Robert who graduated explained, “I can’t remember, but

they had something when I was going to school. Dropping out of school was becoming the thing to do because of teen pregnancies and home situations. Kids had different things going on that would prevent them from finishing.”

Interview Question 9

Were the programs helpful for you or any friends?

There were 5 of 12 participant responses who indicated some type of dropout prevention program was helpful for a friend or themselves. Gloria who dropped out responded, “I would say they were helpful for those really serious about education; it helped them.” Precious who graduated added “Yes, my teacher in CCP was helpful. His students have graduated, and gone off to college. I knew I was going to graduate.”

Two of 12 participants responded that dropout preventions were not helpful. Wayne who graduated responded that the school had a small dropout program, but it was not that serious obviously, because kids were still dropping out. Responses indicated the programs were not helpful, and they were not promoted to students as needed for prevention.

Five of 12 participants were not aware of any dropout prevention programs. Thus, they were not able provide any information on the effectiveness of programs. The data indicated that some former students did not learn about dropout programs because they were not at risk. Other students who did drop out should have gotten more support did not for unknown reasons.

Interview Question 10

At what age did you leave, or get expelled?

The legal age without parental consent in North Carolina is 16 years old. There were six of 12 participants who did not complete the K-12 curriculum to earn a high school diploma.

Three of the six dropouts returned at a later age to earn their GED. Three of six dropout participants decided to leave and dropped out of high school at the age 16. One of six dropout participants was incarcerated at age 18; thus, dropped out of traditional high school. Two of six dropouts were expelled at the ages 17 and 18.

Interview Question 11

Can you remember what event or events that started the graduation or dropout process (Tell your story)?

There were 12 participants that shared their individual experiences leading to graduation or dropping out. Participants who graduated explained the following.

Precious explained, “When I failed that class, I got nervous and had to go after school to take a class to help me pass it. He made me take honors classes, I didn’t have a choice. He stayed on everybody and made sure I got what I needed to finish high school. I would not make any changes because I good educational experience. My teacher pushed me to take those honors classes, he helped me to graduate.”

Jimmy said, “I liked school, and I was not going to drop out. I played sports, and you got to have grades to play ball. So, the sports opportunities motivated me to stay in school and graduate.”

Wayne explained, “I gave up my last year; cause my junior year I had needed some classes to catch up. I was almost there, I was almost finished.” He added, “I went to the Alternative school when I was younger and needed some time to mature because I played so much. I had to catch up. That’s why I went, so I could catch up. I was not getting any help or any support. I didn’t get to learn the material. So, I started doing what I’m not supposed to be because I did not know the material. What am I doing at school now? I was making it fun for

myself, disrupting class, and cracking jokes. Upset, though! Might not of said anything, I don't get it, and I hate school. I was not going to tell anyone. I was going to straight have fun by doing all the wrong things. I was on the verge of dropping out because I did not have any credits towards my graduation. I saw others that went to next grade. I was still in same grade. It hurt me; I wanted to be where I supposed to be. Nothing else I could do, except for finish school."

Robert explained, "I was big on sports. I was really into sports. Back when I was going to school is probably when dropping out was becoming more of a known thing to do; because of teen pregnancies and peoples home backgrounds. A lot of kids had different things going on to prevent them from finishing. You had your guidance counselors, but most of my friends that didn't finish, probably was because of the environment where they lived at. They got caught up in that. It played a big factor, or they played sports and got kicked off the team or something. Sometimes the only reason you would go to school was so you could play a sport. I always looked forward to graduating, walking across that stage! I always wanted to go to college, which was another factor. Mainly my parents supported me; and me being a bigger brother, I wanted to show them the right way to go, one of the ways to go. As a big brother, it was one of my responsibilities to show them the right way."

Participants who dropped out explained the following.

John responded, "I got expelled, but my best experiences were in high school. I had more freedom in high school and they treated you better. It was not really any support offered to me. I was on my own besides the afterschool program. I learned a lot, but there could have been more support from the school." He added, "If I would have stayed in school and I would have went to college and got some degrees; I'd probably be in a better position than I'm in now."

Lamont explained, “I wanted to get back to regular high school, and I went back. I would have done better if I stayed at alternative school. I went to prison at the end of my senior year. I went to prison and got my GED. I wanted to graduate, walk across, and get a diploma. Feeling that accomplishment was the ultimate prize, from Kindergarten on up. I wanted to do it. It hurt me, I didn’t get to, and I had every opportunity. Education is the key. I regret not getting to graduate.”

