Characteristics of Secondary Schools that Influence Former Dropouts to Graduate: A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the characteristics of a secondary school environment that former dropouts were looking for when they returned to school to attain their diploma. A phenomenological qualitative design was used to identify the reasons students dropped out of school, the factors that influenced them to return, the characteristics of the secondary school environment they deemed most desirable, and the differences between the perceptions of African American and Caucasian students in their responses. Eight former dropouts from one South Georgia (USA) school district participated in two individual student interviews and one focus group interview to determine these answers. After coding the responses and identifying common themes, we had a record of the lived experiences and personal voices of these students that determined the essence of their experience. Five participants felt strongly that without the non-traditional secondary school, they would never have earned their diploma. Recommendations for further studies are included.

INTRODUCTION

There is no shortage of literature regarding the negative impact that dropping out of secondary school has on the individual, the community, the nation, and the world. However, there is a gap in the literature focusing specifically on the plight of students who start their senior year, only to drop out at some point before earning their diplomas. Menzer and Hampel (2009) concur that information regarding dropouts is lacking in their assertion that "the vast literature on dropouts says very little about these students" (p. 660). Clearly, America is in the throes of an educational crisis. "The dropout epidemic in the United States merits immediate, large-scale attention from policymakers, educators, the non-profit and business communities and the public" (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006, p. 20).

The statistics regarding dropouts in America are dismal (Alliance for Education Fact Sheet, 2010; Center for Labor Market Studies, 2009). The Alliance for Excellent Education (2009) cites that "over a million of the students who enter ninth grade each fall fail to graduate with their peers four years later," and of students who do earn their regular diploma on time, "barely half of African American and Hispanic students earn diplomas with their peers" (FactSheet, p. 1). Even more disconcerting is the number of students in grade 12 who drop out before earning their diploma. Neild and Balfanz (2006) stated that reasons juniors and seniors drop out of secondary school are more difficult to determine, whereas predictors for freshmen dropping out are far more reliable. With the goal almost at hand and with all the years of hard work nearly over, there are still too many seniors leaving school before graduation.

Background

Little is known about the reasons secondary school dropouts return to complete requirements for their diploma or why they choose a particular secondary school or program upon their return. Berliner and Barrat (2009) stated that "while considerable research and media attention focuses on dropouts as a group, comparatively little is known about those who return to secondary school" (p. 8). However, there is no shortage of literature citing the reasons students drop (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008; Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006; Jordan, Lara, & McPartland, 1996; Martin & Halperin, 2006; McCallumore, K., & Sparapani, E., Somers, 2010). The most common reasons cited for dropping out include high absenteeism, credit deficiency, failing grades, boredom, and ineffective transition to ninth grade.

Dropping out of secondary school is not always a permanent condition (Raymond, 2008, Viadero, 2008; Wayman, 2002). One study in a large school district in California cited that over one third of the students who entered ninth grade in 2001 dropped out at least once, and 31% of those who dropped out reenrolled, with only 18% of the re-enrollees actually graduating (Viadero, 2008). Recognizing that dropouts seeking to return to secondary school are rarely successful in the same secondary school environment, Perlez (1987) cites efforts of the New York City Board of Education to identify "new tactics" to help dropouts successfully return to school for a regular diploma (p. 12). Most efforts to reduce the dropout rate, however, focus on dropout prevention. Typical dropout prevention strategies include dual enrollment in community colleges, year round school, evening programs, mentoring, academic support classes, online classes, and graduation coaches (Institute of Education Sciences, 2008; Princiotta & Reyna, 2009).

One of the many innovative approaches school districts are taking to increase graduation rates is the use of non-punitive alternative secondary schools, or non-traditional secondary schools. This model

has enabled many students who were at-risk for not graduating, regardless of personal or academic reasons, to successfully earn their secondary school diploma. In Georgia, a few innovative non-traditional secondary school models have emerged and utilize the flexibility of seat time and attendance waivers. A seat time waiver exempts a school from requiring the mandatory 150 hours a student must work on a course before a Carnegie unit is awarded (Georgia State Rules, 2010). An attendance waiver exempts a school from requiring the mandatory full day of attendance, as well as the mandatory requirement of 180 days of attendance a student must have for one school year (Georgia State Rules, 2010).

Traditional secondary schools have consistent schedules that encourage students to complete a course within a defined time. With the use of seat time and attendance waivers, less structured students may find they actually need longer to complete course credits, thereby jeopardizing their persistence to stay in school. Non-traditional secondary schools may not be the best fit for all returning dropouts, but having a choice between the two secondary school environments may contribute to more students returning to secondary school.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to identify the reasons students dropped out, to explore what returning secondary school dropouts desire in a secondary school environment when making the critical decision to return and complete requirements for earning a regular diploma, and to determine what value they place on earning a diploma. Because of the racial disparity that exists in this community between African American and Caucasian secondary school dropouts, with African Americans having significantly higher dropout rates, the results of the study may serve to identify particular supports needed by each of the groups to enable more of them to graduate.

Significance of the Study

There is no shortage of literature pointing to the dropout crisis in America and the impact it has on the individual, the community, and the nation (Amos, 2008; Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006; Princiotta & Reyna, 2009; Sum, Khatiwada, McLaughlin, & Palma, 2009). Billions of dollars annually are pumped into schools by the U.S. Department of Education, and research foundations and non-profit organizations donate significant sums of money to support dropout prevention programs (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). However, few studies have been conducted to determine the reasons why students return to secondary school to continue their pursuit of a diploma. Fewer still focus on the difficulties that students encounter when they return, the attrition rate of returning students, and the environments that are most conducive for returning students.

In the landmark report, *The Silent Epidemic, Perspectives of High School Dropouts* (2006), students give many reasons for leaving school. Lack of motivation, academic difficulties, and personal life challenges were just a few of the reasons cited by secondary school dropouts from various locations in the United States. This study seeks to identify those reasons that are most prevalent in the South Georgia community in which the research participants live.

There is a preponderance of literature touting effective programs for keeping students from dropping out. Tyler and Lofstrom (2009) assert that while some school districts are experimenting with non-traditional secondary school programs, "researchers as yet know little about how well these schools achieve stated goals" even though they are "seen as an important tool for both dropout prevention and dropout 'recovery' (p. 94). Choices in secondary school environments are often available to dropouts, but it is important to identify the characteristics of the academic programs that

are most attractive to students. Senior year dropouts are older and may have different life circumstances than younger secondary school dropouts; therefore, knowing how to develop an academic environment that meets the needs these students is important. While some returning students may prefer the traditional environment, many will only return if a non-traditional environment is available.

This study will attempt to provide answers to the many questions that literature has failed to provide up to this time. Secondary school students who make it to their senior year and then drop out during the course of that year may need supports and interventions that are quite different from those provided to students at risk for dropping out in lower secondary school grades. Much attention has been directed to students who drop out as a whole rather than by grade. Policymakers, non-profit organizations, state and local boards of education, and private donations could be earmarked especially for this specific group of dropouts or imminent dropouts if research has clearly identified supports and programs that make a significant impact on ensuring seniors remain in school until they earn their diploma. Finally, this study has the potential to spur further studies relating to what causes students to dropout in their senior year, what motivates them to return, and what dropouts seek in a secondary school environment when deciding to return to secondary school.

Research Questions
The following questions will guide this study:
1. What are the primary reasons a secondary school student drops out of school before earning a diploma?
2. What factors influence a secondary school student who dropouts to return to secondary school and earn a diploma before the age of 20?
3. When given a choice of attending a traditional school or a non-traditional school, what are the characteristics of the selected secondary school environment that influences dropouts to return?
4. What are the differences between the perceptions of Caucasian and African American students regarding reasons for dropping out and returning to complete secondary school?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction:
According the Alliance for Excellent Education, only 71% of secondary school students in America graduate on time, with an estimated 7000 students dropping out daily (FactSheet, 2009). Many reports cite the work of Balfanz and Legters (2004) who state that "in 2000 secondary schools, a typical freshman class shrinks by 40% or more by the time the students reach their senior year" (Executive Summary, p. 1). These high numbers of dropouts negatively impact the graduation rates of secondary schools, the potential lifetime earnings of the dropout, and the economic well-being of the nation.

The costs of being a dropout are staggering. "A single secondary school dropout costs the nation approximately $260,000 in lost earnings, taxes, and productivity;" dropouts are more likely to be incarcerated; billions of dollars in Medicaid costs are spent by states to aid uninsured individuals; and loss of personal income for a lifetime contributes to a weakened economy (Amos, 2009, p. 2). Dropout prevention programs are abundant and necessary. However, less focus is placed on viable programs that recover dropouts and keep them until they earn a regular secondary school diploma.

In the state of Georgia, public school districts do not see the financial feasibility of allowing a student who turns 20 prior to September 1 of an academic year to continue in school as the student will not be counted for funding purposes (Georgia FTE Data Collection, 2010).

The urgency is to find viable solutions for dropout recovery that lead to attainment of a regular diploma before a student exceeds the age limit to attend school and earn one. Few alternative programs exist in Georgia that are successful enough to justify continued funding in these difficult times of deflating budgets and program prioritizations. By conducting a phenomenological study to bring their voices to the forefront and to determine if any themes are persistent in their experiences in dropping out and in returning, it is possible that this one South Georgia school system will become a recognized leader for successful dropout recovery programs leading to increased graduation rates, decreased dropout rates, and increased number of productive citizens contributing to and supporting its community.

