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The Perception of Principals Related to Select Intervention Factors Affecting Student Drop-Out Rate in Three Urban High Schools

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ABSTRACT

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THE PERCEPTION OF PRINCIPALS RELATED TO SELECT INTERVENTION

FACTORS AFFECTING STUDENT DROP-OUT RATES IN THREE

URBAN HIGH SCHOOLS

Committee Chair: Barbara Hill, Ed.D.

Dissertation dated May 2018

Although graduation rates are increasing in Georgia and in the United States, high school dropouts remain an issue of significant concern. Much of the focus of research in this area has been on describing the characteristics of dropouts rather than on developing effective interventions. Moreover, emerging research shows that potential dropouts can be identified with confidence as early as the sixth grade. High school is the time in which dropouts are typically identified and interventions begun, but the seeds of dropping out are often planted well before ninth grade.

This study is about school administrators' perceptions of drop-out factors in three urban high schools. The research design lies within the qualitative spectrum. Data were gathered from semistructured, open-ended interviews conducted with selected participants. Results showed there were no significant differences in the perception of

high school principals as to the importance of specific intervention factors affecting student dropout rates. The participants agreed that instructional coaches, after-school and Saturday school programs and the use of data to target content needs of specific students were the common themes of support to students at-risk of not completing high school requirements.

THE PERCEPTION OF PRINCIPALS RELATED TO SELECT INTERVENTION
FACTORS AFFECTING STUDENT DROP-OUT RATES IN THREE
URBAN HIGH SCHOOLS

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

BY

HARVEY BEASLEY

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The number of students failing to complete high school in the United States is a significant social and economic problem. It is estimated that nearly 1.3 million students who entered high school in 2010 will fail to earn a diploma at all (Rumberger & Rotermund, 2012). An emerging trend in research in dropout prevention is the idea that dropping out is not a singular event but rather a process that begins long before the student actually stops coming to school (Bruce, Bridgeland, Fox, & Balfanz, 2011; Doll, Eslami, & Walters, 2013). As a result, much effort is being placed into developing early warning systems for identifying potential dropouts and beginning interventions as soon as warning signs begin to manifest (Burrus & Roberts, 2012; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). Even though compulsory attendance laws often keep at-risk students in school until high school, warning signs of dropping out are clearly evident as early as sixth grade and sometimes even earlier (Neild, Balfanz, & Herzog, 2007).

Background

After hovering near 70% for nearly two decades, in the 2011-2012 school year the national four-year high school graduation rate finally reached 80% (Stetser & Stilwell, 2014). The four-year graduation rate for minorities, including African Americans and Hispanics, has historically been approximately 50%, even though now this number is

finally creeping closer to 67% (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009, Stetser & Stilwell, 2014). In spite of these increases, one in five high school students and one in three minority students will not graduate within four years. This creates a significant problem in the American educational system and for society at large, and this problem has received increasing study and attention. In an era of increased demands of education, skills, and training, high school dropouts face a bleak economic future (America's Promise Alliance, 2014; Center for Promise, 2014; Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenburg, 2008). They may find themselves without the basics required to be competitive in the modern global society. In addition, high school dropouts have higher rates of unemployment and incarceration and are more likely to be of poor health and on government assistance (McIntosh, Flannery, Sugai, Braun, & Cochrane, 2008). Also, of great concern is the fact that minorities and children of poverty are far more likely to drop out, and the graduation rate of minorities is 15-20 percentage points lower than that of white students (Pharris-Ciurej, Hirschman, & Willhoft, 2012; Balfanz, Bridgeland, Moore & Fox, 2010).

Much of the research relating to dropouts and dropout prevention has focused on identifying factors that place students at risk for not completing high school. Social learning theory as described by Bandura (1977) plays a key role in how students respond to risk factors as it relates to completing school. Bandura notes that a person's experiences, behavior, and environment influence the choices he or she makes, and the ability to make sound decisions to achieve his or her goals is crucial, especially at this stage of development (Grusec, 1992). Additionally, while there are sometimes significant singular events that cause a student to drop out (like an economic factor such as a parent

losing a job and a student has to go to work or a traumatic event that causes a student to lose interest in school), in general dropping out of school is a process that follows a course over a number of years.

Early research tended to focus on what caused students to drop out and what could be done once that decision was made. Self-determination theory comes into play as adolescents find their intrinsic and extrinsic motivations through autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2011). Students at risk for dropping out often have significant shortcomings in those three areas. Teachers at the middle school level often deal with the intense changes associated with adolescent maturation but may not have made the connection that deficiencies in this area place students at risk for dropping out. Likewise, high school teachers may feel limited in addressing these deficiencies by the structural limitations of the school environment; Beland (2014) notes that commonly used motivators and rewards in the school environment do not address those areas effectively. More recent studies have changed the discussion to the process itself and interventions that can and should take place earlier. As a result, the time frame of when dropout prevention should begin has shifted from the actual point at which students drop out to the middle to high school transition and even earlier during the middle school years.

The transition to high school is one of the most critical stages during a student's academic career (Pharris-Ciurej et al., 2012). Students who get off-track by failing courses early in high school are far less likely to graduate, much less on time with their classmates. The ninth grade year has become a key time in the area of dropout prevention

because of the difficulty in transitioning from a middle school to a high school environment and the change in social expectations as students develop into maturity. Schools are placing added focus to help ensure successful completion of the ninth grade because students who are retained have lower achievement levels and/or more disciplinary problems than students who regularly earn promotion (Stearns, Moller, Blau, & Potochnick, 2007).

Research on dropout patterns shows three key factors that predict potential dropouts (Johnson & Semmelroth, 2010). First is a pattern of poor academic performance as evidenced by low grades, low test scores, failing core courses, or not earning promotion. Second is a lack of engagement, which is characterized by high absenteeism, poor disciplinary records, and bad relationships with peers and teachers (Hoff, Olson, & Peterson, 2015). Third is the transition issue, where students exhibit difficulty in the transition years, either between elementary and middle school, or between middle and high school, or both. In fact, the transition year between middle and high school has been found to be the most important time in predicting school completion (Johnson & Semmelroth, 2010).

As important as the transition from middle to high school is, the potential for dropping out frequently manifests itself well before high school. A study by Neild et al. (2007) demonstrated that many students who drop out of high school send signals for several years before reaching the ninth grade. This study researched a cohort of entering sixth graders and identified students who received failing final grades in math or English, attendance below 80% for the year, or a final poor conduct grade in at least one subject.

Neild et al. (2007) found that only 29% of sixth graders with just one of these risk factors would graduate and only 7% of sixth graders with all four risk factors would graduate; more than 50% of those who ultimately dropped out of high school demonstrated one or more of those signals during eighth grade.

Balfanz (2009) conducted similar research and found that sixth graders who failed math or language arts, attended class less than 80% of the time, or received poor conduct grades had a less than 20% chance of graduating on time and less than 25% in five years. Moreover, research has also shown course failure in math or English in middle school was a more reliable predictor of potential dropout than test scores (Andrews, 2011; Balfanz, 2009). Clearly the lack of school completion is no longer a high school problem, as Balfanz's (2009) research showed, it was possible to identify half and sometimes more of potential dropouts in the middle grades. Risk factors often begin manifesting in middle school, and interventions should begin once these risk factors are evident.

Unfortunately, most educators often do not know how to deal with struggling middle and high schoolers. Teachers frequently wait, and hope students improve as they mature or label the issues as temporary due to the adjustment from elementary to middle school (Andrews, 2011). Likewise, students who struggled academically and were retained in elementary school continue to struggle academically and behaviorally in middle school (Im, Hughes, Kwok, Puckett, & Cerda, 2013). In addition, in some states, sixth grade is a gateway for standardized testing, and students deficient in this area are targeted for retention. Retention, in turn, places these students over the usual age for their grade and more likely to drop out (Balfanz, 2009; Stearns et al., 2007).

Problem Statement

A current gap in the literature exists in that much of the research about dropping out has focused on describing dropouts rather than on strategies to prevent their exit (Knesting-Lund, Reese, & Boody, 2013). In addition, while significant research in dropout prevention at the high school level exists, there is not nearly as much about what can be done to address the issue of dropping out before students reach ninth grade. Still, new research and strategies are emerging, particularly as they relate to transition between middle and high school. High schools are using strategies such as graduation coaches and freshman academies to address the needs of these students and help keep them on track (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) note that ninth graders have the lowest grade point average, lowest attendance rates, and highest discipline and course failure rates of any high school grade level. Effective dropout prevention programs should likely focus on middle school and early high school, particularly the ninth grade. However, since research is showing the importance of beginning dropout prevention and intervention even earlier, more research is warranted in the area of early intervention, particularly in middle school (Balfanz, 2009).

Middle school teachers likely do not perceive the importance of their role in dropout prevention and intervention because the focus of middle school is often preparing for high school and less on actually graduating from high school, but McIntosh et al. (2008) write that waiting until high school to begin interventions may be too late. Andrews (2011) argues that middle school is a crucial time for young adolescents and their prospects for high school graduation, yet there is little research into the perceptions

of middle school educators of the importance of the middle grades in dropout prevention. The literature also has not addressed the awareness of middle school teachers as it relates to at-risk factors and dropout intervention strategies. A number of studies have been conducted (e.g., Bridgeland et al., 2009; Knesting-Lund et al., 2013; Knesting-Lund et al., 2015) that have surveyed high school teachers and administrators to measure their perceptions of at-risk students' reasons for dropping out, and those studies have even addressed internal, personal factors versus external and school-related factors. But so far the research has not connected the perceptions and knowledge of middle school teachers who may be far more effective in identifying and implementing a true early-warning system for dropout intervention. Given that the structure of middle school often allows for more meaningful student-teacher relationships (as opposed to the more impersonal structure of high school) and the fact that compulsory attendance creates a more captive audience where interventions can be applied before students have the choice of dropping out, middle school seems ripe for research into effective identification of and interventions for at-risk students.

Likewise, the existing research has lacked the depth to devise meaningful interventions. According to Kennelly and Monrad (2007), "Currently, there is not an extensive menu of proven strategies and interventions tailored for key dropout prevention initiatives most appropriate for various risk factors at differing stages across the education pipeline" (p. 2). While the process of dropping out has been described as the culmination of a complex series of factors, the literature on dropout interventions has been focused more on describing dropouts and therefore simplistic in its prescription for

action to address this area of significant societal concern (Knesting-Lund et al., 2013). The problem is that the focus of research has been on identifying dropouts and risk factors, but that research has yielded little in the area of developing effective Interventions to prevent dropping out when students are identified as at-risk.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this research study was to examine the perceived knowledge of and differences in perceptions of dropout risk factors and prevention strategies between three high school administrators. Research has shown identification and prevention of dropouts is an area of significant focus at the high school level; whereas, middle schools are often more focused on preparing students for high school and not on ensuring high school completion (Montgomery & Hirth, 2011; Neild et al., 2008). This study sheds light on the differences in what high school administrators perceived about dropout risk factors and prevention methods. The independent variables are student attendance, student discipline, organizational structure, monitoring systems, and motivation. The dependent variables is the dropout rate.

Research Questions

The following three qualitative survey questions served as guides for research into this problem:

RQ1: How much of a problem is the student dropout rate at your school?

RQ2: What do principals consider to be the main causes of low graduation rate in their schools?

RQ3: What types of intervention programs have the schools either implemented or considering in order to address student dropout problems?

Significance of the Study

This study was significant because students' failure to complete high school continues to be an issue of great concern for school districts and for society at large (Neild et al., 2008). Much of the existing literature has focused on identifying the characteristics of dropouts themselves but not in identifying methods to help address the issue. Only recently has the research begun to pivot toward moving beyond recognizing students at risk for dropping out and actually developing early-warning systems and interventions for these students (Hoff et al., 2015). Dropping out has largely been considered a high school problem since that is the time in which students are actually able to legally quit school, and much of the research has taken place with both high school students and high school administrators (Knesting-Lund et al., 2013; Knesting-Lund, O'Rourke, & Gabriele, 2015). Compulsory attendance laws force students to remain in school until they reach a certain age, which in Georgia is currently 16 (Georgia Department of Public Education, 2014).

As a result, much of the focus of identifying potential dropouts and developing dropout intervention has focused on high schools (Cushman, 2006; Johnson & Semmelroth, 2010). Since emerging research shows that risk factors for dropping out manifest before ninth grade and potential dropouts can be identified as early as sixth grade, then the focus of dropout prevention efforts must begin as soon as possible (Neild, 2009; Neild et al., 2008). In fact, Lys (2009) argued that middle school is a much more

appropriate time to identify and intervene on behalf of potential dropouts than high school, and Smith and Herzog (2014) have identified seminal moments in elementary school that can get students off the graduation track before they make it to middle school. Given that dropping out is considered the culmination of a process and is rarely a singular event, it is crucial that teachers and school personnel be able to recognize dropout risk factors and refer students for intervention (Bruce, Bridgeland, Fox, & Balfanz, 2011; Doll, Eslami, & Walters, 2013). As such, this study adds to body of knowledge related to the difference between the perceptions and knowledge of dropout risk factors and interventions for high school administrators.

The significance in this study was rooted in the fact that interventions are much more effective when started at the first manifestation of risk factors (Neild, Balfanz, & Herzog, 2007). The perception of school administrators as it relates to dropout risk factors and interventions as compared to high school teachers is crucial because despite the gains in research and knowledge on this subject, Georgia's dropout rate increased in 2014-15 for the first time in eight years (Bonner, 2016). There was a 7.6% increase in dropouts from the previous year, and dropout rates increased across all ethnicities except Asian during that time frame (Georgia Department of Public Education, 2016). Therefore, this study provides valuable insight into how school administrators perceive the risk factors associated with dropping out compared to non-high school administrators, where the focus of dropout prevention often rests. This gives rise to the idea that more accurate perceptions of these factors might possibly lead to more effective identification

and more timely and effective intervention in the prevention of dropping out. The following data clearly states the magnitude of student dropout challenges state wide.

Georgia Graduation Rate/Dropout Data

1. The national high school graduation rate is at an all-time high. The eye opening concern comes when one out of five students fail to earn a high school diploma on time across the nation.
2. High school graduation rates hit a record high in 2015.
3. Do not call them dropouts, but make an effort to understanding the experiences that cause young people to leave high school prior to graduation. Young people do not leave high school for a single reason, it is a cluster of reasons that becomes too much: caregiving for siblings or parents, bouncing around in foster care, homeless, etc.

High School Dropout Statistics

1. Total number of U.S. high school dropouts annually is 3,030,000.
2. Total number of high school students who drop out each day is 8,300.
3. The percentage of all dropouts that happen in the ninth grade is 36%.
4. The percentage of students that repeat the ninth grade and go on to graduate is 15%.
5. The percentage of U.S. crimes committed by high school dropouts is 75%.
6. The percentage of U.S. jobs a high school dropout is not eligible for is 90%.