Gloria responded, “I became a problem student as a loner. Teachers and administrators were not going to spend time on you, if you’re a problem. I was being tardy, being in trouble, and talking back, mouthy. I got suspended for hazing.” She added, “I was in a good spot. I was working and had a job. I was going to school, ready to graduate but it was like a trap because I couldn’t get what I needed. I was not in district, and it was a reason for me not to go to school. I tried to go back and tried to do it again. I got there, and had been through so much, it did not seem right, so I quit again. I didn’t have a mother figure. I did not have two people telling me I was completely wrong. There was no one telling me, no you not doing that, no you not going there. I needed to be taught by a woman, things dad could not teach me. It was like living in single parent home, so I started looking outside for what I was missing. Only person I had was my Dad. We were at odds, but he was never going to leave. I didn’t do the things he expected. It was our whole plan for me to graduate to make something of myself. It constituted a problem so I did what I wanted to. Then at some point my dad and I did not see eye to eye, so I thought I would just leave home. I ended up having a baby, and she passed away. When you start having those issues, it gives you self-doubt.” Also, she explained, “I started to get my GED and I completed three tests. I turned 18 at the time. I was working and I decided I wanted to party or

whatever. I did not complete my GED until 7 years later. Finally, I completed my GED; I went on to get my CNA license.”

Joe responded, “Teachers and I really butted heads because there was not a lot of help.” He explained, “The teacher wrote equations down, and said you come after class to get help. It was like the same thing. They were not trying to help you. They were expecting you to know. I was smart enough and was taking high level classes but not receiving any help. So, I just drop down, all the way down to resource. I stayed after class and they said the same thing from class; but they just did not understand how I did not get it.” He added, “I thought it was easy, so I could just skate through. Then, I started getting into trouble. Kids should be able to learn, but some kids had disabilities. I did not have a disability though. Mama she was smart, but I had nobody to go in-depth with me. I wanted to do all of that. I couldn’t get everything like everybody else. I needed some extra help. They used afterschool to help all of us, being in a big group and going over the same thing, just like class again. I failed English messing around, not wanting to be in school. I didn’t have anybody to help me, but I was good at math. I was a B student, I made good grades. I couldn’t play football, because they kicked me off the team. I did not pass English, so I couldn’t play football. That put me way down! I did not want to be in school. I couldn’t do stuff, I could not do the event I loved. I had messed around failing. I failed English, a deal breaker. You don’t pass English, you don’t play sports. I did not play football. It was a deal breaker, got kicked off the team, and I couldn’t play football. I had co-op and was working. I used to hang around people, and we went to a football game. Some dudes were causing trouble, so we got into a big fight and I got expelled. The only school I could go to was Jefferson, and I was not going there. The alternative school did not accept me so I just quit school and I didn’t go back. I wasn’t going to fight every day at Jefferson, so I dropped out. I just did what everybody else was doing,

that was selling drugs. I went from there. It has affected my life to the point where I can't get a good job. I should have stayed in school, got my diploma and went on with my plans. I could have got my GED and still went to the Service, but I was young and I was not thinking about that no more, I was trapped in the streets." He added, "I did not graduate; so, I took my GED test, failed it and never did go back."

Another participant, Braeden, explained, "I went where there was a lot of racism under the cover but not unless you were a benefactor, honor student, or star athlete. It was kind of a divided high school, blacks and whites. I wasn't an honor student, so I didn't get any special privileges. I didn't have too much help. I had fun in middle school! It wasn't much to worry about, and I made good grades, got promoted. It was a better experience; they cared more in middle school. I had regular classes. At 16 I just left. School was not that important at the time. I had other dramas in life like worrying about clothing, house support, and parenting support. I took on life of a man at a young age without wanting to. I was not searching for that life it came upon me because of bad parenting. The parenting got kind of crazy with no true support or nobody in your corner. Sometimes you do what you have to do. It was more of a financial thing for me like not being able to have things you need like school supplies at the beginning of the year, but you don't have anybody to provide, but yourself. I needed clothes to wear to school and food to eat for school. I really didn't have provider like that at the time." He added, "It would have been different if I would had more supports before the downfall."

Another participant, Woodrow, explained, "I just got kicked out. The 11th was last grade completed. I was expelled for the year, and then I went to alternative school. It's really a school for bad kids. It was not worth the experience. Majority of the children that went there they were either older than 18, 19, or 20, older than the average graduating age, which is 18. A lot of the

girls had kids, and the dudes had felonies or expecting a felony. It was a bad experience. I know I got kicked out of school, because it was disciplinary action. I never had problems with the education part of school, it never bothered me. Like I said, I only got bad grades when I did not like my teacher, or I felt my teacher did not like me.”