Theoretical Framework:

Students drop out of secondary school for a multitude of reasons, but the failure to obtain a secondary school diploma is the outcome in all cases. Understanding what conditions make secondary school more meaningful and accessible to students is essential in addressing this problem. An ontological assumption is important in this study because the different perspectives of the phenomenon are provided via the exact quotes of the participants. In a qualitative study, theories are "used as a broad explanation for behavior and attitudes, and it may be complete with variables, constructs, and hypotheses" (Creswell, 2009, p. 61). By identifying a theoretical framework for this study, it paves the way for organizing empirical findings, explaining phenomena, predicting phenomena, and stimulating new research (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, Sorensen, 2009). Three theoretical frameworks that are important are social-cognitive learning theory, attribution theory, and sociological contagion theory.

Social-cognitive learning theory.

Albert Bandura has contributed significantly to the field of social learning and its impact on the cognitive processes. Efficacy, or the beliefs that "influence how people feel, think, motivate themselves, and behave," produces "effects in one's cognitive, motivational, affective, and selection processes" (Bandura, 1993, p. 118). Many students who are academically at-risk have a poor self-efficacy, with years of self-reinforcement impacting what they believe they can and cannot accomplish. Through his studies, Bandura (1993) determined that children begin to form opinions about their own inherent intellectual capacities, and when they perform at a level less than their peers, they feel threatened or lacking in basic intelligence, and they ultimately settle for "tasks that minimize errors and reveal their proficiency at the expense of expanding their knowledge and competences" (p. 120). Bandura also believes that students with a low self-efficacy are more "vulnerable to achievement anxiety" (p. 133) and that to begin the reversal process, students must develop academic self-regulation, a model he credited to Zimmerman (1990). Bandura (1993) stated that "in social cognitive theory, people must develop skills in regulating the motivational, affective, and social determinant of their intellectual functioning as well as the cognitive aspects" (p. 136). Thus, students with a poor self-efficacy may feel threatened in a traditional secondary school environment but may be more willing to explore academic challenges in a non-threatening, less restrictive environment offered by a non-traditional secondary school. The opportunity to

engage in coursework that is self-paced and based on mastery learning, all in a supportive environment with flexible attendance requirements, offers students who experience academic anxiety and have a history of failure the chance for success and goal attainment of a secondary school diploma.

Closely related to Bandura's social-cognitive learning theory is Julian Rotter's social learning theory (1954). He asserted that one's behavior is determined by his experiences in life as well as his environment. Because both experiences and environment can change, either negatively or positively, so can behavior. Mearns (2010) interpreted Rotter's theory to indicate that personality as well as behavior can be changed, depending on one's experiences and environment. Mearns summarized: "Change the way the person thinks, or change the environment the person is responding to, and behavior will change" (Overview of Theory, para. 3). Therefore, one's personality and behaviors are not permanently set. Rather, "the more life experience you have building up certain sets of beliefs, the more effort and intervention required for change to occur" (Overview of Theory, para. 3).

In response to Rotter's theory, Wolk and Ducette (1973) conducted a study investigating the relationship between achievement-motivation variables and classroom test performance. They found a positive correlation between achievement motivation and test performance and determined that the "moderating effect of locus of control on the relationship between achievement motivation and several dependent variables is obvious and produces a clear pattern of relationships" (p. 67). Students who want to do well will take the risks involved to reach their goal. They are rewarded when successful (good grades), but not deterred from continuing to reach the goal if rewards are occasionally not provided (poor grades). One's environment has the potential to strongly shape personal expectations and beliefs about what he can and cannot achieve. When students have experienced years of academic failure with no rewards for their efforts, regardless of the level of effort expended, the resulting consequence often unfolds as disenfranchisement with school leading to dropping out. If the student's environmental factors, such as family, peers, and neighborhood culture, do no place high value on education, the potential to expend adequate levels of effort to do well in school and graduate can potentially be significantly reduced.

Attribution theory.

Fritz Heider (Psych Classics, 1946) originally conceptualized the attribution theory, but Bernard Weiner is the most well-known writer and researcher regarding the theory. This theory "examines individuals' beliefs about why certain events occur and correlates those beliefs to subsequent motivation" (Anderman & Anderman, 2010, para. 11). Graham (1997) conducted research investigating the differences in attribution of motivation between Black students and White students. She found that differences exist but proposes that further studies be conducted to consider these complex differences in ethnicity. As noted by Alderman (1990), "in order to acquire a high degree of motivation, the student must know how he or she personally contributed to this success," and "there must be a link between what the student did and the outcome" (p. 28). Weiner (2010) demonstrates how attribution plays an integral part of academic success with an example of a student taking an important exam for which he has studied but fails. After he has initial feelings of unhappiness, he looks for reasons that caused him to fail it. If he studied and knows most of the other students took the test and passed it, he may attribute the failure to a personal lack of aptitude, which is "an internal, stable, uncontrollable cause" (p. 33). This gives way to low self-esteem, "low

expectancy of future success, hopelessness, and helplessness" (p. 33). Over time, this "low expectancy (hopelessness) accompanied by these negative affects promotes the decision to, for example, drop out of school" (p. 33). Weiner summarized that the attribution theory captures what he believes is "the underlying 'deep structure' of a motivational episode: thinking gives rise to feelings which guide action" (p. 34).

A decade earlier, Weiner (2000) described the relationship between intrapersonal theory of motivation and attribution theory. He stated that if a "person has always failed in the past, then the current failure is likely to be attributed to the self; if others succeed while you fail, then again failure is more likely to be attributed to the self (rather than to the task)" (p. 4). If academic struggle and failure have become the norm for a student by the time he reaches secondary school, then the likelihood of remaining in secondary school until graduation is often diminished.

Postlethwaite and Haggarty (2002) conducted a study to determine what secondary students believed made them want to learn, what made it difficult for them to learn, and what teachers could do to help them learn. One of their significant findings was that "under-achievers conformed less to the work and social norms of the classroom" (p. 204) and that based on the direct response of the students, "teachers should take care to monitor the *effectiveness* of their communication with these students" (p. 204). By the time students are in secondary school, they have their own preconceived notions about what they believe they are capable of doing and do not see the point in continuing to give effort to tasks they continually fail. The researchers further stated that "from the perspective of attribution theory" (p. 202), teachers might improve their own teaching and improve student learning by drawing "students' attention to the distinction between internal and external attributions" (p. 202). They might also "help students to understand the intentions behind teacher actions" as well as "help students and teachers to recognize that their perceptions of situations will often differ from those of the others involved" (p. 202). Effective communication is just a start to helping students overcome the negative beliefs about what they feel they can and cannot accomplish with adequate effort.

Social contagion theory.

Crane (1991) suggested that like infectious diseases, social problems are contagious and spread via peer influence. Zvoch (2006) cited Crane's theory when he asserted that the "social context of schools can serve to encourage or discourage school completion by facilitating student exposure to positive or negative peer group influences" (p. 98). Zvoch further stated that "peer group influences are thought to stem from student interaction with the attitudes and dispositions of similarly situated classmates and are argued to be positive (in terms of fostering educational persistence) in schools that serve students from affluent economic backgrounds and negative under more economically challenged conditions" (p. 98).

Closely associated with social contagion, and often used in the same context, is emotional contagion. Basade (2002), in describing how emotional contagion operates, stated that "when people enter a group, they are exposed to other group members' emotions, which can be characterized by the valence (positive or negative) of the emotion being displayed and the energy level with which the emotion is expressed" (p. 647).

Marsden (1998) divides social contagion into two major categories of emotional and behavioral. Emotional social contagion is "the spread of mood and affect through populations by simple exposure" and behavioral social contagion is the spread of behaviors "through populations by

simple exposure" (Social Scientific Research on Social Contagion, para. 2). The value of a secondary school diploma can be perceived as a more important goal that is expected of some social groups. When the expectations are higher, when more people within the social group strives for the goal, and when the support is stronger from family and peers, then a student's persistence to attain a diploma is more likely. When students are exposed to high levels of apathy toward finishing school from peers, family, and their immediate neighborhood, then becoming a secondary school dropout is often the eventual consequence. When students become entangled in peer groups engaging in risky behaviors such as having unprotected sex or taking drugs, they sometimes succumb to the contagious nature of these behaviors. Staying in secondary school takes a back seat to the more "exciting" behaviors that some teens seek. Declining grades, lost credits, compromised attendance, and shifting priorities can eventually lead to students becoming secondary school dropouts.

The racial disparity of dropouts among Blacks, Whites, and Hispanics is well documented. For students who attend more advantaged secondary schools, the influences of peer pressure to persist academically, regardless of one's ethnicity or economic background, are more favorable toward secondary school completion. Secondary schools that are more disadvantaged seem to perpetuate negative peer attitudes, which contribute to lower rates of completion. Regardless of whether a secondary school is advantaged or disadvantaged, a flexible school environment is important if the diverse needs of all students are to be met.

Related Literature

In spite of the gap that currently exists in research regarding senior year dropouts and their subsequent return to secondary school, there is significantly more literature and research that addresses important issues closely related to this phenomenon. The evolution of alternative schools has impacted the development of present day non-traditional secondary school environments. Legislation demands accountability from schools in regards to dropout rates and graduation rates. Private and public agencies abound that conduct their own research in combating the dropout problem. An overview of these issues is important in understanding the phenomenon of returning senior dropouts and their choice of secondary school environments in which to complete their requirements for graduation.

