REDUCING HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUT: AN INSTRUMENTAL CASE STUDY OF

SUCCESSFUL HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUT PREVENTION

by

Sasha Davila Crocker

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this instrumental case study was to understand the dramatic reduction in dropouts in a rural high school in central North Carolina. Dramatic reduction in dropouts is generally defined by having reduced the school's dropout rate by at least 50% in less than three years. The theories guiding this study were social learning theory and the stage theory of organizational change. The research questions were as follows: (1) How did the high school drastically reduce the dropout rate? (2) What was the role of each key informant in reducing the dropout rate? The data collection processes included individual interviews, focus groups, document analysis, and a researcher's journal. Data analysis consisted of coding, comparative analysis, and direct interpretations. The results of the study indicated that the school successfully reduced the dropout rate by forming flexible plans for at-risk students, building positive relationships between the staff and students, and utilizing the small environment.

Keywords: at-risk students, disadvantaged minorities, dropout, high school dropout, intervention, low socio-economic, positive relationships, prevention

Dedication

This work is dedicated to my husband and three children who gave me constant encouragement. Despite working full time, my husband scheduled time to watch all three children in the evenings in order for me to research and write and supported me when I decided to take a full year off work to finally finish. To Carter, Eli, and Aria, who supported me with their words, hugs, and kisses, I love you all.

Acknowledgments

This work would not have been possible without the support of my husband and three children, but also equally my parents. They not only babysat countless times so that I could do school work, they always served as encouragers and had faith I could complete my goal. My parents were a huge support and helped a great deal when my husband was deployed so that I could continue going to school. Thank you, Mom and Dad, I love you!

To Dr. Puga, who served as my chair: You have shown constant support through words of encouragement and prayer throughout this long journey. Thank you for sticking with me and always reassuring me that I could finish when I felt defeated. I cannot put into words how grateful I am that you have served as my chair for this work.

To Dr. Evans and Dr. Sinquefield, who served as my other committee members, and Dr. Milacci, who served as my research consultant, thank you. Your prayers and feedback helped me tremendously. Thank you for your patience and guidance during the course of this work.

To all of my participants, this study literally would not exist without you. Thank you for taking time out of your busy teaching schedules to meet with me and talk about how you reach at-risk students.

Last, but certainly not least, my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, without whom I would not be standing here today.

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. Philippians 4:13

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List of Abbreviations

America's Promise Alliance (APA)

American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA)

Big Brothers Big Sister of America (BBSA)

Comprehensive School Reform (CSR)

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

General Education Development (GED)

Hope and Opportunity Pathways through Education (HOPE USA)

National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (NDPC/N)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

Race to the Top (RTTT)

Small Learning Communities (SLC)

Socioeconomic Status (SES)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Within this chapter the high school dropout crisis is introduced, as well as some background information and progression. My situation to the study is discussed in-depth, including my philosophical assumptions. The purpose of this study stems from a long-standing problem for the United States concerning high school dropout rates, yet little has been researched on proven methods to decrease high school dropout rates. Both research questions are listed as well as why they are relevant to the study, and a brief overview of how research was conducted is provided. Chapter 1 ends with a list of definitions that could help a reader understand terms used throughout the study.

Background

The United States is an advanced country, yet the high school graduation rate is only 82.3% per the U.S. Department of Education (2014). Although this percentage hits an all-time high, the gains were minimal for the same disadvantaged group of students—those who are minorities and who live in lower socioeconomic status (SES) environments—who make up the largest portion of high school dropouts (Brown, 2010; Evans-Brown, 2015; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Hopson & Lee, 2011; Mitchell, 2015; Parr, 2015; Schwartz, 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). High school graduation is vital for a successful future. High school graduates are more likely to earn a higher income, be employed, vote, and are more likely to avoid criminal behavior (Child Trends, 2014; Pleis, Lucas, & Ward, 2010; The Statistics Portal, n.d.; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Furthermore, the majority of the studies that have been conducted only address the reasons for high school dropout and are from the perspective of those who have already dropped out, or stakeholders of those who drop out (Fan & Wolters, 2014; Parr, 2015;

Pharris-Ciurej, Hirschman, & Willhoft, 2012; Schwartz, 2014). Those same studies examined why participants dropped out and suggested preventive measures (Fan & Wolters, 2014; Parr, 2015; Pharris-Ciurej, Hirschman, & Willhoft, 2012; Schwartz, 2014). However, there is a lack of investigation as to whether those preventive measures truly work.

Historical Context

Education has become increasingly important for individuals to succeed in all regards of their life (Schargel & Smink, 2013). The high school diploma became increasingly more important in the 1900s as more people enrolled in school and graduated, which meant more graduates in the workforce (Schargel & Smink, 2013). This increase in high school graduates made it part of the competitive requirements of potential employers (Schargel & Smink, 2013).

Individuals who started school and did not graduate have always existed; however, the term high school dropout did not emerge until the 1960s (Schargel & Smink, 2013). The desire to retain students so that they will graduate has changed from the past when some students were encouraged to drop out of high school if they were deemed academically challenged or had behavior issues (Brown, 2010; Parr & Bonitz, 2015). In fact, the number of those graduating with a high school diploma has increased from 2% in the 1800s to approximately 82% in 2014 (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Although the overall percentage of graduating adolescents has increased over the years, the historical graduation rate for minorities, including African Americans and Hispanics, has been around 50% with the most recently graduation rates at approximately 67% (Stetser & Stilwell, 2014).

Social Context

There are various adverse consequences linked with dropping out of high school (Chapman, Laird, Ifill, & KewalRamani, 2011). High school dropouts are more likely to be

unemployed, earn less if employed, receive public assistance, have poor health, and have a higher tendency to engage in criminal behavior and spend time in prison (Brown, 2010; Chapman et al., 2011; Crowder & South, 2011; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Hopson & Lee, 2011; Parr, 2015; Schwartz, 2014). The average economical costs of high school dropouts throughout their lifetime is about $240,000 because of their reliance of government benefits and taxes due to their criminal activity (Chapman et. al, 2011). The recommendations and strategies used in the current study could serve to help decrease the high school dropout rate and, therefore, decrease the social repercussions from high school dropouts.

Theoretical Context

While investigating the literature related to high school dropout, two theories emerged as important in guiding this study: Bandura's (1977) social learning theory and Lewin's (1947) stage theory of organizational change. Bandura's (1977) theory emphasizes that a person's social environment influences his or her choices and, therefore, quality of life; this theory is pertinent to the current study because students either choose to graduate or drop out of high school, often due to social influences. Lewin's (1947) theory pertains to the current study because organizational change occurred in the school district and produced drastic change in high school dropout rates within a school year. This study will examine all aspects that contributed to the success in reducing the school's dropout rate, which may include organizational changes.

<div align="center">Situation to Self</div>

My background is mostly in elementary education, as I have taught in the elementary world for more than five years. However, I also taught mathematics in a General Education Development (GED) program for a year. Prior to working in a GED program, I could not understand how dropping out of high school was even a choice. Education was always an

important aspect of my life growing up. In fact, college was not an option in my parents' eyes; it was a requirement. However, during my time teaching the GED course, I realized that not everyone is fortunate enough to have the support system I did. I never had teachers tell me I would fail, like some of my students had. I could imagine that having that type of negativity could have influenced whether I stayed in high school or dropped out. It was during that time I grew more conscientious of the high school dropout epidemic plaguing our country and passionate about finding ways for students to stay in traditional high schools.

While researching high school dropout rates within the state of North Carolina, I examined the high school dropout rates from the previous four years and noticed one county in which its high schools reduced their dropout rate by 64% in one year. I was intrigued as to whether or not any other district had done anything similar and found that none had. Additionally, the particular county had gradually decreased their dropout throughout the four years and on the fourth year made the dramatic drop. Most of the research examined stated that minorities in urban cities who are from low SES families are more often the ones who dropout of high school (Hopson & Lee, 2011; Parr & Bonitz, 2015; Mitchell, 2015; Schwartz, 2014). Therefore, I decided to research even further within that particular district to determine if any of the high schools had a high population of minority students with low SES. Those attributes would be relevant because statistically those students would be the ones dropping out of high school (Hopson & Lee, 2011; Mitchell, 2015; Parr & Bonitz, 2015; Schwartz, 2014). To my surprise, there was one school within that county who met the areas of interest. After reading the school improvement plan, I discovered the school implemented an intervention program for at-risk students for dropping out. I knew then that I wanted to further investigate that program, because it could contribute to the success in drastically decreasing high school dropout rates.

The philosophical assumptions that led to this research are ontological, because the opinions and thoughts of others will define the themes within the study (Creswell, 2013). Ontology deals with the nature of reality. Essentially, it is an individual's interpretation of what is fact (Creswell, 2013). My biblical worldview helped shaped this study, because my belief that God gives each person a specific gift to use to glorify Him on earth led to my decision to become an educator. As an educator, it is my duty to instill knowledge in each student that crosses my path and help him or her be successful. Therefore, I view high school dropout as the failure of schools and educators, which in turn fails God's calling to educators. "Keep hold of instruction; do not let go; guard her, for she is your life" (Proverbs 4:13, ESV). God wants us to be educated, which is illustrate through Moses, the most educated man of his time, who wrote the first five books of the Bible.

Problem Statement

The problem is there is no known, proven method to resolve the issue of the high number of school dropouts in low SES communities with large minority populations. Studies have found that minority students in poor communities and low SES families comprise the majority of those who drop out (Parr & Bonitz, 2015; Schwartz, 2014). However, those studies focused on who had already dropped out (Parr & Bonitz, 2015; Pharris-Ciurej et al., 2012; Schwartz, 2014). Although focusing on those who have already dropped out is important for preventive measures, there is a lack of qualitative investigation into proven methods that prevent high school dropout. Exploring a school or district that has successfully reduced their dropout rate drastically could be beneficial to the field in providing proven interventions in reducing dropout rates.

To date, dropout prevention policy has not been adequate, evident by the fact that the high school dropout rate was 5.9% in 2015; of those who dropped out, the highest percentage

were African American and Hispanic students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). The most concentrated area of high school dropout rates is in major cities like New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago (Chappell et al., 2015). Until a solution is found, there will continue to be an effect on America's economic growth and social aspects (Chapman et al., 2011; Chappell et al., 2015; Sherman, 2011). Despite an effort to reduce high school dropout rates, schools in urban communities continue to produce high numbers of dropouts.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this instrumental case study was to explain the dramatic reduction in the dropout rate of a rural high school in central North Carolina. Dramatic reduction in dropouts is generally defined as having reduced the school's dropout rate by at least 50% in less than two years. The theories guiding this study were Bandura's (1977) social learning theory and Lewin's (1947) stage theory of organizational change. Bandura's (1977) theory relates because of the social aspects that may influence a person to make a life-changing decision. Lewin's (1947) theory pertains to this study because organizational change could have occurred in the school district and produced drastic change in high school dropout rates within a school year.

Significance of the Study

The significance of the current study expands the body of educational knowledge about successful high school dropout prevention methods and may help other schools when considering dropout prevention methods. This case study could reveal that the preventive measures studies have suggested could work in conditions that often fall victim to inflated high school dropout (Bowers, Sprott, & Taff, 2013; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Fan & Wolters, 2014). Studies on high school dropout often examine the aftermath of high school dropout, meaning the research is done with those who have already dropped out (Brown, 2010; Chapman et al., 2011;

Fall & Roberts, 2012; Hopson & Lee, 2011; Parr & Bonitz, 2015; Mitchell, 2015; Schwartz, 2014). Although studies that analyze high school dropout data and interviews of those who have dropped out are important, they do not serve to prevent high school dropout in a proven or effective way, considering that their participants have already dropped out of high school (Brown, 2010; Chapman et al., 2011; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Hopson & Lee, 2011; Parr & Bonitz, 2015; Mitchell, 2015; Schwartz, 2014).

Specifically, in North Carolina, the state in which the study was conducted, the dropout rate has increased compared to the national data that show a decrease in high school dropouts (National Center of Education Statistics, 2017). The implications from this study may help other schools in North Carolina that share the same curricular aspects and similar demographics because the school in which the study was conducted was one of three in the only county to decrease its dropout rate three years in a row (Cobey et al., 2018). Presenting a case where preventive measures were successful avoids the crisis altogether, versus prior research that has focused on the perspectives of participants after the crisis of dropout has already occurred. The findings of the current study have the potential to reduce the number of high school dropouts and perhaps allow educational leaders the opportunity to develop and implement programs that aid in preventing high school dropout (Bowers et al., 2013; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Fan & Wolters, 2014). The preventive methods utilized in the current study could serve as a template for other high schools to implement and potentially decrease their own high school dropout rates. The results of the current study present recommendations and strategies that could assist school administrators and local school districts in their efforts to support students "at-risk" for abandoning high school and potentially decrease the number of those who dropout of high school.

Research Questions

The current study examines successful high school dropout prevention. The two research questions are derived from the problem and purpose statements.

Research Question One

How did a high school in central North Carolina drastically reduce the dropout rate? This question offers insight into which interventions contributed to the drastic decrease in the dropout rate at the school. Research Question 1 examined professional development and implementation as well as strong points and weak points from stakeholders' perspectives. The participants had the opportunity to discuss what they believed contributed to the school success in decreasing the high school dropout rate. These aspects are important because previous high school dropout research has focused on those who did not graduate, offering possible suggestions but not any proven methods (Fan & Wolters, 2014; Parr & Bonitz, 2015; Pharris-Ciurej et al., 2012; Schwartz, 2014). The interview questions for administration included the percentage of minorities and low SES students who graduated. Examining strategies that a successful school used to reduce dropout rates provides proven, effective methods other schools can implement in hopes of duplicating the same results.

Research Question Two

What was the role of each stakeholder in reducing the dropout rate? This question is vital to the study because not only did participants reflect on their role in reduction of the high school dropout rate at the school, but they explained their perspective of the role played by each key informant. This question stems from one of the guiding theories of the study, the stage theory of organizational change (Lewin, 1947). Lewin (1947) states that in order for an organization to successfully change, it must effectively complete specific steps as a whole.

Collecting qualitative data on the specific steps taken from each stakeholder's perspective could lead to insight to duplicating those same steps elsewhere. The answers from this question offer insight into the role and perceived impact of each person within a student's support system.

Definitions

1. *Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate—* an estimate of the amount of high school freshmen who graduate with a high school diploma (excluding those who earned an equivalent credential) in four years (Lyttle-Burns, 2011).

2. *Event Dropout Rate—* an estimate of the percentage of high school students who leave school, without earning a high school diploma or GED, between the beginning of one school year and the beginning of the following school year (Lyttle-Burns, 2011).

3. *General Education Development (GED)—* a credential that is used as an alternate to a high school diploma by individuals who did not complete school; it is awarded to individuals who pass a series of tests to demonstrate similar content knowledge of a high school graduate. The GED is a joint venture by the American Council on Education and Pearson (American Council on Education, 2015; Dunn Carpenter, 2011; Gall, 2014).

4. *General Education Development Programs—* adult basic education programs that provide GED preparation classes to adolescents and adults to prepare them for the GED tests and provide instruction for literacy and other work readiness skills (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

5. *Free Lunch—* Those students who live in homes with incomes that are 185% below the federal poverty level are eligible to receive free lunch (United States Department of Agriculture, 2013).

6. *High School Dropout—* Those who are not enrolled in school and have not earned a high

school diploma or an equivalency credential such as a GED certificate (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

7. *Reduced Lunch*— Those students who live in homes with incomes between 130% – 185% below the federal poverty level are eligible for reduced-price meals of no more than 40 cents (United States Department of Agriculture, 2013).

8. *Residential Mobility*— When students change their residence and school (Thompson, 2011).

9. *School Mobility*— When students change schools but not their home address (Thompson, 2011).

10. *Social Learning Theory*— Bandura's (1977) theory that people's social environment influences their choices and, therefore, their quality of life.

11. *Stage Theory of Organizational Change*— Lewin's (1947) theory based on the premise that organizations go through stages as they change. Within each stage there are specific strategies that are dependent on the organization's adoption, implementation, and sustainment in aiding the organizations change.

12. *Status Completion Rate*— The percentage of students in a specific age range who have earned a high school diploma or equivalent credential and are not in school (Lyttle-Burns, 2011).

13. *Status Dropout Rate*— The percentage of students in a specific age range who have not earned a high school diploma or equivalent credential and are not in school (Lyttle-Burns, 2011).

Summary

Chapter 1 included background knowledge and literature on high school dropout rates and their effects. The researcher's situation to self is explained, including why the study was

selected as a focus. This chapter included the purpose of the study: to explore proven intervention methods in decreasing high school dropout rates through investigating a successful high school program to aid in resolving the problem of high school dropout. Two research questions were included and rationalized, and an overview of how the research was conducted was outlined. The chapter concluded with a list of definitions of terms used throughout the study.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Chapter Two provides context for the proposed study based on research to emphasize the importance of resolving the problem of high school dropout. Both theoretical frameworks that helped shape the study are discussed within the chapter. Most importantly, the chapter includes literature on previous studies on high school dropout. The review of literature begins with an introduction of the high school dropout crisis after which historical trends in education regarding high school dropout are discussed. The chapter concludes with a review of the educational reforms that have been implemented throughout American history.