Interview Question 12

What would you change about your education experience?

Participant responses varied according to individual educational experiences. There was one who had an educational experience that she would not change. Precious who graduated responded that she would not make any changes because she had a positive school experience.

Other participants responded that they would make changes within themselves or make changes within the school system. Some participants accepted responsibility for changes within self to have improved their educational experience.

John who dropped out responded, “I would change my attitude and my way of learning. I would have focused more on the work, the education part.”

Judy who graduated explained, “I would have had fewer friends and focused more on my work rather than friends and being in social drama. I wasn’t in the drama, but I was around it. That’s what I would change.”

Some other participants responded about changes within the school system. Wayne, who graduated, responded, “Kids learn faster. Kids learn slower. Put a little more focus in it. Now you are able to learn. Get a better understanding. I do not understand and then it makes me feel

like I don't care. You put forth effort but don't understand, not your fault. You are trying but still don't get it. Not saying teachers fault, but they need to do better job individually."

Joe who dropped out replied, "I really wanted to learn, but there was no one to say this is another way. I had a different way of learning, and there should have been a teacher willing to put in more time with me. There should have been a teacher to say, 'Go through this again. I'll teach you how to do this. This is how it is done.'"

Interview Question 13

How has it affected your life today?

Participant responses for graduates and nongraduates varied according to their individual experiences. Robert was a graduate and he stated, "I would say it was a blessing, because it has helped me be able to get a decent job." He added, "It is plenty of successful people that probably did not finish school, but that is a select few."

Wayne who graduated explained, "You have to work harder and get your diploma, because it opens up other doors for you to get a better job."

As could be expected those who did not graduate responded differently to this question than those who did graduate. However, they expressed feelings that were similar to one another. Some of the nongraduates expressed feeling of regret. Others participants responded about possibly being in better positions financially and in their employability had they graduated from high school. Three of 12 participants who did not graduate expressed the difficulty of getting good employment without of high school diploma or equivalent.

Braeden stated, “It has affected my life today by keeping me from getting a good job; I have to struggle hand to hand or day to day. Really no prospering like you want to without an education.”

Lamont added, “Nothing is out there if you don’t have an education.” Joe responded, “It’s done affected me where I cannot go get job that I want now, I cannot get high paying job, and I cannot get my family everything I want to give them. I cannot because I made a decision, not to graduate high school and getting into that fight. It did affect me a heavy amount.”

Interview Question 14

What would you tell educators and parents to better serve at risk students? Words from former students to educators and parents listed below. Participants who graduated expressed the following.

Precious replied, “Get more involved, more involved, get more involved.”

Jimmy explained, “I would tell parents to encourage and tell students about how hard it is to take care of your family.”

Wayne said, “Talk to that kid, build a relationship. He likes you, then he will listen. They will listen to you now, they are interested in learning.”

Rosa said, “Parents should talk to their kids. Tell them to stay in school.”

Judy said, “Pay more attention to them. If they need help, help them. Make sure that their homework is done. Ask them if they need tutoring if they are struggling in class. Make sure they understand.”

Robert explained, “Be in your kids’ life more. Ask them questions. Make sure they’re going to school. Make sure they are learning and not just going to go, make sure they get something. Be there to support them and show them the right way.”

Participants who dropped out expressed the following.

John said, “Tell parents and educators to tell the students to believe in their self. Try hard and you can achieve all goals; you can whatever you want to be in life. You just have to work hard. Try hard and you can achieve all goals; you can be whatever you want to be in life. You just have to work hard.”

Lamont responded, “Stay on them, stay on them, even if they don’t want to hear it. Wish someone would have pushed me extra hard.”

Gloria explained, “Important to have someone that is listening. To listen, that is the problem, people don’t listen to what the kids are saying, what they are going through. Instead of constantly telling them, you got to do this, you got to do that.”

Joe said, “Look out for kids, look for the signs. All of them have signs. Ask questions. If parents see something strange, then ask questions. Are you alright? I see something in you. Make it a good thing.”

Braeden replied, “Stay more involved and make sure everything school wise is completed. Just being there is important.”

Woodrow explained, “Again, understanding. Try to understand, and draw a relationship towards each other.”

Interview Question 15

What words of wisdom do you have for students thinking about dropping out?

The responses to this question were stated similarly. It did not seem to matter whether the respondent had completed high school or had dropped out. All expressed the importance of staying in school. The following are the words of support and encouragement from all participants to students who have recently dropped out or considering dropping out. Participants who graduated expressed the following.