Alternative secondary school environments in America.

"The history of alternative education is a colorful story of social reformers and individualists, religious believers and romantics" (Miller, n.d., para 7). Although the terminology describing alternative school environments has changed through the centuries, the basic concept can be traced to the earliest origins of American education. With the exception of slaves, and "until the 1830's, America and its Framers relied upon an educational tradition of home education, religious schooling, private schooling, apprenticeship, and parent-directed local schools" (Quaqua Society, n.d.). Lange and Sletten (2002), in describing the history of alternative education in America, stated the Civil Rights Movement contributed significantly to the disbandment of racially segregated schools. Prior to the civil rights movement, and as far back as the first American schools, educational opportunities were most often dependent upon one's race, gender, and even social class (Lange & Sletten, 2002).

The concept of alternative schools is certainly not a new concept, but assigning a clear definition to what alternative education is has proven more difficult. There is a wide range of concepts for the

use of alternative schools, with the numbers of these educational settings growing yearly. Lehr, Lanners, and Lange (2003) stated that alternative education "has been an active player in the American public school system" and that in its recent evolutional history, there has been "little agreement on its definition" (p. 1). Lange and Sletton (2002) concurred that a clear definition of what an alternative school is does not exist, primarily because of the wide range of uses for them. One definition for alternative schools states that they are "designed to address the needs of students that typically cannot be met in regular schools," and that "the students who attend alternative schools and programs are typically at risk of educational failure" (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010, p. 1).

Today, alternative schools are thought of primarily in the context of innovative schools of choice providing rigorous academic programs and sometimes even allowing virtual instructional programs so students can work from their home computer. They might also be punitively-assigned schools developed for students with chronically disruptive behaviors or be modified programs designed to address the academic and personal challenges of students who are on the brink of dropping out of secondary school. Raywid (1994) cited that regardless of the function or many purposes alternative schools have today, "they have been designed to respond to a group that appears not to be optimally served by the regular program, and consequently they have represented varying degrees of departure from standard school organization, programs, and environments" (p. 26).

Communities must begin to look more critically at developing unique programs to address the specific needs of their at-risk and dropout teens.

Tracking dropouts.

Dorn (1996), in one of his extensive writings on the history of American dropouts, stated that "dropping out in itself was not a primary concern of educators until the mid-twentieth century," and it was not until after 1960 that students who failed to complete secondary school "became commonly identified as part of a specific problem called 'dropping out'" (p. 80). Prior to the 1960s, dropouts, often called "non-completers," left school to pursue the military, obtain jobs, or apprentice with tradesmen.

In an earlier analysis of the history of dropouts, Dorn (1993) noted that at the turn of the twentieth century, relatively few teens attended secondary school, much less completed it. He further stated that the word "dropout" was not even a recognized category in education until the middle of the twentieth century. However, between 1960 and 1965, interest in the phenomenon of dropping out of secondary school at a time when teens were then expected to graduate prompted dozens of people to write about the dropout problem and what could be done about it. Dorn surmised that "since only a small minority of public school students graduated from secondary school at the turn of the century, no one writing at that time discussed the problem with the degree of urgency that 1960s' writers would later express" (p. 370). He summarized by stating that "the emergence of the 'dropout problem' as a headline issue in the 1960s thus marked a turning point in the symbolic role of the secondary school as it changed from an elite to a comprehensive institution" (p. 370).

When the National Commission on Excellence in Education published *A Nation at Risk* (1983), the American public became keenly aware of the dropout problem and the educational deficiencies of public education. According to the follow-up report in 1998, *A Nation Still at Risk,* more than six million American students dropped out of school between the times the two reports were published. In 2001, the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) was passed. Among the provisions of this federal

law were greater school accountability, mandated assessments, increased parental involvement, and employment of highly qualified teachers. With the advent of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), a measurement that helps determine the rate at which schools are progressing toward the fulfillment of NCLB, educators have lined up on both sides of the debate as to whether the law is helping to close the achievement gap among racial groups and whether it is hurting or helping secondary school graduation rates.

In 1997, the Alliance for Excellent Education cited that 7,000 American secondary school students become dropouts each day, and only 70% of entering freshmen graduate with a regular diploma. They assert that NCLB was created primarily to improve educational outcomes in grades K-8 and that "NCLB emerged with provisions that often neglect, or that are even at odds with, the needs of America's millions of secondary students, particularly the six million students who are most at risk of dropping out of school each year" (p. 2). Today, all public schools, school districts, state educational agencies, and the United States Department of Education track a myriad of dropout data. The statistics are not encouraging.

Contributing factors to dropout rate.
Teenagers face a myriad of challenges, obstacles, and barriers in their pursuit of a regular secondary school diploma. Across the nation, issues of pregnancy, parenting, homelessness, poverty, academic apathy, credit deficiency, academic failure, and chronic absenteeism contribute to students leaving school before earning a diploma (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2009; Thornburgh, 2006). African American students have alarmingly higher rates for dropping out than White students (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006; Jordan, Lara, & McPartland, 1996; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). The Alliance for Excellent Education (2009) cites that millions of students who start secondary school fail to finish, and of students who do earn their regular diploma on time, "barely half of African American and Hispanic students earn diplomas with their peers" (FactSheet). Even more disconcerting is the number of students in grade 12 who drop out before earning their diploma. Regardless of the reasons for students dropping out of school, it usually "reflects their unique life circumstances, and is part of a slow process of disengagement from school," and student surveys indicate "reasons or common responses that emerge relating to the academic environment, real life events, and a lack of personal motivation and external sources of motivation and guidance" (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006, p. 3).

Traditional secondary schools demand that students complete a course within a defined length of time and use the more traditional instructional approach of lecture, writing, and discussions. For students who struggle academically, this often presents a barrier to their success in secondary school. Other students have been forced to seek employment to supplement family incomes because of lost jobs in today's weak economy. These jobs are sometimes during the school day, or they last until late at night. This can result in excessive absenteeism and fatigue, both of which lead to poor academic performance. Teenagers dealing with pregnancy or small children do not always have the support needed to enable them to continue attending school on a regular basis. Some students simply do not find their social niche in a traditional secondary school (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006; Center for Labor Market Studies, 2009; Committee on Education and Labor, 2009; Knesting, 2008; Neild, Balfanz, & Herzog, 2007; Wald & Losen, 2005; Zvoch, 2006).

While much is known about why secondary school students drop out in the first two years, much less is known about why students drop out in their senior year, particularly students who make it to

the twelfth grade on time. In their extensive study on the dropout crisis in Philadelphia, Neild and Balfanz (2006) determined that seniors who earned less than three credits and/or attended school less than thirty percent of the time during their senior year were much more likely to drop out before graduating. They also noted that students who were placed in juvenile facilities during their senior year had a high probability of dropping out.

Schargel (2008) believes that one reason seniors drop out of secondary school is because they have "completed all or most of their core subjects and their staying in secondary school is simply 'treading water,'" and the only solution is for secondary schools "to provide reasons for students to stick around" (para. 2). He further suggests that secondary schools provide incentives available only to seniors, such as driver's education courses and service learning programs. Another credit worthy activity that might be available to seniors only would be community assistance programs, such as providing services to senior citizens that "provide both an intergenerational contact along with an opportunity for personal growth" (para. 5).

Characteristics of non-traditional secondary schools.

Even before the term "non-traditional secondary school" was coined, educators began looking at ways to keep students at-risk from dropping in secondary school. The pioneers in alternative or non-traditional secondary school concepts quickly determined that trying to convince students not to drop out just was not enough. They concluded that there had to be an alternative approach to earning a diploma to offer these students. Dauw (1972) described one such setting in his study of the Individualized Instruction Program in Pontiac, Michigan, a dropout prevention program that opened in 1968 and was designed to encourage more students to complete secondary school. The program utilized individualized instruction, a separate facility, a threat-free environment and a comfortable setting, a reduced pupil-teacher ratio of 15:1, and student participation in the decision-making process (p. 340). His quantitative study seeking to determine if a relationship existed between eight variables, such as dropout rate, school attendance, and student achievement to students' participation in the program, indicated that the program was effective in improving student behaviors and improving academic achievement. Except for student self-concept, all variables tested "attested to the merits of the program" (p. 339).

There are distinctive differences between the environments of most non-traditional secondary schools and traditional secondary schools. Non-traditional secondary schools are often developed to meet the specific needs of a community in which the graduation rate is not satisfactory. In Georgia, almost all alternative and non-traditional secondary schools apply for and receive seat time waivers and attendance waivers. Without substantial differences between the environments of traditional and non-traditional secondary schools, dropouts or students most at-risk for dropping out would make no distinction between the two; therefore, the dropout rate would continue to spiral out of control.

Non-traditional secondary schools are not a dumping ground for at-risk, problematic students. These schools offer intensive student support with flexible means of attending and completing work so that those barriers that previously led to dropping out are minimized. This model is one that "offers a student an opportunity to learn more at their own pace in a way that is positive and encouraging" and enables more students to "reach their peak potential" (Kingston, 2008). In Trenton, New Jersey, a non-traditional model was created to address the staggering numbers of dropouts in its district. Chmelynski (2006) describes the Daylight/Twilight High program that " is

not an alternative school but an attractive option for older teens and adults wanting legitimate proof they completed secondary school" (p. 39). Utilizing a no-nonsense approach to the core academic subjects as well as technology, students can also earn credits for community service and work experience. Many states offer seat time and attendance waivers to alternative and non-traditional secondary schools to increase the likelihood of graduation for students enrolled in the program.