Table 1 shows demographics of high school dropouts for selected years,

Table 1

Demographics of High School Dropouts

Year	Total	White	Black	Hispanic
2014	7.1	4.7	8.7	15.1
2013	7.9	5.0	9.1	15.9
2009	8.1	5.2	9.6	17.6

*Georgia's newest dropout rates indicate that only 67% of students are completing high school. This means that students that take more than 4 years to graduate are automatically placed in the dropout category even if they do graduate in their 5th or 6th year in high school.

The data back up the fact the we have a problem with student dropouts in this state and this research study adds to possible intervention strategies to ameliorate challenges faced by urban high school principals.

Summary

Because existing research has gaps regarding the high school dropout population, and the role of school administrators, this study fills those gaps by providing additional data from the perspectives of three high school principals. The best teachers with the biggest teaching “bag of tricks”, recognize that numerous factors interfere with administrator’s ability to reach many of their students. Students in schools A, B, and C, today are increasingly victims of many social forces that negatively affects their role as students.

Many families are in a state of change and until it becomes stabilized, in whatever form, children’s unmet physical and emotional needs will continue to interfere with their

to learn, adjust in school, and graduate with their diploma. Historically, research on high school dropouts has focused on describing the students who leave, rather than effective approaches to prevent their exiting. The research literature on dropout intervention strategies is mostly descriptive in nature with significant limitations and conceptualization of dropout and methodology (Lehr, Hensen, Sinclair, & Christenson, 2003).

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

What is the root cause of the failure to finish high school, and what can be done about it? While there may sometimes be a significant singular social or economic event that influences a student to leave school before completion, the decision to drop out is the culmination of a long term process of academic, psychological, and behavioral disengagement from school (America's Promise Alliance, 2014; Christensen and Stout, 2009; Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007; Im et al., 2013; Neild et al., 2008). As Bradshaw, O'Brennan, and McNeely (2008) put it, "There is an increasing awareness that school failure and early school leaving are processes, rather than discrete events" (p. 19). Students frequently experience several causes at the same time until they become so overwhelmed that dropping out of school seems like a better decision than staying in (McNeil, Coppola, Radigan, & Vazquez Heiling, 2008). Much of the literature on dropout prevention has focused on identifying potential dropouts and the risk factors they demonstrate rather than the promotion of competencies that increase the likelihood of high school success (America's Promise Alliance, 2015; Balfanz, 2009; Bradshaw et al., 2008; Knesting-Lund et al., 2013). The competencies required for school success include a positive sense of self, self-control, decision-making skills, a moral system of belief, and social connectedness (Bradshaw et al., 2008).

The variables for the study are student attendance, student discipline, organizational structure, monitoring systems, and motivation. These are the independent variables that help shape the high school dropout rate and the dependent variable is high school dropout rates. These variables examined factors predictive of dropping out of high school.

Definition of Variables

Poverty is defined as scarcity or the lack of a certain amount of material/money possessions. Poverty is a multifaceted concept which may include social, economics, and political elements.

Organizational structure is a system that consists of explicit and implicit institutional rules and policies designed to outline how various work roles and responsibilities are delegated, controlled, and coordinated. Organizational structure also determines how information flows from level to level within the company. For example, in a centralized structure, decision flows from the top down while in a decentralized structure the decisions are made at various different levels.

Monitoring systems: school based management is one of the most challenging tasks as far as human resources development is concerned. As a manager, the school head must be able to balance completing requirements of school improvements, teacher's development and the provision of quality teaching and learning processes. As an integral part of the education system, the school head must be able to adjust to the need and expectation of stakeholders.

Motivation is the reason for people's action, desires, and needs. Motivation is also one's definition of behavior or what causes a person to want to repeat a behavior;

motive is what prompts a person to act in a certain way or at least develop an inclination for specific behavior. Motivation is a word that is part of the popular culture and viewed as few other psychological concepts are

Crime is an illegal act for which someone can be punished by the government. It is a gross violation of the law and a grave offense especially against morality.

High school dropout is a person who has abandoned a course of study or rejected conventional society to peruse an alternate lifestyle. A dropout is also concerned to be a student who fails to complete school.

Student Transitional Stages

The transition from middle to high school involves several physical, emotional, and cognitive changes. There are quite a few theories related to high school drop-outs. For this research, the researcher selected:

Adult Learning Theory: This theory shifts power and control from the instructor to the student. The theory rests on constructive assumptions that for adult learning to take place, the learning process and context must be relevant or meaningful to the student (King 1993). The 2006 silent epidemic report found that almost half of high school dropouts leave school because they find it uninteresting and irrelevant to their lives (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006). Incorporating elements of adult learning theory into our high school teaching practices and curriculum is a viable approach to addressing our nations dropout crisis.

Self-determination Theory, as developed by Deci and Ryan (2011), is crucial in a potential dropout's decision of whether or not to complete school. Self-determination

theory deals with intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and posits that those forms of motivation address three basic human needs: competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2011). Their research has demonstrated that students at risk for dropping out often face significant deficits in the areas of competence and relatedness, thus narrowing the opportunity for developing autonomy within the educational environment. Adolescents frequently seek an internal control of their surroundings and want to control their own destinies and attribute their success or failure to their own actions (America's Promise Alliance, 2015). Further, Deci and Ryan (2011) identified those primary motivators as ABC: autonomy, belonging, and competence; these findings were in opposition to the commonly-used school motivators of competition and external reward (Beland, 2014).

Cognitive Theory is another relevant theory which addresses the manner in which students learn. Students frequently come to high school with striking academic deficiencies. The primary indicator of risk of leaving school before graduation is lack of academic success, and therefore any effective dropout prevention program must take into account learning challenges and how to overcome them. Effective school completion programs address social learning, self system models, and cognitive factors as part of a larger-scale dropout prevention strategy.

There are other theories that explain why people do act the way they do. The social control theory, problem-prone behavior a general deviancy theory, primary socialization theories, social learning theory, peer cluster theory, deviant affiliation, the theory of differential association, and finally the strain theory (Townshend et al., 2007). These theories are all tied to deviance which contributes to dropping out of high school.

Historical Summary

The social and economic prospects for high school dropouts in the United States are bleak and place them at a severe disadvantage (Dorn, 1993). Adolescents who do not graduate from high school are more likely to be unemployed, homeless, a teen parent, or involved with the criminal justice system (America's Promise Alliance, 2014). Christle et al. (2007) offers that 56% of high school dropouts were unemployed compared with only 16% of high school graduates. Moreover, 52% of welfare recipients and 82% of the prison population are high school dropouts. For minorities, the effects of leaving school early are even starker; in 2000, black male dropouts were more likely to be incarcerated than employed (Neild et al., 2008). Yet the "dropout crisis" in this country is still a relatively new construct, not really making its first appearance until the 1960s (Christenson & Stout, 2009; Dorn, 1993; Dorn, 2003; Jacob & Lefgren, 2007). The concept of a dropout was meaningless throughout the early part of the 20th century since few people graduated from high school in the first place (Kamenetz, 2015).

The context and meaning of what a high school dropout is and how dropouts have been reported have changed over time. Much of this change has derived from changes in the purpose of high school, itself and the subsequent value of high school completion. Elementary schooling was widespread in the United States prior to 1900, but few adolescents attended, much less graduated from, secondary schools (Dorn, 2003). There were relatively few secondary schools and it was difficult and expensive for most students to obtain a secondary education. At the turn of the 20th century, a primary reason to attend high school was to gain admission to college, and most high schools

offered a classical Latin curriculum for this purpose (Goldin, 1994). Because of this narrow focus in the early 1900s, fewer than ten percent of adolescents were even enrolled in high school, and only about half of those graduated. (Goldin, 1994; Dorn, 2003; Montgomery & Hirth, 2011). Students frequently left school in their early teens for apprenticeships, family, or other work reasons, and that was acceptable within the American landscape.

The rise in demand for secondary education coincided with changes in industrial patterns and labor necessities in the early 20th century. Industries that had previously been dependent on juvenile labor, required less youths to work with the onset of automation and an influx of adult immigrant workers (Goldin, 1994). This led to a significant change in the reason for seeking secondary education as the new economy created white-collar jobs that required more education than the elementary level provided but less than college or university (Goldin, 1998). Early in the 20th century, it was relatively easy for a teenager to find employment, so there was little reason to remain in school beyond age 13 or so. Education became more important, and a high school credential became key to accessing these new white-collar jobs (Dorn, 2003). Likewise, factory work in the early to mid-1900s could be productive and comfortable, and did not require a high school diploma, but that type of work gradually required more education and technical training (Montgomery & Hirth, 2011).

Thus, the high school movement began in the period from 1910-1940, in which the modern American high school was born. The transformation of secondary education was so drastic and so fast that the high school of 1930 bears a closer resemblance to a contemporary high school than it did to a high school in 1900 (Goldin 1994; Goldin,

1998). As more students enrolled in high school seeking employment training rather than college admission, the number of high school graduates planning to go directly to college fell from roughly 55% in 1900 to fewer than 25% by 1930. It was not until the 1970s that the percentages planning to enroll directly in college rebounded to their pre-1920 levels (Goldin, 1998).

Increasing numbers of students enrolled in high school who did not plan to go to college led to an examination of and shift in the classic Latin curriculum that high schools had previously used (Goldin, 1994; Goldin, 1998). Vocational and technical courses were added to the curriculum and remain as part of the secondary curriculum today. In addition, the junior high school concept came about in the 1920s as a response to the high dropout rate of 14 to 16-year old's who had previously not completed schooling (Goldin, 1994). The junior high school was designed to provide academic, vocational, and technical training to students who did not intend on completing the full twelve-year course of study. Likewise, vocational and technical courses remain part of the middle school curriculum even today; although, the expectation is for students to advance to and complete high school (Goldin, 1994).

Enrollment in high school continued to climb so that by 1960, 90% of adolescents were enrolled in secondary education, compared to around 10% just 50 years earlier (Goldin, 1994). Simply providing access to schools helped drive enrollment increases as many students, especially in rural areas, did not have easy access to a high school. As high schools were built and buses provided transportation to secondary schools, there was a corresponding increase in enrollment (Goldin, 1994). Where it was once common and even expected that students would leave school before completion, the perceived value of

an education as access to employment and greater levels of success also drove high school enrollment and completion (Goldin, 1994; Dorn, 1996; Dorn, 2003). Today school is seen as a dominant feature in a child's life, and where students once left school in their early teens, they now attend school until they are legal adults (Dorn, 2003).

High school completion rates spiked initially with the influx of new students and reached levels near 70% by around 1930 and remained relatively flat for the next 70 years or so (Goldin, 1994; Dorn, 2003). Given that three in ten students did not finish high school, graduation simply was not expected of all students prior to the 1960s as it was not an accepted societal norm (Dorn, 1996). The evolution of American society in the post-war baby-boom era included the expectation that adolescents would attend school through high school graduation; even more important than that expectation was the development of the notion that school completion was a route to economic and social success. Nevertheless, dropping out of school was not seen as a serious social problem until the 1960s (Dorn, 2003).

After the initial interest in the late 1950s through the mid-1960s in the societal and economic impacts of dropping out of school, the issue seemed to move to the back burner as American society went through the tumultuous late-1960s and 1970s as many societal expectations changed. The publication of the report *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 again returned the issues associated with lack of school completion to the leading edge of educational discussion in America (Christenson & Stout, 2009; Dorn, 2003). While “dropout” remained (and still remains) the primary term to identify someone without a high school diploma, the term “at-risk” entered the dialogue and was applied to youth who faced additional barriers to school completion (Christenson & Stout, 2009; Dorn,

1993; Kamenetz, 2015). In the wake of *A Nation at Risk* came increased calls for accountability that led to an increase in grade retention to reach proficiency and the beginnings of the high-stakes testing model which exists today and exacerbates the high school dropout problem (Dorn, 2003; McNeil et al., 2008; Montgomery & Hirth, 2011).

At the root of the dropout crisis are a variety of societal and economic complications associated with at-risk youth who become high school dropouts. Students who drop out of school are more likely to be unemployed, to earn lower wages, to show increased risks of health problems, and to receive government assistance (McIntosh et al., 2008). Cohen and Smerdon (2009) pointed out, “According to one recent report, the nearly 1.3 million students who failed to graduate in 2004 will cost the nation more than \$325 billion in lost wages, taxes, and productivity during their lifetimes” (p.178).

There is also specific concern as it relates to the high numbers of minorities and those who live in urban areas who drop out before completing high school. African American, Native American, and Hispanic students all have higher than average dropout rates as do those students born outside the United States (Lys, 2009; McNeil et al., 2008; Pharris-Ciurej et al., 2012). Low-income urban youth also demonstrate significant risk factors in truancy and school disengagement (America’s Promise Alliance, 2014; Rodriguez & Conchas, 2009). Other key risk factors for dropping out include socioeconomic status, lack of parental or family support, behavior problems, poor academic performance, and grade retention (Stearns et al., 2007). Additionally, boys make up a higher percentage of those likely to drop out given that they have a higher percentage of school suspensions and are referred for special education four times as frequently as girls (Lamport & Bulgin, 2010).

As previously noted, after an initial spike high school graduation rates remained relatively flat from the 1930s to the early 2000s. Conversely, as it was reported that high school graduation rates began to stagnate in the 1970s, the United States often reported completion rates of well over 80% (Ziomek-Daigle & Andrews, 2009). Research has found that this number is frequently based in self-reported household surveys and census-type data, and often includes those who have completed alternative high school programs or equivalency programs such as a GED (Pharris-Ciurej et al., 2012). The number of students who actually receive a high school diploma within four years has hovered around 70% (Henry, Knight, & Thornberry, 2012). At the same time, the four-year graduation rates for minorities, including African Americans and Hispanics, are approximately 50% (America's Promise Alliance, 2014; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; McNeil et al., 2008). In the 2011- 2012 school year, the United States reported a four-year graduation rate of 80%, although minorities were still lower at approximately 67% (Stetser & Stilwell, 2014). While this indicates a significant increase, it still means one in five high school students and one in three minority students will not complete high school within four years. This clearly indicates a crisis within the American educational system.

For years, there was little in the way of data related to why students dropped out before finishing high school and, more important, what could be done about it. As a result, key indicators for dropping out were missed, or supports were given over a large scale and missed those students who most needed them (Bruce et al., 2011).