The literature identifies common attributes of those who drop out, which includes discussing: (a) data and studies that reflect trends amongst high school dropouts to improve graduation rates; and (b) emerging trends and data in regard to the disproportionate numbers of minority students and those from low SES homes who do not graduate from high school in underprivileged school districts. Details of how poverty, lack of personal development, parent and community involvement, SES, gender, and race impact the causes and effects of high school dropout are covered next. Examining the common characteristics of those who drop out is the underlying issue and causation of this study. The chapter includes literature that addresses alternative school options that are now becoming popular among those at risk for high school dropout.

The chapter concludes with preventive methods that research has proposed based on what studies have found from those who have dropped out of high school as well as strategies that studies have found to reduce the high school dropout rate. However, there is a gap in the research regarding proven intervention methods, which is why this study is needed.

Theoretical Framework

The guiding theory for the study is Bandura's (1977) social learning theory. The framework for social learning theory was created by John Dewey, who acknowledged the importance of the learning environment (Pearson, 2015). There is a significant effect on learners based on how they interact with the environment around them (Dewey, 1938). Dewey claimed, "Developmental behavior shows, on the other hand, that in the higher organisms' excitations are so diffusely linked with reactions that the sequel is affected by the state of the organism in relation to environment" (Dewey, 1938, p. 31). Dewey believed that education involved nurturing and fostering relationships; essentially, he believed that social environment affected the learner, dependent on the expectations and demands of others (Pearson, 2015).

Albert Bandura (1977) utilized Dewey's theory to support his social learning theory. He theorized that students needed to interact with the learning environment through direct experiences and observing other's behaviors. Lave and Wenger (1991) believed that a learning environment is more complex than a teacher-learner relationship: "This points to a richly diverse field of essential actors and, with it, other forms of relationships of participation" (p. 56). The social learning theory suggests that a person is more likely to "adopt modeled behavior if it results in outcomes they value than if it has unrewarding or punishing effects" (Bandura, 1977, p. 28). This can apply in a school environment based on the reward or consequence a student received based on a behavior. Those past rewards and consequences may motivate a person's future behaviors (Bandura, 1977). The rewards and consequences can be classified as stimuli (Bandura, 1977; Pearson, 2015), and stimuli generate behaviors due to predictive factors, meaning stimuli create scenarios that develop expectations (Bandura, 1977). Therefore, students for whom stimuli have generated negative behaviors may disengage with school. Bandura

theorized that students with the same stimuli make different decisions based on three dynamics that intermingle with one another: behavior, cognitive and personal factors, and environmental events (Bandura, 1977; Pearson, 2015).

Those who have a greater sense of effectiveness are more likely to attempt to cope with difficult situations; likewise, those with lower sense of effectiveness are less motivated to deal with challenging situations (Bandura, 1977). Self-efficacy relates to the amount of anticipated fear people feel and the belief in their ability to accomplish tasks related to efficacy (Bandura, 1977). It follows that schools with a positive culture offer students more opportunities to succeed and increase the likelihood that students will develop a greater sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). In relation to the current study, Bandura (1977) believed that the actions of one person could provide useful information to those who observe, which in turn could allow the observers to learn from the modeled behavior. However, Bandura (1977) reported that rewarded imitative behavior produced more favorable results than non-rewarded behavior, which could indicate that a positive school culture may result in higher student achievement.

A second theory relevant to the study's framework is Lewin's (1947) stage theory of organizational change, which is based on the premise that organizations go through stages as they change. The theory states that within each stage there are specific strategies dependent to the organization's adoption, implementation, and sustainment in aiding the organization's change. Proper application of the theory would be to assess appropriate strategies for each stage (Lewin, 1947). The theory is relevant to the current study because a form of organizational change within the school or district must have occurred to influence the drastic drop in high school dropout for the school district.

Related Literature

Education is an ever-changing system that should grows in a way that better aids student learning for all. Unfortunately, public high schools in disadvantaged communities of America are failing to meet that expectation. The United States is ranked 17th among developed nations in high school graduation rates (Evans-Brown, 2015). Unfortunately, there is a disproportionate focus on students who are high achieving and make good grades that disguise significant learning gaps between different subgroups (Brown, 2010). The fact of the matter is that 30% of students in high school will not graduate in four years (Evans-Brown, 2015). More specifically, half of all African American and Hispanic high school students will not graduate in four years (Evans-Brown, 2015). Those statistics are staggering when 90% of the fastest growing jobs require post-secondary education (Evans-Brown, 2015).

Accurately defining and describing the high school dropout crisis is a challenging issue because of the lack of consistent accountability. High school dropout rates have decreased overall in recent years; however, high school dropout rates continue to remain high among English language learners, underrepresented minorities (African American males and Hispanics), and low-income communities (Chavez, 2012). There are countless reasons to address the high school dropout crisis, but three are in grim need of addressing. The first is the lack of accountability to maintain a specific high school retention rate (Chavez, 2012; Lyttle-Burns, 2011). Although there have been and will continue to be education reforms, none specifically address high school dropout in an explicit way as to hold schools accountable for ensuring their students graduate (Chavez, 2012; Lyttle-Burns, 2011). The second affects society as a whole economically due to an inability to attain proper careers, a higher rate of criminal activity, and the need for government assistance (Chavez, 2012; Evans-Brown, 2015; Lyttle-Burns, 2011).

The third directly correlates with the demographics of our country as the United States continues to grow and diversify (Chavez, 2012). The fastest growing population also happens to be the highest population of high school dropouts (i.e., Hispanics), which could potentially mean an increase of high school dropouts as the number of Hispanics within our country increase (Chavez, 2012). The current study seeks to explore the interventions put in place for students "at risk" (those from low SES homes, low school performance, and minorities) to prevent high school dropout in a North Carolina high school; the findings from this study may be used in other high schools to decrease high school dropout rates and, therefore, increase graduation rates.

High School Dropout Historically

In the 1800s only a specific population, mainly white males, attended high school, and few graduated (Schargel & Smink, 2013). In fact, the U.S. Bureau of Census (2016) estimated that only 2% in 1870 and 6% in 1900 of high school students graduated. During this time, high school was viewed as selective and mostly for people who had the monetary, intellectual, and social means to attend high school (Schargel & Smink, 2013). Not to mention, most employers did not require employees to have a high school diploma (Schargel & Smink, 2013).

However, in the mid-1900s a shift occurred in the labor market due to technological changes and the enforcement of child-labor laws, which resulted in fewer job availability for adolescents and an increase in high school enrollment (Schargel & Smink, 2013). In fact, by 1940, 80% of people ages 14 to 17 were enrolled in high school and 50% of 17-year-olds were high school graduates (Schargel & Smink, 2013). Due to the increase in high school students, more people graduated (Schargel & Smink, 2013). As more graduated, the value of a high school diploma increased and, thus, there was an increase in employers' desire for high school graduation to be a qualification for employment (Schargel & Smink, 2013).

Before the 1960s phrases such as "elimination from school" and "leaving school" were used to refer to students who did not graduate high school (Evans-Brown, 2015; Schargel & Smink, 2013); however, in the early 1960s the term "dropout" emerged to describe students who left school before earning a high school diploma (Schargel & Smink, 2013). "The premise of dropping out is based on the assumption that schools are accountable for and have the responsibility to socialize adolescents, prevent delinquency and dependency, and to keep students in school until they graduated" (Brown, 2010, p. 36).

Although the dropout rate in 1972 was only 5% (Evans-Brown, 2015), in the 1970s a pattern of suspension and students pushed out of school occurred for minority children at a much higher rate than Caucasian students (Brown, 2010). During this period of time and during much of the 1980s, students who posed behavioral issues were encouraged to drop out to make the schools safer for students who were deemed able to graduate (Brown, 2010; Parr & Bonitz, 2015). Although that trend is not widely accepted now, students who are identified as "at risk" are still often minorities (Brown, 2010; Chapman et al., 2011; Crowder & South, 2011; Evans-Brown, 2015; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Hopson & Lee, 2011).

Dropout Rates

Calculating the dropout rate is complex, because although there are requirements based on government school reforms, the accountability of those requirements is not as clear. The criteria used to report the dropout rate differ from state to state and are even dependent on which outlet is calculating the results (Lyttle-Burns, 2011). However, the U.S. Department of Education uses four set methodologies to determine a state's dropout status: event dropout rate, status dropout rate, status completion rate, and averaged freshman graduation rate (Lyttle-Burns, 2011). Event dropout rate is an estimate of the percentage of high school students who leave

school, without earning a high school diploma or GED, between the beginning of one school year and the beginning of the following school year (Lyttle-Burns, 2011). Status dropout is the percentage of students in a specific age range who have not earned a high school diploma or equivalent credential and are not in school (Lyttle-Burns, 2011). Status completion rate is the percentage of students in a specific age range who have earned a high school diploma or equivalent credential and are not in school (Lyttle-Burns, 2011). Finally, the averaged freshman graduation rate is an estimate of the amount of high school freshmen who graduate with a high school diploma (excluding those who earned an equivalent credential) in four years (Lyttle-Burns, 2011).

Those Who Drop Out

Although there is not a definitive age when high school dropout is decided, it is a process that can begin as early as first grade (Evans-Brown, 2015). Dropouts are found to have about 60% more absences in first grade, 134% more absences while in middle school, and 247% more absences in high school than their graduate peers (Evans-Brown, 2015). Those who drop out often earn poor grades, have been retained in at least one grade, and are disengaged in the classroom (Evans-Brown, 2015). Research suggests that there are multiple reasons why students drop out of high school, such as being part of a minority group (Brown, 2010; Chapman et al., 2011; Crowder & South, 2011; Evans-Brown 2015; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Hopson & Lee, 2011; Mitchell, 2015; Parr & Bonitz, 2015; Schwartz, 2014; Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010); living in a low-economic community (Brown, 2010; Chapman et al., 2011; Crowder & South, 2011; Evans-Brown 2015; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Hopson & Lee, 2011; Mitchell, 2015; Parr & Bonitz, 2015; Schwartz, 2014); family ties (Lyttle-Burns, 2011; Parr, 2015); and transient reasons (Lyttle-Burns, 2011). Many factors can contribute to a student's decision to dropout,

some of which are attributes a student has no control over that predispose them to possibly dropping out of high school.

     Minorities. In the United States, each year nearly one third of all students in public secondary schools' drop out of high school (Fall & Roberts, 2012; Snyder & Dillow, 2015). Within that one third are minority students with low SES who live in underprivileged communities (Brown, 2010; Chapman et al., 2011; Crowder & South, 2011; Evans-Brown 2015; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Hopson & Lee, 2011; Mitchell, 2015; Parr, 2015; Schwartz, 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). In fact, Hispanic and African American students are dropping out at higher rates than Caucasian and Asian students (Snyder & Dillow, 2015). Roughly 62% of Hispanic and 83% of African American adults over the age of 25 complete high school or the equivalent, compared to 92% of Caucasians and 89% of Asians/Pacific Islanders (Elliott-Ghalleb, 2016). Furthermore, national dropout statistics indicate that most African Americans who drop out are male students (Sherman, 2011). Of those who drop out of high school, 11.8% come from low SES, 8.7% from middle class families, 4.1% from upper middle class families, and 1.9% from upper class families (Snyder & Dillow, 2015). These statistics further support the claims of previous studies that explored students at risk to drop out of high school.

     Bell (2014) identified that 73% of Hispanic and African American participants quit school because of factors such as home difficulties, medical needs, lack of focus and socialization, and peer pressure. Other factors included teacher relationships, SES, single-parent families, residential mobility, and cultural norms (Elliott-Ghalleb, 2016). Male minorities are at risk of academic failure due to inadequate test scores, increases in special education service referrals, and higher rates of disciplinary action than their counterparts (Elliott-Ghalleb, 2016). There are long-term consequences for Hispanic and African American males who drop out of

high school, and they are more likely to be suspended and expelled from school than any other subgroup (Elliott-Ghalleb, 2016). In fact, on average incarcerated ninth graders attended school only 58% of the time, read between a sixth grade level and eight grade level, failed one quarter of classes, and have been suspended at least once (Elliott-Ghalleb, 2016). A prior history or suspension leads to an increased likelihood of high school dropout by 78% (Elliott-Ghalleb, 2016).

African American children are identified as having behavior disorders and mental disabilities at twice the rate of Caucasian children (Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010). In the past, parents who lacked knowledge about the special education system were convinced to place their children into special education classes, saturating special education programs in urban communities across the country with minority students (Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010). Many students who are identified with emotional or behavioral disorders with poor academic performance often have other attributing factors such as family unemployment, mental health problems, and poor support with social interactions (Sherman, 2011). Those identified often are low-performing, which is an at-risk indication for high school dropout (Sherman, 2011; Snyder & Dillow, 2015). Low performance can be attributed to the frustration that triggers aggressive behavior, especially as students become more aware of their performance compared to peers, all of which sets the stage for an increased potential of behavior issues and high school dropout (Sherman, 2011).

Low-income communities. Poverty is a significant risk factor that affects academic achievement (Elliott-Ghalleb, 2016). In comparison to other subgroups, Hispanics are more likely to be uninsured and live in unsafe neighborhoods (Elliott-Ghalleb, 2016). Payne (2012) reported that poverty is a common risk factor for numerous settings which include antisocial

behavior and emotional or behavioral disabilities (Elliott-Ghalleb, 2016). Hispanics and African Americans comprise 80% of the student population in extreme poverty-stricken schools with 90%–100% of the student population coming from low SES homes (Elliott-Ghalleb, 2016). On average, a third of adults who live in underprivileged counties do not have a high school diploma (Lyttle-Burns, 2011). Unfortunately, uneducated residents result in an unstable work force with low wages (Lyttle-Burns, 2011). The lack of income results in a limited amount of funds to support the schools within those communities (Lyttle-Burns, 2011). A student's SES can be measured by parental education, occupational status, or income and is one of the strongest and most consistent correlations to high school dropout (Elliott-Ghalleb, 2016). Studies have found that students with a lower SES consistently do worse academically compared to those with a higher SES (Brown, 2010; Chapman, Laird, Ifill, & KewalRamani, 2011; Crowder & South, 2011; Evans-Brown 2015; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Hopson & Lee, 2011; Mitchell, 2015; Parr, 2015; Schwartz, 2014).

Family ties. Studies have also found that parental involvement impacts student success (Crowder & South, 2011; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Lyttle-Burns, 2011; Parr, 2015). Specifically, paternal involvement positively affects student success in regard to grades earned and extracurricular activities, and those students are less likely to be suspended or expelled (Lyttle-Burns, 2011). Parent educational attainment also affects the probable success of a student, specifically the mother (Lyttle-Burns, 2011; Parr, 2015). Students of parents who have high expectations of their children tend to score higher on standardized tests, earn better grades, and are more likely to attend higher education (Lyttle-Burns, 2011; Parr, 2015). These same parents are prone to having an easier time communicating with teachers and school administration (Lyttle-Burns, 2011). Therefore, students with parents with a lower SES and lower educational

attainment have lower self-efficacy and are less likely to experience academic success (Lyttle-Burns, 2011; Parr, 2015). Jordan, Kostandini, and Mykerezi (2012) found that family and peer characteristics trumped where a student lived; they found that students from two-parent homes (biological parents) regardless of community, especially in African American students, were more likely to graduate high school.

Transitory reasons. There are two types of mobility: (a) school mobility, which is when students change schools but not their home address, and (b) residential mobility, which is when students change residences and schools (Thompson, 2011). Mobility is linked to families of lower SES due to homelessness, unemployment, and immigration (Thompson, 2011). There is an impact on academic success of transient adolescents (Lyttle-Burns, 2011). Transient students have to deal with a disruption in their learning environment because of differences in curriculum and school climate (Thompson, 2011). Students who move three or more times are more likely to have emotional and behavioral issues at school (Thompson, 2011). Unfortunately, mobility contributes to academic failure, behavior problems, and high school dropout (Thompson, 2011). Academic success is negatively affected for students who move often or do not have a steady home-life who are younger than age 7 or between ages 12 and 15 (Lyttle-Burns, 2011). Moving during high school interrupts a student socially and physically which can result in problems such as (a) below reading grade-level performance, (b) grade retention, and (c) health problems (Lyttle-Burns, 2011). Unfortunately, students who change schools during their elementary or high school years are more likely to be high school dropouts, regardless of family background (Lyttle-Burns, 2011). Students with transitory issues often suffer from absenteeism, misbehavior, lower educational expectations, higher suspension rates, decrease in classroom participation, and lower academic achievement (Lyttle-Burns, 2011). In fact, transient students

tend to live in lower SES communities and have parents who continuously look for employment and shelter. Of those who live below the poverty line, 24.2% are mobile compared to the 12.8% of people who live above the poverty line who are mobile (Thompson, 2011). A commonality found in transient students is a dominant makeup of African American and Hispanic students (Thompson, 2011). When compared to Caucasian and Asian students, African American and Hispanic students are more likely to change schools (Thompson, 2011).

Causes of High School Dropout

Dropping out of high school is not a spontaneous decision; it is the end of the process of accumulated disengagement that may have started as early as elementary school (Brown, 2010; Fall & Roberts, 2012). Many factors contribute to high school dropout, such as (a) lack of experienced teachers, (b) low levels of academic competition, (c) lack of advanced courses, (d) feeling alienated from school, (e) feeling as though school officials did not care about the students, and (f) not having a strong bond to school (Awang-Hashim, Kaur, & Noman, 2015; Bowers, Sprott, & Taff, 2013; Brooks, 2015; Brown, 2010; Hopson & Lee, 2011; Mitchell, 2015; Parr, 2015). Students whose self-efficacy and motivation are low have a higher chance of high school dropout (Parr, 2015). However, not all risk factors have the same impact on a student's decision to drop out of high school; Doll, Eslami, & Walters (2013) found three categorizes that influence at-risk student to drop out: push, pull, or fall out.