Precious said, “I would tell them to keep going and don’t stop! Things will get better whatever they may be going through, just don’t stop! Do the best you can to graduate and get your high school diploma. If you don’t do anything else, do that!”

Jimmy responded, “I have seen some of my cousins and close friends drop out and as soon as they dropped out they were in trouble. It was not a smart thing to do. Stay in school it will take you a long way and at the end of the day with an education, you can provide for your family and be happy.”

Wayne said, “So, what I would tell this kid is to try harder and stick with it.”

Rosa responded, “You will regret dropping out, so don’t do it! And if you want to be somebody in life, stay in school.”

Robert said, “I would tell them mainly tough it out because it will be worth it. Never give up! Try to rethink it! Stay strong and finish it out.”

Participants who dropped out expressed the following.

Lamont replied, “Anything that involves learning is a plus; educating yourself is a plus!”

Gloria explained, “Don’t give up and keep fighting because at the end of the day it is going to benefit you more than you can see. Even though it’s a piece of paper, you did dedicate 12

years of your life to something. And people are going to notice it whether they are employers or colleges. They want to see that you can follow through with things. Like I said, just don't give up no matter what you are going through."

Joe responded, "Your best bet is to stay in school!"

Braeden explained, "I would tell them stay strong and keep focus because giving up is not going to make it no better. Without education you have no way of making it in life, no ways of making money, and no ways to provide for your family. So, stay strong and do their best no matter what is holding them back, no matter what problems they having in life."

Findings

Six of the 15 developmental assets (Appendix E) discussed in Chapter 2 were identified by interview participants. Data in this study indicated that school-community collaboration, mentoring, family engagement, alternative schooling, after school opportunities, and active learning were developmental assets identified from the experience of former students, graduates and dropouts.

School-Community Collaboration

The data collected in this study identified school-community collaboration as one of the effective developmental assets for enabling students to complete a K-12 curriculum. School-community collaboration is community groups and school working together to provide appropriate student support. Lamont, a nongratuate, responded that there should have been more programs set up and support in the community other than what was offered at school. Another nongratuate, Joe, responded that more time should be taken to help kids instead of just letting them run the streets after school. These participants' responses identified the positive value of

school-community collaboration to enable students to finish high school. These findings support the literature from Chapter 2 on the effectiveness of initiatives that involve partnering with the community are School-to-Work Programs, drug abuse prevention programs, after-school centers, and parental involvement programs.

Mentoring

The data collected in this study identified mentoring as one of the effective developmental assets for enabling students to complete a K-12 curriculum. Mentoring is a one-to-one relationship between an adult and student in which the mentor provides supportive guidance to the mentee. Precious, a graduate explained, “It was my CCP teacher; he taught me how to take notes and how to be organized.” Also, she responded that her teacher talked with her other teachers to check on her progress. Another graduate, Wayne, explained that more focus should be on the student, “someone should sit kids down and talk to them.” He added, “Talk to that kid and build a relationship. If he likes you, he will listen and be ready to learn.”

Some of the participants were dropouts, but they, too, discussed mentoring adults as a positive impact. Lamont explained, “It should have been more one-to-one tutoring; I would have had a better grasp.” He added, “Students should listen when someone who has been through something similar is trying to guide them the right way.” Gloria responded that sometimes it takes an outsider to talk to a student, not necessarily family or a friend. Joe responded that some students really want to learn but don’t have adults to put in time with them. Kids need someone to put down the basics and show them how things are done. He added, “That I needed someone to say take this course or to do that to get my GED and go to the military.” These findings support the literature from Chapter 2 that mentoring is understood to be an effective strategy for working with youth in at risk situations and in need of role models and a positive support system.

Family Engagement

The data collected in this study suggest that family engagement was one of the effective developmental assets for enabling students to complete a K-12 curriculum. This intervention was the most frequently identified in the data. There were 10 of 12 participants who discussed family engagement that includes financial, educational, and emotional support for high school graduation. Six of six graduates and four of six dropouts discussed family engagement.