Current Issue Discussion/Emergent Theme

What a potential dropout looks like, what risk factors a dropout demonstrates, how early those factors manifest, and what can be done to ameliorate those factors drive the discussion on dropouts and dropout prevention. Unfortunately, there is no uniform profile of students who fail to graduate nor is there a single factor that leads to the decision to leave school (America's Promise Alliance, 2014). Similarly, there are students who would seem to be prime candidates to drop out who find a way to finish school, while students who seem to lack many of the usual risk factors end up dropping out (Montgomery & Hirth, 2011).

There is general consensus among the research that the decision to drop out is typically a long-term process and not a singular event (America's Promise Alliance, 2014; Bradshaw, Brennan, & McNeely, 2008; Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007; Christensen and Stout, 2009; Im et al., 2013; Neild et al., 2008). Adolescents who drop out are more likely to be from single parent homes, to be of a lower socioeconomic status, to have parents and/or siblings who dropped out, to show academic deficiencies including grade retention, to be frequently absent, and to have behavioral challenges (America's Promise Alliance, 2014; Christenson & Stout, 2009; Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007; Montgomery & Hirth, 2011; Slack, Johnson, Dodor, & Woods, 2013). Dropouts also are more likely to be male, to be older than their peers, to be minority, to have family fragmentation, and to have to work to support the household (Lys, 2009; Mann, 2013; Neild et al., 2008). The accumulation of these conditions, referred to as risk factors, help drive the identification of and interventions for prospective dropouts;

although, having one risk factor or even several is not always a reliable predictor of not completing school (Christenson & Stout, 2009).

Still, these risk factors are the primary predictors of leaving school before graduation. The America's Promise Alliance (2014) found adolescents in their study frequently mentioned 25 different risk factors as playing a role in a decision to leave or stay in school. Meanwhile, Suh and Suh (2007) analyzed data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth and considered 180 variables as possible contributing factors to dropping out of school. They whittled those down to 16 statistically significant predictors. Of those 16, three had the greatest significance: academic risk, behavioral risk, and socioeconomic risk. Their study takes a position that early intervention should begin when students begin to show one or more of those risk factors and not wait until a set time or age to begin intervention.

Research on dropout patterns shows three key factors that predict potential dropouts (Johnson & Semmelroth, 2010). The first is students who have a pattern of poor academic performance as evidenced by low grades, low test scores, failing core courses, or not earning promotion. The second is lack of engagement characterized by high absenteeism, poor disciplinary records, and bad relationships with peers and teachers. The third is the transition issue, where students exhibit difficulty in the transition years either between elementary and middle school or between middle and high school or both. In fact, the transition year between middle and high school has been found to be the most important time in predicting school completion (Johnson & Semmelroth, 2010).

It is important to note that risk factors are cumulative in nature; they do not occur

independently, and the negative effect of each factor is multiplicative rather than additive (McIntosh et al., 2008). The more risk factors a student accumulates, the more likely a student is to drop out (Henry et al., 2012). Given the importance of these risk factors, the National High School Center developed an early warning system tool for first-year transition based on information commonly available from school-based data (Johnson & Semmelroth, 2010). This includes attendance, course performance, and staying “on-track” as measured by progress towards promotion. This system offers four “red flags” for at-risk students: missing more than 10% of instructional time the first year, missing more than 10% of the first 20 days, earning a grade point average of less than 2.0, and failing more than one course. Johnson and Semmelroth (2010) show that attendance may be the most practical indicator for students in need of early intervention.

Beyond the academic and behavioral risk factors, however, is the influence of social forces from both inside and outside the school. Strom and Boster (2007) noted that parental expectation of school completion played a vital role in a student’s decision to stay in school, but “school process variables like student-teacher interactions are beginning to receive more attention in the dropout literature” (p. 446). Positive interactions at school can work in concert with positive messages from home or can work to counteract negative feedback about school from parents and peers. Likewise, the structure of the school itself can be a contributing factor to early school leaving as well as to effective dropout prevention. Patterson, Hale, and Stessman (2007) conducted research into how school organization and culture contributed to the dropout issue. They suggested that the bureaucratic nature of schools is a barrier to being culturally responsive and collaborative.

Christenson and Stout (2009) arranged the risk factors uncovered in their study into three main categories as well. The first is social background, which includes minority status; socioeconomics; gender; transience; being overage relative to peers; and parental factors including incarceration, homelessness, and abuse. The second is educational experience, which encompasses the student's interactions with the school, such as a low grade, low standardized test scores, retention, disciplinary issues, and absenteeism. The third category takes in the school itself, such as the size, structure, and student-teacher relationships.

All risk factors do not have the same influence and impact on a student's decision to drop out. Doll et al. (2013) found that the factors that influence at-risk students to drop out can be categorized as push, pull, or fall out. According to their research, a student is pushed out when conditions inside the school impact a dropout decision. These conditions include grades, attendance, and discipline. A student is pulled out when external factors such as employment, family, or other financial reasons influences a decision to leave. A student falls out when he or she becomes disconnected, apathetic, or disillusioned inside the school environment. "The key difference between push, pull, and falling out factors has to do with agency" (Doll et al., 2013, p. 2). In push, the school is the primary agent, while in pull it is the student. With falling out, it is really neither side. They distinguish pull and falling out as pull having an attractive or distractive aspect, while falling out does not.

It is important to note that identification of potential dropouts is not an exact science. While the relationship between student characteristics and student dropout status has helped paint a profile of the at-risk student, identification of risk factors does not

always accurately identify which students will actually drop out of school. Zvoch (2006) states “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). In addition, the research conducted on an entering cohort of ninth graders indicated students who entered high school overage for their grade level, who lived in poverty, or who had deficient academic test performance was at greatest risk of dropping out. Zvoch found that schools with smaller learning communities had lower rates of early leaving among those identified risk factors.

An increasing amount of research is being done on the challenges students face in the transition from middle to high school and on generating positive outcomes for ninth grade students. Ninth grade students have the highest rates of truancy, discipline referrals, failures, and retentions, and a school’s worst data points are usually found among its freshmen (Habeeb, 2013). Pharris-Ciurej et al. (2012) studied one West Coast school district that showed there were typically, 3,000 students enrolled in the ninth grade, but roughly half that number is enrolled in the senior class. There are usually a larger number of freshmen due to retentions and students transferring into the district, but still there is an attrition in this district of nearly 50% in the four years between ninth and 12th grades. While this ratio may not be as high in every school district, there is still no doubt that 12th grade enrollments are usually significantly less than ninth grade enrollments nationwide.

Research shows that the transition to high school is one of the most critical stages during a student’s academic career (Pharris-Ciurej et al., 2012). Students who get off-track by failing courses early in high school are far less likely to graduate at all, much

less on time with them classmates. Retention in the ninth and 10th grades has a particularly negative effect as more students drop out in these grades than any other (McNeil et al., 2008). In addition, students who are retained have lower achievement levels and/or more disciplinary problems than students who regularly earn promotion (Stearns et al., 2007).

There are a number of other issues that often seem to manifest during the first year of high school. Research suggests “there is likely a convergence of developmental and contextual factors during this period that can shed light on the timing and severity of these students’ academic challenges” (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009, p. 179). In addition, this is an unusual juncture in an adolescent’s life. For the first time, he or she is faced with decisions with long-term consequences but lack the maturity and foresight to make them intelligently (Habeeb, 2013).

One of the first challenges rising ninth graders face is finding themselves unprepared for the structure and demands of high school. The academic demands of high school are usually greater than that of middle school, and this can lead to significant amounts of academic failure in the freshman year (Pharris-Ciurej et al., 2012). There are also significant structural changes as well, such as the more chaotic movement around a high school building and the more impersonal nature of the high school experience (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). The middle school environment is usually more personalized, and the bureaucratic, hierarchical structure of large, comprehensive high schools allow students to fall through the cracks (Montgomery & Hirth, 2011; Neild et al., 2008).

Neild et al. (2009) point out that ninth graders face key transitions and challenges that can interfere with academic and social success. These include ninth grade often

coinciding with life changes such as reduced parental involvement and supervision and increased peer influence. Also, students are often inadequately prepared for the academic environment of high school as well as the organizational structure of high school. Neild suggests that keeping students progressing toward graduation and earning promotion to the tenth grade are keys for ensuring student success. To achieve this goal, she suggests creating supports for struggling students to catch up academically and to examine the structures and organizations of high school to help ensure student success.

Also, of concern for first-year students are the teachers these students will have. Neild et al. (2008) demonstrate that ninth grade teachers are more likely to be new to the profession, new to the school, and/or uncertified. In addition, secondary teachers are often not well prepared to deal with the lack of literacy and numeracy of deficient freshmen. As a result, they lack either the knowledge or materials to help ninth graders deal with deficits in these areas.

Another key point is the self-esteem issues experienced by early and middle adolescents. This is already a unique time in adolescent development, where students are developing their individuality and experiencing a release from their parents and more dependence on their peer groups (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). At the same time, academic frustrations take a toll on self-esteem, and as a result, students can turn away from academic efforts to focus on things that allow students to feel better about themselves (Stearns et al., 2007). This search for self-esteem can often be the gateway to further school disengagement and can open the door to self-injurious behavior, delinquency, and drug use; all of which would then further contribute to the likelihood of dropping out (America's Promise Alliance, 2014; Henry et al., 2012).

Along those lines as student academic performance declines in the first year of high school, the perceived support of students declines as well. Latino students perceive the middle-to-high school transition to be more difficult than African-American or white students (Lys, 2009; McIntosh et al., 2008). There is also a marked decline in the relationships between retained students and their peers and teachers (Stearns et al., 2007). The experience of youth in school is framed by their perceptions of their relationships with teachers (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014). Negative student-teacher relationships manifest in many ways from poor academic performance to increasing the disconnect with the school environment. Perhaps more important is the lack of positive influence from parents as it relates to the prevention of disengagement and absenteeism.

There is also an important connection between behavioral issues and academic outcomes, particularly in the ninth grade. McIntosh et al. (2008) found that students with early behavior problems are at greater risk for academic problems. Brown (2007) states that students with disciplinary issues may have had prior experiences of being suspended or excluded from school, and this may have left them academically disengaged and distrustful of the school adults on whom they need to depend for success in the school environment. This becomes a vicious cycle as students who are struggling academically then engage in aversive behavior to remove themselves from the challenging academic environment. Ultimately, many of these students then receive discipline that removes them from the classroom or suspends them from school, adding to the absenteeism issue that is such a prime predictor of dropping out. Students can then fall into a trap of retention due to both school absence and poor academic performance, which again is a significant risk factor for early school leaving (Brown, 2007; Stearns et al., 2007).

The literature suggests that the potential for dropping out frequently manifests itself well before high school, even as far back as kindergarten. Neild et al. (2008) argues that some students are set on a track of school failure from their initial transition into school, shaped partly by experiences in preschool. These students are labeled as low academic achievers and troublemakers; they often will carry this label with them throughout their schooling years.

The middle grades are very difficult for students already navigating very complex changes in the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional arenas (Bailey, Giles, & Rogers, 2015). This is also a time during which young adolescents begin engaging in risky behaviors such as experimenting with drugs, alcohol, and tobacco. During the middle school years, students possess increasingly negative attitudes towards school (Raphael & Burke, 2012). These kinds of risk factors mirror those shown by high schoolers at risk for dropping out.

Neild et al. (2007) demonstrated that many students who drop out of high school send signals for years before reaching the ninth grade. This study researched a cohort of entering sixth graders and identified students who received failing final grades in math or English, had attendance below 80% for the year, or received a final poor conduct grade in at least one subject. More than 50% of those who ultimately dropped out of high school demonstrated one or more of those signals during eighth grade as well. The seeds of high school dropouts are often sown in middle school as middle schoolers often face decreased motivation and are more likely to engage in bad behavior. Some of this is part of the natural development into puberty, but school environment and instructional practices contribute as well (Raphael & Burke, 2012).

Weiss and Bearman (2007) investigated the effects of the transition between middle and high school and noted that “for many students, poor performance in the first year of high school establishes a pattern of failure, leading to lower educational trajectories and poor outcomes throughout school and a substantially higher risk of dropping out of school” (p. 396). But they also found that the transition itself is accompanied by negative changes whether or not there is a physical change in location, i.e. moving from a middle school to a high school building. Yet the researchers found, there can sometimes be a positive effect in that the high school transition offers a fresh start for some students.

In addition, there are a number of increased demands on ninth graders that can cause a negative impact on student success and place them at risk for leaving school early. McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) suggested that ninth graders have the lowest grade point average and attendance rates and highest discipline and course failure rates of any high school grade level. They also found that many students enter the ninth grade with reading comprehension issues, which adds to the challenge of high school transition. Their research indicates targeted programs such as freshman academies and increased vertical alignment and teaming between middle and high school teachers can help address these issues. Additionally, many large, comprehensive high schools have been reorganizing into smaller learning communities in order to personalize the learning experience for incoming ninth graders and support their unique learning needs (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014).

There are other effects of large high schools that contribute to the challenge of freshman transition. Large schools allow chances for students to roam the halls and hang

out with friends, and students skip classes with lowered academic standards because they feel they will not be missing much (Montgomery & Hirth, 2011; Neild et al., 2008). In addition, the simple structure of high schools makes it more difficult to build student-teacher relationships, and the organization of high school can be unwelcoming and marginalizing to students who are already at risk for dropping out (Lys, 2009; Montgomery & Hirth, 2011).

These issues are not unique to the transition between middle and high school. The transition from elementary to middle school also has the capacity to knock students off track for academic success. The transition to middle school offers challenges to students who have been in self-contained elementary environments, and changing classes can be overwhelming (Raphael & Burke, 2012). Bailey et al. (2015) also point out that rising sixth graders share some of the same concerns as their counterparts transitioning to ninth grade as it relates to peer pressure, academic performance, and bullying. The middle school can appear large and uncaring in comparison to elementary school just as high school looks large and uncaring in comparison to middle school. Nevertheless, the transition years from fifth to sixth grade and from eighth to ninth grade are the most critical for academic success (Christenson & Stout, 2009).

A key point of contention in the debate over accountability, high-stakes testing, and dropping out is the role of grade retention. The push for accountability has brought this issue to the forefront. Starting in the 1960s, there was growing concern that retention had an adverse impact on social, emotional, and cognitive development and was a key contributor to dropping out (Jacob & Lefgren, 2007). Grade retention came into vogue as a method to ensure proficiency in the 1980s, and today some states, such as Texas,

Florida, and North Carolina, mandate grade retention for students who do not pass certain gateways (Smith & Herzog, 2014). However, the research shows no generalizable impact of retention on student outcomes. Some research shows an increased likelihood of dropout with retention, while other research shows some benefit in achievement. Smith And Herzog (2014) found that studies that focused on the achievement of retained students over time found more benefit, while those that focused on retained students over promoted students found less benefit.