Aronson (1995) identified critical characteristics of successful alternative and non-traditional programs. Among these include a choice for teachers to work at the school rather than being assigned to the school, a staff of caring and supportive teachers, a degree of autonomy from the other schools in the district, and a flexible curriculum to meet the needs of all students. Replicating the environment of a non-traditional secondary school is simply not feasible for most traditional secondary schools. While they strive to provide caring teachers who support all students, the smaller class sizes and flexible curriculum is generally not attainable.

Summary:

The concept of secondary school dropouts is not new. The identification of a consistently viable program that meets the needs of returning dropouts continues to emerge. Very little research exists, either quantitative or qualitative, that suggests returning dropouts, especially senior dropouts, are satisfied with the environments   offered that meet their unique needs. Most dropouts are faced with personal life challenges and academic difficulties that were years in the making. Obviously, there is no single solution. If there is one thing that is clear based on the dismal dropout statistics in America, it is that the existing traditional secondary school model is not the most appropriate environment to meet the diverse needs of all students of secondary school age in America. Choices must be available, but identifying the most desirable characteristics of a secondary school that enable dropouts to return is critically important. The answer may be found by allowing the voices of those students who did return and had choices tell their stories. From them, we can gain a new perspective of the needs of one of the most precious resources our nation has, which are the future adult citizens of our community and country. This literature review suggests that our educational system has failed too many students, and the trend continues to spiral out of control. The dropout crisis is an "ailment" that "threatens the nation's democracy, economy and social fabric" (Williams, 2009, p. 13). Urgent action is needed to recover millions of dropouts before they are no longer eligible to receive their secondary school diploma. Starting with the recovery of senior dropouts is of highest priority as they have the least amount of time left to attain their secondary school diploma.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

An empirical, transcendental phenomenological approach was used for this study, as it offers a rigorous approach to inquiry and design, with the researchers, readers, and participants having roles in how the study is designed. A phenomenological approach was needed to "reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence" (Creswell, 2007, p. 58). This approach enabled us to use the voices of former senior year secondary school dropouts to more fully understand why they dropped out in their senior year, what influenced them to return to the secondary school setting, and which characteristics of a secondary school environment were

considered as most important by these students when deciding whether to enroll in a traditional secondary school or a non-traditional secondary school upon their return. The students used their own words to express what they found appealing about their selected choice between the two different secondary school environments and why they felt it contributed to their attainment of a secondary school diploma. It was the thoughts and experiences of the participants, in their words, that the researchers sought to interpret. The results of the study allowed the researchers to identify improved dropout prevention strategies and program supports for students at-risk of dropping out of secondary school in this school specific district and to identify specific conditions of a secondary school environment that are important in effectively meeting the needs of students at-risk for dropping out or for recovering dropouts who have not reached the age of 20.

Participants

Each of the eight participants lived in the same Georgia school district in which the study took place and was either 18 or 19 years of age. These eight participants were selected because of their age and their respective choices of schools to attend, and because they are representative of both genders and of the two predominant races attending all three of the secondary schools. Of the three former dropouts who chose to return to the traditional secondary school setting, two were African American males and one was an African American female. Of the five former dropouts who chose to go to the non-traditional secondary school setting, two were Caucasian females, one was an African American female, and two were Caucasian males. All students were considered economically disadvantaged before dropping out of school, and five of the students had several discipline referrals prior to dropping out.

Site Description

The study took place in a South Georgia school district in which there are two traditional secondary schools and one non-traditional secondary school. This district was unique to this region of Georgia as it is the only one that offers a non-traditional secondary school of this type that operates utilizing waivers that allow for program flexibility at the local level as authorized by the Georgia Department of Education (§160-4-8-.12, 2010). One of the traditional secondary schools, which had a 2010 enrollment of 1,819 students, had a total graduation rate of 80.5% that same academic year. The graduation rate was 66.4% for Black students and 86.4% for White students. The other traditional secondary school, which had a 2010 enrollment of 1,748 students, had a graduation rate of only 65.5% that year. The graduation rate was 63.9% for Black students and 63.6% for White students. Neither of these secondary schools made Adequate Yearly Progress in 2010. The two traditional secondary schools operated on a Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. schedule. Both traditional secondary schools utilized 90-minute block scheduling and offered a large variety of extracurricular activities, including nine different sports. Students could take dual enrollment courses at the local college, could participate in Advanced Placement classes, and could select from five foreign language classes. Students at the traditional secondary schools had 20 career pathway classes from which to choose.

Data Collection

Creswell (2009) states that, "investigators file research proposals containing the procedures and information about the participants with the IRB campus committee so that the board can review the

extent to which the research being proposed subjects individuals to risk" (p. 89). Upon IRB approval, informed consent was obtained by each of the participants. No parental permission was necessary since the participants were either 18 or 19 years of age and of competency to give their consent.

Creswell states that "in conducting qualitative research, procedures rely on text and image data, have unique steps in data analysis, and draw in diverse strategies in inquiry" (2009, p. 173). Individual interviews, a focus interview, a review of the participants' secondary school student records, and a comparison of graduation and dropout rates for the district for the year prior to the study and the year in which the returning senior dropouts graduate was conducted.

Individual Interviews.

Two individual audio-recorded interviews were conducted to provide detailed responses to important questions that we felt would help explain the phenomenon. Four questions were presented to each participant during the first interview that allowed them to share their personal experiences, tell their stories, and explain how their experiences have impacted their lives. As the students told their stories, they were able to describe in their own words the reasons why they dropped out of secondary school when they were so close to finishing, why they returned to secondary school, what value they place on a secondary school diploma, and why they selected either the traditional or the non-traditional secondary school to attend. The second individual interview session took place upon each student's completion of secondary school requirements. The questions focused on identifying specific challenges the student faced upon returning to secondary school to earn a diploma, determining experiences that may have been different upon their re-entry to secondary school, identifying how the student perceived the relationship between their future and an attainment of a diploma, and determining what recommendations the student had for the school district to consider in order to prevent other students from dropping out of secondary school. To ensure accuracy of student responses, both sessions were audio-recorded and then transcribed word-for-word.

Comparison of graduation and dropout rates.

The addition of the non-traditional secondary school program to this school district has garnered the attention of the Georgia Department of Education as well as surrounding school districts that have no such program. This particular school district took a leap of faith in a time when deep economic cuts were taking place in the educational system, but was banking on positive results in the form of increased attendance, increased graduation rates, and decreased dropout rates. It was also a place where area dropouts who were not overage by Georgia mandates for funding could return to earn their secondary school diploma. Neither of the two local traditional secondary schools made adequate yearly progress (AYP) for the last two years, in part because they failed to meet minimum graduation rate requirements. Most of the recovered dropouts attending the new non-traditional secondary school could potentially help both secondary schools with their graduation rate if they graduated on time. Comparing the graduation and dropout rates of the two prior school years and the school year in which the senior dropouts graduated was necessary to determine if positive changes were noted. Although there is no way to determine if the non-traditional program was the single cause of any improvements from this study alone, it could prove favorable in the eyes of the local board of education if improvements occur and AYP is met. A comparison of graduation and

dropout rates was also important in fully answering the research question regarding the characteristics of a secondary school environment sought by returning dropouts. If students favored the non-traditional secondary school over the traditional secondary school, then more students were likely to return for their diploma, thus positively impacting the district's graduation and dropout rates.

Triangulation.

Creswell and Miller (2000) stated that triangulation is "a validity procedure where researchers search for convergence among multiple and difference sorts of information to form themes or categories in a study" (p. 126). The method of triangulation was utilized in this study to corroborate conclusions and strengthen validity. The researchers utilized individual student interviews, focus interviews with students, data from student records, and graduation and dropout rates of the school system. Data from both the non-traditional secondary school and the other two local traditional secondary schools were needed to establish the characteristics of a secondary school environment sought by returning senior dropouts.

FINDINGS

This study was conducted to answer four questions regarding the phenomenon of former senior year dropouts who return to secondary school for their diploma and what characteristics they seek in a secondary school when given a choice between a traditional secondary school environment and a non-traditional secondary school environment. In addition, this study sought to identify what the reasons where that prompted the participants to drop out as seniors, what their motivations were to return to secondary school, and whether there were any significant differences in the responses between African American and Caucasian participants.

Participating Secondary Schools

The participants in this research attended one of three secondary schools in the district. These are the only three secondary schools students could attend. Secondary school A and Secondary school B are traditional secondary schools that follow a Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. schedule. Secondary school C is the district's only non-traditional secondary school. It opened January 10, 2011, as a dropout recovery secondary school.

Secondary school A is a traditional secondary school that serves students in ninth through twelfth grade. The school had approximately 1759 students for the 2010-2011 academic year. Of these students, 30% were African American and 58% were Caucasian. The school has historically served students from one particularly large area of the school district that is home to a cluster of wealthy neighborhoods. The school reported that 39% of all students enrolled for the 2010-2011 academic year received free or reduced lunch. The school utilized block scheduling and offered an array of Advanced Placement and honors classes. All major sports and extracurricular activities were offered to eligible students. The secondary school has not met Adequate Yearly Performance for the last three years.