With family support students were encouraged to complete high school and held to high expectations of graduating, which were the necessary components of family engagement. Several of the participants made statements about family support and some families were single-parent families, yet they were strong families because of the support. Students who had both parents in the home and students who only had one parent in the home were successful because the family encouragement, involvement, and support. Whether it was support from a step-parent or from a biological parent or a parent who lived in the separate household but still participated in the students' lives it made a difference. In addition, parental involvement in the social and academic life of students is an important developmental asset in getting students to graduate. Parental involvement included active listening to students and being a part of their academic and social life because the parents cared. Joe responded, "Every day you come home, bring me something. Everything teachers write, bring it home, bring it to me. I will sit down with you and go step by step with you and show you how there could be an easier way, how to learn it." Additionally, he explained, "Parents can tell the signs. Sometimes they might be wrong, just apologize. I was wrong, I love you though; I didn't do right, so I'm watching you. If I see something crazy going on I will confront it. Look for signs."

It is about seeking to understand and to empathize with the experiences of the student. Family engagement recognized those subtle changes and addressed specific issues and concerns. The students' needs were very important in the home and in the school. Thus family engagement is a combination of family support and family engagement in the students' life for enabling him or her to complete a K-12 curriculum in high school. These findings support the literature from Chapter 2 that when parents are involved in their children's education, children excel. Family engagement was one of the most frequent developmental assets noted from interviews. Almost all participants indicated that family support was a very important factor for encouraging the student to graduate. Family engagement and support allowed students access to opportunities that would lead to graduation. For example, some participants did live in single-parent homes; however, they did receive support from a second parent who lived at another household or extended family support. Students who received strong family support had fewer opportunities to engage in risky social behaviors such as sexual activity or dangerous street activity. Having parents to assist with homework and to assist with completing college admissions paper was an activity participants valued and welcomed.

Alternative Schooling

The data collected in this study identified alternative schooling as one of the effective developmental assets for enabling students to complete a K-12 curriculum. Alternative schooling provides other options for students who are at risk for dropping out high school. One participant who graduated from the community alternative school attended there because he was immature and needed some time to mature. Another participant who dropped out of the alternative school yet earned GED explained that he did not like the alternative school because it was no support, and that it was a school for bad kids. Lamont who dropped out and earned his GED had a

positive experience at the alternative school. There were graduates and dropouts who attended the alternative school and had different experiences. These findings support the literature from Chapter 2 that smaller classroom settings and more individual attention at an alternative school are beneficial for potential dropouts. Alternative schooling provides a variety of options that can lead to graduation.

After School Opportunities

The data collected in this study identified after school opportunities as one of the effective developmental assets for enabling students to complete a K-12 curriculum. After school opportunities are programs and time spent after regular school hours and days to support the academic needs of students. Some of them include summer enrichment programs. Graduates and dropouts responded about the impact of after school opportunities. Precious, a graduate, explained that she failed a class because her math teacher was a football coach and did not provide any after school opportunities. Joe, a dropout, explained that he was offered help after school, but it was the same as being in class; he didn't understand. John, who also did not graduate, explained that basketball and football activities were available, along with after school programs that helped with studying. Another dropout participant responded that she participated in Jr. ROTC program and played softball. After school opportunities such as tutoring, clubs, and sports impacted graduates and dropouts. These findings support the literature from Chapter 2 that after-school opportunities have positive effects on academic success, social behavior, and enrichment of at-risk students.

Active Learning

There were six of 12 participants in the study including four of the six graduates who said it was learning activities in which they could actively engage contributed to their success. Wayne was a graduate who explained, “It is the teachers’ job to make sure, make fun activities, make hands on, and make school fun. Now they make school more exciting, the magic starts.” He added, “They helped me, when they got a little more hands on activities.” Joe was a nongraduate who responded, schools need somebody who’s going to sit with kids, and teach them other ways of doing the work. He added, “They need more people to give time, really teach them, and put down the basics.” Active learning embraces teaching and learning strategies that engage and involve students in the learning process. These findings support the literature from Chapter 2 that when students find new creative ways to solve problems achieve success and become lifelong learners when educators show them that there are different ways to learn (NDPCN, 2015). These findings from participants illustrate the application and the need for active learning to positively impact graduation rates.

Summary

The goal was to develop a framework for gaining insight into the efficacy of K-12 developmental assets and other graduation influence factors from the school experiences of former students. This chapter provided a discussion of the data obtained from former high school students, graduates and nongraduates, in Buncombe County of western North Carolina. There were 15 questions used to solicit data from school experiences. All data were collected through interviews. All participants were informed that their participation was voluntary. There were 12 interviews conducted and analyzed for this study.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMODATIONS

Summary of Findings

This chapter contains a discussion of the findings, conclusions, and recommendations for researchers and practitioners who may use the results as a resource for developing programs to meet the educational needs of the youth. This qualitative study was designed to draw out the perceptions of former students regarding their educational experiences. All of the 12 participants expressed the desire to learn when they attended middle school and high school.