Jacob and Lefgren (2007) studied retention in middle school and found that retention in the sixth grade had little impact on dropping out but that retention in eighth grade increased the chances of dropping out by 14%. Smith and Herzog (2014) came to a similar conclusion as Jacob and Lefgren, which is the earlier the retention, whether in elementary or middle school, the less impact on dropping out since earlier retentions give more opportunities to catch up with peers.

Retention in high school, particularly in the ninth grade, has quite a different impact. Students retained in ninth grade are immediately “off track” for graduation, and the chances of dropping out go up significantly (Neild, 2009). The dynamic in high school is different as students have to pass individual courses to earn credits toward graduation. Students then fall behind their peers, and those already overage from previous retentions face being significantly older than their classmates. It becomes easier to disengage when academic struggles are coupled with social difficulties. Also, as opposed to earlier grade retentions, there is less time to catch up. Clearly retention in high school has a negative impact on high school completion (Jacob & Lefgren, 2007).

Emerging Strategies for Student Dropouts

The identification of risk factors has usually been the primary focus of research and intervention in dropout prevention. Research has indicated a number of factors as the most powerful predictors of students dropping out although the impact of these factors varies according to individual studies. McIntosh et al. (2008) cite poor academic performance and problem behavior as especially powerful reasons for dropping out. Likewise, Johnson and Semmelroth (2010) note a lack of engagement and high absenteeism as strong predictors. Stearns et al. (2007) offer that students who repeat a grade are very likely to drop out. These variations, coupled with the external factors such as socioeconomic status and lack of parental support, make it difficult to create a “one-size-fits-all” plan of prevention and intervention to address the dropout crisis.

While early identification of students at risk for dropping out is vital in prevention and intervention efforts, research is showing that these initiatives and strategies have the best chance for success when implemented at the first sign of manifestation. For many students, that time frame is middle school. Johnson and Semmelroth (2010) found that patterns emerge as early as sixth grade for students who are at elevated risk of dropping out. McIntosh et al. (2008) argued “that waiting until high school to identify individual students at risk for dropping out may be too late to provide benefits for students already on a path to dropout in middle school” (p. 252).

Research has shown that signals for potential dropouts can be seen as early as elementary school and certainly by middle school. Ziomek-Daigle and Andrews (2009) cite one study that offered four dropout risk factors identifiable in middle school: a final grade of “F” in English/language arts, a final grade of “F” in mathematics, a final

behavior grade of “unsatisfactory” in at least one class, and an 80% or lower attendance rate. The study found that only 29% of sixth graders with just one of these risk factors would graduate, and only 7% of sixth graders with all four risk factors would graduate. This study also showed course failure in math or English was a more reliable predictor of a potential dropout than test scores (Andrews, 2011). As Herzog, Liljengren, Mulvihill, and Balfanz (2009) demonstrate, “Every year, thousands of middle level students exhibit one or more of these ‘ABCs’ (attendance, behavior, course failure). Those who have any one of these risk factors have only a 10% to 20% chance of graduating within five years of entering high school” (p. 8).

While there is no single factor that leads to a student’s decision to leave school nor is there a uniform profile of dropouts, one recurring concern is the lack of connectedness experienced by students (America’s Promise Alliance, 2014). Beginning in the middle school years, students have increasingly negative attitudes towards school (Raphael & Burke, 2012). Neild et al. (2008) describe two levels of engagement with school: academic and social. Academic engagement deals with following rules, participating in the school environment, and putting forth an effort to gain knowledge, while social engagement includes positive relationships with peers and adults. At each level of transition from elementary to middle and middle to high, the dynamics of friendships and interactions with teachers change as the structure of the school changes. At each level, it becomes especially harder to make meaningful connections with adults, and connectedness to others is both a risk factor for leaving as well as a reason students say they persist.

Crime is defined as an illegal act for which someone can be punished by the government. It is a gross violation of the law and an grave offense especially against morality. High School dropout. A person who has abandoned a course of study or rejected conventional society to peruse an alternate lifestyle. A dropout is also concerned to be a student who fails to complete school.

Given they are wedged between two major transitions, middle schools often find themselves in a valley between two mountains of intervention. There is much in the way of resources and research that have been directed to increase language and numerical literacy at the elementary level; similar efforts have been made for dropout prevention and career and college readiness at the high school level (Ziomek-Daigle & Andrews, 2009). While students in grades five through eight represent 58% of all students taking standardized tests under No Child Left Behind, the middle grades receive only about 10% of the funding earmarked for at-risk students (Andrews, 2011). In addition, a majority of the schools under sanction by NCLB for not meeting Adequate Yearly Progress targets are middle schools, and poor performance on standardized tests is a predictor for dropping out later in high school. Andrews (2011) cited a report from ACT that calls this time “the forgotten middle.” She suggested that recent research shows middle school is a crucial time for young adolescents and their prospects for high school graduation? Middle school is an important transition time as students are exposed to different social situations, multiple teachers, and increased academic demands (Kieffer, Marinell, and Neugebauer, 2014).

One potential barrier to promoting high school readiness early in middle school is that educators often do not know how to deal with struggling sixth graders. Teachers

frequently wait and hope they grow out of it or label the issues as temporary due to the adjustment from elementary to middle school (Andrews, 2011). But the sad reality, as evidenced by the red flags exhibited as early as sixth grade, is that these students are often already on the road to dropping out. In some states, sixth grade is a gateway for standardized testing, and students deficient in this area are targeted for retention.

Retention, in turn, places these student's overage for their grade and more likely to drop out (Stearns et al., 2007). Neild et al. (2008) also point out that secondary teachers, including those in middle school, do not have the training or resources needed to address deficiencies in numeracy and literacy. If these issues are not addressed in middle school, students fall further behind when they arrive in high school without the requisite skills in this area.

In addition, Bailey and Baines (2012) asserted that middle school teachers, especially those in eighth grade, spend large amounts of time preparing students academically for high school, while high school teachers devote a good amount of time helping new ninth graders adjust to the high school environment. This focus on academic preparedness at the middle level versus the focus on adjustment at the high school level is indicative of how middle school teachers perceive their role in their students' academic journeys.

Fortunately, the middle grades are no longer being ignored in state and national efforts to reduce dropout rates and improve high school completion rates (Andrews, 2011). The Success in the Middle Act of 2011 represents one step that the federal government is taking to provide a new focus on middle grades education and improving educational outcomes for middle school students (Andrews, 2011). Another promising

initiative is the addition of dedicated personnel in middle schools to identify at-risk students (Ziomek-Daigle & Andrews, 2009). Whether they are called “graduation coaches,” “success coaches,” or “student advocates,” these professionals often have counseling backgrounds and are tasked with using known risk factors to identify those students at greatest risk of dropping out. They also help with the transition from elementary to middle school and from middle school to high school. They can also access community resources to help meet the needs of students.

Likewise, there is growing recognition of the need to provide programs and strategies for students at the middle level. A good place to start is to identify those students with greatest academic need and teach academic success skills to improve grades and to better prepare for high-stakes testing (Mason & McMahon, 2009). In addition, middle school administrators and teachers must ensure a rigorous curriculum that prepares students for academic success at the high school level. Students who are potential dropouts often report being academically unprepared for high school (Pharris-Ciurej et al., 2012). Middle and high schools should work together to encourage vertical teaming so that content area teachers at the middle school level are familiar with the high school curriculum and what the expectations are. They can then more adequately prepare their students for the rigor of high school. Middle school teachers should also continue to work to make their own curriculum as rigorous as possible and to hold students to high expectations. There is often a disconnect as “significant majorities of both teachers and principals do not believe students at risk for dropping out would respond to high expectations and work harder” (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Balfanz, 2009, p. 21). Yet over

70% of students who did end up dropping out said they would have responded positively to higher expectations (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009).

Programs that focus on academic needs alone can miss the root causes of being at risk and dropping out. At-risk adolescents face circumstances that leave them unprepared to cope with social and emotional situations (Slack et al., 2013). Meeting these social and emotional needs, and ensuring middle school teachers are capable of recognizing and addressing these needs, are crucial components for ensuring success at the middle level and into the transition to high school (Raphael & Burke, 2012). School professionals should also tailor programs to meet the needs of specific populations. For example, Mann (2013) offers that few intervention programs are gender specific and that at-risk girls are most likely to benefit from activities that promote self-confidence, self-esteem, and identity. Boys, on the other hand, often benefit from adult mentoring, especially African American boys (Slack et al., 2013). Lys (2009) found Latino students are best served by strengthening the connection between home and school. Administrators and teachers can understand the expectations of their students' home lives, and parents can better communicate with the school, including making sure documents, rules, and regulations are available in Spanish.

Transition times between the fifth and sixth grades and again between the eighth and ninth grades have been found to be most crucial for the ultimate completion of high school. The concerns of students making the transition from elementary to middle school and from middle to high school are remarkably similar. Students going through those transitions are worried about the increase in academic rigor, the change in relationships between peer groups and between students and teachers, and the loss of personalization,

as students move from the self-contained environment in elementary school to middle school and the team-centered environment in middle school to high school (Bailey et al., 2015; Bushaw, 2007; Montgomery & Hirth, 2011; Raphael & Burke, 2012). Effective dropout prevention systems must pay close attention to the critical predictors of school failure, particularly at these crucial transition times (Christenson & Stout, 2009). A good place for schools to start is to focus on the transition between eighth and ninth grade and to involve staff from both the middle and high school levels in the creation of transition programs (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014).

In line with this idea, middle and high schools should work together to continue to facilitate transition activities that ease the shock of moving from eighth to ninth grade. Campus visits, curriculum fairs, and new parent/student nights are ways middle and high schools can collaborate to facilitate the transition before students set foot in the high school on the first day of ninth grade. Cushman's (2006) interviews with ninth grade students showed the need for early transition activities to increase the opportunities for success at the beginning of high school, and Roybal, Thornton, and Usinger (2014) point out that research shows effective freshman transition programs include planning sessions between middle and high school teachers, parental involvement, block schedules for core classes, small learning communities, and celebration of successes.

Clearly the ninth-grade year is a crucial one for high school success. In response to the growing body of evidence in this area, schools have adopted a number of strategies to combat what Pharris-Ciurej et al. (2012) describe as "the ninth-grade shock." Much of the literature focuses on the importance of the ninth grade in creating an effective dropout prevention strategy. Cushman (2006) interviewed new ninth grade students for a first-

hand perspective on student needs for support and success at the high school level.

Among the suggestions from the students themselves were the need for peer mentoring and role modeling of students who were being successful in high school already. These students also stressed the need for smaller learning communities and advisory groupings to help personalize the high school experience. The need for a process for students to receive help both in and out of class was crucial to assist students who might fall behind and get discouraged with school.

Many schools are employing early warning tools to identify students at risk for dropping out (Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2009). The simplicity of this system is that it relies on readily available data that are excellent predictors of high school completion (Johnson & Semmelroth, 2010). Feeder middle schools should share their at-risk data with high schools whenever possible so that high schools have a head start on identification and can target interventions from the first day. Schools are also turning to community resources to help with the social aspect that students sometimes lose in high school and to empower them to be successful both inside and outside the school environment (Rodriguez & Conchas, 2009).

Knesting (2008) investigated why students who were at risk for dropping out stayed in school. She points out that among all the voices contributing to the issue of dropout prevention, rarely were the students themselves included in the discussion. Merely allowing at-risk students to be heard and have positive interactions with teachers and administrators was vital to a decision to remain in school. A caring school environment was also crucial as caring teachers were as much a reason for at-risk

students to stay as uncaring and disrespectful teachers were a reason for leaving.

Montgomery and Hirth (2011) stress the importance of simply having someone take an interest in students as a number of dropouts reported they simply stopped coming to school and no one cared.

A popular strategy in addressing freshman transition is the creation of freshman academies, wherein students are grouped with a group of teachers that teach only ninth graders and usually isolates freshmen within a specific part of the building (Habeeb, 2013). Freshman academies often include advisory components and may include a transition course that teaches academic and life skills (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014). Neild (2009) notes that inadequate preparation for high school-level academic requirements and the organization of high schools themselves are the most significant factors for freshmen getting off track early. Concepts such as a freshman academy help provides a bridge between the structure found in middle school and the more fluid organization of the high school.

Likewise, the relationship-building and advisory function of the freshman academy addresses what Knesting (2008) identified as key factors in why students at risk stay in school, including a caring environment and a commitment to helping students stay in school. Along the same lines, Somers, Owens, and Piliawsky (2009) found that personal interaction is key to keeping at-risk students in school, even if specific metrics such as grade point average did not significantly rise.

But freshman academies themselves are not a panacea for addressing the transitional needs of ninth graders. Habeeb (2013) argues that academies themselves are ineffective for the 10-30% of freshmen who are academically and socially prepared for

high school and that isolating them from the rest of the high school experience can actually slow their growth and acclimation. He also argues that the stresses on the school structure, both in physical resources and human needs, are not worth the hassle and that instead schools should focus on developing a teaming model in which teachers work together and address the individual needs of students.

High schools would be well served to study and implement the concept of dedicated staff members to work on dropout prevention (such as graduation coaches and student advocates) rather than relying on regular counselors only. High schools must also examine their structure and organization to find ways to ease the transition. High schools tend to be larger organizations and are more impersonal and competitive than middle schools (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). They must find a way to decrease that difference, such as through the utilizing small learning communities; designing freshman academies; locating ninth graders in a particular section of the building; and developing student-faculty advisory programs to make high school easier to navigate and less impersonal. The most successful transition programs are those that incorporate students, faculty, and parents. Maintaining parental involvement is especially important as high school is a time when many parents disengage from their student's academic and social environment (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009).

Dorn (2003), Christle et al. (2007), and others share a concern that programs such as freshman academies, parent nights, and mentoring are just that—programs. They do not address the structural challenges of high school itself that are restrainers for success for entering freshmen. The organization of high school can be unwelcoming and can marginalize those students already at risk for dropping out (Lys, 2009). The literature

suggests students entering high school would benefit from a less complex and more intimate and responsive school structure. Legters and Balfanz (2010) argued that whole school transformation and reform must occur in both middle and high schools where students are falling off the graduation track. They suggest abandoning the large, bureaucratic structures that are often associated with failing schools, particularly high schools, and replacing them with smaller and more responsive units.

Other structural changes that high schools should explore to improve early outcomes include block scheduling, targeted literacy instruction, and credit recovery programs. Students who fail courses during the freshman year are more likely to end up “off track” and therefore at greater risk for dropping out. Schools would be well served to focus on improving chances for success with ninth graders and for making concerted efforts with those students who do not pass the first year. Stearns et al. (2007) argued that schools that are interested in reducing dropout rates should give particular attention to retained students. But regardless of the changes made, schools should organize into structures that promote meaningful relationships (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014).

