A CASE STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES WHO DID NOT COMPLETE HIGH SCHOOL

By

Richard Wieringo

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES WHO DID NOT COMPLETE HIGH SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

This case study explores the experiences of students with disabilities who have dropped out of high school, so as to identify related factors that led to their decisions. Participants included both males and females who were designated as students with disabilities at Ridgeville High School (pseudonym for a Virginia high school) and who dropped out between their third and fourth years of high school, during the 2010 to 2014 academic years. All participants were between the ages of 18 and 24. The case study was conducted through the use of semistructured interviews, journaling, and observation of the sample population, with the aim of identifying common experiences among students who have dropped out of school close to graduation. The results of the semistructured interviews were examined using reductive qualitative analysis, which included the use of coding and extraction of themes. The study results indicated that the overall sense of belonging of the students was low. The attitude of the students towards themselves, especially the nature of their disability, was another aspect that was found to be a great determinant of the reasons connected with high dropout rates of students with disabilities. The students also believed that more effort is needed from the teachers, their peers and the schools to help them in the school environment.

Key Words: Achievement gap, disability, dropout prevention, IDEA 2004, dropping out, IEP, inclusion, the No Child Left Behind Act, qualitative data analysis, special education and student engagement.

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Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.

– Proverbs 3:5-6

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The United States has had a well-documented struggle with dropout rates in public education. Tyler and Lofstrom (2009) reported that the United States high school dropout rate consistently fluctuates between 22% and 25%. The Editorial Projects in Education (EPE) Research Center (2010) estimated that approximately 1.3 million youths drop out of high school every year. Of these, many are considered to be students with disabilities. Feng and Sass (2010) reported that the likelihood that students with educational challenges, such as those in special education, will drop out of school is double that of their peers. Furthermore, Mellard (as cited by Iosifides, 2011, p. 58) noted:

> Even though it is easy to talk about dropout rates, it is much harder to keep track of them. Tracking special education dropout rates is challenging. Yet, such information is critical in communicating the significant dropout issues of youth with disabilities to Congressional and state lawmaking bodies, state and local commissioners, and the general community.

Therefore, the effort to address the challenges of high school dropouts should include examining the significant subpopulation of students with disabilities who opt to discontinue their high school education. This qualitative case study will (a) explore the lived experiences of individuals with disabilities who dropped out of a selected high school between 2010 and 2014 and (b) examine the issues and policies that affect the school dropout issue among youth with disabilities. This chapter provides relevant background about the issue, as well as an explanation of the research problem and purpose. The research questions that will guide the study are presented, and the nature of the study is discussed. The chapter concludes by presenting the organization of the remainder of the study.

Background

In today's information age, financial stability and professional achievement are strongly correlated with educational attainment (Gratz, 2009). Obtaining a high school diploma significantly enhances a young person's capacity to earn a living wage and to ensure economic security (Spring, 2008). Individuals who drop out of high school thus enter the job market at a disadvantage. Levin (2009, p. 8) noted, "High school graduation captures both the cognitive and the noncognitive attributes that are important for success in adulthood, and it is usually a minimum requirement for engaging in further training and higher education." Higher education, in turn, characteristically enhances opportunities for advancement in a chosen profession (Gratz, 2009). Today's world is widely considered a "knowledge-driven economy," where employability is measured by one's level of education and unique set of skills (Kennedy, 2010, p. 821). Arguably, education and special skills are acquired through attending high school and are further enhanced and developed during postsecondary education.

Conversely, a student who does not graduate from high school encounters seemingly insurmountable obstacles in securing employment in an increasingly competitive market (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). The recent economic recession has further narrowed job opportunities for high school dropouts (Fogg, Harrington, & McMahon, 2010). Dropping out of high school is a strong predictor of serious negative consequences for both the individual and society (Strother, 2006).

These already formidable challenges are further exacerbated for the high school dropout with a disability. Individuals with disabilities typically feel alienated throughout their high school experiences (Edgerton, 2001). As they venture out into mainstream society, these problems carry over and are intensified by the students' frequent dependence on welfare and

health services and their difficulties in meeting the demands of society (Tymchuk, Lakin, & Luckasson, 2001).

Students with disabilities who require special accommodations in the workforce routinely face obstacles in securing employment, even when they are well educated (Ford, 2007). When individuals with disabilities drop out of school, they may be inadequately prepared for the challenges of gaining and maintaining employment and thus at risk of becoming unproductive citizens (McNeal, 2011). Vilhjalmsdottir (2010, p. 678) reported that "dropping out of school is a move that can have dramatic consequences in a career." The added challenge of managing the barriers associated with a disability in the workplace can have significant consequences.