 Secondary school B, the other traditional secondary school, is across town from Secondary school A and had a slightly higher enrollment at 1825 students. The school was comprised of 40% African American students and 46% Caucasian students. Half of the students enrolled receive free or reduced lunch. Like Secondary school A, it offered almost the same Advanced Placement and

honors classes and utilized block scheduling. Eligible students could participant in a wide variety of sports and extracurricular activities. It operates five days a week from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. The two secondary schools are rivals in most sporting events, and have their own Junior/Senior Prom and Homecoming Dance for students.

Secondary school C is a new non-traditional secondary school that opened January 10, 2011. The enrollment was at 129 in March 2011. As word of the secondary school spread and local dropouts found out about it, enrollment stood at 150 by the fall of 2011. The school is open Monday through Thursday from 4 p.m. until 10 p.m. No transportation or meals are provided. There are no sports or extracurricular activities, but all students receive intensive and on-going counseling support to keep them focused on their progress. The state-mandated Georgia Secondary school Graduation Tests are administered at Secondary school C during the same testing window as the other two secondary schools. Students do all their coursework on E2020, the district's board approved online, web-based curriculum program that meets the academic standards for Georgia Department of Education courses. Daily attendance is not mandatory, but students must attend at least one day a week for five hours to remain enrolled. Most students attend more than one evening a week. Limited amounts of coursework can be completed from home if students have access to a computer and the internet. In less than one year, 48 former dropouts and students significantly at-risk for dropping returned to secondary school from the local area to complete requirements for graduation.

Individual Interviews

All the participants returned to school for the fall semester of 2011, which began August 11 for the school district. The first interviews took place during the first two weeks of October 2011 in the counselor's conference room at the secondary school where each of the participants attended school. The second set of interviews took place during the month of December of 2011. All eight participants had completed their requirements for graduation by that time.

Analysis of Participants

Charlie. Charlie, a soft-spoken 19-year old Caucasian male student, entered ninth grade in the 2007-2008 school year at Secondary school B. He has two older brothers, neither of whom graduated from secondary school. While in secondary school, he never had a discipline referral yet struggled academically as evidenced by the 11 courses he failed, nine of which he had to retake. At the time he dropped out of secondary school, he had passed four of the five required graduation tests. He passed the writing test on the first attempt but had to take the English/Language Arts, math, and science tests three times before he was finally able to pass them. He had taken the social studies test three times by the time he dropped out but still had not passed it. Charlie needed to earn only two more credits and needed to pass the social studies graduation test at the time he quit attending. He began secondary school with regular attendance, but by the time he was in tenth grade, absences became more frequent.

Charlie also revealed that his mother depended on him to help out financially. He has worked since he was in eighth grade to help his mother make ends meet. He finally got a job at a local car dealership that gave him sufficient hours to work and that kept him in the automotive environment he loves. However, because of the hours he had to work, it left virtually no time for him to do homework or rest properly before going to school the next morning. In making his decision to return to secondary school, Charlie said the need to keep his job was his motivating reason to enroll in the non-traditional, evening secondary school.

Rose. Rose, a 19-year old African American female who entered ninth grade in the 2006-2007 school year, attended both Secondary school A and B. She had been receiving special education services and was identified in elementary school as having an emotional and behavioral disorder. Rose was quick to share that she has had a troubled life, especially since she started ninth grade. She acknowledged that her behaviors, both in school and out of school, were not conducive to a positive lifestyle. She stated that academically, school was never hard for her. She even passed all of her mandatory graduation tests on the first attempt, with the exception of the writing test which she took twice. She failed four classes in secondary school, three of which had to be retaken. She had 11 discipline referrals that included six for being tardy to classes, two for cellphone infractions, one for classroom disruption, and one for willful disobedience. Her attendance was very poor. She had 57 absences, not including two months of incarceration in a youth detention center at the end of her tenth grade year. She also had 34 days of
hospital/homebound services upon her release from a mental health facility
At the time she dropped out, Rose needed five and a half credits to graduate. She eventually went on to earn her General Equivalency Diploma (GED), primarily because she was on probation and was being pressed to either return to secondary school or obtain her GED. She said that getting her GED was really easy for her, completing the entire process in less than two months. She repeatedly stressed that academic struggles was not the reason she dropped out; in fact, she never felt she struggled with the coursework.
Rose revealed that she struggled with substance abuse during her secondary school years as a result of her anxieties. She frequently took overdoses of her prescribed medication to help her sleep at night and often huffed aerosols, including Raid, an insect killer. She acknowledged that was rushed to the emergency room on several occasions because of her actions. At least once she attempted suicide. In the year prior to her return to secondary school, Rose realized it was up to her to begin setting her life in better order. She still yearned for her secondary school diploma but had no desire to return to the traditional secondary school environment.

Trey. Trey is a 19-year old African American male who entered ninth grade in the 2007-2008 school year. As a student receiving special education services for both a learning disability in reading and written expression, as well as for emotional and behavioral issues, he has always struggled academically in school. At the time he dropped out of secondary school, he only needed to pass the English/Language Arts graduation test, which he had failed four times already, and to earn one more credit. He had an extensive discipline record throughout secondary school, garnering 28 referrals to the office. His offenses included skipping class, possession of and use of tobacco on campus, classroom disruptions, vandalism to school property, fighting, theft, possession of unknown pills, and using the computer to enter unauthorized sites. Trey readily admitted to his frequent difficulties following school rules.
In addition to his extensive behavioral record, he racked up 116 days of absences before dropping out. It was not until he stopped attending Secondary school A that he came to the realization that much of his failure was attributed to his own actions rather than his learning disability. He acknowledged that reading was always extremely difficult for him, and to compensate for this deficit, he misbehaved.
He also realized that in spite of his struggles, his special education teachers at Secondary school A were always behind him and were ready and willing to give him the assistance and accommodations

he needed. He often chose, however, to ignore their offerings. After failing the English/Language Arts graduation test for the fourth time, he decided he just could not pass it. He had already struggled with the other graduation tests multiple times. It took him two attempts to pass the writing test, five attempts to pass the math test, five attempts to pass the science test, and five attempts to pass the social studies test. It was not until he returned to secondary school that he successfully passed the English/Language Arts test on the sixth attempt. Trey's decision to return to the traditional secondary school setting was primarily because of the support he realized he had from key teachers, and he did not want to let them down. He noted their outreach to him when he inquired about returning to his former secondary school.

Trey's decision to return to the traditional secondary school proved to be successful. His special education teachers rallied behind him to provide the encouragement and inspiration he needed to finish all his requirements for a diploma in less than one semester of secondary school.

Kay. Kay is an 18-year Caucasian female who excelled in secondary school, taking as many Advanced Placement (AP) and honors classes as possible. She entered ninth grade in the 2007-2008 school year and needed six credits to graduate at the time she dropped out. Her 34 absences from school all came right before dropping out as she was pregnant at the time and was missing days because of sickness and doctor's appointments. She had never failed a class, and she had an A average throughout secondary school.

Kay, unlike the other participants, actually went to Secondary school B to officially withdraw at the start of her senior year. She felt compelled to be with her baby and did not want to leave him in daycare while she went back to school. She felt it was more important for her to be a caring mother who gave her son appropriate attention during his formative years than for her to put him in a setting where people do not have a vested interest in how he is being raised. She continued to live with her parents after having her baby but also maintained a relationship with the father of her child, who also assists in raising their son. The father of her child is employed full-time working at a Toyota car dealership after having obtained his GED. He dropped out of secondary school to seek employment to help with his financial responsibilities in caring for his son. Kay's decision to drop out of secondary school was painful to her as she felt she was giving up her dream of becoming a teacher one day. She stated that striving for academic excellence had always been important to her.

Kay had every intention of pursuing a GED one day and changing her career goals since she did not think she could get into college without a secondary school diploma. When she heard about the non-traditional secondary school, she immediately enrolled in it. She felt the school offered the compromise she was seeking in returning to secondary school and not having to put her baby in day care as she would have the assistance of family to help her with the baby in the evenings.

Upon her return to secondary school, she was able to quickly earn the six remaining credits she needed by working diligently both in the evenings at school and on the computer from home while her baby slept. She spent long hours late into the night and on weekends to finish in one semester.

Thomas. Thomas is 19-year old African American male who attended traditional Secondary school B prior to dropping out. He entered ninth grade in the 2007-2008 school year. He had only six office referrals during secondary school, most of which were for being tardy to class and excessive talking in class. He had a total 86 absences, but 20 of those were excused because of an illness that put him in the hospital during his senior year. He needed only to pass the social studies graduation

test, which he had already failed five times before dropping out, and to earn one credit in order to have his regular diploma. During secondary school he failed eight classes, six of which he had to retake for purposes of meeting minimum graduation requirements. He was forthright in his assertion that the only reason he dropped out was because of his frustration in not being able to pass the social studies graduation test. When asked if he felt he had adequate preparation for the test in his secondary school social studies classes, he revealed that he had to take some of his social studies courses on the computer in his senior year because he had missed 20 days of school due to an illness. When he was finally able to return to school, he had already missed too many days of the direct instruction classes, so he was assigned to do the courses on E2020, the computer-based program used primarily for credit recovery in the school district. Two of these courses, American government and economics, were done using this program. Thomas indicated that he did not feel he learned much on the computer and missed the opportunity to interact in vital class discussions. Thomas stressed that his eyes got tired looking at the computer, and he found it to be quite boring. He further acknowledged that the test preparations provided by the secondary school consisted of computer-based reviews and packets of reading handed out to the students. He said he would have much preferred to have direct instructional reviews so he could engage in meaningful dialogue with a teacher about difficult concepts.