There are a number of restrainers that make it difficult to implement substantive changes to address the needs of at-risk students and work toward more impactful dropout prevention. Making structural changes to school function at the middle or high school levels is often difficult as school’s face capital and human resource challenges that make it impractical to change how schools do business (Dorn, 2003; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014; Habeeb, 2013). The middle and high school models are well entrenched and require a paradigm shift that some schools are either unwilling or unable to embrace.

In addition, there is a body of research that deals with the perceptions of high school dropouts, and these perceptions are sometimes at odds with the perceptions of teachers and administrators who would likely be implementing dropout prevention programs. Bridgeland et al. (2009) note that “significant majorities of teachers and principals do not believe that students at risk for dropping out would respond to high expectations and work harder” (p.2). Yet two-thirds of dropouts said they would have worked harder if more were expected of them. Bridgeland et al. (2009) describe this as an expectations gap, which is a possible impediment to closing the achievement gap. In addition, their research showed that less than one-quarter of principals and teachers felt boredom was a factor in dropping out, but half of dropouts reported being bored in school and failing to see the relevance of education to their lives. This type of disconnect makes it even more difficult to establish effective initiatives to combat the dropout issue.

Nevertheless, trends have emerged through the data that have allowed for the creation of screeners and other early warning systems to identify students at risk for dropping out as soon as possible and begin interventions. Johnson and Semmelroth (2010) note that despite varying requirements for graduation across school districts, screening should take place in all school districts for students who are at risk for dropping out, students who have learning needs requiring intervention, and students who are at risk for not meeting standardized test benchmarks. Likewise, Henry et al. (2012) advocate an early warning index to measure school disengagement, which can lead to dropout, delinquency, and substance abuse. Still, the question remains: how early should an early warning system come into play? The answer is that effective dropout prevention

programs should likely focus on middle school and early high school, particularly the ninth grade.

There is still some disagreement among middle and high school educators about when intervention and dropout prevention programs should start. Research has shown that the potential for dropout can be statistically accurate as early as the sixth grade and that warning factors manifest even earlier (Neild, 2009; Neild et al., 2008). Lys (2009) suggests that middle school, not high school, is the pivotal point in the dropout experience and that effort and resources should be expended in the middle grades to keep adolescents on track. Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2014) recognize the role that middle school educators serve in the preparation for high school but focus their suggestions on what middle school teachers can do to support high school efforts in the transition process. Habeeb (2013) says this about middle school efforts at dropout prevention:

Many focus on what happens before high school. Although there is nothing wrong with pre-high school efforts, such strategies are comparable to premarital counseling: it is a great idea but young couples are going to need some additional guidance once they tie the knot. (p. 19).

Clearly there is not a consensus on how best to meet the unique needs of at-risk students. Nevertheless, the reviewed literature and various anecdotal school experiences reveal a number of key applications and recommendations for incorporating targeted transition from middle to high school into an effective dropout prevention program. First, schools should move past the bureaucratic and structural challenges that impact student achievement while striving for a caring and collaborative culture that recognizes student

diversity and the values that contribute to leaving school early (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014; Patterson et al., 2007).

Second, schools would benefit from developing programs to educate and involve parents and develop a more personalized educational setting (Lys, 2009; Somers et al., 2009). A truly effective, inclusive program should help personalize the learning experience and increase parental and family involvement.

Third, Bradshaw et al. (2008) suggested that schools implement mentoring programs that last at least one year. They also suggest early intervention and the creation of programs that promote effective decision-making, self-control skills, and social connections. Chhuon and Wallace (2014) noted that the key to adolescent development is forming positive adult relationships outside of parents.

Fourth, Zvoch (2006) noted the creation of smaller learning communities such as freshman academies can have a positive effect on reducing dropout rates by increasing the attachment to school and counteracting the external pressures to leave school early. The anecdotal success of freshman academies certainly supports that line of thinking. Even if not going as far as an academy model, any move towards a teaming model that more closely mirrors the middle school experience is helpful (Habeeb, 2013, Neild et al., 2008).

Fifth, data show that if a student makes it to tenth grade, she/he is far more likely to graduate from high school (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Therefore, focusing on promotion, especially for those students retained after the first year of high school, is a vital part of freshman transition (Neild, 2009).

Sixth, transition programs should address the academic deficiencies of at-risk students to increase school success and reduce the potential for dropping out (Neild, 2009). Strategies in this area include the purposeful hand-scheduling of students into English and math classes and addressing the literacy deficiencies of incoming freshmen with flex grouping as well as creating outreach and vertical teaming opportunities with feeder middle schools to identify and address these academic deficiencies earlier. In addition, transition programs should include processes for teaching studying and goal-setting, and for developing other life skills necessary for success (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014; Montgomery & Hirth, 2011).

Finally, any at-risk intervention strategy must focus on making students feel connected to the school and especially to the adults in the school. Whether this includes changing entire structures or implementing targeted programs, time and again a connection to the school environment or, more important, a lack of a connection is the primary reason students make the ultimate call to leave school before graduation (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014; Montgomery & Hirth, 2011; Neild et al., 2008). The more a student is connected and engaged, the greater resilience is fostered in the face of adversity (America's Promise Alliance, 2015). It is very easy to devise programs for academics and procedures, but until the social and emotional issues, particularly as related to connectedness, are addressed, initiatives will not have their greatest impact (Bailey et al., 2015). As previously noted, being connected can be the prime reason a student stays in school or the prime reason a student leaves school (America's Promise Alliance, 2014).

Bushaw (2007) cited the results of a national survey of 1,800 middle schoolers in which 93% of the students said there was no chance they would drop out of school, and 92% said they would go to college. This survey highlights two findings: First, American middle school students by and large expect to graduate from high school and attend college. What is happening that somewhere between one in four and one in five students do not graduate from high school, and what can be done about it? Second, by middle school, 7% of students do not see themselves as high school graduates. This is concerning and shows the need for intervention at the middle level. This study shows that interventions should begin as soon as risk factors are present and supports should continue through the ninth-grade year and beyond to ensure high school success for as many students as possible.

Summary

The research is clear about the national problems of student dropout in America. The historical overview of major causes of dropout or why students in this country do not complete their education can be traced back to a time in our history when a high school diploma was not needed to become gainfully employed, to the poverty issues affecting many families across the nation, to teacher shortage, and to lack of financial support provided to American schools to address the many issues they face on a daily basis. But in spite of all these issue, there are still many school leaders who have tackled the problem of student dropout and increased the completion rate at their schools where there was an intentional focus on positive intervention strategies.

CHAPTER III

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of and knowledge of dropout risk factors by high school administrators. High school has often been the focus of dropout prevention efforts because that is when students usually reach an age at which compulsory attendance laws no longer apply (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Neild, 2009; Suh & Suh, (2007). Emergent research has demonstrated that risk factors for dropping out began to show as early as sixth grade, if not before, and that interventions to prevent dropping out should begin as soon as these factors begin to manifest, including in middle school (Lys, 2009; Neild, 2009; Neild et al., 2008). In addition, the literature shows one of the most critical times to help ensure school completion is the transition from middle school to high school (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Knesting, 2008). Therefore, this study compared the perceptions of core-area (language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies) teachers of middle schoolers with the same perceptions of core-area teachers of high schoolers, where dropout prevention is expected to be a focus.

For this research, Albert Baddura's Behaviorism Theory, which has emphasis on experimental methods, focuses on variables we can observe, measure, and manipulate, and avoids whatever is subject, internal, and unavailable (i.e., mental). All these boils

down to be a theory of personality that says than one's environment causes one's behavior.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs which is a theory of human motivation is critical to the engagement of students in the learning process. Additionally, Cognitive Behavioral Theory is the belief in behavioral strategies that characterize people and observe the pattern of their behaviors. Finally, John Dewey's Theory of Education believes that learning was active and schooling was unnecessarily long and restrictive. His idea was that children came to school to do things and live in a community which gave them real guided experiences which foster their capacity to contribute to society. Moreover, Dewey believed that student should be involved in real life tasks and challenges.

Theoretical Framework for Research

The theoretical framework for this study includes (a) a review of various leadership roles, style and their effectiveness; (b) an assessment of dropout prevention efforts, and (c) an exploration of leadership profiles and strategies between the school principals of the three identifies schools.

Literature has shown that the gaps in research regarding high school dropouts should be addresses through conducting further research. The following covers the study design, how the sample was identified and the selection criteria, data collection and instruments that were used to conduct the study, protection of human subjects were discussed, as well as how the data was analyzed.

Research Design

The research design for this study was a qualitative non-experimental survey study. According to Creswell (2012), qualitative survey research is one of the most common methods of research in the social sciences as the purpose of survey research is to generalize to the population from a designated sample. Creswell (2012) suggests further that questionnaires used in qualitative and quantitative survey research can be used to develop, evaluate, and identify findings of other research studies. This study included a one-shot survey approach, which Lodico, Spaulding, and Voegtle (2010) describe as being conducted with school administrators and determining the current perceptions of a group at a point in time.

Theories of Dropout Causes

Variables that cause students to drop out of school are real and many times psychological.

Locus of Control

Kronick and Hargis (1998) stated that most research shows that dropouts report external as opposed to internal locus of control. The research in locus of control began with the work of Rotter (1966). He defined a control orientation as the extent to which an individual perceives that an event occurs because one's own actions (internal locus of control) or due to luck or chance (external locus of control). Peng, Lee, Wang, and Walberg (1992) found that locus of control was a significant predictor of academic success.

Self-perception

Kronick and Hargis (1998) point out that it is commonly accepted that dropouts have lower self-concept than graduates do, at least before they drop out. As cited by Whaley and Smyer (1998), inner-city poor African American adolescents view academic performance as less relevant to their global self-esteem than their middle-class counterparts do (e.g., Hare, 1981, 1985; Jordan, 1981 Mboya, 1986). These youths invest more of their self-esteem in job competence. A major reason African-American youth give for dropping out is that they have to work (Tidwell, 1988).

Influence of peer groups

There can be peer pressure to drop out, especially in the African-American and Hispanic community (Hoedden, 1997).

Drugs and Alcohol

Callison (1994) reported that two-thirds of substance abusers are drop outs (as cited in Friedenber, 1999). Research has shown that alcohol disorders and heavy drinking lead to dropping out of school for adolescents (Williams & Wynder, 1993).

Pregnancy

Research has shown that adolescent child bearing has no effect on dropping out of high school when underlying socioeconomic factors are taken into account (Olsen & Farkos, 1998; Ribar, 1992; Upchurch, McCarthy, & Ferguson, 1993). Pregnancy has become a silent epidemic in the southern parts of Fulton County Schools (School Social Workers, 2016).

School-level Variables

For all gender and ethnicity groups, school-related factors (alienation from school, safety, and suspension) are the most cited reasons for dropping out (Jordan et al., 1996).

School Climate

One variable among the school policies and practices variables is the perceived discipline climate. Brouillette (1999) found that for inner-city dropouts, their decision to leave high school had often been the result of the level of violence both in and around their former schools.

Transition to High School

Many students make the decision to drop out of school after they make the transition to high school (Hertzog & Morgan, 1999). Student attendance data indicate that missing more than five days of school each year regardless of the cause, begins to impact student academic performance and start shaping attitude towards education. School attendance is a predictor of dropping out than test scores. Student discipline serves an important purpose of maintaining safe and orderly learning environments in our schools, but research shows that an emphasis on harsh punitive practices such as “zero tolerance” policies, does not improve school safety. Instead student behavior and learning outcomes can be improved by using evidence based approach known as school-wide poverty behavior support. Such an approach relies on teaching and reinforcing clear behavioral expectations, providing support and interventions. For students with challenging behavior, and using alternative to suspension or expulsion. Both students and society

benefit when youth are not excluded from school, since such exclusion places students at great risk of dropping out and engaging in crime/violence.

Relationship among the Variables

The variables for the study are student attendance, student discipline, organizational structure, monitoring systems, and motivation; these are independent variables that help shape the high school dropout rate. The dependent variables are high school dropout rates. These variables examine factors predictive of dropping out of high school (see Figure 1).

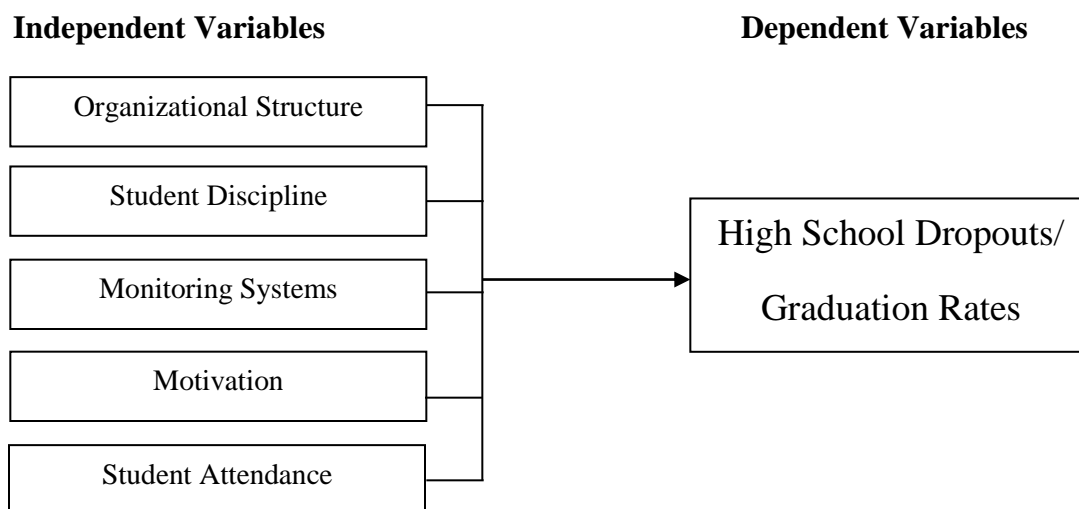


Figure 1. Relationship among the independent and dependent variables.

Definition of Variables

Poverty is defined as scarcity or the lack of a certain amount of material/money possessions. Poverty is a multifaceted concept which may include social, economics, and political elements.

Organizational structure is a system that consists of explicit and implicit institutional rules and policies designed to outline how various work roles and responsibilities are delegated, controlled, and coordinated. Organizational structure also determines how information flows from level to level within the company. For example, in a centralized structure, decision flows from the top down while in a decentralized structure the decisions are made at various different levels.

Monitoring systems: School based management is one of the most challenging tasks as far as human resources development is concerned. As a manager, the school head must be able to balance completing requirements of school improvements, teacher's development and the provision of quality teaching and learning processes. As an integral part of the education system, the school head must be able to adjust to the need and expectation of stakeholders.