Push. A student is pushed out when conditions inside the school impact his or her decision to drop out of high school such as grades, attendance, and discipline (Doll et al., 2013). Research indicates that students fall behind between 9th and 10th grade, partly due to the number of students held back in ninth grade (Pharris-Ciurej et al., 2012). Transitioning from 9th to 10th grade is a crucial step in ensuring students graduate high school, especially in low SES schools

(Pharris-Ciurej et al., 2012). Ninth grade students have the highest rates of truancy, retentions, failing grades, and discipline referrals; Pharris-Ciurej et al. (2012) found that of 3,000 students enrolled in ninth grade only half were still enrolled by 12th grade in a West Coast school district.

The high-stake tests make it difficult for those students to meet the requirements to move to tenth grade, and students who do not pass the tests are often labeled as having low academic achievement (Parr, 2015; Pharris-Ciurej et al., 2012). Factors that affect academic achievement amongst students include quality of instruction, poor pedagogy, lack of student engagement, focus on behavior management over academic achievement, low expectations, and inadequately prepared teachers (Snyder & Dillow, 2015). If students begin school with low academic readiness skills, they are at risk to continue having academic difficulties including grade retention, poor grades, and dropping out of high school (Hughes & Chen, 2011).

Low academic performance is a predictor of subsequent behavioral and social issues in school (Fall & Roberts, 2012; Hughes & Chen, 2011). Tied into the at-risk attributes are students in low SES groups who are either African American or Hispanic (Brooks, 2015; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Hughes & Chen, 2011; Snyder & Dillow, 2015). Evans-Brown (2015) noted that people who have high self-efficacy often consider more career options and better prepare themselves educationally for those occupations. The low achievement correlates to increased referrals to special education, which means an increase in dropout rates due to the academic achievement gaps between affluent and underprivileged students in urban communities (Snyder & Dillow, 2015). If placed into a special education program, students are often kept from the mainstream general education classroom, limiting their ability to acquire the necessary educational requirements to earn a high school diploma (Snyder & Dillow, 2015). The exclusion

and label of special education can push students to make the decision to drop out of high school (Snyder & Dillow, 2015).

Pull. A student is considered pulled out when external factors such as family, employment, or other financial reasons impact their decision to drop out of high school (Doll et al., 2013). Men are not the only ones affected by high school dropout. The number of unmarried females in communities with high rates of high school dropout has increased as the number of male dropouts who are incarcerated or unemployed increases (McMurrey, 2014). In fact, 30% of girls who drop out of high school do so due to pregnancy (Marshall, 2011). Of those who have a baby as a teen, 38% earn a high school diploma before they turn 18 (Marshall, 2011). Only 51% of teen mothers eventually earn a high school diploma, compared to 89% of female students who do not become teen mothers (Marshall, 2011). In fact, the predictor that is mentioned frequently in studies of high school dropout is family factors (Crowder & South, 2011; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Parr, 2015). Studies have found that students from low SES families have a higher dropout rate compared to their high SES counterparts (Parr, 2015). In addition to SES contributing to high school dropout, students who have parents with higher levels of education are less likely to drop out of high school (Parr, 2015). Parental involvement is crucial to a student's transition into education (Niehaus & Adelson, 2014). There have been dramatic increases of female-headed families amongst the African American community, who suffer poverty at higher rates than other family types (Niehaus & Adelson, 2014). However, there are also many contributing factors to high school dropout that are attributed to the school system.

Fall out. A student falls out when they become disconnected, uninterested, or disillusioned inside the school environment (Doll et al., 2013). Teachers have influence in a student's decision to leave high school (Collie, 2015; Hughes & Chen, 2011). It is widely

documented that positive academic results stem from the collaboration of family, community, and school (Niehaus & Adelson, 2014), so much so that No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top required that schools under improvement to use strategies that promote effective parent involvement in the school (Evans-Brown, 2015). When students have a positive and supportive relationship with their teachers, they are more likely to have peer acceptance, academic achievement, and are more engaged—less likely to feel disconnected—within the school environment (Hughes & Chen, 2011). Sadly, students from low-income communities have teachers with the likelihood to believe they have less favorable futures and feel ineffective working with them (Lyttle-Burns, 2011). Low expectations from adults can negatively affect low-income students' educational performances (Lyttle-Burns, 2011). Students who have tumultuous relationships with their teachers are more likely to drop out of high school, endure grade retention, be excluded by their peers, and exhibit inappropriate behaviors (Collie, 2015; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Hughes & Chen, 2011). Within the classroom, other students can influence a student's decision to drop out of high school (Hughes & Chen, 2011). More specifically, when students are rejected by their peers, they are more likely to perform low academically and have a lower self-efficacy, which as earlier established, can attribute to a student dropping out of high school (Collie, 2015; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Hughes & Chen, 2011).

Research has addressed factors that contribute to high school dropout in an attempt to identify risk factors (Awang-Hashim et al., 2015; Brooks, 2015; Brown, 2010; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Hopson & Lee, 2011; Mitchell, 2015; Parr, 2015). As previously mentioned, those who are consistently identified as "at risk" are students with low SES who are minorities in urban communities (Brooks, 2015; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Snyder & Dillow, 2015). In addition, they are students who have adult responsibilities, who have been retained, or have changed schools

(Fall & Roberts, 2012). There are many attributing factors to high school dropout with very dire effects.

The Effects of High School Dropout

Several negative outcomes are associated with high school dropout (Chapman et al., 2011). Those who do not graduate are more likely to be unemployed, earn a lesser wage if employed, receive public assistance, have poor health, engage in criminal behavior, and be incarcerated (Brown, 2010; Chapman et al., 2011; Crowder & South, 2011; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Hopson & Lee, 2011; Parr, 2015; Schwartz, 2014). The economic burden of an average high school dropout is about $240,000 over the dropout's lifespan due to his or her higher reliance on government health care and welfare as well as tax money due to higher criminal activity (Chapman et al., 2011).

Societal conflicts. Not only does the United States lead the world in prison incarcerations, but the majority of inmates are minorities, specifically African American males (Chapman et al., 2011; McMurrey, 2014). Many of those incarcerated are high school dropouts who are not married or divorced and live in poverty (Hopson & Lee, 2011; Sherman, 2011). To put the issue in perspective, African Americans males make up just 14% of the United States' population, yet they account for 70% of the prison population and of that 70%, 52% have dropped out of high school (McMurrey, 2014). A person who is an unemployed dropout is six to 10 times more likely to commit a criminal activity than their counterparts (Sherman, 2011). In fact, "increasing the high school completion rate by just one percent for all men ages 20 to 60 would reduce costs in the criminal justice system by $1.4 billion a year" (Evans-Brown, 2015, p. 32).

Those incarcerated effect the economy as well (Chapman et al., 2011; Sherman, 2011). The average state spends about $24,000 per year for an incarcerated youth but spend less than $9,000 per student for K–12 education (Sherman, 2011), meaning it costs more to incarcerate underprivileged minority high school dropouts than it would to keep them in school and get them an education. Thankfully, preventive methods can and should be utilized in an attempt to keep all students in school.

Family effects. The struggles of high school dropouts extend to their offspring as well (Fall & Roberts, 2012). Children of high school dropouts are more likely to perform poorly in school and dropout of school themselves (Fall & Roberts, 2012). The intergenerational effects of high school dropout attribute importance to this study. High school dropout is a cycle that will continue as it is without drastic intervention. Dropping out of high school is a dangerous decision. Three quarters of fast growing jobs currently require at least a high school diploma (McMurrey, 2014). Dropping out of high school means students leave school unprepared for the increasingly competitive global market (McMurrey, 2014). A high school dropout is eight times more likely to be on probation or jailed than someone who graduated high school (McMurrey, 2014; Sherman, 2011).

Education Reforms

American students perform lower when compared to performances of students from other countries (Altbach & Salmi, 2011; Kessinger, 2011). Therefore, throughout American history, education reforms have been implemented in an attempt to close the gap. In 1989, President Bush and the nation's governors —including future President Clinton— met at the Education Summit at the University of Virginia (Kessinger, 2011). This was a historic event because the president and governors had never before met to attempt to create a set national education goal

and rearrange educational policy responsibilities among all three branches of government (Kessinger, 2011). The intent was to increase American students' performance in comparison to other countries around the world (Kessinger, 2011).

Since that summit, several educational initiatives have been instituted, yet none have proven to be fully feasible or effective; the Department of Education has stated that dropping out remains a challenge for American schools and affects students' global competitiveness (Altbach & Salmi, 2011; Kessinger, 2011). Unfortunately, current reform efforts suggest that the challenge of keeping students in school will increase due to higher state academic standards and high-stakes performance assessments which make it more difficult for students to earn a diploma (Kessinger, 2011).

Goals 2000: Educate America Act. During his presidency, William Clinton signed into law the Goals 2000: Educate America Act (Civic Impulse, 2016). The act was a direct result of the Education Summit held by President Bush five years prior (Altbach & Salmi, 2011). The goal was to significantly reduce the nation's dropout rate by improving the graduation rate to 90% by establishing a framework of academic standards, measuring student progress, and providing the necessary support students may need to meet those standards (Civic Impulse, 2016). However, although the act included a goal to have 90% of students graduate high school by the year 2000, accountability for how these rates would be reported was not specific. Without an accountability piece, schools and the government were not forced to actually put into place strategies to prevent high school dropout. Authorization for Goals 2000: Educate America Act was withdrawn when No Child Left Behind was signed into law (Civic Impulse, 2016).

No Child Left Behind. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was signed into law by President George W. Bush in 2002. NCLB significantly increased the role of the federal government in

holding schools responsible for ensuring that all students make academic progress (Klein, 2015).

The law put special emphasis on ensuring that states and schools increase performance of

specific groups of students, such as English language learners (ELL), special education students,

minorities, and students from low SES families (Klein, 2015). Although states were not required

to abide by the new law, they risked losing federal Title 1 money if they chose not to comply

(Klein, 2015).

Graduation rate accountability was included in the provisions as a first step by Congress

in recognizing the dropout crisis in America (Kessinger, 2011). Prior to NCLB, the graduation

rates were excluded as formal accountability pieces in many states (Kessinger, 2011). However,

there is not a set guideline nationwide for accounting for dropout rates; therefore, the public is

unaware of how immense the dropout issue is due to inaccurate and distorted graduation rate

reporting (Kessinger, 2011). What this means is that states are not required to disaggregate

graduation rates that are reported by minority subgroups (Kessinger, 2011), further diluting the

accuracy of reported graduation rates. NCLB does not have specific requirements for yearly

growth for graduation rates, which means no accountability for school leaders to decrease the

dropout rate (Kessinger, 2011; Klein, 2015). In fact, NCLB could be used to motivate schools to

"push out" low performing students to increase a school's test scores and yearly progress

(Kessinger, 2011). Unfortunately, NCLB emphasizes test performance without addressing the

ultimate performance component: graduation (Kessinger, 2011; Klein, 2015). Implementing

effective dropout prevention programs would require more specific state and federal policies

with explicit prevention, intervention, and re-enrollment guidelines (Kessinger, 2011). The lack

of accountability has resulted in a large number of schools on the bottom-tier being targeted as

Program Improvement Schools (Weinbaum, Weiss, & Beaver, 2012).

Race to the Top. President Obama signed into law the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) on February 17, 2009, initiated Race to the Top (RTTT) to improve schools and public education while the legislation designated $4.35 billion for the RTTT fund (U.S. Department of Education, 2017b). The government was approaching the issue of high school dropout on the notion that by improving schools structurally and providing more incentives, the dropout rate would decrease (U.S. Department of Education, 2017b). Therefore, a main focus of RTTT was to pour into schools that yield many of the nation's dropouts in an attempt to fix the schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2017b). Instead of relying on outside agencies, as previously practiced, the fourth component of RTTT strove to start within the schools through programs such as the Hope and Opportunity Pathways through Education (HOPE USA) grant (U.S. Department of Education, 2017b). Essentially HOPE USA provided students who had previously dropped out of high school the opportunity to return to school and earn a high school diploma, versus receiving a GED, typical to those who return to school after dropping out (U.S. Department of Education, 2017b). Unfortunately, it was found that programs like these did not get "buy-in" from the students because their voices were not heard; instead, policymakers, school boards, teachers, and administrators decided what was best for students (Mansfield-Cummings, 2013). By excluding students from the decision-making process, students who historically struggle in school based on race, gender, and socioeconomic status, continued to not engage in higher levels of learning and not build strong relationships with peers and teachers (Evans-Brown, 2015).

Every Student Succeeds Act. Congress passed Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in December 2015 to replace NCLB (Klein, 2016). Unlike NCLB, ESSA seeks to cut back the federal role in K–12 education (Klein, 2016). The act reauthorized the Elementary and

Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which targeted equal opportunity for all students (U.S. Department of Education, 2017a). Assessments are required to measure high-order thinking skills and understanding, which can be shown through portfolios, project, and performance tasks (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2017a). As accountability, multiple indicators of student performance must be used by states beyond test scores (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2017a). The law does not allow the Secretary of Education to stipulate what those multiple measures are, nor their weight; this allows states the opportunity to consider which measurements are given weight to improve teaching and learning, as long as they are based on the state's adopted academic standards (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016). However, states must create long-term goals with interim progress measurements for all students, including subgroups such as those with low SES, ethnic groups, children with disabilities, and English language learners (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016). In regard to high school graduation accountability, specifically, states must calculate their graduation rates by including only "standard" diplomas, meaning those who graduate with a four year high school diploma and not alternative options (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016). The new change will decrease reported graduation rates, since in the past states were allowed to decide which factors were included when reporting their graduation rates.

Mistaken Solutions

There has been an increase in popularity of alternative methods to attain a high school diploma, methods that are mistakenly being assumed as equal in value and as possible solutions to the high school dropout crisis, the appeal being that programs for re-enrollment are often small in class size, held after school hours or during the summer, and led by educators (Stipanovic, Lewis, & Stringfield, 2012). Choices such as GED, charter schools, parochial schools, and

online classes allow for a more flexible schedule and are appealing and more realistic for students to attend (Stipanovic et al., 2012). However, due to the inconsistency of calculating high school graduation rates, there is no empirical evidence that these other methods yield higher graduation rates.

Charter schools. Another option that is becoming increasingly popular among at risk students is charter schools (Paino, Renzulli, Boylan, & Bradley, 2014). Charter schools are public schools that are managed by boards consisting of educators, parents, community members, and organizations instead of the state and local government boards (Paino et al., 2014). They provide families with school choice, autonomy, and the feeling of private education without the usual cost (Paino et al., 2014). Students are selected through a lottery to ensure enrollment equality (Angrist, Pathak, & Walters, 2013).

The results of Angrist et al. (2013) alludes to an advantage of urban charter schools. However, charter schools are not always designed close to academic achievement gaps for at-risk students (Paino et al., 2014). Charter schools have more flexibility in what they are allowed to do in regard to which students they accept in the school and reasons to terminate students' ability to attend (Paino et al., 2014). Therefore, the most challenging students may be excluded, which can skew success rates (Paino et al., 2014). Unfortunately that means that charter schools are not necessarily the solution to improving at-risk students' educational needs.

Parochial schools. A parochial school is a private school affiliated with a religious organization (Paino et al., 2014). Although there is little difference in the achievement gap between minorities and Caucasian students who attend these types of schools, the majority of students attending a parochial school have a different socio-economic status and family life than the typical at-risk student (Paino et al., 2014).

Like charter schools, parochial schools can exclude students; however, because they are not tied to the state, they can exclude any student for any reason (Paino et al., 2014). The ability to include only students they wish greatly skews the data collected at these schools for students who are at risk, low SES, and minority (Paino et al., 2014). They are normally not affordable for all, have limited enrollment, and can choose whether to participate in state-funded scholarships (Paino et al., 2014). Therefore, parochial schools are not a feasible solution for at-risk students who may drop out of high school.

Online high schools. The majority of high school students today are technology savvy (Paino et al., 2014). Online classes allow students the flexibility to attend class when it is convenient to them, which addresses absenteeism of at-risk students (Gilbert, 2015; Paino et al., 2014; Shaw, 2015). Students who study online have additional time to process information learned and the flexibility to decide in which conversations to participate (Shaw, 2015). Essentially, online students are self-regulated learners, which means they have the capability to learn at their own pace (Gilbert, 2015; You & Kang, 2014). Self-regulated learners tend to use numerous "cognitive and metacognitive strategies to accomplish their learning goal" (You & Kang, 2014, p. 126). These types of learners more often have better time management, review learning material habitually, meet deadlines, have improved problem-solving and decision making ability, better research and computer capabilities, increased critical and creative thinking skills, and pursued help from professors or peers (Gilbert, 2015; Shaw, 2015; You & Kang, 2014).