Kyle. Kyle is a 19-year old Caucasian male who entered ninth grade in the 2006-2007 school year. At the time he dropped out, he needed to pass the social studies graduation test, which he had not yet taken, and to earn 5.5 more credits. While in secondary school, he had 73 absences and no discipline referrals. He passed the other four graduation tests on his first attempt. He failed eight courses in secondary school. Of those classes, he failed Algebra II twice. After failing Algebra III the first time, he switched from pursing a college prep diploma to a technical/vocational diploma, thus avoiding the higher level math courses. Kyle readily acknowledged that all his problems took place outside the school environment, although these problems all contributed to his decision to quit secondary school. Early in secondary school, he found he could make substantial sums of money as a drug dealer, up to $1000 a week. He asserted that he never had problems with school and actually enjoyed learning. But as he became more and more immersed in his lifestyle, he found it to be all-consuming, exciting, and profitable. After three years of being a drug dealer and not getting caught, he slowly came to the realization that he was in a dangerous profession. It was about that time that he also realized that he both wanted and needed to return to secondary school to get his diploma.

Tara. Tara is an 18-year old African American female who entered ninth grade in the 2007-2008 school year. At the time she dropped out, she still needed to pass the social studies graduation test and earn one more academic credit. She only failed three classes during secondary school, all of which were vocational elective classes and did not have to be made up. She missed 24 days between ninth grade and the time she dropped out. She accumulated only six office referrals, two of which were for the use of cellphone during class time, one for use of profanity and not taking class notes, and the rest for being tardy to class. Tara passed the writing graduation test on her first attempt; however, she struggled to pass the others. It took her seven attempts each to pass the English/Language Arts, math, and science tests. She finally passed the social studies test on her seventh attempt after returning to secondary school.
Tara is the oldest of 11 younger siblings, some of whom are half-siblings. She has lived with her

grandmother during most of her secondary school years. She has never held a job. Like most typical students attending the Secondary school A, she enjoyed attending football and basketball games, going to the prom, hanging out with her friends, and participating in extracurricular activities. When it became clear to her that she would not graduate with her class, she did not see the point in continuing with secondary school, in spite of coming so close to completion. When she made the decision to return to secondary school, she opted to return to the same secondary school she left. Tara repeatedly spoke of her friends and their importance to her, even though she acknowledged that several of them suggested she just get her GED.

Faith. Faith is a 19-year old Caucasian female who entered ninth grade in the 2006-2007 school year. At the time she dropped out, she needed six more credits to graduate. She had already passed all her graduation tests. Prior to dropping out, she had failed 15 classes. Some of these classes were ones she made up upon her return to secondary school. She accumulated 66 absences, with most of them occurring in the months leading up to her departure from secondary school.

Faith's pregnancy resulted in hostility from her mother and step-father. Neither of them approved of or even liked the father of her baby. On several occasions when he tried to come by to visit the baby, loud arguments would erupt between the young man and her step-father. On at least one occasion, her step-father called law enforcement to have him removed from their property. Her mother and step-father tried to keep Faith's pregnancy a secret from their employees at the small business they owned together. They refused to help her so she could return to secondary school, telling her that the problem was hers to deal with.

Faith indicated she wanted to return to secondary school, but once her daughter arrived, she saw her hopes for a diploma fading. Faith found out about the non-traditional secondary school and determined it was the only way she could pursue her diploma.

Themes

Once the data were analyzed, themes began to emerge that represented commonalities among the participants. These themes provided us with the ability to understand the phenomenon from the viewpoint of the participants.

1. Academic performance
2. Personal/Emotional struggles
3. Relationships
4. School environment
5. Personal aspirations

The five identified themes did not all reflect positive thoughts of the participants. For several of them, it represented the very reasons that triggered their decision to drop out of secondary school. Without exception, all of them transitioned from voicing thoughts of negativity to voicing feelings of hope and pride as they began to see the

attainment of their secondary school diploma within their reach.

Academic performance. Upon close inspection of each participant's secondary school records, it was evident that except for one student, they all struggled academically. Kay was the only student who did not fail a class in secondary school, while the others failed anywhere from four up to a high of fifteen classes. Some of the failures were attributed to excessive absences, and some were a

result of poor performance. Failing grades led to dismal grade point averages for most of them by the time they graduated, with the exception of Kay who took several Advanced Placement and honors classes and performed well in them.

Absences.

All the participants had excessive absences prior to dropping out. Only Kay accumulated hers just prior to leaving. While many of these absences may have been excused due to illness, most were not, as noted by the participants. Whether by choice, force, or circumstance, having excessive absences in school did not fare well in these participants' ability to perform well in their courses.

Georgia Secondary school Graduation Tests

Passing all five Georgia High School Graduation Tests (GHSGT), in addition to earning the minimum state and local mandated course requirements, is required in the state of Georgia for a student to earn a regular diploma. Students must take and pass a test in English/Language Arts, Math, Science, Social Studies, and Writing. Failure to pass just one test can prevent a student from attaining a diploma. Four of the eight participants struggled to pass one test, which made a significant impact on their decisions to drop out.

Instructional format.

In the school district where the study took place, there are two primary methods of curriculum presentation, direct teacher instruction in the classroom and a web-based Internet program called E2020. In the E2020 classes, students are assigned the particular course they need, and students within one classroom work on a variety of courses representing all secondary school grades. The teacher in the classroom is a facilitator who monitors their work and keeps them on task. The direct instruction is in the form of video lectures within the individual computer courses. Students listen to the videos, do practice work, and then take a quiz to determine mastery. A student must achieve a score of 80 to move to the next lesson. If not, they must repeat some of the work until they achieve mastery. Several of the participants clearly had strong feelings about the two different presentations of curriculum.

Personal/Emotional Struggles. As each interview unfolded, it became apparent that most of the participants were facing more than just academic challenges. Some of them fared better than others in that they had overcome their challenges; others were continuing to battle their daily struggles. For some, the struggles were no fault of their own, and for others they were consequences of earlier choices they had made. Regardless, these struggles were contributing factors leading up to the participants' decisions to drop out of secondary school.

Pregnancy.

Teen pregnancy is not new to the school district in which this study took place. Many of the girls enrolled in the district's non-traditional secondary school are teen mothers. Kay and Faith are two such mothers whose lives changed dramatically once they became pregnant.

Drugs.

It came as no surprise that the subject of drugs came up in the interviews. For three of the participants, drugs played a major role in their struggles both in school and in their lives outside of school. None of the students indicated they had any problems with alcohol, but cocaine and marijuana were part of the downward spiral that impacted the lives of Rose, Trey, and Kyle.

Social discomfort.

Returning to secondary school after most of their peers had already graduated, or even dropped out,

was embarrassing to some of the participants. The ones who were 19 years old and nearly 20 years old found the concept particularly hard to swallow.

Relationships.

Each of the participants felt strongly about the impact relationships made in their struggle to attain a secondary school diploma. Not all relationships were positive, nurturing, and support. However, the impact of relationships both hindered and helped the participants in their secondary school academic journey. For some, having enduring family support or encouraging adults at school made a positive difference they felt compelled to share with me. On the other hand, family turmoil made the journey almost impossible for some participants, while some of them felt teachers and counselors contributed to their decision to drop out. Regardless of whether it was a hindrance or a help, the influence of relationships was a strong theme among all the students.

Family relationships.

Not a single participant failed to voice how the impact of key family members helped or hindered their ability to graduate. Only two participants, Kay and Trey, spoke of an intact nuclear family that was comprised of their biological mother and father. All other students either lived with their mother, their mother and step-father, a grandmother, or no parents or guardians at all. In some cases, participants felt their graduation was necessary because of a desire to please key family members who kept pushing them and giving encouragement. For others, they pushed themselves in spite of a lack of family support, drawing from their own inner strength instead.

School relationships.

The existence, or lack thereof, of a meaningful adult relationship in the secondary

school setting that is based on trust, support, and encouragement struck a chord with all the participants. Some of them praised key teachers who provided encouragement to them on their most difficult days; others voiced disdain for uncaring and uninterested teachers. All of them had strong opinions regarding the impact that relationships with faculty and staff had in their decision to drop out or return to secondary school.

Secondary school environment.

Determining the characteristics of a secondary school environment that returning senior dropouts seek in their return to secondary school was a key component of this research. The participants provided a rich volume of information in responding to questions about which secondary school environment they preferred. Secondary school A and Secondary school B are the two traditional environments offered by the district. Each of the participants began secondary school at one of these two schools. Upon their return to school after dropping out, they had two choices from which to make their decision about where to finish their requirements. They could either return to the traditional secondary school where they had previously attended, or they could enroll at Secondary school C, the non-traditional setting that was opened specifically for dropout recovery. Of the eight participants who returned as former senior year dropouts, three chose to return to the traditional secondary school environment, and five of them chose to return to a different setting that offered a non-traditional environment.