Motivation is the reason for people's action, desires, and needs. Motivation is also one's definition of behavior or what causes a person to want to repeat a behavior; motive is what prompts a person to act in a certain way or at least develop an inclination for specific behavior.

Crime is an illegal act for which someone can be punished by the government. It is a gross violation of the law and a grave offense especially against morality.

High school dropout is a person who has abandoned a course of study or rejected conventional society to peruse an alternate lifestyle. A dropout is also concerned to be a student who fails to complete school.

Student Attendance: The number of days a targeted student attends school as required by state law.

Additional Research Terms

At-risk students are students who have exhibited one or more of the factors that show statistically higher rates of failure to complete high school (Suh & Suh, 2007).

Compulsory attendance is school attendance that is required by law. The majority of states allow a student to drop out at age 16 (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006). In Georgia, all students between the ages of 7 and 16 are required to attend school by Georgia General Statute 115C-378 (Georgia Department of Public Education, 2014).

Dropout: For research purposes, a student who fails to earn high school graduation at all is defined as a dropout (Pharris-Ciurej et al., 2012). The state of Georgia has more specific guidelines of a dropout for reporting purposes to include not graduating and not being accounted for through transfer, illness, or death (Georgia Department of Public Education, 2014).

Overage refers to a student who is significantly older than his or her peers at a particular grade level. This is usually the result of one or more previous retentions. A student who is 16 years old or older in the ninth grade is generally considered overage (Stearns et al., 2007).

Retention is when a student does not earn promotion to the next grade. Retention may be caused by academic performance, attendance, or failure to meet standardized testing gateways. Students who have been retained in one or more grades generally have lower educational outcomes than their continuously promoted peers (Im et al., 2013).

Risk factors are predictors that increase the chances a student may not graduate from high school. Suh and Suh (2007) identified 180 contributing factors and condensed those down to 16 statistically significant predictive risk factors.

Student advocate, in the school district involved in this study, is a person at each school who is the primary dropout prevention specialist. All eight high schools have this staff position, but only one middle school has this position. This position is now officially referred to as a “graduation coach” at each high school but remains referred to as a “student advocate” at the middle school.

Transition refers to the period of movement from middle school to high school. For most school organizational structures, this occurs between eighth and ninth grades (Neild, 2009).

Research Study Design

As previously stated, the purpose of this study was to understand further the reasons for students to leave school early. Based on the literature, research conducted qualitatively would be beneficial regarding the population of dropouts in schools A, B, and C.

The information gained from interviewing school administration, school counselors, and school social workers can be used to strengthen the existing data. The method of conducting this study from a qualitative angle will be useful for interviewing school personnel for hire. According to schools A, B, and C more school social workers are needed to curtail dropouts.

The purpose of this study was to answer the following question: What is the perception of school administrators, counselors, and school social workers of students leaving school early in schools A, B, and C?

The Impact of Variables

The term “independent variables” are associated with “cause” and the “dependent variables” are associated with “effect.” The “independent variables” are ones that people think of as causal, the “dependent variable” is the one that people think of as being affected by the “independent variable.” The way the terms independent variable and dependent variable are used today causes much confusion and some mischief. The researcher is not sure “dependent” and “independent” are the best adjectives. In some cases, the terms are outright misleading. According to scholars, an independent variable is exactly what it sounds like. It is a variable that stands alone that is not changed by other variables that you are trying to measure. For example, someone’s age might independent variable. Other factors (such as what they eat, how much they attend school, how television they consume) is not going to change a person’s age; when one looks for some kind of relationship between variables, they look to see if the independent variables cause some kind of a change in other variables. A dependent variable is exactly what it sounds like. It is something that depends on other factors. For example, a test score could be a dependent variable because it could change depending on several factors such as how much you study, sleep, or even nutrition. Usually when looking for a relationship between two things the effort is directed at trying to find out what makes the dependent variable change the way it does.

Limitations of the Study

- Each of the participating high school principals in this research provided a different definition as to how they computed the graduation rate at their various schools. Differences in definitions of dropouts may also limit transferability.
- The research method used in this study was limited in its scope of inquiry. For this study, general limitations of phenomenological qualitative study may make transferability of the results of the findings restricted to urban school similar to the one in which actual research took place.
- Although the methodology associated with qualitative research elicits rich, in-depth responses, the information gathered would not be transferrable to other staff members due to fact their opinions were not solicited and findings therefore might have been different.
- The location for the study was identified as three of Georgia urban high schools; known as schools A, B, and C and this should be considered when attempting to extrapolate the results to another area. The information elicited from the individuals participating in the study was limited to information they were willing to reveal.

Summary

This research is impacted by several theoretical framework concepts that only serve to verify the challenges that confront high school principals as they work to provide instructional intervention strategies that would impact the student dropout rate in each of

these participating urban high schools. This qualitative research is limited in scope due to the perceptions of the three high school principals view the scope of the challenges they face in meeting the needs of their high-risk student population.

The research sample was a convenience sample selected from the school district. While convenience samples are often used in this type research, it can present a challenge in making the data generalizable across a larger population of high school administrators. The survey instrument used in this research study was designed for use with high school administrators and as such included questions about dropout risk factors and rates that may have been unfamiliar to high school teachers.

Theories of motivation (Maslow), Bandura' Social Learning Theory, John Dewey' Educational Learning Theory, and multiple other theories related to high school dropout are all part of the answer to the equation of how to serve this targeted population on under-served students exiting many urban high schools daily.

CHAPTER IV

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

“The methods section describes the rationale for the application of specific procedures or techniques used to identify, select and analyze information applied to understanding the research problem, thereby, allowing the reader to critically evaluate a study’s overall validity and reliability” (Bem, 2008). As the methodology is defined further, it will disclose assessment instruments used to collect data and investigate variables for this study.

The general intent of this study was to explore factors influencing graduation rates and dropout rates in three Georgia urban high schools. Specifically, the study employed a mixed method qualitative design to examine and discuss the issues facing the educational institution and make recommendations that can be employed to increase the opportunity for student success within the districts. This chapter presented the investigation techniques, the participants, data collection procedures, analysis, ethical considerations, and trustworthiness. The research addressed three questions.

Research Questions

RQ1: How much of a problem is the student dropout rate at your school?

RQ2: What do principals consider to be the main causes of low graduation rate in their schools?

RQ3: What types of intervention programs have the schools either implemented or considering in order to address student dropout problems?

Research Design

The purpose of the study was to uncover factors that were impacting the low graduation and high dropout rates in three urban Georgia high schools. To address that problem, a qualitative research approach was employed. The qualitative approach was particularly suited for this study because it addressed weaknesses found in studies where perception data is the primary source of information (Creswell, 2007).

There were two phases of the design. During the first phase, a quantitative approach allowed the researcher to examine relationships among variables (gender, ethnicity, family status, mobility, and grade retention). These variables were examined to determine the relationship to graduation status among a cohort of k-12 Georgia students.

The district's cumulative records provided data for the cohort of students that entered kindergarten in the fall of 2004 and graduated in spring 2016. Although traditional quantitative strategies used in this research provided an understanding and insight into the study, they lacked the ability to provide a holistic view and is without the richness that can be obtained through qualitative inquiry (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007; Jackson, 2009; Muijs, 2004).

This is a qualitative method study that investigates if gender, class size, teacher experience/qualification, attendance, ethnicity, socioeconomic status (SES), school location, leadership style, and quality of instruction affect schools A, B, and Cs dropout rate. What was the perception of the three high school principals? Even, the best teachers

with the biggest “bag of tricks”, recognize that numerous factors interfere with their ability to reach many students.

The Role of the School Administrator

The current role of a high school principal is ever changing. The demands of the job are great and require exceptional expertise, a principal is essentially the CEO of a good-size company.

- 1000-3000 students
- Staff as large as 300 people
- Sizable local budget
- Key performance goal that must be achieved
- Understanding the importance of teachers and principals to student achievement.

In this study, three high schools, all from the same school district, were selected to participate. For the purpose of this study, the three schools were identified as schools A, B, and C. Each was strategically selected for this research project.

Overview of School A

- The student population of 1,702 students has declined over 7% over 5 years.
The teacher population of 111 teachers has stayed relatively flat over 5 years.
- School type: magnet school.
- Grades offered: 9-12.
- Gender (percent): Male = 48%; Female = 52%.

- The student teacher ratio is currently 15:1, a decrease from 17:1 over 5 years.
- The school's diversity score, the chance that two students selected at random, would be a different ethnic group. Scored from zero to one, a diversity scores closer to one indicate a more diverse student body, of 0.36 is less than the star average of 0.41. The school's diversity has stayed relatively flat for over 5yrs. Minority enrollment is 99%.
- Graduation rate: 76%. State test scores percent proficiency reading 16% math12%.
- Total economically disadvantage (percent of total): 80%.
- Diversity score: 0.36.
- Special programs: Students can take advanced placement course work. AP participation rate is 54%.
- Title 1 Magnet school.
- The current principal has served as school leader for 2 years.

Overview of School B

- Gender: 45% male and 55% female
- Total minority enrollment is 99%
- School B is an alternative school and is one of 19 high schools in the district
- Total enrollment: 212; total minority enrollment (percent of total): 99%
- Full time teachers: 22
- Grades served: 9-12

- Setting: large suburb
- Eligible for title one funds
- Student/teacher ratio 10:1
- The current principal has served as school leader for 3 years
- Average graduation rate: 52%
- State test scores in reading 72%; math 53%

Overview of School C

- Magnetic school that serves 1,461 students; serves grades 9-12; public school
- Administrators = 4; counselors = 4; teaching staff =104
- Title 1 school
- Average graduation rate is 62%; state test score in reading 13%, math 6%, AP enrollment 10%, AP math and science is low
- SAT test scores (average): 930
- Pupil/teacher ratio: 15.13:1
- The current principal has served as school principal for 3 years.
- Gender of student body: Male = 50%; Female =50%
- Ethnic background is 97%
- Free and reduced lunch 80%

Sampling Procedures

This study was a mixed method in nature and does not lend itself to sampling techniques. The setting was selected with consultation from dissertation chair and committee members. The researcher had constant communication with the principals of these three high schools in the Atlanta metro area of Georgia. After discussing the nature of the study, the principals all agreed to participate in the study and be interviewed to respond to the primary research questions related to dropout rate. No names or specific identifying information were asked during the research process.

Data Identification of Schools A, B, and C

School A posted low academic scores on the most recent state mandated tests of students, and the average SAT score was 1299. Students in School A received an overall score of 200 on a scale of 0-500, putting the school dead last among the other large central U.S. cities grouped together in the NAEP.

School B posted an average SAT score of 1198 which is among the lowest in the nation; the school is located in a community with a high crime rate, and students perform at the lowest level on state required assessments.. According to the Neighborhood Scouts Research of School Performance, School B is ranked as one of the bottom worst public schools in the southeast.

School C: Each year, approximately 158 students drop out of school C. School C graduates only 55% of its student population. Students at this school struggle to perform at the proficient level based on state required assessments.

Working with Human Subjects

Protection of human subjects, confidentiality, and anonymity was paramount in this study, due to the direct questioning of individuals. Informed consent and debriefing statements was given to each volunteer interviewee upon entering into the study. A number was given as an identifier to each interviewee to maintain confidentiality. Since tape-recording interviews is an option, each tape-recording was given a number that corresponds with the interviewee. To protect the human subjects in this study, data were kept in a locked cabinet in the interviewer's home until the study is completed. Upon completion and analysis, the tape recordings were deleted.

Instrumentation

School leaders in this study were interviewed to determine how effective they have been with helping students complete all graduation requirements. Intervention strategies implemented at each school were discussed as to their effectiveness.

Research Setting

The interviews took place in both private and public settings (library, restaurant, and schools). The participants generally had additional time due to limited roles during the summer months. The type of interview was standardized with each participant required to respond to the same questions. The same open-end questions were asked to all interviewees. The questions were both subjective and objective with principals providing opinions/values and feelings type responses. This part of the study was qualitative. This research was gained for an understanding as to the perceptions of high school

administrators related to the student dropout issues they face daily. The interview provided insight into the problems for both the students and the school principals.

Data Analysis

This was a qualitative study; therefore, the data collected were based on individual interviews conducted with school personnel. The instruments that was used for this study were a set of questions comprised of demographic information. Questions referenced information such as age, ethnic origin, highest level of education, marital status, religious affiliations, and geographic location.

The general outline of this interview was structured around three basic questions:

1. What is your perception of students that quit school?
2. In your opinion, what could have prevented them from dropping out of school?
3. What do you think were the factors that led to dropping out of high school?

The purpose of using a semi-structured instrument was to allow the interviews to take its course without being too structured and outlined. The purpose of this was to gain the perspective of the individuals; therefore, it was structured more like conversation.

Protection of Human Subjects

As previously stated in this paper, confidentiality and anonymity were paramount in this study due to the direct questioning of individuals. To protect the human subjects in this study, data were maintained in a secure environment.

Instruments

The following instruments were used in this study:

1. One-on-one interviews with three urban high schools
2. Document review of State required assessments, state schools profiles
3. Attendance data

Data Collection Procedures

The data gathered were produced initially through close communication with the school leaders of schools A, B, and C. Interviews were conducted through reaching out to principals of three school leaders with schools located in the same district.

The researcher contacted the interviewer through phone calls and emails to set up interviews time and locations. The topic of the study was given prior to each interviewee in order to inform them of the purpose of the study. Each participant was informed that this was in informal session focused on their perception as to why students in their local high school dropped out of school. Interviews were conducted in convenient locations for the participants.

Because the existing research had gaps regarding the high school dropout population, this study might provide some insight into the gaps missing in the current research. The quantitative data collected from school administrators, working in an urban school setting, in making decisions related to intervention strategies to reduce the number of high school students to leave school without their diploma could add to the current body of research.

Summary

All three schools included in this study are urban high schools. Students and teachers in urban settings have greater challenges to overcome than suburban and rural counterparts. On average, urban schools have larger enrollments and are more likely to serve low-income students; urban students most likely attend schools with a higher concentration of low-income students. On average, students in urban schools have lower achievement scores in reading, writing, mathematics, and science, and experience more student behavior problems, absenteeism, classroom discipline, weapons, drug possession, and student pregnancy (John Hopkins University, 2015).

This research focused on school leaders' perception of causes and solutions related to students in high school dropping out of school. The three principals at Schools A, B, and C were interviewed related to this topic. The researcher used a mixed-method approach for this study.

CHAPTER V

PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

This study examined interviews conducted with three principals in one metro Atlanta School District to discover more about causes of high school low dropout ratings and intervention strategies used to increase these numbers. The researcher focused on the school's organizational structural, school discipline, monitoring systems, motivational strategies, and student attendance. Research instruments used in this qualitative study included interviews and a review of select district and state documents that reported on individual school's dropout ratings.