However, there are disadvantages to online learning. One is the inability to offer certain types of classes that require physical interaction or observational learning, such as music, the arts, physical education, and language courses (Shaw, 2015). Online courses may lack academic

rigor due to the limitations of the types of classes offered (Gilbert, 2015). For example, music students have experienced a more difficult time learning online and have a lower quality performing than traditional students (Shaw, 2015). There is also a lack of socialization and connectedness with online learning (Gilbert, 2015; Shaw, 2015). Not only do online students have limited interaction with peers but with their teachers as well (Shaw, 2015). Although the flexibility of online courses may seem solely an advantage, it can be a disadvantage for students who lack motivation and the ability to organize their time well; in fact, online schools have an issue with students dropping out due to an inability to turn assignments in on time or learn material (Gilbert, 2015; Shaw, 2015).

General Education Diploma. A GED can be attractive to a high school dropout because most states do not differentiate between a high school graduate and a person with a GED credential (Mitchell, 2015). In fact, students with a GED can attend higher education institutions (Mitchell, 2015). Originally the GED was targeted towards enticing people to enlist in the military (Mitchell, 2015; Tuck, 2012). Veterans would be able to use the credential to help enter post-secondary schools using the GI Bill, but by the 1950s more civilians were utilizing the credentials than veterans (Mitchell, 2015; Tuck, 2012). Unlike typical high school dropouts, those who earn a GED do not have the same negative repercussions to society, such as imprisonment and government funded programs (Mitchell, 2015; Neely & Griffin-Williams, 2013; Zajacova, 2012).

In the 1990s high schools tried to fix the dropout problem by starting GED programs (Mitchell, 2015). Since then, GEDs have become an increasingly popular alternative for students over traditional schools (Mitchell, 2015). In fact, about one million people who drop out of high school seek a GED credential each year (Mitchell, 2015). Unlike traditional high schools, GED

programs also assist students for career and technical jobs (Mitchell, 2015). A GED is attractive to untraditional students because it is free and offers various flexible attributes (Mitchell, 2015; Tuck, 2012). Students can attend class through various avenues—such as through a community college, technical college, or public school—at their own pace (Mitchell, 2015; Tuck, 2012; Zajacova, 2012).

Penner (2011) conducted a study comparing the performance of undergraduates that received high school diplomas to those who earned GED credentials and determined no difference existed between female students. However, male students with a GED showed a lower performance than those with high school diplomas (Penner, 2011). Maralani (2011) found that those who earn a college degree who had a GED did not differ from those who earned high school diplomas in regard to opportunities (Maralani, 2011). However, Miles (2014) found that students who had a high school diploma fared better during their first semester than those with a GED credential. Additionally, those with high school diplomas had higher grade-point averages (GPAs) and earned more college credits (Miles, 2014). Although a GED is a comparative alternative to attaining a high school diploma, students who earn a GED are high school dropouts and have disadvantages already attached to their educational future with a GED instead of a high school diploma (Mitchell, 2015). Therefore, the GED is not a solution to the dropout crisis.

Preventive Measures

High school programs exist to target at-risk students in an attempt to prevent them from dropping out of high school (Sherman, 2011). Behaviors of students who are considered at risk with the potential to drop out might include disengagement, low self-efficacy, low aspirations, and poor home environments (Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010). Often at-risk students come from low SES families with parents who have not attended higher education (Nelson & Guerra,

2014). Therefore, programs that target at-risk students should have engaging teaching practices, high expectations for all students, positive teacher-student relationships, and a positive school environment (Nelson & Guerra, 2014). The relationship between student performance and a positive affect is significant (Nelson & Guerra, 2014). Specifically, dropout prevention programs should include small class sizes, teachers who want and can build relationships with students, fair discipline policies, and student involvement at the school (Nelson & Guerra, 2014; Sherman, 2011). There are five broad strategies for reducing the dropout rate: adoption of a long-term plan to strengthen school readiness, concentrated focus on ninth grade, centralized emphasis on the contributing factors outside of school, addressing the needs of the highest risk of students dropping out, and development of skills to assist adults who affect student motivation and drive to stay in school (Evans-Brown, 2015). The school should promote awareness and reach out to those students as well as develop a team to specifically address dropout prevention (Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010). Assessments must be included to aid in determining the prevention program's effectiveness (Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010). All at-risk students should have a school supervisor to check on them periodically as well as individual counseling (Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010). Schools should also consider some type of credit recovery (Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010). There are several prevention methods that schools put in place in an attempt to retain students, such as early intervention, smaller class sizes, after-school programs, career readiness curriculum, and mentor programs.

Early intervention. At-risk students must receive individual attention and be actively involved with their peers, families, and community; therefore, school officials must identify at-risk students early to implement effective intervention (Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010). There are many different traditional education reform approaches (Noguera & Wells, 2011;

Stipanovic et al., 2012). One approach is to funnel money into lower grades and do no interventions in high school as an attempt of prevention; however, that approach has proven ineffective because it only focuses on dropout from one facet (Noguera & Wells, 2011). A successful initiative would be multifaceted with interventions throughout a student's education (Loeb, Kalogrides, & Béteille, 2011; Noguera & Wells, 2011).

Smaller class sizes. Another recommended approach is creating small schools (Loeb et al., 2011). The small schools would have no more than 300 high school students to give them individual instruction and personalized attention, although Loeb et al. (2011) admit this approach is not feasible. A suggested approach is creating themed schools based on career paths (Loeb et al., 2011). A recommendation is to convert large high schools into small learning communities to give varying autonomy (Loeb et al., 2011). However, this is unrealistic as it would cost money to build more schools to enable the ability of smaller class sizes.

After-School Program. Non-profit organizations usually use one of two methods to assist with high school dropout: direct service or advocacy (Noguera & Wells, 2011). Direct service is a school-based or after-school program that focuses on keeping students in school (Noguera & Wells, 2011). There are currently two approaches that are funded by the U.S. Department of Education: The Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) and the Small Learning Communities (SLC; Noguera & Wells, 2011). However, each grant only provides three years of funds, which does not even cover one cohort of students through graduation (Noguera & Wells, 2011).

David (2011) noted that after-school programs benefit students who lack parental supervision or opportunities to continue their learning; participating in after-school programs allows those students the chance to partake in academic enrichment activities in a safe

environment. David also found that high quality after-school programs can duplicate regular school programs and therefore, assist families, schools, and the community in the interest of the students. However, David found that after-school programs that are designed poorly have high staff turn-over, lack clear objectives, and do not have longevity due to funding.

Career Readiness Curriculum. Another high school dropout prevention model includes career academics, a school-within-a-school approach (Hibler, 2013). The model offers career-related curriculum based on specific careers, academic coursework, and work experience through employer partnerships within the community (Hibler, 2013). Results indicate that many high schools offer programs like these, but very few students take advantage of the courses (Hibler, 2013). Therefore, data as to how effective this method may be are limited and inconclusive. More research would need to be done on this particular method to provide information regarding whether or not it is a proven preventative high school dropout method.

Mentor programs. Mentor programs have long been a part of intervention methods. Big Brothers Big Sister of America (BBSA) began in 1902 and helps adolescents transition into becoming successful citizens in society (Simmons, 2013). More recently a dropout prevention program called Check and Connect has been implemented in schools across the United States (Hibler, 2013). The program monitors teacher effectiveness when working with at-risk students and provides support including case management and mentoring those students (Hibler, 2013). Some at-risk student behaviors include students with attendance issues, behavior problems, external woes, and low academic performance (Hibler, 2013). The purpose is to ensure that all students achieve proficiency in standards and graduate high school. There are two main components of the prevention program: (a) checking on the student and (b) connecting with the student (Hibler, 2013). Teachers are accountable for continually assessing student engagement

through by closely monitoring student performance and other progress indicators put in place by the school (Hibler, 2013). After regularly reviewing student performance, program mentors implement research-based interventions that address specific problems for individual students (Hibler, 2013). Teachers build a partnership with other school personnel, student family members, and community members to give individualized attention and support to students (Hibler, 2013). The mentors act as student advocates and provide ongoing feedback to encourage students to stay in school (Hibler, 2013). However, implementing a comprehensive progress monitoring system has its challenges (Hibler, 2013; Simmons, 2013). This is because intervention must be put into place early and regularly monitored, which requires regular student assessment progress and implementing interventions with fidelity; both are difficult to do with students who have truancy issues or behavior issues and attend school inconsistently (Hibler, 2013; Simmons, 2013).

All stakeholders play an integral part in addressing dropout prevention (Simmons, 2013; Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010). Positive student-teacher relationships correlate to student retention (Hibler, 2013; Loeb et al., 2011; Simmons, 2013; Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010). Although research literature indicates a connection between student-teacher relationships and student engagement, these studies are mostly conducted with preschool through elementary students (Hibler, 2013). However, as students get older, teachers have more of an opportunity to help students manage and express their emotions due to brain development (Hibler, 2013). A balance where teachers and students build healthy and professional relationships in order to create an engaging learning environment may encourage students to stay in school. Unfortunately, there are insufficient data to support the idea that student-teacher relationships significantly affect student success in secondary years (Hibler, 2013). There is also the

possibility of clouding relationships and students viewing their teachers as peers rather than authority figures (Hibler, 2013).

Schools often include advisory programs as a type of intervention to prevent at-risk students from dropping out of high school (Hibler, 2013). McClure, Yonezawa, and Jones (2010) conducted a three-year investigation into the relationship between advisory programs and student academic achievement; the study included a total of 4,117 by its third year in 14 small California high schools. Results indicated that student engagement, academic achievement, and school environment improved when higher levels of personalization were present (McClure et al., 2010). However, McClure et al. concluded that the relationship between advisory periods, personalization, and academic outcomes was still unclear and needed further investigation.

Reducing the High School Dropout Rate

Unfortunately, there is a lack of accurate data on the number of students who drop out in America because states use different methods to monitor students' progress and graduation rates (DePaoli et al., 2015; Chapman et al., 2011). Therefore, although some may believe the high school dropout crisis is improving, American students still fall behind competitively in the global market (DePaoli et al., 2015; Sherman, 2011). The push for high-stakes tests and their accountability does not factor for those not tested due to dropping out (DePaoli et al., 2015). The unsuccessful strategies in an attempt to keep up with our global counterparts are only worsened by the loose guidelines for reporting those who drop out of high school (DePaoli et al., 2015).

In an attempt to reduce the high school dropout rate, two coalitions have developed. The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (NDPC/N) was founded in 1986 to form and disseminate "best practices" in decreasing the number of students who drop out of high school (NDPC/N, 2017). To ensure strategies are effective, the NDPC/N conducts evaluations of

dropout prevention initiatives (NDPC/N, 2017). There is a database consisting of programs organized by initiative effectiveness that is maintained by the NDPC/N; each initiative is given a rating based on a 4-point scale that considers three aspects: how many years the program has existed, the evaluation method used, and the empirical evidence establishing either dropout prevention or reduction or the improvement of graduation rates (NDPC/N, 2017).

The second coalition is the America's Promise Alliance (APA) which encompasses over 300 partner organizations through its Dropout Prevention Initiative (APA, 2017). The APA focuses on five factors the organization believes improve students' lives: adults who care for them, having safe places, receiving an effective education, having a healthy start, and other opportunities (APA, 2017). The organization has sponsored hundreds of Dropout Summits as well as conferences for educators, parents, and the community to plan solutions for the high school dropout crisis (APA, 2017).

The dropout crisis is still a controversial topic, despite more public awareness and an overwhelming amount of evidence (DePaoli et al., 2015). One major barrier plays a role in all the above-mentioned potential resources to prevent dropouts (Schargel & Smink, 2013; Sherman, 2011). The first is a continuous need for funding (Chappell et al., 2015). Financial resources are limited because to invest in dropout prevention would mean to decrease funding somewhere else that is also greatly needed (Chappell et al., 2015). In addition to the limited funding is the fact that there is a lack of incentives for schools and districts to integrate dropout prevention (Chappell et al., 2015). There is no penalty for schools in regard to dropout rates and no rewards to those who have a low dropout rate (Chapman et al., 2011; Chappell et al., 2015). In reality, the ultimate factor in schools' ratings is standardized tests results (Chapman et al., 2011; Chappell et al., 2015).

Within the studies of high school dropout are preventive measures that researchers suggest could be beneficial. However, they do not test those preventive measures or discuss cases in which those suggestions were successful (Brown, 2010; Chapman et al., 2011; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Hopson & Lee, 2011; Parr, 2015; Mitchell, 2015; Schwartz, 2014). Therefore, although previous studies contributed a great deal to understanding why a student would choose to drop out of high school, the findings are of little use to school officials who desire to reduce dropout rates. In North Carolina where the current study was conducted, there were 11,097 dropouts reported in 2016–2017, and the dropout rate increased by 0.9% from 20152016 (Cobey et al., 2018). The county in which the study was conducted was one of two counties to decrease their dropout rate for three consecutive years below the state average (Cobey et al., 2018). Further research within that particular county could prove beneficial in the regards to studying the specific interventions in place to retain students. Educators can do very little with students once they are out of the school building. Realistically, it is more sensible to address the issues and prevent high school dropout rather than explore causation after the fact. The potential gains for assessing successful preventive measures include reducing the dropout rate as well as creating a conceptual framework to guide other schools in doing the same (Parr, 2015).

High school dropout is not a new phenomenon and the voices of those who drop out have been heard through various studies (Brooks, 2015; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Fan & Wolters, 2014; Mitchell, 2015; Parr, 2015; Zabloski & Milacci, 2012). What is currently known about high school dropout rates are possible preventive methods based on what stakeholders—high school dropouts and school personnel—have said contributed to dropping out. In fact, those key informants provided insight to the factors that are known to cause students to drop out of high school and the effects of dropping out. However, there is a lack of research in methods that have

worked to prevent high school dropout. Instead of waiting to speak with students who drop out of high school, it may be more beneficial to explore a scenario where a school has beaten the odds.

Summary

Chapter 2 focused on literature that provided background for the proposed study to stress the importance of resolving the high school dropout issue. Both theoretical frameworks which shaped the study were discussed within the chapter. The section began with an introduction of the high school dropout crisis and led to historical trends in education in regard to dropout. The history was followed by educational reforms that have been implemented throughout American history and the common attributes of those who drop out, attributes identified by data and studies that encourage trends amongst high school dropouts to improve graduation rates and emerging trends and data in regards to the disproportionate numbers of minority students and males who fail to graduate from high school in urban school districts. The common qualities of those who drop out are the fundamental issue and causation of this study. Therefore, the chapter included causes and effects of students who struggle with poverty, a lack of personal development, parent and community involvement, low SES, gender, and race and how these impact their ability to graduate. Alternative school options becoming increasingly popular among those at risk for high school dropout were discussed next. The section concluded with preventive methods that research has concluded should work, based on what studies have found from those who have dropped out of high school. Then strategies that studies have found to reduce the high school dropout rate were included. However, the puzzle pieces missing are proven intervention methods that work prior to a student dropping out, which is why this study is essential.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The research design is thoroughly defined and rationalized in the following chapter. Within the design section, research questions are included that are connected to the problem and purpose statements listed in Chapter 1. Pertinent information about the setting and participants are detailed, as well as the procedures used to collect data including documents, interviews, focus groups, and a researcher's journal. Data analysis includes coding, limiting researcher bias, and comparative analysis. The chapter ends with trustworthiness procedures and ethical considerations.

Design

The research design for this study is an instrumental case study that focuses on how an individual school addressed the issue of high school dropout. Yin (2011) defined a case study as the study in the context or setting of real life. Therefore, a case study is part of a bounded system (Creswell, 2013). Bounded means that the case study has boundaries in terms of time or place (Creswell, 2013). An instrumental case study focuses on a particular case to provide understanding of an issue (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, the case itself is of secondary interest and serves as a catalyst to gain insight (Stake, 1995). Although the case is examined in depth, all contexts within the case are explored only because of the external interest, which in this case is high school dropout (Stake, 1995). The research design fits the purpose of the study, because the focus is not on the case itself, but in the gains of knowledge that are possible for decreasing high school dropout.

A case study was selected for the current study because of the rarity of the phenomenon being studied. Case studies are the ideal research method when "(1) the main research questions

are 'how' or 'why' questions; (2) a researcher has little or no control over behavioral events; and (3) the focus of study is a contemporary (as opposed to entirely historical) phenomenon" (Yin, 2014, p. 2). The particular school included in the current study was the only one in the state of North Carolina that met the criteria of having a large at-risk population yet succeeded in drastically reducing its dropout rate in a single year. In other words, the school is a bounded system because the boundaries are a specific school and the timeframe is a single school year (Creswell, 2013). The main purpose of the study is to answer how the school succeeded. The researcher had no control of behavioral events, and the focus is contemporary.

Research Questions

The current study examined successful high school dropout prevention. The two research questions were derived from the problem and purpose statements.

RQ1: How did a high school in Central North Carolina drastically reduce the dropout rate?

RQ2: What was the role of each stakeholder in reducing the dropout rate?

Setting

The setting was a rural high school in a North Carolina school district that reduced its dropout rate by 64% in one year (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2014). Almost half (49%) of the students received free or reduced lunch, meaning they live at least 130% below the poverty line (Great Schools, 2016). The minority population was approximately 36% (Great Schools, 2016). Much of the minority population was African American at 24%, although other minorities included 8% Hispanic, 2% Native American or Pacific Islander, 1% Asian, and 1% mixed race (Great Schools, 2016). Per the school's improvement plan, which was found on the school website, the school implemented an intervention program in which at-risk students were

targeted and followed closely throughout their four years at the school in an attempt to prevent them from dropping out. The study examined the details of that program by interviewing staff members who had participated in the program mentoring students.