Traditional secondary school.

For Trey, the familiarity of the traditional secondary school setting where he knew he had the support and encouragement of key teachers was the defining reason he chose to return to Secondary school A.

Non-traditional secondary school.
Charlie indicated that the only reason he was able to return to secondary school after dropping out was because of the evening hours and flexibility of attendance at non-traditional Secondary school C. Because of his need to work to help his mother with household expenses, he knew he could not go back to the structured schedule of his previous secondary school. For Rose, who made the decision to enroll in the non-traditional secondary school upon her return, the evening hours, flexibility of attendance, personal attention, and feeling of social comfort were important to her.

Personal aspirations.
Each participant in this research was a former senior year dropout who made the decision to return to secondary school for a regular diploma. No doubt, there were personal reasons each one had that motivated them to return. They made a personal commitment to complete a journey they had begun when they were very young. Each participant voiced clear and worthy reasons for why he or she wanted a secondary school diploma. For some, they could barely contain their joy and pride in sharing with me that they had accomplished a goal they thought they would never achieve. Without exception, personal aspirations garnered the most excitement in the voices of these eight participants. All of them yearned to have their diploma, a symbol of achievement that they hoped would pave the way for opportunities leading to success and meaning for their lives.

Diploma.
Charlie not only wants his secondary school diploma for himself and to make his mother proud,
but he also wants to be the first sibling in his family to attain his diploma since his older brothers never earned one.

College.
Charlie felt his diploma would provide the opportunity for him to achieve his goal of having his own automotive business. He knew he needed a diploma from a technical college to give him the additional skills and knowledge he needed to be successful. He stated, "I want to be able to open up my own business, and the only way to do that is with a secondary school diploma so I can go to college."

Career.
Charlie wants to be in the automotive business. One of his older brothers, a secondary school dropout, works as a janitor at a local school. His other older brother, another dropout, is a maintenance worker at the same car dealership where Charlie works doing the same thing. Trey felt that without a diploma, options leading to any kind of career success would be dismal. He stated, "Without a diploma, you not going to get good jobs and in your personal life, you might wind up on the streets and maybe even jail." His personal vision was stated simply, "I want to get a job and one day get a house."

DISCUSSION

Data Analysis
The most powerful data originated from the stories of the participants. To more fully become familiar with these stories, meticulously transcribed interviews were read a minimum of three times. From there, the horizontalization process began in which significant words and sentences were extracted. It was from these words and statements that similar sentences began to emerge. By

arranging and rearranging these sentences, themes began to emerge from which meaning could be derived and developed into important descriptions that yielded what the experience was like from the participants' points of views and how they experienced the phenomenon.

Summary of the Findings

These eight participants provided a treasure trove of information shedding insight into the focus of this study. They shared compelling, heartfelt stories describing their frustrations, hardships, and obstacles that ultimately led to each of them dropping out of secondary school in their senior year. Even more powerful were their voices of hope, aspirations, and success. Their desire for specific characteristics of a secondary school that would meet their needs provided a deep insight into what works and what is lacking in our secondary schools to enable all students to graduate. They readily made suggestions for improvement to secondary school supports based on their own challenges and eventual successes. A glimpse at the graduation rates of the two traditional secondary schools for the last five years shed interesting light on why their rates suddenly spiked during the same year the district's new non-traditional secondary school opened.

Secondary school environments.

The three participants who decided to return to their former traditional secondary school were seeking a comfortable and predictable environment. These three students had been out of school for the shortest length of time. The two males and one female were all African American. Only one of them was employed at the time, but none had children of their own to care for. These participants were the only ones in the entire group who had only one credit to complete as well as one remaining graduation test to pass.

The remaining five participants who enrolled at the non-traditional secondary school were adamant that without the alternative environment, they would have remained a dropout. They spoke of the characteristics of the secondary school that appealed to them and that suited their particular life situation.

Participants who attended the non-traditional secondary school appreciated the flexible attendance policy, evening hours, self-paced coursework, personal attention from teachers, supportive and nurturing environment, and knowledge that they were not the only overage students returning to earn their diploma.

Reasons for senior dropouts.

In their landmark study, *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of Secondary school Dropouts,* Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morison cited that in focus groups from 25 different locations in the United States, students dropped out primarily because of "lack of connection to the school environment; a perception that school is boring; feeling unmotivated; academic challenges; and the weight of real world events" (2006, p. 3).

A longitudinal study prepared by Regional Educational Laboratory West that one cohort for five years in secondary school from 2001-2001 through 2005-2006 and focused on students who dropped out and returned to successfully earn their secondary school diploma (2008). Even though this study took place in a large, urban school district, students in that study encountered most of the same challenges and obstacles as did the participants in this research. Interviews with students revealed "both 'push' and 'pull' factors that motivated their dropout and return to school" (p. iii-iv).

Push factors include "academic struggles, boredom, and limited ways to make up failed course credits," while pull factors were "life circumstances that pull them in directions that stall completion - family crises, employment, pregnancy, and gang pressure" (p. iii-iv).

Social difficulties and feelings of embarrassment were acknowledged as reasons for dropping out as well as reasons for not returning to the traditional secondary school setting. Rose described in detail her discomfort with peers in secondary school and her ongoing anxiety problems that resulted in drug abuse and mandatory time in mental health facilities. Charlie felt embarrassed because of his repeated failures in trying to pass the social studies test. He indicated he felt humiliated by his counselor and select teachers each time the results came back.

Motivations to return for diploma.

The participants shared inspiring goals and dreams they had for themselves upon their decision to return to secondary school. It was the motivations that prompted the returns. Without a reason, a cause, a dream, or a motivation, none of them would have allowed themselves to think they would ever have the chance to pursue endeavors that might lead to more fulfilling adult lives. Without exception, each of them spoke of furthering their education by going to college. Most of them knew their career goals. Kay and Faith shared heartfelt longing to complete secondary school so their own children would never be embarrassed by having a mother who dropped out of secondary school.

All of the participants except for Kyle indicated they were excited about actually walking across the stage in a cap and gown and having their diploma handed to them. Trey expressed how he cannot wait to see his diploma aligned on a wall beside his brothers' diplomas so his mother will be proud of him. For each of them, the actual diploma held deep meaning for them. For them, it represented the reward for their decision to return to secondary school in spite of the challenges that would make the journey difficult, especially when most of their peers had already graduated at least a year before they would.

Perceptions of races.

The participants in this study were evenly split with four African Americans and four Caucasians. Of the four African American participants, three chose to return to the traditional secondary school environment; of the four Caucasian participants, all four chose to attend the non-traditional secondary school environment. Two of the African American students returned to the traditional secondary school because their other siblings had already graduated from the same school, and they wanted to continue the tradition of remaining in that setting for their mothers.

One of the most significant findings among both African American and Caucasian participants is that without exception they all voiced either concerns with or appreciation for family relationships and teacher-student relationships. The theme of relationships was important to all of them. Also, they all expressed the same personal aspirations. They spoke longingly of earning their diploma, going to college one day, and having a fulfilling career.

In addition to considering the differences in perceptions between races, the differences in perceptions between genders is worthy of mention. Two of the females dropped out because of pregnancy and ultimately having to care for their baby, while none of the males indicated they had parenting responsibilities. None of the females were employed, yet all of the males were employed. Of the four female participants, three of them opted to attend the non-traditional secondary school

upon their return. It was an even split among the males. Only one female among all eight participants, Kay, voiced a desire to attend a traditional four-year university to pursue a degree in education. All the other participants, both male and female, indicated a desire to attend technical college.

What is clear is that for whatever reason each participant dropped out of secondary school as a senior, he or she had compelling reasons to return for their diploma. Their voices were strong and passionate in their desire to complete their educational journey started so many years ago. They each desired a meaningful future. They had someone in their lives, as well, whom they could thank for supporting them as they made a final attempt to earn a diploma. Without having a larger sample of participants, it is difficult to extract conclusions about the perceptions of either race in regards to dropping out of secondary school as a senior and returning for a diploma. What is certain, at least among these eight participants, is that they shared a common goal after experiencing a common act of dropping out of secondary school in their senior year.

Recommendations

This study examined the phenomenon of former senior secondary school dropouts who returned to secondary school and achieved their goal of graduating by attending either their former traditional secondary school or a non-traditional secondary school. By allowing them to orally share their stories and speak without judgment, they gave me a rich volume of personal experiences through which they lived and only they could verbalize. From their stories, coupled with their secondary school academic and behavioral history, recommendations were gleaned that could prove useful for the educational leaders in this school district. The recommendations came as no surprise, with the participants identifying them as weaknesses or non-existent in their schools.

Non-traditional secondary school.

Of the eight returning senior dropouts who were participants in this research, five of them selected the district's non-traditional secondary school to attend. The events that had occurred in their lives made it difficult, if not impossible, to return to the daily structure of the traditional secondary school environment. Not only can the non-traditional secondary school provide a viable means for eligible dropouts earn a regular diploma, it could serve as a setting for the most at-risk students in the traditional secondary school who are on the fringes of completing dropping out. The following are specific recommendations to strengthen this program.