The following is an overview of how each of the three participating principals, in this research, viewed themselves as school administrators. Each statement was a self-reflection of each principal related to their roles in their current assignment.

School Principal A viewed himself as an educator, leader, and someone that cares for children and their education. He has served in his current role for 3 years.

School Principal B viewed himself as a leader who has a major emphasis on the development of a continuous learning environment for students to learn. Additionally, this administrator values faculty professional development and supports continued education for teachers in this school. Dr. X, as he is known in this study, was in his third year as the building leader.

School Principal C viewed herself as an educator, building leader, family-focused person and someone who cares for children and their education. She worked to move the students from just receiving a high school diploma to entering postsecondary education opportunities or into the work force. She has 4 years of experience as a principal and building leader.

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: How much of a problem is the student dropout rate at your school?

The Principal at School A reported that the student dropout problem was twice as low as the school district's overall rating. Using student dropout data for the class of 2015, obtained through the researcher's request of an open records document, the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* found that the graduation rate for 2015 was 76.4% and 76.2% in 2016, indicating a slight reduction from the previous year.

Principal at School B stated that it came as no surprise that more students drop out of high school in urban cities than elsewhere. The reasons are many. However, two factors mentioned most often are poverty issues and parental involvement. He stated that parental engagement declines as students get older and become more independent. The graduation rate for School B in 2015 was 62.5% and in 2016, there was an increase to 68.3%.

The Principal at School C stated that the calculation of dropout rates varied according to how the concept was defined. Research studies showed that a variety of definitions are used, thus supporting the principal's statement (Hammack, 1986; MacMillan, Balow, Widsman, Borthwick-Duffy, & Hendrick, 1990, Thurlow, Johnson,

& Sinclair, 2002). The discrepancy came to light in 2011 when the federal government made all states use a more rigorous method to calculate graduation rates. Under the new formula, the state graduation rate plunged from 80.9% to 67.4%, one of the nation's lowest.

RQ2: What do principals consider to be the main causes of low graduation rate in their schools?

In reasoning the causes behind low graduation rates, all three school principals cited specific factors that varied from low parental involvement, transient student population, poverty, and limited English speaking skills. The average high school graduation rate in the nation's fifth largest city was 53% compared to slightly higher rate of 71% in the suburbs. The school leaders at schools B and C supported the above causes of low graduation completion. The principal at school C stated additionally that the *No Child Left Behind Law* signed in 2002 did little to improve the problem of critically low graduation rates in urban schools. Schools A, B, and C participants in the research study were all located in the southern part of a large urban school district. The demographics of the three high schools were similar: the median age of residences located in the assigned school zones was 33.5 and the median household income of families was \$47,000.00. The race and ethnicity composition of the student population was between 70% to 80% black and 19% Hispanic, which was identified in the disaggregated test results. All three schools were challenged by an on-going issue of teacher quality and retention. The principals agreed that improving teacher quality was crucial to increasing the graduation rate in all three schools. Other commonality that affected graduation rates was Title 1:

80% to 90% of their student population have been identified as illegible for the National School Lunch Program (Free and Reduced Lunch).

How do the three high schools in this research differ?

According to the three principals interviewed in the participating high schools for this research study, it appears that three school leaders primarily concentrated on curriculum/student learning outcomes, assessment/state test results, and accountability goals. The one significant missing link was school culture.

Recent education reform efforts have focused on creating effective school cultures as a means of improving student achievement, higher graduation rate and improving the drop out problem, because the role of the principals was viewed as essential to the successful implementation of these efforts. The daily demands on school leaders have continuously increased which have created a multitude of challenges. The changing role of school principals have shifted to more emphasis on transforming instructional programs, managing the school as a successful organization, and other related school reform measures. The overall operation of the school on a day to day basis is supervised by individual principals and other support staff. Each of the schools in this study were different in some aspects mainly because of the varying leadership styles of their principals which may range from being an instructional leader, a visionary leader, an adaptive leadership, and/or a transformational leadership.

Principal A's approach was more of a democratic nature or an adaptive leader, which allowed faculty and staff to be more involved in the instructional process and the day to day operation of the school. He supported the concept of faculty and staff

engagement. While Principal B operated as a visionary leader and/or a transformational leader, bringing new and innovated learning styles to the faculty and staff. He was driven by motivating his faculty to buy into the vision of innovation as a way to reach all students. Principal C displayed a more autocratic style to impact the learning environment where all employees were expected to monitor and report regular student progress as well as to follow specific established guidelines and procedures. All three schools struggled to graduate successful students while at the same time dealing with a high numbers of daily discipline incidents, as well as faced with the internal and external influences of poverty issues on the academic learning environment. Both factors were major contributors to low graduation rates in these targeted high schools.

RQ3: What types of intervention programs have the schools either implemented or considering in order to address student dropout problems?

Schools A, B, and C principals were under pressure to consider and develop an intervention program to address their schools' dropout problem. All three schools were implementing possible solutions including graduation coaches, after school tutorials, and mentoring programs. The graduate coaches were assigned to local public schools by state legislators to address the graduation completion problem. The graduation coaches' mission was to ensure the successful transition of all students from elementary to middle, middle to high school and high school to post-secondary education opportunities or to the work force.

In addition to the use of graduation coaches, all three schools developed a mentoring program to support many of the students who were facing life challenges in

the transition from childhood to young adulthood. Family engagement was another preventive strategy examined by the three schools. The circle of support provided by family and schools as partners pursuing the same goal of graduation completion had an impact on some of the targeted population of struggling students.

Additionally, after school programs was another intervention strategy used by the three schools and many other schools in the district to address lagging student academic performance. After school programs currently serve around 8 million students across the United States (After School Alliance, 2011). Schools are the largest providers of these after school programs, followed by YMCA's, Boys and Girls Club, religious Organization and Private Schools. These select schools designed plans where content teachers were given stipends to support students identified areas of concerns. Each student was provided an individualized learning plan with specified goals. Other programs included Saturday classes with breakfast and lunch served as an incentive to attend these sessions.

Intervention has become an important tool for serving students who struggle academically, particularly in reading, math, and science. After-school intervention programs are very popular with meeting the academic needs of at-risk students and these programs provide more one-on-one delivery under the leadership of certified staff. This strategy has proven to be highly successful for many students in the three schools struggling to meet graduation requirements.

Summary

The purpose for this qualitative study was to examine the perception of three high school principals on factors impacting the dropout rate in their individual schools. The research study identified and examined three high schools, all located in one school district, whose demography data were similar as related to student dropout rates. The impact data for this research suggests that graduation rates in the targeted high schools were all challenged by internal and external poverty issues, lack of parental engagement, limited English skills, low academic performance and high rates of student absenteeism. The three participating administrators indicated that recruiting and retaining high quality teachers was a major challenge. This factor played a key role in low student achievement in their collective schools, all which were performing below the district's level of academic expectations. School leaders are held accountable, by both local school districts and the state department of education, to increase graduation rates in their schools.

Additionally, this study focused on the leadership of three principals and the impact of the various organizational/instructional strategies utilized in their schools to improve the completion rates of targeted students by employing the services of graduating coaches, mentors, and various after-school intervention strategies. All these intervention strategies have been used to address the low graduation problem at the participating high schools. According to participating High School principals, known as A, B and C school leaders, each indicated that most low performing at risk students tend to leave high school without their diplomas with a diminished hope of ever completing this task.

CHAPTER VI

FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

According to the introduction of the National Center for Education Statistics (Chapman, 2004), school authorities in America have been concerned about the ongoing problem of those who failed to complete high school for many years. Often, it is many of these students who eventually become a dropout statistic and/or absent from school with increasing frequency and consequently, who find themselves in the Juvenile Justice System (Smink & Reiner, 2000). Therefore, lowering student dropout rate in America is “one of the most significant challenge facing educators today” (Schargnel, 2001, p. 2). This research study has focused on the intentional organizational and instructional strategies implemented by three urban high school principals to remediate this problem.

Findings

The findings from this case study indicated that in these three urban high schools there is a serious challenge with struggling high school students to complete all graduation requirements.

RQ1: How much of a problem is the student dropout rate at your school?

All three participating high schools principals stated that their schools were below the state and district’s completion rate and that student drop out presented a serious

problem for both the school and local community. The three high schools shared a similar student profile: low income, Title 1 illegible, and a serious problem with recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers.

RQ2: What do principals consider to be the main causes of low graduation rate in their schools?

All three participating high school principals cited specific factors ranging from low parental engagement, transient student population, poverty and limited English skills both oral and written. These various factors coupled with teacher quality challenges, all play into issues impacting low graduation rates. One serious missing link was school culture. The principals in this study did not specify school culture as a focus area. However, all listed factors in this study directly impact the learning environment in a significant way. According to the recent education reform efforts, school culture is one the most impact elements known to ensure that learning outcomes are positive and students are thriving.

RQ3: What types of intervention programs have the schools either implemented or considering in order to address student dropout problems?

All three principals were pressured by district office personnel to consider and develop intervention programs to meet the academic needs of their underachieving students. All three schools have utilized graduation coaches to address this problem. The coaches have been assigned to schools throughout the state to work with targeted students struggling to meet academic learning goals. Progress has been slow but steady.

Additionally, After-School programs have been around for some time staffed by certified teachers. These three schools are utilizing this daily remediation format, as well as Saturday schools to support this student population. Incentives are utilized to encourage attendance at Saturday schools. Everything from free breakfast and lunch programs, to technology tools to be used at home have been tried to motivate students to attend. Parents have been informed of support strategies to utilize at home and parent workshops have also been utilized.

Implications

The implications of these findings revealed that select educators from the targeted school district, the high school principal, graduation coaches, and select teachers, are knowledgeable as to the 18 research-based risk factors that contribute to students dropping out of schools. The research review indicated that risk factors included, students who have been retained multiple times, students who have a history of discipline problems, parents who have limited engagement with the child's academic success, have no real relationships with adults in schools, and who come from communities of high crime are a few factors that impact graduation completion. These factors may provide a solid base from which to train teachers to identify students at risk for dropping out as early as possible and respond to these issues.

Meanwhile high school administrators frequently have interactions with students who are at risk of dropping out of school. Principals should educate teachers and parents in this area to the fact that dropping out of schools is a process and generally not a singular event (Bradshaw et al., 2008). School administrators also need to know that, as

Balfanz (2009) showed that it is possible to identify more than 50% of potential dropouts in the middle grades, so working with administrators in the middle grades should be a collaborative mission. Feeder schools should identify targeted students and establish a student profile early on to provide student support.

Another implication from this study related to the second research question is that many teachers in the targeted district are not familiar with dropout prevention statistics in either their school or district-wide data. Fully one-third of respondents choose the “do not know/no answer” option when asked about the five-year dropout trend of their school and the district. Again the results of this study are consistent with existing research that shows a focus on describing dropouts rather than on strategies to prevent them from dropping out (Knesting-Lund et al., 2013). An opportunity exists here to better inform both administrators and high school teachers about the district’s dropout strategies and about the important role dropout prevention plays in the school setting.

The assumption of the researcher, prior to the study, was based on the intentional focus of the high school faculty on graduation completion, the inclusion of state level graduation rate in quantitative high school performance assessment data, and the body of research dedicated to identifying and describing dropouts at the high school level, would be that high school administrators would perceive this problem as an urgent matter. However, the results of this study showed a significant difference in the perceptions of high school administrators as to the importance of teachers in dropout prevention efforts. Knesting-Lund et al. (2013) found in their study, that high school administrators often perceived factors outside the school as having more influence on a student’s decision to

drop out than factors controlled by the school. An opportunity exists in the target district for educating both administrators and high school teachers on the importance of teachers and their relationship to a student's decision to drop out.

Finally, the study only addresses part of the gap in the literature. While these results widen the net and should include middle school teachers and their perceptions into the dropout problem, the survey relied heavily on identification of risk factors and less on development and assessment of effective prevention programs, which is where the significant gap in the research exists.

The findings from my interviews with principal were that urban high school that predominately serve at-risk students, High Schools A, B, & C, have not fared well, with disproportion numbers of minority children and Hispanics children dropping out of school on a daily basis. The purpose of this study was to examine the intervention strategies that were implemented by school leader and the impact on potential dropouts in three urban schools. This research was guided by literature that included review of leadership and studies of leadership practices all collected from purposeful samples of three administrators in a select urban school district.

Schools A, B, and C Commonalities

- Overcrowded schools and underfunded,
- Work with diverse learners,
- Title I School,
- Low test scores,
- Attendance problems,

- Low graduation rate
- All three principals are African American with less than 5 years of experience.

Principals in an urban setting deal with unique challenges not faced by their colleagues in less populated areas. It is important to note that the challenges facing these urban schools are not entirely unique to the metropolitan area, nor are all urban school systems confronted with the same challenges. Urban schools do, however, share some physical and demographic characteristics that differentiate them from suburban and rural school districts.

Conclusions

The purpose of the study was to examine the relationship between school leaders and potential dropouts in three urban schools. This research was guided by literature that included review of leaders and interviews of leadership practices. The qualitative information was collected from purposeful samples of nine administrative in these schools. Findings from the case study indicated that school leaders did not have a positive relationship with potential dropouts. Administrators indicated a need for upper management support. Future studies should include parent voices as they relate to high school dropout and connectedness to Schools A, B, and C. Therefore, limitations of this study were those that were largely outside of the control of the researcher. Parent and student interviews were not conducted.

At the crux of the researcher's paper was the outreaching questions as to why some schools have lower dropout rates while others with similar demographics have

higher ones (Kornick & Hargis, 1998). The researcher purposed a theory of the high school graduation rate and dropout processes based on research.

One type of dropout is known as the “quiet dropout.” This type of dropout is defined by low achievement and repeated grade failure with reaction to stoicism. The second type is known as the “low achieving push out.” This type of dropout is defined by low achievement, chronic grade failure, and behavior problems. These students differ from the quiet dropouts because they overtly react to their chronic failure. The third type of dropout is the smallest group, and is known as the “high achieving push out.” These students have adequate and even above-average potential and often display behavior problems. The source of their school failures and circumstances is sometimes outside of the school such as motivation problems, family problems, and substance abuse. The final type of dropout is known as the “in-school dropout.” This type is not formally considered to be dropouts because they complete school; however, they do dropout of the learning process due to their low academic potential while physically staying in school. Dropouts are also disproportionately minority.

Recommendations

Recommendations for School Leaders

1. High School administrators should examine student profiles in 9th grade to design an academic support team to follow the instructional progress of low-performing students.