Participants

Thirteen participants were selected through purposeful sampling of school administration and teachers who had taught at the school for at least one full school year. Yin (2011) defines purposeful sampling as "the selection of participants or sources of data to be used in a study, based on their anticipated richness and relevance of information in relation to the study's research questions" (p. 311). In other words, purposeful sampling is the process of selecting a specific type of participant to increase the likelihood of in-depth, information-rich cases for the study (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2011). Information-rich cases are situations in which a great deal can be learned about the central issue, in this case, high school dropout (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2011).

School administration did not complete a survey as there were a limited number of people within those positions at the school and district level. All other participants completed a survey ensuring that they fit the delimitations of the study. School personnel completed a survey regarding their years of experience, years at the school, and the extent to which they were willing to participate. These questions ensured the most variation in participants within the case.

Procedures

There were several steps taken to ethically conduct this study. The first was to secure Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval through Liberty University. After receiving IRB approval, district and then school approval was secured. The researcher then contacted the district administration and school administration to participate in the study. Once permission was granted, signed consent was requested prior to interviews and focus group participation. To

elicit teacher participants, the principal sent an e-mail to current teachers in the school. Those who were interested signed consent forms and completed a demographic survey. Interviews took place with 13 participants until data saturation was reached. Staff members participated in a subgroup focus group. Interviews were transcribed and then analyzed for significant statements based on the research questions. Significant statements were clustered into themes through comparative analysis.

The Researcher's Role

Although most of my career has been at the elementary level, I taught three semesters of mathematics in a GED program. There I built relationships with students who dropped out of traditional high school. My students had various reasons for deciding to drop out of high school such as criminal behavior, boredom, a life event, or related to some type of relationship with school personnel. I felt as though the people in their lives, especially their educators, had failed them. Many of my students were under 20 and did well in my class, so I could not understand why they would have dropped out when most of the reasons given were preventable. What could schools do differently? Driven with that question in mind, I have been determined to find the answer.

Therefore, my purpose in researching at the particular school in the study was because the school fit the criteria that studies and data describe as at risk to be unsuccessful in student retention; however, despite the odds, this school was succeeding. I wanted to glean from their experiences to improve dropout interventions. The only way to learn from the experiences of all stakeholders involved was to conduct a qualitative study utilizing a case study design.

The assumption I had made before conducting this study was that some type of district-wide initiative had been implemented, based on the drastic decrease in the dropout rate

throughout the district. It appears it was a slow process for a few years and then suddenly dramatic success the fourth year. The researcher has no connection to the school, county, nor the participants. However, the school was selected because it is located in the state in which the researcher resides and met the required delimitations (Great Schools, 2016).

Data Collection

Triangulation of data was used in the current case study to facilitate validation of the data collected. Yin (2014) described triangulation as the process of using multiple sources of evidence within the same study to further conclude information gathered during data collection. The data triangulation utilized for the current study included document analysis, interviews, focus groups, documents, and researcher's journal. The specific sequence in which data were collected was chosen to best fit the case study. The researcher's journal was utilized throughout the process to record any prior bias. Document analysis of the school improvement plan and any data pertaining to student demographics was the first source of data to ensure that the school fit the case criteria. Research journaling occurred prior to conducting the interviews to lessen researcher bias. After participant demographic questionnaires had been analyzed, interviews of those who fit participant criteria were conducted individually. These interviews allowed insight into the individual perspectives of stakeholders. Focus groups occurred after interviews to determine if any common group themes arose once stakeholders had an opportunity to discuss their insights with one another.

Document Analysis

Documents are used to "corroborate and augment evidence from other sources" (Yin, 2014, p. 107). Documents can be used to verify correct spellings of names and organizations mentioned in an interview or study, provide specific details that confirm information given by

sources, and allow for inferences to be made (Yin, 2014). A primary document was analyzed throughout the data collection process. The school's school improvement plan was used to acknowledge any goals and interventions in place by the school to address the school's dropout prevention, as well as any dropout data free to the public on the Department of North Carolina Public Instruction's website. The school improvement plan was found on the school's website and is available to the public. Utilizing the school improvement plan helped identify strategies used by the school that reduced its dropout rate, as well as the role each stakeholder played in that outcome.

Interviews

A vital form of data collection for any case study is interviews, as they are an essential source of evidence (Yin, 2014). The current study included structured, open-ended interview questions; all participants were asked identical questions targeted for open-ended responses (Turner, 2010). The open-ended nature of the questions allowed participants to fully express as much detailed information as possible while still allowing the researcher to ask further probing questions (Turner, 2010).

Interviews were conducted face-to-face (Wofford, Ellinger, & Watkins, 2012). Interviews occurred in the conference room at the high school. Interviews were voice recorded using two voice recorders, one as a backup, and transcribed by the researcher. The researcher Field notes were made about the environment prior to going into the school for the first time; field notes were also taken before each interview to record personal information about the participant and immediately after each interview and focus group to record body language and information shared by the participant that would contribute to the rich description of participants.

School personnel interviews. School personnel interviews were conducted with any staff member who was a part of an intervention program targeting at-risk students including teachers, teacher assistants, guidance counselors, and support staff. Questions were selected to ensure the targeted research questions could be answered. Question 1 was created to help the participants become comfortable with the interview and to give insight to daily interactions within the school. Questions 2–4 stemmed from RQ 1 and focused on identifying elements from the program that key informants believed had contributed to the success in drastically reducing the number of dropouts at the high school. Questions 5–9 addressed RQ 2 by specifically asking about each stakeholder's role in the school progress. These questions provided insight into what each participant believed each role should have contributed as well as their own contributions.

The following questions were used for school personnel interview questions:

1. Describe a typical work day for you.

2. What do you believe contributed to the drastic decrease in high school dropouts at this school?

3. What methods are used to ensure students at risk for drop out are retained?

4. What is the selection process for students who participate in alternate graduation paths?

5. What types of strategies are used to retain students at risk for dropping out?

6. What role did district administration have in reducing the dropout rate at this school?

7. What role did school administration have in reducing the dropout rate at this school?

8. What role did school personnel (i.e., teachers, counselors, etc.) have in reducing the dropout rate at this school?

9. What role did parents have in reducing the dropout rate at this school?

10. What role did students have in reducing the dropout rate at this school?

11. Is there anything else you would like to mention about high school dropouts at your school?

School administration interviews. Questions were selected to ensure the targeted research questions could be answered. Question 1 was created to help the participants become comfortable with the interview and to gain insight into daily interactions within the school. Questions 2–6 stemmed from RQ 1 and focused on identifying elements from the program that key informants believed contributed to the success in drastically reducing the number of dropouts at the high school. Questions 7–12 addressed RQ 2 by specifically asking about each stakeholder's role in the school progress. These questions offered insight into what each participant believed each role should have contributed as well as their own contributions.

The following questions were used for school personnel interview questions:

1. Describe a typical work day for you.

2. What do you believe contributed to the drastic decrease in high school dropouts at this school?

3. What methods are used to ensure students at risk for dropout are retained?

4. What is the selection process for students who participate in alternate graduation paths?

5. What percentage of students were from low-socioeconomic families?

6. What percentage of students selected were of a non-Caucasian ethnicity?

7. What types of strategies are used to retain students at risk for dropping out?

8. What role did district administration have in reducing the dropout rate at this school?

9. What role did school administration have in reducing the dropout rate at this school?

10. What role did school personnel (i.e. teachers, counselors, etc.) have in reducing the dropout rate at this school?

11. What role did parents have in reducing the dropout rate at this school?

12. What role did students have in reducing the dropout rate at this school?

13. Is there anything else you would like to mention about high school dropouts at your

school?

Focus Groups

The study included focus groups, providing opportunities of interaction with more than one participant at the same time (Creswell, 2013). The focus groups were face-to-face and occurred in the conference room of the high school. Each focus group session was recorded by two voice devices, one as a backup. The researcher took field notes immediately after each focus group to record body language. Recordings from the focus groups were transcribed by the researcher. The focus groups consisted of nine of the teachers included in the study. Focus group prompts were aligned with the individual interview questions and research questions. The focus groups answered the research question: How did the high school drastically reduce the dropout rate? The study was dependent on participants' historical recall, and since historical recall can lead to inaccuracies, focus groups were used because they allowed participants to engage in a collaborative discussion that aided in recall (Rogers, 2003).

The following questions were used as focus group questions:

1. Is focusing on at-risk students (those who may drop out) to increase the school's graduation rate and decrease the dropout rate working?

2. Without implementing action steps to address preventing dropout, would the school still have a high graduation rate and low dropout rate?

3. Who played the largest role in ensuring students are not dropping out at this school?

4. What accountability pieces are in place for students identified as at-risk to ensure they successfully graduate?

5. What accountability pieces are in place for staff to ensure students identified as at-risk successfully graduate?

6. What accountability pieces are in place for administration to ensure students identified as at-risk successfully graduate?

7. What role did parents have in reducing the dropout rate at this school?

8. What one thing do you think would be beneficial to add or take away from the methods used already that would ensure at-risk students graduate?

9. Is there anything else you would like to mention about high school dropouts at your school?

Data Analysis

Participant names for this qualitative case study were assigned realistic pseudonyms based on the appropriate gender. The data were read for a general sense first, after which data were coded for description to highlight themes (Creswell, 2013). Data analysis involved:

(1) preliminary exploration of the data by reading through the transcripts and writing memos; (2) coding the data by segmenting and labeling the text; (3) verifying the codes through inter-coder agreement check; (4) using codes to develop themes by aggregating similar codes together; (5) connecting and interrelating themes; (6) constructing a case study narrative composed of descriptions and themes. (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011, pp. 308–309)

Comparative analysis is the process of comparing and contrasting two things to find critical similarities or differences between what is being compared (Creswell, 2013). Comparative analysis was used to find common trends by going back and forth between data collected through interviews and focus groups to evaluate for common themes (Creswell, 2013).

Data were analyzed and coded to identify themes. Coding was done using *ATLAS.ti*, which is the program to which all interviews, focus groups, and field notes were uploaded from a password-protected Microsoft Word document that contained transcriptions. Coding is the process of giving codes to something for classification proposes (Creswell, 2009). Through the process of coding, themes were identified within the data. Themes are ideas that caught the researcher's attention during or right after data collection (Yin, 2014). As data were analyzed, themes were pulled out and compiled to see if any themes or ideas were reoccurring (Yin, 2014). The researcher sorted through the collection of themes to determine their empirical strength (Yin, 2014).

Direct interpretations were used to pull single instances from interviews or focus groups (Creswell, 2013). Data interpretation is the process of assigning meaning to information gathered to determine significance and implications of the findings (Creswell, 2009; Stake, 1995). Because data interpretation in this study utilized the researcher's perspective and experiences, it was vital that every precaution be taken to exclude research bias brought to the study (Yin, 2014).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is an important part of the research process to ensure the findings are reliable and valid. Trustworthiness is the "demonstration that the evidence for the results reported is sound and when the argument made based on the results is strong" (LaBanca, 2010, p. 1). Essentially, trustworthiness is the process of establishing truth of the results of a study (LaBanca, 2010). Therefore, to ensure trustworthiness of the current study data collection and analysis included bracketing, member checking, thick and rich descriptions, and triangulation to create credibility, confirmability, transferability, and dependability for this study (Creswell,

2013). The current study also received IRB approval to further verify validity and trustworthiness.

Credibility

Credibility is the extent to which data findings describe reality accurately (Yin, 2014). It is important that the study have credibility to ensure that the data truly represent what it is supposed to represent and that there is no intent to misrepresent the data results (Stewart, Gapp, & Harwood, 2017). The current study established credibility through bracketing, member checking, and triangulation (Creswell, 2013).

Bracketing. Bracketing is the practice of recording thoughts and bias prior to collecting data, such as interviews (Creswell, 2013). Bracketing allows the researcher to establish their bias openly and acknowledge them for data analysis to help establish credibility (Creswell, 2013). Bracketing should be recorded in the researcher's journal and analyzed during and after data collection.

Member checking. Member checking contributes to the credibility of a study (Creswell, 2013). All participants in this study were given the opportunity to check their portion of the focus groups as well as verify their transcribed interview. By doing so, participants had a chance to confirm what was said, remove any of their words, and add input to the possible themes (Buchbinder, 2011; Creswell, 2013).

Triangulation. Triangulation is a form of trustworthiness that combines multiple data sources into a cohesive analysis to aid in transferability, dependability, and credibility (Creswell, 2013). Triangulation helps in identifying constructs, patterns, and themes (Stake, 1995). "Triangulation has been generally considered a process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation" (Stake, 1995, p. 443). In

this study, focus groups, interviews, and documents were utilized to continuously compare and triangulate data to answer the central research question: What elements are needed to dramatically reduce dropout in an urban high school?

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability is used to improve reliability of a study. The researcher can establish dependability by demonstrating that the methods used in the study are consistent and appropriate (White, 2010). Dependability was established in the current study through triangulation (Stake, 1995; White, 2010).

Confirmability is the idea of objectivity to limit the amount of bias in the procedures and interpretation of the findings (White, 2010). Objectivity is almost impossible in a qualitative study, but methods such as bracketing and member checking help establish confirmability (White, 2010).

Triangulation. Triangulation is a form of trustworthiness that combines multiple data sources into a cohesive analysis to aid in transferability, dependability, and credibility (Creswell, 2013). Triangulation helps in identifying constructs, patterns and themes (Stake, 1995). "Triangulation has been generally considered a process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation" (Stake, 1995, p. 443). In this study, data from focus groups, interviews, and documents were continuously compared to triangulate the answer to the central research question: What elements are needed to dramatically reduce dropout in an urban high school?

Bracketing. Bracketing was used to record the researcher's thoughts and biases prior to conducting interviews or focus groups, as previously mentioned for credibility. However, since reducing researcher bias is difficult to do, more than one method of confirmability was used.

Member checking. Member checking was used as form of confirmability as well. Allowing participants the opportunity to corroborate what was said, eliminate any of their words, and contribute ideas to the possible themes limited researcher bias and established a firmer confirmability (Buchbinder, 2011; Creswell, 2013).

Transferability

The capacity to transfer findings from a study to a similar setting is transferability (White, 2010). Transferability also includes the degree that a study's findings can be generalized to other contexts, also known as external validity (White, 2010). Although transferability is not the goal of qualitative research, the researcher is responsible for providing adequate and detailed descriptions of the context for readers to make essential judgements and comparisons about similarities (White, 2010).

Thick, rich descriptions. The field notes recorded in the researcher's journal yielded thick, rich descriptions which help establish transferability (Creswell, 2013). With such deep descriptions, the researcher provided readers enough information to transfer the information to other contexts to test for transferability (Creswell, 2013).

Triangulation. Triangulation is a form of data interpretation that supports credibility, transferability, and dependability (Stake, 1995). Triangulation of data was used to aid in the transferability of the current study's findings (Stake, 1995). Transferability was established through analyzing the data from interviews, focus groups, and documents.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were accounted for in this case study. For instance, there was a risk that the researcher would share personal experiences or offer solutions to issues that the participants discussed. To ensure such an action did not occur, the researcher closely followed to

the research and interview questions, asking only questions pertinent to participants and the study for probing purposes. There was also a risk of losing confidentiality of participants, because it is the only school district in the state that reduced its dropout rate to that degree. Therefore, the district, school, and all participants were assigned pseudonyms. Protection of data is also an ethical consideration; data were coded and password-protected with limited access. Data were stored in a data program called *ATLAS.ti* and password protected. Physical data were stored in a locked filing cabinet to which the researcher has the sole key. IRB approval from Liberty University was attained prior to any data collection consent forms were collected from the school district as well as all participants. Each participant had the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

<div align="center">**Summary**</div>

Chapter 3 described methods used in this case study. The research design, an instrumental case study, was defined and rationalized. The design section included research questions related to the problem and purpose statements for the study in regard to high school dropout. Relevant information related to the setting and participants were detailed, as well as procedures used to collect data (documents, interviews, focus groups, and a researcher's journal). Data analysis methods were described, such as coding, memos, limiting researcher bias, and comparative analysis. This chapter ended with trustworthiness procedures and ethical considerations. Chapter 3 presented the means to fulfilling the gap in literature that address possible interventions to assist in the dropout crisis. In Chapter 2 ,literature was explored as to the types of students who may be at risk of dropping out, those in lower SES communities who are Hispanic or African American. This instrumental case study aimed to understand the dramatic reduction in dropouts in a rural high school in central North Carolina, with a large

minority population and low SES students. Studying interventions occurring in a high school that is successfully retaining most of its lower SES and minority students may shed light on possible preventive methods of high school dropout. The results from this study could aid in educational leaders creating and implementing preventative programs that may eventually avoid the high school dropout crisis altogether.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this instrumental case study was to describe factors that the participants believed influenced the decrease in dropout rates at the rural high school, Small Town High School (pseudonym). This chapter includes a description of participants in the study, results from interviews, and presents themes that were developed through data analysis. This study examined the perspectives of 13 employees of Small Town High School with a range of teaching experience. The participants were recruited from a high school located in North Carolina that decreased its dropout rate by over 50% in one school year. Results from the study are discussed and the development of themes generated from the data collected from one-on-one interviews, two focus group interviews, and the researcher's journal. The chapter concludes with an in-depth discussion of the research questions.

Participants

The 13 participants interviewed for this study were all employed at Small Town High School for at least one full school year. The participants ranged in years of teaching experience and included administration, support staff, and teachers from various subject areas. Participants completed a demographic questionnaire and signed the consent form prior to being interviewed. To protect their identities, each participant was assigned a pseudonym.