Dropout prevention is presented as an effective strategy for increasing literacy rates, expanding career opportunities, and decreasing unemployment rates among students with disabilities. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) and Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) both support the goal of decreasing dropout rates for the general populace as well as for students with disabilities. The standard elements of dropout prevention programs include

- Raising standards and expectations relative to students and programs for aiding young people at risk to ensure that they meet these higher standards and expectations;
- Identifying early warning signs of dropping out and intervening effectively (Knight & Ruddock, 2008);
- Improving instruction in the classroom;
- Ensuring teacher and school accountability;
- Improving teacher quality;

- Including vocational training and counseling as a part of the school curriculum; and
- Including and improving participation in schools by families, peers, and the community, particularly with respect to support for students at risk (Martin & Fabes, 2008).

One important limitation of these efforts is that their success has been primarily measured with standardized assessments (Abedi, 2004), which have been widely criticized for failing to address the unique needs of students with disabilities. Students already struggling with achievement in schools can expect to find the stringent standards imposed by standardized testing unattainable; feeling hopeless, these students are likely to give up their educational pursuits at the earliest opportunity (Boeije, 2009).Further, standardized testing and assessment may negatively affect the motivation of some students and thus increase the dropout rate, because teachers are forced to teach to the tests within a narrow curriculum, compromising student engagement (Rumberger & Palardy, 2005).

The shift toward standardized testing has failed to result in a meaningful reduction of high school dropout rates, and students with disabilities continue to be marginalized by the culture of testing in public education (Dynarski, Clarke, Cobb, Finn, Rumberger, & Smink, 2008). The needs of students with specific educational challenges are diverse and complex, and the solutions to their needs are not revealed in the results of standardized testing (Crawford & Tindall, 2006). Special education issues that demand more immediate attention include (a) ensuring that special education teachers have appropriate textbooks, (b) providing special education teachers with help to complete needed paperwork relative to student assessments and intervention, and (c) investigating why “a disproportionate number of children of color end up in special education” (Shorr, 2006, p. 1).

Without giving the proper attention to special education, the ongoing challenge of students with disabilities' dropping out of high school cannot be addressed. This issue is both under recognized and undertreated. Bringing the attention to the issue will allow this concern to be addressed.

Ascertaining the characteristics that dropouts display and identifying the common reasons why students with disabilities drop out is vital to developing and applying appropriate effective dropout prevention strategies and programs. According to the Council for Exceptional Children, students with disabilities are diverse and have different needs and goals (Gargiulo, 2011). The Council for Exceptional Children (2010) explained that students with disabilities

- Differ from one another in ability, age, learning style, and personality;
- Come from all cultural backgrounds and may speak languages other than English;
- Have unique learning needs based on their disabilities that require a number of special education and related services, such as specially designed instruction, adapted materials, speech-language therapy, or adaptive physical education;
- May have cognitive impairments, such as intellectual disability, that can range from mild to profound;
- May have learning disabilities that require specific teaching strategies, including accommodations to and modifications of the general education curriculum;
- May have physical disabilities that require the use of wheelchairs or other assistive devices;
- May have impairments that are sensory, such as hearing loss and vision impairments;

- Might have emotional conditions; and
- May have their learning complicated by chronic health problems and multiple disabilities (Gargiulo, 2011).

Contrary to common myths, students with disabilities can succeed in school, and, when provided with an adequate education, they grow mentally and socially (Gargiulo, 2011).

Much variation exists within the population of students with disabilities; however, particular disability classifications are more strongly linked to negative educational outcomes, as well as to a lack of confidence, self-consciousness, and difficulties in understanding language and instructions (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010). In addition, students with disabilities "are . . . more likely [to] become involved in major disciplinary incidents like suspensions and expulsions than are their peers in general education programs . . . [They regularly] attain significantly lower levels of academic performance than the average student" (Swanson, 2008, p. 1). These factors certainly contribute to dropping out and to the lifelong consequences that follow.

Situation to Self

I have always taken a particular interest in students with disabilities; my goal has been to help these students perform to their fullest potential and to ensure that they complete high school to reverse the dropout rate among special education students. This research study is therefore very important to me in my quest to assist my students. I believe that, if I can understand the experiences that culminate in the decision to drop out of high school, I can reduce those experiences as a teacher and, further, encourage administrative changes that could encourage special education students to stay in school.

Problem Statement

The disabilities experienced by special education students place them at a disadvantage in pursuing financial stability and professional success (Ford, 2007). While

most special education students who graduate with disabilities will eventually require special accommodations in the workplace, some may have cognitive disabilities that limit their career opportunities (Levinson & Palmer, 2005). Not completing high school inherently increases the challenges that these individuals face as they strive to become productive members of society and attain personal independence. To reduce dropout rates among students with disabilities, strategies beyond increased government spending on special education programs should be investigated. Understanding the experiences of students with disabilities is a starting point for developing such strategies.