2. Data collected by CCRPI, bench mark progress reports, and teacher classroom observations should be used to develop school-wide plans that focus on instructional needs of targeted under-performing students.
3. After-School and Saturday intervention programs should work to develop active learning instructional strategies that are focused on data indicating content areas of weakness.
4. Students who have been identified as underachievers might work better receiving placement in smaller class sizes so that teacher and students can build trusting relationships.
5. School administrators should provide sensitivity workshops school-wide for urban teachers to better understand the needs of the student population.
6. School leaders should provide qualitative feedback and support to all new teachers in order to increase retention rates of highly qualified teachers.

Recommendations for Teachers

1. Teachers should work with school counselors and other support systems to address the needs of low performing students. Develop a referral system to provide help/support early and regularly to targeted students.
2. Teachers should work in small teams to support other new teachers to the school community especially what to do and not do when working with underachieving students.

Recommendations to District Leaders

1. High School completion should be a district-wide initiative with specific roles for administrators, counselors, social workers, and teachers to implement in order to address low graduation rates of targeted schools.
2. Engagement of parents and community stakeholders should become more intentional and district communications of expectations should begin with members of the Board of Education defining the roles of parents/community stakeholders in supporting local schools and their children.
3. The district should focus on changing institutions rather than changing individuals.

Recommendations for Future Research

The following are recommendations for further research:

1. The study should be expanded to examine the impact of the roles of school counselors and social workers on the dropout student population
2. Additional research should be conducted to qualitatively understand teachers' and administrators' perceptions of dropout risk factors and prevention methods.

Limitations of the Study

There were many limitations to this study.

- This was a case study, its research design was non-experimental, and the variables in the research could not be randomly assigned (Creswell, 2012).

- The sample was a convenient sample selected from the school district demographics all the same and low test scores in all Title I schools.
- The case study instruments used in this research study was designed for use with high school administrators and as such included questions about dropout risk factors and rates that may have been unfamiliar to high school teachers.
- Finally, the study only addresses part of the gap in the literature. While these results widened the net and include middle school teachers and their perceptions into the dropout problem, the case study relied heavily on identification of risk factors and less on development and assessment of effective prevention program, which is where the significant gap in the research exists.

Summary

A qualitative approach emphasizes the qualities of entities processes, and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured in terms of quantity, amount, intensity or frequency (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The researcher understands the overall content and context of the study during the research process. The data were collected and analyzed to illustrate the findings of schools A B and C on successful schools. The findings helped to explore overall improvement intervention strategies for improving and enhancing the quality of schools with major dropout concerns. The success or failures of these schools will provide evidence of consistent behaviors and practices to produce positive achievements and outcomes for dropout prevention and school reform. This study allowed the researcher the opportunity to use valid and reliable research methods to

generate possible insights into intervention strategies that impact student dropout rate in three Atlanta metro high schools.

APPENDIX A

Request for Permission to Use Instrument

Dear Principal:

I am currently a Doctoral candidate at Clark Atlanta University, and I am writing a dissertation entitled, "Factors Affecting High School Graduation Rates in Metro Atlanta Schools." I need to disperse data collection instruments for my research project regarding the impact that school leadership style and quality of instructions have on the drop-out rate of students to your counselors and social workers.

I believe that the information gathered will be useful in evaluating the impact of leadership style and quality of instruction on high school graduation rate, and dropout rate.

I am asking that the surveys be placed into the mailboxes of all the administrators that serve at your school. I will advise the participants of the requested time to have survey responses returned to me.

If you have any questions please feel free to contact me at (404) 289-4598

If approved, please sign here: _____

Respectfully Yours,

Harvey Beasley (Mr.)
Clark Atlanta University

APPENDIX B

Survey Instrument Completed by High School Principals

All responses will be kept confidential

Principal Demographics:

1. Number of years at current school:

___ 0-1 ___ 2-5 ___ 6-8 ___ 11-20

2. Number of years in education (total):

___ 0-1 ___ 2-5 ___ 6-10 ___ 11-20 ___ 20+

3. Number of years as a school principal:

___ 0-1 ___ 2-5 ___ 6-10 ___ 10+

4. Age: ___ 25-30 ___ 31-39 ___ 40-50 ___ 51-65

5. Highest level of education:

___ Bachelor's Degree ___ Master's Degree

___ Specialist Degree ___ Doctoral Degree

School Data:

Please provide the school's graduation rate and dropout data:

School Year	Graduation Rate
2016	
2015	
2014	
2013	

School Year	Dropout Rate
2016	
2015	
2014	
2013	

Principal Expectations:

Please respond to each of the following statements by placing a checkmark in the blank underneath the response that represents your answer:

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Questions	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
6. Students should be present every day				
7. Students should make an attempt to pass				
8. I expect all students to learn				
9. I expect all students to graduate				
10. I expect that my students will follow the school-wide rules				

*Please check all that apply.

11. Why do you think teens drop out of high school?

- A. Problems at home
- B. Drugs
- C. Can't catch up
- D. Friends

12. Name something that would make a student want to drop out of school?

- A. Teachers
- B. Being bullied
- C. Something else

13. What would you change about high school to make it more fun for teens so that they don't drop out of high school?

- A. Better learning environment
- B. Extra help
- C. The community

Thanks for Your Participation!

APPENDIX C

Survey Instrument Completed by School Guidance Counselors

All responses will be kept confidential

Introduction

October 2016

Dear County Schools/High School A, B, and C:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Clark Atlanta University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Education degree. The purpose of my research is to test the differences in perceptions of dropout risk factors and dropout prevention methods between high schools. Examining these differences will help add to the research on dropout prevention and the development of effective interventions, and I would like to invite you to participate in my study.

If you are a high school administrator and are willing to participate, you will be asked to complete a brief, question survey about perceptions of dropout characteristics and interventions. It should take approximately 10-15 minutes for you to complete the survey. Your participation will be completely anonymous, and no personal, identifying information will be required.

To participate, click on the link below to complete the survey. A consent document is provided as the first page you will see after you click on the survey link. Please click on the "I agree" button at the end of the consent information to indicate that you have read the consent information and would like to take part in the survey.

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this research study!

Sincerely,

Doctoral Candidate
Clark Atlanta University

Survey Questions

*Please check all that apply

1. Why do you think teens drop out of high school?
 - A. Problems at home
 - B. Drugs
 - C. Can't catch up
 - D. Friends

2. Name something that would make a student want to drop out of school?
 - A. Teachers
 - B. Being bullied
 - C. Something else

3. What would you change about high school to make it more fun for teens so that they don't drop out of high school?
 - A. Better learning environment
 - B. Extra help
 - C. The community

4. How many teens do you think in your high school dropout a year, and why do you think they do?
 - A. 0-5
 - B. 5-10
 - C. 10-20
 - D. 20+

5. What grade do most teens dropout of high school?
 - A. 9
 - B. 10
 - C. 11
 - D. 12

School Demographics

Please complete the following:

1. Age: ____30s ____40s ____ 50s ____60+

2. Number of years at current school:
 ____0-1 ____2-5 ____6-10 ____11-20 ____20+

3. Number of years as a school counselor (total):
 ____0-1 ____2-5 ____6-10 ____11-20 ____20+

4. Highest level of education:

Bachelor's Degree Master's Degree
 Specialist Degree Doctoral Degree

Thanks for your participation!

APPENDIX D

Survey Instrument: Teacher Perceptions of Dropout Factors and Interventions

Harvey Beasley

Clark Atlanta University

School: _____

Primary Content Area Taught (check all that apply):

____ English/Language Arts ____ Science ____ Math
____ Career/Technical ____ Fine Arts ____ Social Studies
____ Foreign Language ____ Other Elective

Current Grade Level(s) Taught (check all that apply):

____ 6th ____ 7th ____ 8th ____ 9th ____ 10th ____ 11th ____ 12th

Years Teaching:

____ 1-5 ____ 6-10 ____ 11-15 ____ 16-20 ____ 21-25 ____ 26+

Gender:

____ Female ____ Male

On a scale of 1 to 5, how much of a problem is dropout at your school?

1	2	3	4	5	NA
Not a Problem	Mild Problem	Moderate Problem	Significant Problem	Pervasive problem	Do not know/ No Answer

On a scale of 1 to 5, how much of a problem is dropout in our district?

1	2	3	4	5	NA
Not a problem	Mild problem	Moderate problem	Significant problem	Pervasive problem	Do not know/ No Answer

On a scale of 1 to 5, how would you describe your school's dropout rate during the last five years?

1	2	3	4	5	NA
Significantly decreasing	Somewhat decreasing	No change	Somewhat increasing	Significantly increasing	Do not know/ No Answer

On a scale of 1 to 5, how would you describe the district's dropout rate during the last five years?

1	2	3	4	5	NA
Significantly decreasing	Somewhat decreasing	No change	Somewhat increasing	Significantly increasing	Do not know/ No Answer

On a scale of 1 to 5, how much of an influence do you believe teachers can have on students' decisions to stay in or drop out of school?

1	2	3	4	5	NA
No influence at all	A little influence	Some influence	Significant influence	Primary influence	Do not know/ No Answer

On a scale of 1 to 5, how important do you believe teachers are to schools' efforts to reduce the number of students who drop out?

1	2	3	4	5	NA
Not important at all	A little Important	Somewhat Important	Significantly Important	Primarily important	Do not know/ No Answer

What type of influence do educators have on students' decisions to stay in or drop out of school?

How much do you believe each of the following factors contribute to students' decision to drop out of school?

	Not at all	A little	Somewhat	Significantly	Primary	Don't Know/ No Answer
Low academic achievement	1	2	3	4	5	NA
Working up to 15hrs/week	1	2	3	4	5	NA
Working 15+ hrs./wk.	1	2	3	4	5	NA
Retained a grade	1	2	3	4	5	NA
Frequent trouble at school	1	2	3	4	5	NA
Trouble with the law	1	2	3	4	5	NA
Frequent Absences from school	1	2	3	4	5	NA
Parenting a child	1	2	3	4	5	NA
Not having friends at school	1	2	3	4	5	NA
Not having a close relationship with the teacher	1	2	3	4	5	NA
No sense of belonging at school	1	2	3	4	5	NA
Not seeing a benefit to earning diploma	1	2	3	4	5	NA
Being unmotivated	1	2	3	4	5	NA
Limited parental educational support	1	2	3	4	5	NA
Feeling physically unsafe at school	1	2	3	4	5	NA
Feeling emotionally unsafe at school	1	2	3	4	5	NA

	Not at all	A little	Somewhat	Significantly	Primary	Don't Know/ No Answer
Believing no one cares if they drop out	1	2	3	4	5	NA
Believing adults at school want them to drop out	1	2	3	4	5	NA

If there are factors that you believe contribute to dropout and that are not identified above, please list them below:

Survey adapted from Knesting-Lund, Reese, & Boody (2013). Teacher's perceptions of high school dropout and their role in dropout prevention: An initial investigation. *Journal of Studies in Education*, 3(4), 57-70.

APPENDIX E

Clark Atlanta University IRB Approval



CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY

**Institutional Review Board
Office of Sponsored Programs**

May 30, 2017

Mr. Harvey Beasley <HarveyBeasley@bellsouth.net>
Educational Leadership,
School of Education
Clark Atlanta University
Atlanta, GA 30314

RE: The Perception of Administrators Affecting the Drop-Out Rate in Atlanta.

Principal Investigator(s): Harvey Beasley

Human Subjects Code Number: HR2017-5-732-1

Dear Mr. Beasley:

The Human Subjects Committee of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your protocol and approved of it as exempt in accordance with 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2).

Your Protocol Approval Code is HR2017-5-732-1/A

Type of Review: Expedited.

This permit will expire on May 30, 2018. Thereafter, continued approval is contingent upon the annual submission of a renewal form to this office.

The CAU IRB acknowledges your timely completion of the CITI IRB Training in Protection of Human Subjects – “Social and Behavioral Sciences Track”.

Your CITI certification expires on March 3, 2019.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB Office or Dr. Paul I. Musey, (404) 880-6337.

Sincerely:

Paul I. Musey, Ph.D.
Chair, IRB
Human Subjects Committee

223 James P. Brawley Drive, S.W. * ATLANTA, GA 30314-4391 * (404) 880-8000

Formed in 1988 by consolidation of Atlanta University, 1865 and Clark College, 1869

APPENDIX F

School District Research Approval



Principal Support to Conduct Research in Schools

Dear Principal:

The researcher identified below has submitted a proposal to the Department of Research and Program Evaluation (DRPE) and requested that your school serve as a site for his/her research. While the DRPE evaluates the proposal in terms of research design, methodology, and compliance with federal regulations and also obtains district-level feedback, the researcher must secure your support and permission to conduct the study in your school.

Researchers should clearly describe their project and provide you with a detailed description of the research activities that will take place in the school. Please complete this form and return it to the researcher so that he/she can submit it to the Department of Strategic Planning, Research and Evaluation. Forms must be on file prior to the initiation of the study.

Researcher/Principal Investigator: Harvey Beasley

Title of Study: High School Dropout case study

Research will involve:

Cooperating School: Alternative School Grade(s): 10-12

#Classes: N/A #Students: None # Staff: Principal, Counselor, Social Worker

Data Collection Start Date: 5/30/2017 Data Collection End Date: 11/30/2017

This study has been explained to my satisfaction: x Yes No

This study may be conducted in my school: x Yes No

Principal Name(print): Loretta M. Henderson

Signature: Loretta M. Henderson Date: 4/25/2017

Please contact the Department of Research and Program Evaluation (fcsresearch@fultonschools.org) with any questions.

APPENDIX G

Consent Cover Letter for Survey Research

Dear Participant:

I invite you to participate in a research entitled _____. I am currently enrolled in the Doctoral Ed. Leadership program at Clark Atlanta University in Atlanta, GA, and am in the process of writing my dissertation. The purpose of the research is to determine why students drop out of school.

The enclosed questionnaire has been designed to collect information on three south metro Atlanta High Schools:

- Graduation Rate
- Dropout Rate

Your participation in this research project is completely voluntary. You may decline altogether, or leave blank any questions you don't wish to answer. There are no known risks to participation beyond those encountered in everyday life. Your responses will remain confidential and anonymous. Data from this research will be kept under lock and key and reported only as a collective combined total. No one other than the researchers will know your individual answers to the question.

If you agree to participate in this project, please answer the question on the questionnaire as best you can. It should take approximately 15 min to complete. Please return the questionnaire as soon as possible in the enclosed business reply envelope.

If you have any questions about this project, feel free to contact me below. Thank you for your assistance in this important endeavor.

Sincerely Yours,

Principal Investigator
Harvey Beasley
HarveyBeasley@bellsouth.net
404-289-4598

* Information on the rights of human subject in research is available through the IRB at Clark Atlanta University website.

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