Table 1

Participants Demographics

Criteria	*n*	Percentage
Gender		
Female	9	69
Male	4	31
Ethnicity		
Caucasian	13	100
Position		
Administration	1	8
Regular Education	7	53
Foreign Language	1	8
Exceptional Children	1	8
Counselor	2	15
Social Worker	1	8

Terry

Terry has been principal at the high school for the last seven years. She commented on the fact that she grew up in the area and that it has a family atmosphere. She attended the school herself as a high school student and mentioned the fact that she was once taught by some of her current employees. She discussed her passion for making connections with the students and said she quickly realized during her first year as principal that a drastic change had to be made concerning the high dropout rate and suspensions.

Gary

Gary is a veteran teacher and is currently teaching advanced and honors math at the high school. Although he is soft spoken, he had a lot to say about the strategies being used at the school. He spoke about how students in past may have dropped out due to the difficulties of those required math courses.

Kelly

Kelly served as the school's social worker for seven years. However, this school year she was a district level social worker assigned to multiple schools including Small Town High School. As a social worker, she works closely with the two school counselors and focuses on students who may be at risk. She discussed primarily focusing on students identified as McKinney-Veto, which means they are classified as homeless.

Sally

Sally has been one of the school counselors for many years and serves students with the last names L–Z. She attributes the school's small size to why the dropout rate can continue to be low. She said, "We're lucky, because we're smaller so we really get to know our kids, and so it's really, you just take the kids on as if they were your own children." She spoke on the fact that she was one of the few veteran staff members who openly accepted how at-risk students would be addressed when the change began seven school years ago.

Bill

Bill is a veteran teacher. He is part of the math department and teaches higher level math courses. He also sponsors the Strategic Gaming Club. The club is one that was the brain child of a student after the principal charged the students to come up with any club they would want in the school and as long as it was appropriate and they could find a staff sponsor, she would support them. He believes in "just getting to know your students and their individual situations and making adjustments as needed." He also spoke on his belief that extracurriculars are strong reasons for high student-retention.

Abby

Abby is originally from the same county as the high school, so she grew up in the rural area. Although she has been teaching for several years, it is only her second year at Small Town High School. She is a part of the math department and teaches Math 3.

Nicole

Nicole has been teaching for a few years. She is a part of the English department teaching honors and standard senior courses. She describes herself as one of the staff members that has to give tough love but one with whom the students feel comfortable talking about their issues. She said, "If there's a real issue, in that circumstance, we're going to work with them, and make it work."

Lynn

Lynn is a veteran teacher and serves as one of the school's exceptional children (EC) teacher. Outside of her traditional teaching role, she serves as one of the staff sponsors for the Strategic Gaming Club. Lynn attributed some of the success of the low dropout rate to the fact that the staff, parents, and students all know each other outside of school through church and the fact that the community has very few local eateries, so they all go to the same places.

Mary

Mary has been the Spanish teacher at Small Town High School for five years. She described a family dynamic in the school and discussed that there are staff members who provided a more comforting role and others who provide a stern role for the students. She proclaimed herself to be more of a father figure, in the sense that she is more liable to give them a stern reaction, but says, "They love it, and they need it and I think that they get a little bit of what they need from everybody."

Eric

Eric is currently the Career Technical Education Agriculture teacher. He serves as staff sponsor for the Future Farmers of America (FFA) club and the shooting club at the school. When not working, he serves as the youth minister at the local Baptist church where many students attend. He has worked at the school for several years and lives in the small town.

Debbie

Debbie is a veteran teacher and currently teaches the Career and Technical Education (CTE) course Health Science; she is also the assigned staff member to lead and organize graduation. She referred to herself as the little mama for the senior class because she meets with each senior and personally speaks to him or her, ensuring that caps and gowns are ordered. She said her role allows her to be "an extra person to come in and say, you know, don't worry about that, we will get those little things done for you, and I think that helps with our dropout rate, it even helps with our seniors that are not at risk of dropping out, they kind of have somebody looking over their shoulder," for those who cannot afford a cap and gown.

Chad

Chad is one of the counselors for the school for students with the last names A–K. He is currently in his second full year at the school since graduating from Liberty University's Master of Counseling program. Prior to working for the school, he served as an elementary school teacher for two years. He is a Christian and regular church attender.

Jane

This is Jane's seventh year teaching. It is her second full year at the Small Town High School and she currently teaches in the English department. Her courses include all of the junior

level English courses, both honors and regular. Prior to working for the school, she previously taught at another high school for five years.

Results

The purpose of this instrumental case study was to discover how a rural high school in central North Carolina was able to drastically reduce its dropout rate and the role each participant played. Data were collected through interviews, two focus groups, and the researcher's journal. Interviews and focus group meetings were transcribed and analyzed utilizing *ATLAS.ti* to pick out themes from the data.

Theme Development

To answer the research questions for the current study, data were collected, analyzed, and themes were developed to describe how participants believed the school successfully decreased its dropout rate and the role each key informant played. The following section explains the steps taken to form those themes.

Questionnaires. A demographic questionnaire (Appendix C) was filled out by each participant, prior to signing the consent form. The questionnaire was used to ensure that each participant met the delimitation set for the study. Each participant needed to teach at the school for at least one full school year, have supported an at-risk student, and be willing to be interviewed one-on-one and participate in a focus group.

Interviews. Prior to any interviews being conducted, participants were given a consent form to read and sign. The consent form (Appendix B) outlined the purpose of the current study, informed them of compensation, and asked permission to record the interview. It also informed participants that not only would their identities be protected but so would the school's and district's identities. Prior to audio recording each interview I attempted to make participants

comfortable by making small talk. We discussed some personal life attributes and activities or

hobbies they did outside of work. I answered any questions they had prior to the interview

which included why I picked their school and some questions about my current school and

personal life. Interviews were conducted based on staff availability in a conference room at the

school and ranged from 20–50 minutes.

Focus groups. In addition to one-on-one interviews, I was able to conduct two focus

group interviews. Although all the participants were willing to also partake in a focus group, the

allotted time given to conduct the focus group did not allow for all participants to be interviewed.

That meant that I could either do two separate focus groups and be able to interview most of the

participants or do one focus group and only interview a small fraction. I decided to schedule two

separate focus groups in order to interview the most participants. The first focus group consisted

of five participants: Gary, Bill, Chad, Lynn, and Abby. The second focus group had four

participants who all happened to be women: Debbie, Mary, Jane, and Nicole. Small talk was

conducted prior to the interviews, much like the one-on-one interviews to try and set all

participants at ease. Participants all knew each other because they all worked at the school and

mostly within the same department. Both focus groups' participants seemed at ease with each

other and were able to feed off one another in their responses.

Researcher journal. Throughout the data collection process, I kept a researcher journal

using the Field Notes Template (Appendix D). Prior to each interview I would make notes of any

information given to me that could be used in each participant's rich description, as well as

physical attributes so that I could remember them better. After each interview I wrote further

questions I thought of due to the interview on the template and reflected upon my experience

interviewing the participant. I recorded observations of my interpretation of the participant, in

regard to their body language or tone and responses, thoughts I had about meeting the participant, and any comments the participants made that I wanted to revisit during data analysis. The field notes helped me remember the interviews vividly while listening to them as I transcribed. While transcribing, I used the notes to write down any connections I may have made or specific participants I wanted to revisit for quotes for themes and results.

Themes. Theme development begin with transcribing all individual interviews and focus group meetings (Appendix H). All participants were assigned realistic pseudonyms. Direct interpretation was used to identify and code significant phrases from those transcriptions. All transcriptions were complete and comparative analysis was conducted utilizing the word count and code-document table tool in *ATLAS.ti* to determine common codes and then aggregated into common themes (Table 2). Three themes emerged that correlated directly to the research questions: positive relationships, being a small school, and flexibility. Additionally, one theme unexpectedly emerged from the data: monetary reasons.

Table 2

Theme Development

Open-Codes	Enumeration of open-code across data	Themes
Build/Building Relationships	10	Positive Relationships
Positive Relationship	34	
Relationship	30	
Mentor/Mentee	19	
Connection	17	
Help	34	
Care	15	
One-on-One	4	Flexibility
Online	12	
Flexible Schedule	4	
Course	14	
Individual	12	
Alternate Schedule	12	
Credit	17	
Twilight	13	
Tutoring	8	
Small School	31	Smaller School
Smaller School	4	
Financial	4	Monetary Reasons
Job	26	
Work	50	
Money	26	
Paying	3	
Administration	6	
Terry	12	
Principal	9	
Leadership	5	

Positive relationships. A key theme that every participant discussed in some capacity

during his or her interview(s) was the importance of establishing positive relationships between

the staff and students. All participants were open about the fact that there is not a required

mentorship at the school anymore but spoke about the unofficial way staff members mentor

students and build relationships with them. Although there is no formal accountability for

mentorship, most participants noted that it is a natural part of the community within the school.

For Lynn, it is enough just being told, "'Hey this child is at risk of dropping out can you stick with them, can you pay a little extra attention to them?' and so we just try to give them a little more confidence and let them know they can do it and finish." Nicole spoke to this during her interview as well, stating, "It's just part of the culture that everybody knows."

The staff understood that although they themselves may not have a connection with a particular student, it was okay because they felt confident that another staff member did. A few participants specifically made statements to that regard. For example, Mary said, "If he doesn't want to talk to [Nicole], or [Jane], or [Debbie], well then maybe he'll talk to me. Or maybe if he doesn't want to talk to me, he might talk to one of them, you know, I think it just comes down to all of us are just all always really involved, because we genuinely care." Gary stated, "I may not have a connection with a student in my class, but somebody else might know them and have a past with them and be able to be that mentor for them."

Based on my interview with the principal, I was not surprised that a positive relationship was the most common theme among participants. Terry spoke about the importance of each student having a connection with at least one adult in the school. To encourage staff connections with the students, she does the same activity every year during the beginning school year staff meeting. The activity involves placing a picture of each rising sophomore, junior, and senior on tables with cards underneath the pictures that say: first name, last name, grade, and something I know about the student; there are blank spots for the staff to fill in next to those subjects on the card. The staff then go around the tables and write what they can on those cards. At the end they look at those who have any blanks as a staff. This year there were 15 students who had one or more blanks on their cards. They consisted of mostly Hispanic females who were rising sophomores, so as a staff they discussed why they thought those students had blanks and

concluded it was because "they're quiet in class and are not behavior problems," in Terry's words. So as a staff this year, Terry challenged them to try to make a connection with these specific girls, but also be more aware of the quiet students and those who are not always behavior problems to try and make connections, if possible, with those students.

A positive relationship was deemed the most beneficial method used to ensure at-risk students graduate by all participants in both focus groups. When asked that question (number eight) during the second focus group, Nicole's response was simply, "Relationships, relationships, relationships," to which every other participant in the group either responded yes to or nodded her head in agreement. But it was not just significant within the focus groups; Eric stated, "I think the most important thing you can do is establish a positive adult relationship with that person, someone who can pour into that person and spend time with them."

Small school. Another theme that was brought up in various interview responses from participants was the fact that the school was small. It is a mostly agriculture area with the closest Walmart 20 minutes away. There is one main eatery in the town and a Dollar General a few minutes outside of town. Most of the occupations within the community revolve around farming or the school.

Although the town is somewhat secluded, the staff discussed that as a positive attribute. Eric stated that being a small school means, "It's usually a warm, an inviting atmosphere." It also means getting to know all of the students because, as Abby described, "Just walking down the hall you can see kids I don't even know their names, because I haven't had them. I mean I can tell the difference, 'that kid, there's something going on with that kid, because you see them all the time, because it's so small, I know that something is wrong.'" Kelly discussed that being a smaller school gives the staff the opportunity to build a family atmosphere and "go above and

beyond," unlike other schools she's worked at. Terry discussed that being a small school means only having about 3%–5% of their students be considered at risk for dropping out which equates to about six to eight students. Having only a few at-risk students allows the opportunity to support them before they drop out.

However, one staff member discussed how being a small school can make the school as a whole look less successful than they truly are. Chad said, "Being a small school, if we have one dropout that's a significant percentage, whereas at other schools where the graduating class may be 500, one dropout may be statistically negligible." The school's graduating class last year was a little over 100, so Chad pointed out the fact that even a small number of dropouts make a large impact on the school dropout data. The principal discussed this as well when she mentioned that Small Town High School only had three students drop out last school year but shared the same dropout rate as the other two high schools in the district even though they had a lower number of students drop out. The participants had a strong opinion on how the small school environment played a role in the significant decrease in dropouts.

Flexibility. A reoccurring theme that was discussed by every participant was the flexibility in schedules for students to successfully graduate because, according to Sally, the school looks at "each kid individually and help[s] create a plan for them to graduate." In addition to the typical course plan for traditional students, the school district has allowed principals the autonomy to utilize other resources for students who cannot follow the traditional track. Terry talked about how, when she first became principal of Small Town High School, the district required every student to have 28 credits in order to graduate, even though the state only required 22. The district began allowing students to graduate with the state minimum and that helped students who needed to work or needed to repeat courses and would otherwise drop out.

Sally's response mirrored that of Terry's when she said, "When I first got here [the district] said that every student needed 28 credits, so the county had added on additional elective courses to make them graduate, but the state says they only have to have 22 credits, which is mostly core courses with six additional elective courses. So, we have allowed kids to just going to getting 22 credits which helps our kids who need to repeat courses and have lost time to be able to get all of those elective courses." The adjustment in credits means students who are at risk have the option to take fewer elective courses and focus on core classes instead.

In addition to reducing the amount of credits required to graduate, the school district offers alternative course options for students that principals deem as at risk. This ability was often brought up in responses, because students expressed the need to make money and work for their families. Flexible schedules are a key component to encouraging at-risk students to stay in school; according to Chad, "Some students don't get from A to B the same way. So, trying to find alternatives, working around it, individualizing their education and just really working with them one-on-one." Students can also make up their missed course time; Sally explained, "They can't miss more than eight days of school per class, per semester, so if they go over the eight days, they cannot pass that course until they've made up the time, so we give them time during the summer." Students selected by the principal can attend Twilight School which meets from 4:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. at the Career Learning Center. Terry told me that she allows students to attend this school if they have extenuating circumstances that require them to either take additional hours to graduate early or, due to work, need to take classes in the evening. The Career Learning Center also provides an avenue for the GradPoint Curriculum, which can be completed before and during school hours. Terry said that she uses this option only for her at-risk students. Chad specifically stated that this is something they have used as a form of credit

recovery or for students who for whatever reason, cannot function in a traditional setting. GradPoint is an online course that allows students to work at their own pace and has a lab facilitator.

There is also flexibility within the school building with the way students are permitted to attend classes. A few participants mentioned flexible course loads. The administration and guidance office will adjust a student's school schedule if needed due to work or other extenuating circumstances. Jane shared a specific example of a student needing to take English IV but missed class to go to work, "so they worked with him and switched his English to first period and then he could leave fourth period and go to his job and he would still have what he needed to graduate, so that's what kept him to come on and graduate." However, it doesn't just start senior year; Eric said, "Specifically, for science and math they draw it out for a whole year, instead of it being a one class, they break up into two classes, so it takes up a whole year, so two semesters. They're identified as they come as 8th graders and then progress into 9th grade and they try to track those kids into classes so they'll more successful in science and math particularly." The same is done for math, Sally said, because they track each student. If students seem like they may not be successful at a higher level math while they are a freshman, she will start to think about "what courses that they can take as their fourth math, so I'll go ahead and factor that in and put into their schedule, maybe as a sophomore or a junior, so I'll go ahead and get that in so that I know I've got that fourth math done." According to Kelly and a few other participants, at-risk students at Small Town High School have the ability to "differentiate their schedule based on the student and not the mass." Sally explained, "The climate here with [Terry] is that we are going to work with kids and we're not going to consider them all alike."

Monetary reasons. An unexpected theme that arose in interview responses was the monetary reasons students expressed in regard to dropping out of high school. Several of the participants mentioned that the school is surrounded by agriculture and that the culture for most is to just go out and work. The participants discussed that students tell them they are making minimum wage now, so they do not need to finish school. Jane said, "I have several kids who, they have zero motivation to finish school because some of them already have jobs, so what's the point? I'm already making money, so what do I need to finish school for?" Chad believes, "There is a strong correlation between those who want to drop out and who are living in poverty and the biggest factor I believe is the ability to work. Students are wanting to go into the workforce and it's the instant gratification piece." Eric said, "They may feel the pressure to go and make money and contribute or to get out of a situation to get out on their own." Other participants like Nicole, Sally, and Kelly shared similar opinions to Eric: the fact that at-risk students may have a hard home life and need to work. Nicole shared that a student told her, "I need extra money, it's, 'my sister doesn't eat if I don't go to work.' So, you know, it's the same thing, I had one last year, who seriously was saying, 'If I miss an hour, then that's something that my younger siblings went without.'" Kelly said something similar when she shared, "It's not about the academics, I mean they've gotten behind, but it's not due to they can't do it, it's just the fact that their attendance of not coming is that avoidance has put them behind. But most of what I hear is that financial part. They need to work. They need to work."

Research Questions Responses

Research question one. "How did a high school in central North Carolina drastically reduce the dropout rate?" To answer this research question, it was necessary to interview key informants who had played significant roles in supporting students at risk of dropping out of high

school at a school that had drastically reduced its dropout rate. Therefore, participants in this study were those who had been employed at the high school for at least one full school year, had supported an at-risk student, and were willing to be interviewed one-on-one and participate in a focus group.