Those who graduated received support from the family, community, and school settings. Those who dropped out before completing high school expressed the need for more individualized instruction, greater family engagement, and safer learning environments. The data were collected by conducting interviews with 12 former African American students in western North Carolina. Each participant was asked 15 open-ended interview questions that were analyzed and described in the Findings section of Chapter 4. The responses of participants suggest that developmental assets and other graduation influence factors discussed in the study can make a positive impact on African American students from low-income families and disadvantaged communities of Buncombe County in western North Carolina and perhaps other areas as well. These influences and learning developmental assets might better enable similar students to complete high school. The following summary of findings and conclusions are presented here as they relate to the research questions of this study.

Research Questions

The overarching question addressed in this study was: What individual qualities contribute to school success for African American students? The secondary research questions were:

- What were the educational experiences of students who graduated and of students who did not graduate from high school?
- What research identified developmental assets support individual students in completing a high school education?

Conclusions

The data identified six of 15 developmental assets that were found to be effective for the individuals in this study. Those developmental assets were school-community collaboration, mentoring, family engagement, alternative schooling, after school opportunities, and active learning. All six developmental assets held the potential for increasing graduation rates by which students' achievement and attitude about their potential to graduate high school could be achieved. Additionally, the six assets identified suggest the central importance of the relationship between schools, their communities, and the individuals they serve. Perhaps the theoretical perspective confirmed by this is that all individual problems are school problems and all school problems are community problems.

The educational experiences of participants varied for each participant. Former students who graduated from high school had more positive experiences while in school and had fewer negative experiences than former students that dropped out before graduating. The participants liked different things about school ranging from content areas of math to food in the cafeteria to

social life of high school. Also, there were participants who expressed dislike for a specific class, or a dislike for teachers they did not get along with. There were 11 of 12 participants who responded about changing their education experience by changing something about themselves or something about the school they attended. Participants identified 6 of 15 developmental assets listed in Appendix D.

The data from this study also indicated that there were other influencing factors that impacted graduation rates. These other factors included family values, expectations, and environmental factors that influenced student perceptions towards graduation or dropping out. The data illustrated that education is an important value in the family and community for 12 of 12 participants, graduates and dropouts. High school graduation was a family expectation for most students.

In 10 of 12 interviews, participants reported that both parents were high school graduates; and parents expected the students to do the same. There were also environmental factors that played a vital role in the school experience. The factors such as disengaged or parents not present to provide emotional, financial, and academic support causing students to take on adult responsibilities at early ages.

The data illustrated that the process of dropping out or graduating is often a decision made by the student. Two of the participants were expelled for disciplinary actions as a result of poor choices. Some students were allowed to make choices and supported by parents, yet others had to make adult decisions without any parental support. The data illustrated the positive impact of student choices and the negative impact of poor student choices. Student responsibility works well with family engagement and support. The data overwhelmingly illustrated the

positive impact on graduation rates when students took responsibility for their learning in a safe learning environment with equal access and opportunities to resources.

Participant perceptions in this study also indicated that student motivation is another graduation influence factor that makes a positive impact on graduation rates. This motivation included words of wisdom gained from the experience of former students to students who have recently dropped out of high school or considering dropping out. Graduates and dropouts strongly encouraged students to stay in school and graduate. Also, participants encouraged students to tough it out no matter what they are going through and to never give up. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation has potential to influence students to graduate high school.

Some participants expressed perceptions that teachers often failed to meet their needs. Participant indicated a need for more individualized instruction by teachers. A few participants noted their unique learning differences and expressed the need for former teachers to have met those needs. Some wanted after school tutoring for instruction yet received whole group instruction similar to regular class settings. Also, some participants expressed their thoughts and attitudes about times when former teachers did understand how the students did not understand particular tasks and assignments. A couple of participants did not understand how their teachers were not able to figure out how the students were not learning the material. These responses indicated the need for educators to have greater awareness of student individual learning styles and needs. The ideas of improving teaching to better meet the needs of individual learners is clearly supported by the perceptions of participants in this study.

The perceptions of the participants also indicated a need for safe learning environments. Safe learning environments enable students to feel safe and express vulnerability in appropriate school settings. There were two of 6 dropouts who responded that they did not feel comfortable

going to seek help from teachers or counselors. Gloria responded, “I was not the type to explain my problems to teachers or counselors, but I tried to keep smile on my face.” She added, “I dropped out because I could not deal with the other students.” These were the perceptions of participants who felt as they were alone and unsupported. In such environments educators needed to create safe learning environments conducive to interpersonal and academic growth.