- Continue funding the program. It generates enough money from full-time equivalency (FTE) funding that virtually everything requires little to no additional funds.
- Consider moving the program to a more central location where it is more accessible to students who attend it. Currently, it is in a facility many miles out from the main part of the town. Finding transportation and the cost of gasoline is crippling many of the students who yearn to attend more often. There are many facilities closer to town that could be utilized in the evenings, such as an elementary or middle school.
- Research grants that, if obtained, might be used to provide buses for transportation.
- Provide an evening meal for the students even if it is just a sandwich and fruit.
- Continue with the Monday through Thursday schedule. Allow students to come in by appointment on Fridays to receive career counseling, receive assistance with college applications, and map out a timeline for completion.

- Partner with community businesses and organizations for work-based experiences for students.
- Do feature stories in the newspaper highlighting the former dropouts who "made it" and are graduating.
- Collaborate with secondary school principals to determine how the non-traditional secondary school could serve the most at-risk students in their schools so they do not become dropouts.
- Provide equal opportunities for students at the non-traditional secondary school for picture day or senior pictures (for yearbook purposes) as they are currently left out.
- Allow eligible students the option of participating in traditional Secondary school A's and Secondary school B's after school extracurricular activities if they desire.
- Invite juniors and seniors from the non-traditional secondary school to attend any field trips to college campuses. An alternative would be to allow students at the traditional secondary school to have their own field trips to colleges.
- Track students who graduate from the non-traditional secondary school for at least five years to determine if positive changes are reflected in their lives.
- Allow seniors from the non-traditional secondary school to apply for the same local scholarships as seniors from the traditional secondary schools.

Site-based childcare.

Teen mothers, and even teen fathers, struggle with secondary school completion because of their new responsibilities. Most are unprepared for the cost of caring for an infant or toddler, and even fewer have family members or friends who can assist with free daily childcare that would allow the parent to continue going to school on a daily basis. Marshall (2011) succinctly states that the reason so many young teen mothers dropout of out of secondary school is because "the task of balancing their education and a baby proved impossible" (para. 2).

Examining successful models of other secondary schools that have childcare programs is a worthy suggestion for the school district. This program could be woven into a career pathway for students in the field of early childhood education or preschool education, thus vocational funds would help offset the costs of it.

Teacher-student relationships. Most of the participants shared their frustrations regarding what they perceived as uncaring faculty unable to give them the time and personalized attention they needed to be successful. As seniors, they had only a short road to travel to complete their requirements for secondary school. However, lack of access to teachers and counselors, lack of student engagement in classrooms, lack of support for the challenges and obstacles they were dealing with in their personal lives, and lack of feeling liked they "belonged" had a deeply negative impact on some of the participants. Rimm-Kaufman points out that teacher-student relationship have a deep and lasting impact on the academic and emotional well-being of students. She stated:

Those students who have close, positive and supportive relationships with their teachers will attain higher levels of achievement than those students with more conflictual relationships. If a student feels a personal connection to a teacher, experiences frequent communication with a teacher, and receives more guidance and praise than criticism from the teacher, then the student is likely to become more trustful of that teacher, show more engagement in the academic content presented, display better classroom behavior, and achieve at higher levels academically (2012, Introduction section, para. 1).

The following recommendations might be considered in developing a plan to ensure students feel important, worthy of individual time, and valued.

- Identify struggling learners in the classroom and ensure they receive additional encouragement and

  help in mastering course content.
- Find time to talk to students to build trust (in between classes, before and after school, lunch, special events, designated appointments).
- Exhaust all means of following up on students who stop coming to school. Develop a plan to help them finish based on the specific needs of the student.
- Conduct self-analysis of instructional techniques to ensure differentiated instruction is effective.
- Provide support to teachers who are not engaging all students in the classrooms.
- Create times so counselors can meet more often with students known to be at-risk for dropping out and especially those students who specifically seek out time with a counselor but do not receive it.
- Develop counseling groups that focus on small groups of students sharing similar problems to brainstorm ways to keep them in school and provide necessary supports, such as for pregnant teens, students who are working to help support families, and students who repeatedly take and fail graduation tests.
- Develop a "Teachers as Mentors" initiative to ensure every student has a designated mentor in the school.
- Have teacher mentors send personalized encouragement notes or letters to students for even small accomplishments. Acknowledge student efforts.
- Ensure all faculty and staff are respectful to students.
- Develop a survey to assess student feelings regarding teacher-student relationships. Create a plan of action based on the results.

Effective and engaging classes.

Much has been written about the benefits of engaging, relevant, interactive classrooms for students. Teachers who utilize differentiated instruction with fidelity can enable struggling learners to be as success as their higher achieve counterparts. Beach (2010) states that "the use of differentiated instruction, combined with multiple methodologies in teaching and learning, motivates students of varying student learning styles and reflects a democracy that works in the classroom" (p. 1). She further states that "in a heterogeneous classroom, students living in poverty, lacking a parent at home, abused, unable to make decisions for themselves or struggling to be noticed, need a teacher willing to help them perform and identify their individual learning strengths" (2010, p. 1).

Specific recommendations to address making courses more engaging, relevant, interactive, and differentiated for all students include:

- Provide professional development classes for teachers that promote an engaging classroom.
- Provide initial and refresher training for teachings in the use of differentiated instruction.
- Provide opportunities for the best teachers utilizing differentiated instruction to mentor new teachers or struggling teachers in the use of a highly effective instructional classroom.
- Reevaluate effectiveness of current co-teaching classes and consider additional ones, if needed, to ensure students with disabilities have access to equal educational opportunities.

- Ensure teachers are utilizing effective classroom management techniques so the focus remains on instruction.
- Conduct a student survey to determine which classes are engaging and which ones are not.
- Develop learner-centered classroom for higher levels of engagement for all students.
- Conduct more impromptu, short classroom observations by administrators and instructional coaches to observe teaching practices.
- Integrate "more effective instructional environments" in the school's improvement plan.

Graduation tests preparation.
  Half of the participants indicated they would have liked to have better preparations for the required graduation tests. The participants voiced their frustrations at what they felt was a lack of adequate preparation for the tests.
  The following are specific recommendations that address the apparent weaknesses in preparing all students for the graduation tests.
- Develop review classes that involve direct teacher instruction utilizing games, PowerPoint presentations, flash cards, Internet scavenger hunts, and practice test items.
- Do practice tests that utilize questions from previous years.
- Do a "question of the day" in all major content classes beginning in ninth grade at the beginning of each class period that takes no more than two minutes to complete.
- Begin reviews at least one month before the tests, and focus on one test each day of the week.
- Conduct the reviews after school or in the evenings, or rearrange the daily schedule to create a 30-minute slot during each school day for reviews.
- Have a "Test Blitz" one day before tests begin to review all major topics.
- Have a pep rally for students taking the tests the Friday before they begin to get them excited about doing well.

Implications for Further Research
This study investigated what secondary school environment former senior year dropouts choose, when given an option, upon their reentry to secondary school. The eight participants shared their unique stories that explained why they dropped out as seniors, what motivated them to return for their diploma, and why a diploma mattered to them. This study was not quantitative in nature as it was the detailed understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon that was important. By allowing the participants to articulate their stories in their own words, without any changes or corrections in the transcription process, common themes emerged. These themes enabled this to draw conclusions that this school district, as well as other districts, might consider to provide eligible secondary school dropouts with a wider array of options for earning their secondary school diploma.

Because this particular research was limited to African American and Caucasian students in a mid-size town in South Georgia, different results might emerge utilizing similar qualitative methods in large urban schools, as well as with the inclusions of other races. Another recommendation would be to expand the size of the participants in the study to expand on the lived experiences of former senior year dropouts. Conducting the study in school districts where there are no options other than the traditional secondary school environments might yield differing results as would conducting the study in urban areas where an array of options for earning a secondary school diploma are offered.

A longitudinal study to follow returning dropouts, especially senior year dropouts, for five to ten years to determine if they achieved any of their career goals might prove beneficial. In order to convince school districts that both traditional and non-traditional secondary school environments are needed to meet the needs of all students, they will most likely need compelling data supporting the idea that a secondary school diploma for former dropouts leads to post-secondary education and employability.

Finally, quantitative studies using statistical analysis could utilize student surveys, dropout return data, satisfaction scales of students and teachers from both traditional and non-traditional secondary schools, and comparison of graduation rates and dropout rates to yield numerical conclusions unavailable in a qualitative study. These quantitative studies might investigate specific data from several different geographic locations, from districts

representative of different cultural and racial communities, and from districts of varying sizes.

Conclusion

The participants in this study were former senior year dropouts who made the important decision to return to secondary school for their diploma before they became ineligible to do so. In doing so, they were faced with choosing to return to either their former traditional secondary school or the new non-traditional secondary school. Three participants who had been out of school the shortest length of time and had no prevailing responsibilities such as a job or a child opted to return to their former traditional secondary school. The remaining five participants selected the non-traditional secondary school because of the flexibility it offered in attendance, seat time, and course pacing.

In sharing their stories, they told of the compelling reasons that caused them to make the critical decision to drop out of school in their senior year. Then they spoke of their dreams and goals that they wanted to achieve in life that could only be accomplished by first obtaining a secondary school diploma.

The non-traditional secondary school has already enabled former dropouts to return and to earn their secondary school diploma. It has proven its worth and has demonstrated that it could be a primary factor in a substantial increase in the district's graduation rate that coincided with the opening of the non-traditional secondary school. Secondary school dropouts who have a viable means of returning to secondary school for their diploma can lead a more fulfilling life and can contribute to the economic well-being of the community.

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