One significant theme that reoccurred in every participant's interview was the positive relationships that the staff fosters with students. Participants shared that they were able to foster such strong relationships with the students because they were in a small town and that allowed for a more "family" culture. According to Mary, the family culture means, "Everybody knows somebody and I can be like, 'Hey [Debbie], do you know this kid?' and she can be like, 'Yes' or 'No,' and if she does I can pick her brain about him and the home-life situation and I can be sensitive to it." Several participants made similar comments about students feeling comfortable enough to come to them about personal issues.

Those positive relationships mean that students feel comfortable discussing personal matters with the staff and expressing the need for flexibility, which was another key theme. According to Bill, part of the school's culture is "just getting to know your students and their individual situations and making adjustments as needed." That flexibility tied into an unexpected theme of monetary reasons. Students had to work, which was part of the reason they were dropping out; being able to be flexible so that they could go to work and take classes helped keep them in school and, therefore, lowered the dropout rate.

Being in a small school was a third major theme. A small school meant that there were not any strict accountability guidelines to ensure staff addressed at-risk students' needs. Many of the participants said that addressing students' needs is simply expected and something staff intuitively does. Gary said, "We're a small enough school, that a lot of stuff happens just

because you talk to somebody, or somebody asks to do something, and it's pretty much

understood that you're going to follow up on it. It's the kind of community that we have here."

       Research question two. "What was the role of each stakeholder in reducing the dropout

rate?" To answer this research question, it was essential to explicitly ask key informants their

perspective of each stakeholder's role. Therefore, each participant was asked what role they

believed each stakeholder played. Stakeholders included the district, the school's administration,

the school's staff members, and the student body.

       District. From the participants' perspective, the district played a couple of roles. The

district reduced the credit requirement for graduation from 28 to 22. The district provides the

means for students to attend the GradPoint or Twilight programs at the Career Learning Center.

As Chad, Sally, and Kelly pointed out, the district assigns administration.

       Administration. The school's administration role was to foster positive relationships and

be flexible so that students would want to continue attending school. That means not just

building positive relationships with the students but also building positive relationships with

parents and the community. Chad said, "We have a very positive, engaging school principal who

really sees the value of relationships, just from the top down. So, like you'll see her around

campus during breaks talking; you know, with it being a small community, she knows

everybody, and everybody knows her." Sally attributed the school's drastic decrease in dropouts

to its administrator: "I would say it's because [Terry] got here. I mean that's part of it, because

she is so student-centered and understands that not every kid is not the same and that the

circumstances around that kid can be very different and so different things work for different

kids. . . . She is able to look at every kid separately and see what their needs are." Terry also

contributed to the culture of the school. Participants discussed that she builds the climate in the

school with the expectation that students come first, and they are all individuals with individual needs. Kelly explained that Terry is not the only administrator who goes "above and beyond." There are two assistant principals, Henry and Zack, who also make a point to build positive relationships with students: "Henry, was a prior teacher in math, so he would provide tutoring to kids, and they would come to his office during certain times, and he would just provide tutoring, help them through it."

Staff. Staff help identify at-risk students because they are required to. Debbie explained, "We meet as groups and identify our at-risk students, and we have to collect data on our at-risk students. Since it's a small school here, it's easy for us to, uh, we all know which students are at risk of possibly dropping out."

Also, the staff is led by example from Terry. Sally stated, "She says that all the time and she shows that, she models that, so I think the teachers have learned that about her, she understands that flexibility is necessary for some students." However, it was made clear that not everyone who was employed at the school when Terry started agreed with the culture. According to Terry and Sally, in the seven years since, most of those staff members have left the school. Therefore, Terry has been afforded the ability to hire employees who know her expectations from their initial interview.

Participants spoke significantly about the positive relationships they try to build with students. This was evident by many of their comments, such as one made by Lynn: "So a lot of that is just because we're a small school, and we have that personal connection to each other, and we know our children." Kelly also commented, "For me the biggest thing is supporting them and to let them know that no matter how far behind that we can come up with a plan." Students are encouraged to talk with the adults in the school and trust that they will come together to help

them. Kelly made the following observation: "I think the main thing at this school is that they have really developed a family atmosphere. A lot of kids at this school don't really have that at home and they have created that here. I think that teachers invest in the kids, in school and outside of school. So, these teachers know about them more than some of their parents do or some of their relatives do." Jane said, "They will do things, they will complete assignments, they will show up, just because they know that you expect that of them and they don't have anybody at home giving them any real expectations, so they know they don't want to disappoint Mrs. So-and-so, so they're going to show up."

The staff understand that it is not just about building positive relationships with the students but also with each other and parents. Chad shared, "We're very fortunate that as a rural, small community support school, that we have a strong rapport with parents and the community for the most part. That really helps with the buy in and the investment." Therefore, the staff play a large role in building relationships within the school between all stakeholders who are involved, as well as helping to identify which students may be at risk and in need of a flexible schedule.

Parents. Unlike the other stakeholders, the role of parents had mixed responses from participants. They were both negative and positive, depending on each person's perspective. The school has a significant amount of minority students, specifically from Hispanic origin. Therefore, something that was discussed was the language barrier. However, even with the language barrier, there are strategies the staff put forth in order to make the connection and have parental involvement. Bill said, "We rely heavily on [Mary] the Spanish teacher or anyone else we can get from the county that might could help translate to the parents and then they're all on board for it, but they just may not know or have the resources to check their grades online or

anything like that, so it can be really difficult if we're trying to get their support. But they're very supportive when they do figure it out." Bill also shared that if a district or school person is unavailable, the parents may utilize another parent or friend to communicate with school staff members. Abby shared that parents who want to be involved and have a good relationship with the school often turn to the staff for assistance: "I'll get parent phone calls and emails saying, 'Hey will you talk to little Johnny, because he's talking about dropping out of school. I can't do anything with him here, but he might listen to you. Will you sit down with him and talk to him about this?' And so, I think that even if they want them to, a lot of times they turn to us at the school to encourage them to finish." Chad added, "Parents are more acutely involved here, and having worked at other schools I can say that parents are more involved here than other schools I've been with and I think part of that is just that strong sense of community and knowing that whenever I bring my child here, they're getting the very best from people who really do care about them and want the best for them."

Sally shared that although "we expect, I expect, parents to make sure that their kids have a place to sleep, have food to eat, and that they encourage them to go to school. So that is the expectation, but there are parents that don't do that." But Sally discussed that for that reason, the relationship between staff and students is so important. Unfortunately, the most recurring discussion in regard to the role parents play at the high school was the lack of parental involvement in pursuing a high school diploma. Sally talked about the culture at home being one where students believe, "My daddy or my mama dropped out, so I think I'll be okay," and parents "encouraging them to drop out."

Mary said, "Some of them [students] live on their own." Debbie shared similar thoughts, stating, "Some of our kids here don't really have parents. Some of them live with siblings, some

of the kids that are high risk, their parents might be drug users, or that kind of things." Eric noted,

> For those kids, the parents aren't in the picture, they usually live in a broken home situation, living with grandparents or other relatives and some of them I think even just bounce around from home to home and are considered homeless and so, yea, having the stability of a parent would greatly increase their chances.

Sally also talked about parents who dealt with other issues such as not being "there at night, or aren't providing, or are drug addicts, or whatever is going on with them, and so that really then becomes a hindrance to that kid coming to school."

Students. In Kelly's opinion, students "have all the control!" Students are the ones who make the ultimate decision to stay and finish school or drop out. Participants shared different thoughts on students' roles depending on how they understood the question. Some discussed students' role from the perspective of the at-risk student, while others discussed how other students play a role in keeping at-risk students from dropping out. A few of the participants shared that for the students who are at risk of dropping out, the first step in encouraging them to stay is to make sure their basic needs are met: "food, clothing, and shelter," according to Kelly.

The staff shared that the positive relationships built between the staff and students play a large role in students wanting to stay. They also provide outlets for students to play a role in so that they will want to be in school. In addition to school clubs, there are school athletics. During his interview, Bill addressed this, saying:

> Our coaches that are sticking behind the kids and making sure they're doing
>
> what's right. One of our coaches yesterday told us that he was called into a
>
> meeting with a teacher and one of his basketball players and you know the bottom

line was, you know if you want to be on the basketball team, you've got to do

what she asks and there was no support from home or anything like that, so it

made a difference, so that kid wanted to be on his basketball team, so he wanted

to do what he needed to rather than just say, just forget it. A lot of our soccer

players that I think are here and are going to graduate, because of that soccer

program. It's really made a difference with them and their coach is really positive

with them that they need to stay in school.

Students not only build relationships with staff; they build relationships with other students.

Kelly noted that for some of the students "on the verge of dropping out, it was another student

that helped get them back on track, whether it's that student offering transportation to go get

them, or kind of doing a little mentoring to other students." The participants all agreed that all

stakeholders held important roles in the dropout rate decrease at the school.

Summary

This chapter began with a rich description of each of the 13 participants in the study.

Data analysis included participant questionnaires, one-on-one interviews, two focus groups, and

the researcher's journal. Participants were current staff members at a rural high school in central

North Carolina. The purpose of this study was to describe factors that the participants believed

influenced the decrease in high school dropout at their rural high school and the role each key

informant played. Data were coded from the transcriptions of one-on-one interviews and focus

groups using *Atlas.ti*. Data analysis resulted in developed themes and answers to both research

questions. Emerging themes were positive relationships, being a small school, flexibility in

courses and schedules, and monetary reasons. The chapter ended with a description of the role

each key informant played in a student's decision to remain in high school.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this instrumental case study was to describe factors that the participants believed influenced the decrease in high school dropout at one rural, North Carolina high school. The following chapter discusses the findings and answers the research questions. Theoretical and empirical literature from previous studies is discussed in the areas of high school dropout prevention and how those pertain to the current study. Theoretical, empirical, and practical implications from the study are then explored. The study included set delimitations and limitations that are acknowledged within this chapter, and the chapter concludes with recommendations of how the current study's findings could lead to future research.

Summary of Findings

The current study explored the methods used to decrease a rural high school's dropout rate. The research questions were: (1) "How did the high school drastically reduce the dropout rate?" (2) "What was the role of each key informant in reducing the dropout rate?" Data were collected through public documents, participant demographic questionnaires, one-on-one interviews, two focus group interviews, and the research journal notes. The results indicated the students at this particular high school successfully graduated because of the positive relationships formed between staff and students and the flexibility with criteria needed to graduate. An additional benefit was the fact that the school was small with about a 100-student graduating class in 2017. Although there was no formal mentorship program, staff repeatedly linked the small school environment to the fact that they were able to identify at-risk students and quickly and effectively act on their individual needs. As Chad explained,

That's one of the benefits of being a small school, we're able to see and spot students on

a regular basis, that other schools that are upwards of 2,000 don't get to have that same

benefit. So, we're able to, again, build positive relationships, and maintain those

relationships throughout the year, and just again, go the extra mile for them.

Because monetary reasons were blamed for pulling students out of school, the school utilized

district flexibility with credits and the way students attended school to aid in their successful

graduation. This included allowing students to take online courses through GradPoint, to attend

an evening school called Twilight, to attend school only during hours they were available, and to

graduate with 22 credits instead of the traditional 28 so that they could go to work or tend to

other outside factors in their personal lives.

Discussion

The results from the current study provide evidence that supports and expands existing

research examined in the literature review. Data collection included a document analysis,

researcher's journal, one-on-one interviews, and focus groups. Interviews, both one-on-one and

focus groups, were transcribed into *Atlas.ti* and then coded and analyzed for themes. The

following will discuss the results of the study and how they connect to the theoretical literature

of Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, Lewin's (1947) stage theory of organizational

change. Findings reflected similarities to previous empirical literature on the effects of smaller

class sizes, after-school programs, career readiness curriculum, and mentor programs.

Theoretical Literature

Bandura's (1977) theory stemmed from John Dewey's theory. Dewey (1938) believed

that social environment affected the learner and that education should involve nurturing and

fostering relationships. Bandura expanded on that and theorized that students in the same

circumstances will still make different decisions based on three dynamics: (1) behavior, (2) cognitive and personal factors, and (3) environmental events. The current study expanded Bandura's theory that a person's social environment influences his or her choices; the results of this study indicated that positive relationships and a small school size influenced student success at the high school. The study also found that the three dynamics Bandura theorized affected a person's decisions were true. Although all of the students attended the same high school, factors such as having to work affected whether or not they would attend school. The environmental events, such as alternative ways to graduate and being able to confide in an adult to discuss why they were considering dropping out, aided in their ultimate decision to stay in school.

This study also emerged from Lewin's (1947) stage theory of organizational change. Lewin (1947) believed that organizations go through stages as they change and that within each stage, specific strategies are used to adopt, implement, and sustain successful change. The school in the current study did in fact have strategic organizational change. The school received a new principal seven years ago, who then, with the district's permission, implemented flexible schedules and course loads for at-risk students, such as fewer required credit hours, different schedules during school hours, different but equivalent courses, online courses, and evening classes. In addition to adjusting graduation criteria, the principal fostered a school climate of positive relationship building. This became an expectation of the staff as a whole and has resulted in a continuing decrease of dropouts in the high school.

Empirical Literature

A review of related literature indicated various reasons students drop out of high school, several of which were reaffirmed through the current study. Preventive measures previous literature deemed as necessary were all implemented at Small Town High School in some form.

Those preventive measures included early intervention, small class sizes, after-school programs, online courses, career readiness courses, and mentor programs.

Early intervention. Four of the participants specifically mentioned intervening early in an at-risk student's high school career. Although the literature focused more on early intervention taking place in grades lower than high school, one facet discussed was giving individual attention to at-risk students and ensuring they were actively involved with peers, family, and the community (Ziomek-Daigle & Christiensen, 2010). In this study, the school was able to give at-risk students individual attention and build a relationship with them in order to best support their needs. One of those methods included allowing incoming ninth graders who were deemed at risk to break difficult science and mathematics courses into two semesters instead of one; they entered high school as eighth graders and progressed to ninth graders in their second semester.

Smaller class sizes. Smaller class sizes mean more personalized and individual attention (Loeb et al., 2011). The high school in the current study was able to make this accommodation because the student population is small. As Abby noted, the ability to have small class sizes means that teachers know students whom they may not teach just through interactions in the hallway.

After-school programs. Students who participate in after-school programs have the opportunity to participate in academic enrichment activities in a safe environment (David, 2011). After-school programs benefit all students but especially at-risk students who tend to lack parental involvement or other means for academic enrichment (David, 2011). Small Town High School has numerous after school clubs and athletics that give students the opportunity to build a sense of community with peers as well as staff members.

Online high school. The majority of participants discussed GradPoint, which is an online program in which at-risk students are able to participate at Twilight school. Twilight school is held at the local community college and a facilitator monitors student who participate in the online GradPoint curriculum. The use of GradPoint allows students the ability to self-regulate and learn at their own pace (Gilbert, 2015; You & Kang, 2014). Examples given for the types of students who were allowed to utilize this program were pregnant students, students who had jobs during the day, students with anxiety, and students who needed credit recovery.

Career readiness curriculum. Hibler (2013) believes that schools should include career academics in addition to core classes. Little data is available for this method of prevention, but at this particular school, the career and technical classes flowed into after-school clubs. For example, the agriculture class has the Future Farmers of America (FFA) club. The school also had a health class that helped students interested in the medical field explore whether or not that was something they would like to do.

Mentor programs. Mentor programs have an emphasis on positive relationships. Positive student-teacher relationships raise student retention (Hibler, 2013; Loeb et al., 2011; Simmons, 2013; Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010). Although Small Town High School no longer has a formal mentorship program, the culture of the school is to have unofficial mentors, based on relationships that authentically occur between staff and students. As Debbie explained, these students are monitored regularly and staff "meet as groups and identify our at-risk students, and we have to collect data on our at-risk students." The guidance office, which includes the school's social worker and district social worker, checks in with at-risk students first thing every morning to see how they are doing and whether they are at school or not.

Therefore, based on the data collected for this study, in combination with previous research, at-risk students are more likely to be successfully if they are in small class sizes, take part in after-school programs, have options for classes outside of the core curriculum, and have positive relationships with their teachers.

Implications

This instrumental case study explored the perspectives of 13 participants employed at a rural high school that was able to drastically reduce its dropout rate. In this section the theoretical, empirical, and practical implications found through the data collected are discussed.

Theoretical Implications

The theoretical implications of this current student support both Bandura's (1977) social learning theory and Lewin's (1947) stage theory of organizational change. The social learning theory, which claims people make different choices based on their behavior, cognitive and personal factors, and environmental events (Bandura, 1977), was supported through the discussion of the participants' building authentic, positive relationships with students. The stage theory of organizational change was affirmed, because when a new principal was brought in, she changed staff expectations to put students first and build relationships, as well as being flexible when needed for at-risk students; this included various ways of doing so, such as adjusting course work and hours required to be at school, offering online or evening classes, and allowing students to graduate with the minimum 22-credit requirement.

Empirical Implications

The data collected through public documents, participant questionnaires, one-on-one interviews, and two focus groups confirmed empirically that positive relationships, smaller class sizes, and after-school activities influence a student's decision to stay in school. All 13

participants explicitly discussed that the most beneficial aspect of the methods used to retain students was positive relationships. The positive relationships were established more readily due to the after-school activities sponsored by staff members and the smaller school environment. The empirical implications also confirmed that students who come from low-income families, lack parental involvement, and are transitory were identified as at risk.