Participants in the study also indicated a need for educators to create active learning environments. In active learning environments students are engaged by design and thoughtful instructional strategy. When students are not engaged, they have more incidents of disciplinary actions in the classroom. Wayne explained, “They should make school more exciting. I was showing up at school sleep in class, and not wanting to participate. My main focus was what am I going to do? I’m going to do something else, and that was the problem.” He added, “Make it more interesting. I didn’t have time to get into trouble, because I was trying to get work done, loved it. Now, I know what I’m doing. I love it.” Appropriate evaluation of work assigned to students and their interaction with the work would enable teachers to design meaningful and engaging lesson plans for active learning.

All of the participants in this study shared both positive and negative schools experiences. Perceptions of participants in this study also indicated a high frequency of positive experiences. Some teachers were like mentors and coaches built positive relationships with students. In several instances when the teachers and parents were involved, the former students had more positive experiences. Also, participants reported that interaction with peers and school sports created positive experiences. It is important to have caring parents, teachers and counselors actively involved to make a positive impact on graduation rates. There were six graduates and six dropouts shared their school experiences. Students who dropped out of school had more negative

school experiences and fewer positive school experiences than those graduates who completed the K-12 curriculum.

Participant perceptions in this study also indicated higher frequency of negative experiences than positive experiences by graduates and nongraduates. Many of these negative experiences involved other students, parents, or educators. Some participants were suspended or expelled due to negative incidents such as teen violence, teen pregnancy, or involvement with illegal street activity. In other incidents teachers did not spend enough time teaching, did not understand student unique learning needs of some participants, thus, creating negative learning experiences for graduates and nongraduates.

Recommendations for Schools

The analysis of data collected from the participants in this study and the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 suggest consideration of the following recommendations for institutions engaged in the education of African American and perhaps others students from low income, disadvantaged communities.

1. Schools systems should work to increase family engagement in K-12 grade levels. Parental involvement has consistently been considered an effective intervention and indicator of student success, and the perceptions shared by study participants clearly support this.
2. Teachers need to be encouraged by their administrators to provide more individualized instruction to benefit all students. Educators should be more assertive in their efforts to address learning differences and provide individualized instruction. Educators along with students and

parents should review student academic transcript at the end of each grading period, if student is earning a failing grade, to monitor progress of credits towards graduation.

3. Students need a safe learning environment that enables them to increase their academic performance and improve attitudes. It is important for students to feel safe at school. School leaders can make deliberate efforts to create a school culture where students feel welcomed and supported. Also, schools can enhance opportunities for students to communicate their needs and express themselves in a positive way.

4. Educators should create more active learning environments so that students feel greater freedom to engage in meaningful tasks and assignments. Active learning is specifically designed to increase student interest and student participation. This might be accomplished by adopting or developing educational programs designed to address individual learning needs. Also, teachers could improve active learning by using technology devices such as Smart Boards and tablets along with meaningful assignments that include real world experiences.

5. Educators and parents should be actively involved in creating school environments where students can be engaged to assume greater responsibility for their own learning at every level (Grades K-12). The determination, resilience, and efforts of students to succeed in difficult academic and home environments should be priority for educators to enable students to graduate high school.

6. The perceptions of participants indicated the need for educators to better meet student social and emotional needs. There was overwhelming response from participants indicating the need for more professional development in areas of relationship building and instructional strategies. Professional development can include development on topics for math and writing. Also, it can

include development for emotional and social needs of students. The perceptions of participants indicated that there is a need for teachers and students to have trusting and positive relationships. Without positive relationships it can be difficult for students to learn. So, there should be professional development that is focused on strategies and best practices demonstrating how to build positive relationships and how to better address individual student needs.

Recommendations for Community Leaders

Findings from this study indicated that African American communities are in need of effective developmental assets and other graduation factors to improve high school graduation rates. School leadership in some instances has resources to improve community relations and to involve African American parents in school functions and activities. African American community leaders such as ministers, community organizers, policemen, and city/state officials might consider the following recommendations.

1. Community leaders should work to enhance parent involvement in the educational process.
2. Community leaders should set and continue to maintain clear expectations for their students.
3. Community leaders should organize positive mentors to communicate with students.
4. Community leaders should work to provide opportunities for students to make good choices.
5. Community leaders should create positive partnerships with schools to better address student needs.

Recommendations for Additional Research

The findings of this study suggest that some factors support and others interfere with the school success of African American students. Additional studies could provide greater depth of investigation into the nature of student dropouts for African American students and students from other disadvantaged groups. The following are recommendations for further research:

1. Researchers should continue to identify and evaluate programs that enable students from all ethnic and economic groups to successfully complete high school.
2. Researchers should continue to investigate developmental assets as an avenue that supports stakeholders in developing ways to improve the practice of teaching and learning to increase graduation rates.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Interview Sample for Participants

I. Introduction

A. Thank the participant and explain the intent and purpose of study: The purpose of this qualitative research study is to gain some understanding for why some students do not complete k-12 education curriculum. In addition, the purpose is to generate a theoretical framework that helps identify factors in the lives of disadvantaged African American students that enable them to overcome obstacles that interfere with school success.

The findings of this study may be of value to students, policy makers, parents, and educators. It will contribute valuable feedback from former students that could be used to increase graduation rates and to improve the practices of teaching and learning in k-12 schools. I will use your words to develop the theoretical framework and may quote you in my final report. However, I assure you that your participation in this study will remain anonymous. I were not use your name in association with your quotes, nor were I use any identifiers that might link you to your words in the publication. During the interview, I were stop to ask if you still want to continue or withdraw without penalty, and if not, will proceed with the interview. This session should take us approximately 45 minutes.

B. Signing the Informed Consent Form – (go through the informed consent form explaining the procedure of the interview and the rights of volunteering participants. Ask if he or she has any questions. If no questions, ask him or her to sign the informed consent form and give him or her copy of the signed form.

C. To ensure accuracy while reporting your comments, I would like your permission to record our conversation. I will also be making memo notes in the course of the interview. Do I have your permission? Do you have any questions before I turn-on the recorder? (If none, turn on the recorder).

II. Main Interview Questions

- 1) What is the last grade level you attended?
- 2) What was your family economic status when you were in grade school?
- 3) How did your parents feel about school and education?
- 4) What were your parents' highest levels of education?
- 5) What did you like about school?
- 6) What did you dislike about school the most?
- 7) Did you feel as if teachers and administrators genuinely care about students?
- 8) Can you remember any dropout prevention programs at your school? If so, what can you tell me about them?
- 9) Were the programs helpful for you or any friends?
- 10) At what age did you leave, dropout, or get expelled?
- 11) Can you remember what event or events that started the dropout process (Tell your story)?
- 12) What would you change about your education experience?
- 13) How has it affected your life today?
- 14) What would you tell educators and parents to better serve at risk students?
- 15) What words of wisdom do you have for students thinking about dropping out?

Appendix B
Ethical Checklist

Ethical Issues Checklist:

1. Explaining purpose
2. Promises and reciprocity
3. Risk Assessment
4. Confidentiality
5. Informed consent
6. Data access and ownership
7. Interviewer mental health
8. Advice
9. Data collection boundaries
10. Ethical versus legal

Abbreviated chart produced by Patton (2002, pgs.408-9).

Appendix C

Copy of Participant Letter

Dear Mr. Mrs.

I am a student at East Tennessee State University working to complete the degree Doctor of Education. I would like to thank you for your time and shared experiences. The purpose of this qualitative research study is to gain some understanding for why some students do not complete k-12 education curriculum. In addition, the purpose is to generate a theoretical framework that helps identify factors in the lives of disadvantaged African American students that enable them to overcome obstacles that interfere with school success. Findings from this study could be used to inform parents, educators, and policy makers about developmental assets that enable students to graduate high school.

You have been selected for this study. To ensure the selection of participants who have knowledge and experience about the research topic, participants have been selected purposeful and not random. The purposeful criteria for this study were be: (a) variation of males and females, (b) years of public education, at least eight years of attendance before leaving school, and (c) location of public school, Western North Carolina. Your experiences and quotes were be used in my final report; however, I assure you that your name were not be used in association with your quotes, nor were any identifiers connecting you or your school to this study. Your participation will have complete anonymity. If you have any questions or concerns please, feel free to contact me.

Thank you,

Randall Johnson

Appendix D

Most Effective Intervention

School and Community Perspective

- Systemic Renewal
- School-Community Collaboration
- Safe Learning Environments

Early Interventions

- Family Engagement
- Early Childhood Education
- Early Literacy Development

Basic Core Strategies

- Mentoring/Tutoring
- Service-Learning
- Alternative Schooling
- After-School Opportunities

Making the Most of Instruction

- Professional Development
- Active Learning
- Educational Technology
- Individualized Instruction
- Career and Technology Education (CTE)

(NDPCN, 2013)