Practical Implications

The current study provides practical implications based on the data collected. All 13 participants believed that positive relationships played the most significant role in the reduction of dropouts at the school. Although this study was a small scale one, conducted with participants who all worked at the same school, and the school itself was small, the school met all the requirements that empirical literature states should result in a high dropout rate. The school has a significant minority population and is a low-income area. However, despite those factors, the school is flourishing with a 91.6% graduation rate and only had three dropouts in 2016 (Public Schools of North Carolina, State Board of Education, Department of Public Instruction, 2016). The results indicate that regardless of student population, building positive relationships can result in student retention, which is easier to do in a smaller environment.

It is unrealistic to have small class sizes everywhere, due to lack of funds. However, measures can be taken by state legislatures, district leaders, school administrators, and school staff to establish positive relationships with each and every student. For example, larger school staff could meet once a month and do an exercise similar to what Terry does at the beginning of the school year with student pictures and index cards. In doing so, schools could more readily identify at-risk students and intentionally make an effort to retain them.

Delimitations and Limitations

There are delimitations of the study. For instance, the school was located in a rural area with about 50% free or reduced lunch student population; it was part of a district that reduced its high school dropout rate by 64% in a single school year (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2014). The teachers who participated in the study must have taught at the school for at least one full school year and were still employed by the school at the time of their interviews. Administration had to be employed in an administrative position at the time of the study.

One known limitation is the fact that the study was focused on a single case. It could be more beneficial to study multiple cases with similar delimitations. Another known limitation is, because students were not interviewed, the ethnicity or SES of students deemed and discussed as at risk is unknown and cannot be connected to literature reviewed in regard to student race statistics.

Another limitation of the study was the lack of ethnic variety amongst the participants. All of the participants were Caucasian. It would have been interesting to explore the perspective of a minority, considering the extent of information in regard to minorities being more likely to drop out in the literature review.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are various recommendations for future studies in regard to high school dropout based on this study's findings. Even though the current study was conducted in a small school, the other two schools in the district had approximately the same dropout rate; collectively, as a district, the dropout rate was 2.23% (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2016) and less than the state average. The other two schools did not have a small student population; in fact, one of the graduating classes numbered approximately 500 students. Therefore, although based on my data

the small school size was credited with graduation success, that cannot be a theme or factor for the other two schools, yet they yielded approximately the same dropout rate. I believe further research in the form of a case study involving all three of the high schools would yield a more encompassing answer as to how the district has one of the lowest dropout rates in the state.

Another recommendation would be to conduct a phenological study on the perspectives of students who were identified as at risk but went on to graduate successfully. It would be beneficial to interview former students who were at risk and discover to whom or what they attribute their success and whether it was through one of the methods discussed in the current study. There would have to be a way to delimit the study to students who were at risk and graduated successfully; therefore, participants would need to have some form of verification from their high school. Verification could be from administration or documents proving they participated in an alternative path (such as the Twilight school discussed in Chapter 4).

The commonality between all three schools in the school district is the individual student plans (alternative paths) to graduate and the 22 versus 28-credit requirement. Further research into the methods utilized in this regard could reveal the significance of these methods and potentially be duplicated elsewhere. Therefore, a qualitative study involving students who attended alternate schools or graduated with 22 credits could result in higher graduation rates.

The current study was conducted in a small rural district consisting of three high schools—two were rural and one was metropolitan. It would be beneficial to explore a case study of a school or school district with similar dropout success in an urban community from the perspectives of both the students and the school staff. However, the same demographics other than location should be kept, such as high minority and high poverty student population.

During the current study several of the participants spoke on the positive relationships built between the staff and students and how they believed that was what aided in student retention. Further research on specific strategies used to establish those positive relationships could be beneficial for possible duplication elsewhere. A case study including schools that specifically utilize relationship-building strategies should be conducted to ensure that those methods are what contribute to graduation success over other factors.

Summary

This instrumental case study examined the perspectives of 13 participants employed at a rural North Carolina high school that drastically reduced its high school dropout rate. Data collected through public documents, participant questionnaires, one-on-one interviews, two focus groups, and the researcher's journal notes indicated that participants perceived that being a small school allowed them the ability to easily build positive relationships between staff and students and identify at-risk students to form individual plans to aid in their academic success.

Once students were identified, the staff were able use flexibility of course loads to help students remain in school and graduate high school. The study expanded on theoretical research, because data suggested that social environment and organizational change do affect a student's decision to stay in school. There were various reasons that affected a student's choice to drop out, such as transitory reasons, lack of positive relationship with staff members, and family issues; these findings were all confirmed through the data collected for this study. Participants reported being told that students wanted to drop out because of the need to work and make money and that many did not have stable homes and were considered homeless. Results of the study indicated that specific changes made by the administration and carried out by the staff established a culture of support through positive relationships between staff and students.

Another key implication was the ability to be flexible with students' schedules and courses, encouraging them to finish school while allowing them to take care of matters outside of school.

Essentially, I believe that the school successfully reduced its dropout rate by making a change as a staff to put relationships first. By doing so, they were able to build a school culture where students felt comfortable enough to share their personal struggles with staff. When staff became aware of personal matters that could affect a student's ability to come to school, the staff made adjustments to aid the student in graduating.

A school who hopes to reduce its dropout rate must be able to make organizational changes and take the time to foster positive relationships. School administration and district and state level leaders have to be open to the idea of allowing students to graduate with less elective courses so that those who are at risk are more encouraged to stay in school.

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APPENDIX A

IRB Approval

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

October 18, 2018

Sasha Crocker
IRB Approval 3396.101818: Reducing High School Dropout: An Instrumental Case Study of Successful High School Dropout Prevention

Dear Sasha Crocker,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Your study falls under the expedited review category (45 CFR 46.110), which is applicable to specific, minimal risk studies and minor changes to approved studies for the following reason(s):

> 6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
The Graduate School

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APPENDIX B

Consent Form

The Liberty University Institutional
Review Board has approved
this document for use from
10/18/2018 to 10/17/2019
Protocol # 3396.101818

CONSENT FORM
Reducing High School Dropout: An Instrumental Case Study of Successful High School Dropout
Prevention
Sasha Davila Crocker
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study on how one high school drastically decreased their dropout rate. The purpose of this instrumental case study will be to understand the dramatic reduction in dropouts in a rural high school in central North Carolina. You were selected as a possible participant because you are at least 22 years of age or older, have worked at the school as an administrator or staff member for at least one full school year, and are willing to participate. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Sasha Davila Crocker, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this study is to understand the dramatic reduction in dropouts in a rural high school in central North Carolina.

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:
1. Participate in an audio-recorded interview for approximately 45 minutes.
2. Participate in an audio-recorded focus group session for approximately 45 minutes (staff members).
3. Review the transcribed interview and focus group sessions as verification of what you said. This review may take up to 45 minutes.

Risks: The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

Benefits: Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. Benefits to society include studying interventions occurring in the high school that are successfully retaining most of their lower socio-economic status and minority students, which may shed light on possible preventive methods of high school dropout. The possible results of the current study could aid educational leaders in creating and implementing preventive programs that eventually could avoid the high school dropout crisis altogether. Presenting a case where preventive measures were successful avoids the crisis altogether.

Compensation: Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. Participants will receive a $10 Walmart gift card after their interview and be entered into a raffle for a $20 Walmart gift card for participation in a focus group. Those who have completed the screening questionnaire will be entered in a raffle for a $10 Amazon gift card.

Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participants will be assigned a pseudonym. I will conduct the interviews in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- I cannot assure participants that other members of the focus group will not share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

Voluntary Nature of the Study: Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

How to Withdraw from the Study: If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Contacts and Questions: The researcher conducting this study is Sasha Davila Crocker. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at scrocker1@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher's faculty chair, Dr. Jose Puga, at japuga@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.

Statement of Consent: I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____   _____
Signature of Participant   Date

_____   _____
Signature of Investigator   Date

APPENDIX C

Screening Questionnaire

Date: _____

Participant: _____

<u>Contact information</u>
Email: _____   Phone number: _____

1. I have worked at this high school at least

    one full school year (meaning all 10   YES   NO

    months of one school year).

2. I have supported a student at risk of
                                                           YES   NO
    dropping out in some capacity.

3. I am willing to participate in a 45-minute

    one-on-one interview to discuss my
                                                           YES   NO
    support with *at-risk* students.

4. I am willing to participate in a 45-minute

    focus group (a small group of staff
                                                           YES   NO
    members) to discuss my support with *at-*

    risk students.

APPENDIX D

Field Notes Template

Date: _____ Time: _____

Participants: _____

Location: _____

Notes to Self	Observations

Emerging Questions/Analyses/Reflection:

APPENDIX E

School Personnel Interview Questions Template

Date: _____   Time: _____

Participants: _____

Location: _____

1. Describe a typical work day for you.

2. What do you believe contributed to the drastic decrease in high school dropouts at this school?

3. What methods are used to ensure students at risk for drop out are retained?

4. What is the selection process for students who participate in alternate graduation paths?

5. What types of strategies are used to retain students at risk for dropping out?

6. What role did district administration have in reducing the dropout rate at this school?

7. What role did school administration have in reducing the dropout rate at this school?

8. What role did school personnel (i.e. teachers, counselors, etc.) have in reducing the dropout rate at this school?

9. What role did parents have in reducing the dropout rate at this school?

10. What role did students have in reducing the dropout rate at this school?

11. Is there anything else you would like to mention about high school dropouts at your school?

APPENDIX F

School Administration Interview Questions Template

Date: _____   Time: _____

Participants: _____

Location: _____

1. Describe a typical work day for you.

2. What do you believe contributed to the drastic decrease in high school dropouts at this school?

3. What methods are used to ensure students at risk for drop out are retained?

4. What is the selection process for students who participate in alternate graduation paths?

5. What percentage of students were from low-socioeconomic families?

6. What percentage of students selected were of a non-Caucasian ethnicity?

7. What types of strategies are used to retain students at risk for dropping out?

8. What role did district administration have in reducing the dropout rate at this school?

9. What role did school administration have in reducing the dropout rate at this school?

10. What role did school personnel (i.e. teachers, counselors, etc.) have in reducing the dropout rate at this school?

11. What role did parents have in reducing the dropout rate at this school?

12. What role did students have in reducing the dropout rate at this school?

13. Is there anything else you would like to mention about high school dropouts at your school?

APPENDIX G

Focus Group Questions

Date: _____   Time: _____

Participants: _____

Location: _____

10. Is focusing on *at-risk* students (those who may drop out) to increase the school's graduation rate and decrease the dropout rate working?

11. Without implementing action steps to address preventing dropout, would the school still have a high graduation rate and low dropout rate?

12. Who played the largest role in ensuring students are not dropping out at this school?

13. What accountability pieces are in place for students identified as at risk to ensure they successfully graduate?

14. What accountability pieces are in place for staff to ensure students identified as at risk successfully graduate?

15. What accountability pieces are in place for administration to ensure students identified as at risk successfully graduate?

16. What role did parents have in reducing the dropout rate at this school?

17. What one thing do you think would be beneficial to add or take away from the methods used already that would ensure at-risk students graduate?

18. Is there anything else you would like to mention about high school dropouts at your school?

APPENDIX H

Sample Interview Transcription

Me: Describe a typical work day for yourself.

Chad: So that's definitely a trick question. No two days are ever alike. But typically, I get here early and try to handle all of my clerical office tasks before the students get here, so that when the students get here, I can start meeting with them. Walking the campus so I can see who looks slow today or who appears to be off or need assistance. Um, we wear many hats as counselors, so sometimes we're in meetings, sometimes we're working with community partners. It's just a very diverse, like I said, no two days are alike.

Me: What do you believe contributed to the drastic decrease in high school dropouts at this school?

Chad: I think a lot of this comes from administration down. We have a very positive engaging school principal who really sees the value of relationships, just from the top down. So, like you'll see her around campus during breaks talking; you know, with it being a small community, she knows everybody and everybody knows her. Um, and so just that engagement piece there's really a strong focus on just making sure students know that we care. I think it's, I know there's a quote out there, and you can fact check this for me later, it's like, last name Comer, "No significant learning comes without significant relationships." That's a really big push here. Um, and so, also, we're willing to work with students. We know that not all students can matriculate through this nice straight and narrow path of you know, "I get my English I, then my English II, English III, and English IV." Um, some students don't get from A to B the same way. So, trying to find alternatives, working around it, um individualizing their education and just really working with them one-on-one.

Me: What methods are used to ensure students at-risk for drop out are retained?

Chad: So, um, just, and this isn't like assigned or anything, but we do try to do mentorship, you know, fostering an environment where the student feels supported. Really, just trying to work with them and trying to be flexible with their needs, so try to accommodate them. Um, so that's about it.

Me: What is the selection process for students who participate in alternate graduation paths?

Chad: What do you mean alternate graduation path?

Me: Meaning, not cookie cutter you take these classes and you graduate. It's like you mentioned, those that don't fit into the, you take these classes freshman year and this sophomore year and so on to graduate.

Chad: So, we do have um credit recovery as an option where students who if they don't pass a class in a traditional setting, we're able to put them in additional class, like a computer lab with a facilitator and they're working through the course work like in the Grad point curriculum. Um, and that's definitely and option that allows them to work through and regain credit. If that's still not feasible or if students, for whatever reason, whether that be working or extenuating circumstances, like family life, if they're not where they're able to be here, present physically, we are able to work with them through our district level services, such as our alternative school, um the community learning center, and then we have this program called Twilight and basically, again, allows students to again make use of that Grad point curriculum and attend from, I think it's like 4-7 in the evenings, which again, accommodates students who for whatever reason, need to work.

Me: What role did district administration have in reducing the dropout rate at this school?

Chad: So, the district level has certainly worked with the resources and just again, assisting with the flexibility for students, like before, that cookie cutter and don't fall into that category. I would say, ultimately district chooses our school administrator, and just again, having that positive engaging school administrator has really made a difference here.

Me: What role did school administration have in reducing the dropout rate at this school?

Chad: So again, um, she builds strong relationships, I mean she's very maternal, she loves these children like they're her own. Um, she truly does want the best for them, and so that's why she's willing to go the extra mile and move Heaven and Earth to get these children to where they need to be and be productive members of society.

Me: Um, what, what role did school personnel (i.e. teachers, counselors, etc.) have in reducing the dropout rate at this school?

Chad: So, we do refer to ourselves as the Mustang family. Uh, that's something that you'll hear us say here, administrators, counselors, teachers, and as well as students and their family members they understand that there is a strong sense of community here, and so, again that's one of the benefits of being a small school, we're able to see and spot students on a regular basis, that other schools that are upwards of 2,000 don't get to have that same benefit. So, we're able to, again, build positive relationships, maintain those relationships throughout the year, uh and just again, go the extra mile for them.

Me: What role did parents have in reducing the dropout rate at this school?

Chad: So that ties back into the community support. Um, we're very fortunate, in some ways, that this is a small rural community. Many of the parents here went to school here. Went to school with the teachers. Went to school with the principal. Um, you know, they, we all, some of us go to church together, we see each other out in the community. Um, we see them at the post office, at the Chicken Hut, which that's a whole nother story, um, but, parents are more acutely involved here, and having worked at other schools I can say that parents are more involved here than other schools I've been with and I think part of that is just that strong sense of community and knowing that whenever I bring my child here, they're getting the very best from people who really do care about them and want the best for them.

Me: What role did students have in reducing the dropout rate at this school?
Chad: Students, for the most part, are motivated and wanting to make us proud, because we do have that investment and that relationship with them, so they are naturally wanting to make the best of their time here, for the most part.

Me: What are specific reasons students say are why they want to drop out?

Chad: For the students who do want to drop out, I think there is a strong correlation between those who want to drop out and who are living in poverty and the biggest factor I believe is the ability to work. Students are wanting to go into the workforce and it's the instant gratification piece of, "I want to make $7.25 looks good now, whereas if I put in 2 more years, I can get a high school diploma, which opens up more doors. And if I put in 2 more years after that at a community college, which opens up just a plethora of doors, and even further

APPENDIX I

School District Approval

October 17, 2018

Sasha Crocker
Graduate Student
Liberty University

Dear Ms. Crocker,

I am pleased to inform you that the ███████████ Internal Review Board has supported your request for permission to conduct research in ███████████

As per your research design, through Liberty University, you are permitted to email your approved survey to the teachers of ███████████ and conduct the follow-up interviews with your voluntary participants. As a courtesy to our principal and staff, please follow our communication protocol of securing the principal's permission before emailing the staff with the survey request. You may use this letter as evidence of ███ Internal Review Board approval. It is the final decision of the principal to permit the survey email. Principal emails are found on their school webpages following a link for the district page, ███████████ under "Schools." Thank you for following these expectations.

Teacher and staff participation in the study is completely voluntary. Interviews should be scheduled so as not to conflict with the academic day.

As we agreed, ███████████ and it's staff shall not be named in the final reports or subsequent presentations of your research.

When your research is completed and approved by your university, a final copy of your research must be submitted to M███████████ at the Office of Planning, Accountability, and Research.

███████████ wishes you success with your research and looks forward to learning from your findings.

Sincerely,

███████████

Director for Planning, Accountability, and Research