Predictive factors or indicators must be recognized early to delay and stop special education students from dropping out. Balfanz, Herzon, and MacIver (2007) asserted that four indicators predict a student's risk of dropping out of high school: (a) Missing school more than 20% of the time, (b) earning a poor final behavior grade, (c) failing English, and (d) failing math. Directing additional interventions toward students with disabilities is often thought to drain resources that could potentially yield results elsewhere; Balfanz et al. (2007) contended that students with disabilities routinely receive extra interventions when other students who might benefit from additional interventions are not successfully identified.

I argue that interventions helping to ensure that students with disabilities graduate from high school should not be perceived as a financial drain but rather as an investment. Interventions for one group of students may simultaneously serve to benefit other groups. Identifying common reasons why high school students with disabilities drop out can inform the successful application of various dropout prevention strategies and techniques that might eventually be generalized to other populations. While students may drop out for diverse reasons, common factors may exist that could point to opportunities for change within the school to better support all at-risk students. The literature rarely, if ever, focuses on the early indicators and warning signs behind the high dropout rate of special education students. This

research study attempts to fill that gap by gaining personal insight from the perspective of students with disabilities who decided to drop out of school.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the lived experiences of individuals with disabilities who dropped out of the selected public high school in Virginia between 2010 and 2014 and to evaluate the effectiveness of the special education program with special education students who were at high risk for dropping out of high school. Research studies typically focus on the common attributes and demographics of students with disabilities who dropped out of school, rather than on the experiences of these students that led to and influenced their decision to drop out. In-depth interviews were the primary data gathering method. Ten participants were asked to share their experiences as they came to the decision to drop out of high school.

The results of this study may contribute insight into the causes of attrition rates and thus suggest strategies that can address the problem. The school under study was chosen because of its broad population of students with disabilities and its high dropout rates. The investigation used the participants' personal experiences to interpret the phenomenon of dropping out of high school. I assumed the participants were honest and open while answering the interview questions. I used a methodology to ascertain why students with disabilities dropout of high school. From the results of the study, I was able to recommend approaches that may reduce the dropout rate among students with disabilities.

Research Questions

This qualitative research study was guided by four research questions:

1. What are the general educational experiences of students with disabilities who drop out of school (Quinn, 2010; Woods, 2007)?

2. What are the special educational experiences of students with disabilities who drop out of school (Simpson, Peterson, & Smith, 2011)?
3. What factors lead to the decision to drop out of school for students with disabilities (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Kortering, 2009)?
4. How does dropping out of school impact the quality of life of students with disabilities (Bello, 2006; Schulte & Villwock, 2004)?

Research Plan

The research plan was to examine the factors that lead up to a student dropping out of school and to understand the experiences of students with disabilities who drop out of school. The research plan entailed collecting qualitative data to compile case studies of several students with disabilities who dropped out of school. The case studies were formed after the critical qualitative analysis of in-depth, semistructured interviews with students who were both disabled and dropouts.

The case study approach was appropriate because it allowed the broader phenomenon of the disabled dropout experience to be probed in detail, thereby providing a thorough overview of the experiences of students involved in the study. The results of this research are not applicable to all students, but they do provide a specific snapshot of the situation in a certain space and a certain time.

Delimitations

Delimitations refer to those aspects of a research study that are within the control of the researcher (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Delimitations are intentional selections of boundaries for conducting the research and are informed by time, resources, location, and the scope of the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). In other words, delimitations describe the workable boundaries that allow for a thorough investigation of the research questions and thus increase the credibility of the research.

Limitations are factors that "expose the conditions that weaken the study" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 114) and the "external conditions that restrict or constrain the study's scope or may affect its outcome" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 103). One such factor is the breadth of the term "disability." The broad nature of the term may result in wide variations among reported factors that contributed to students' dropping out, and this range of unique experiences and circumstances could limit the generalizability of the findings. The type and severity of students' disabilities are critical to the study, because they affect other outcomes. For instance, the researcher established that students with more severe disabilities have a greater likelihood of high absenteeism, which positively correlated to the probability of that student dropping out (Lehr, Johnson, Bremer, Cosio, & Thompson, 2004, p. 12). Spencer (2009) studied attendance records of 42 eighth-grade students at an urban school and determined that the students who were persistently absent eventually dropped out.

Based on the recommendation of Lehr et al. (2004), initial data were gathered on each participant to learn more about that person's background. The data included age, gender, socioeconomic background, ethnicity, native language, region, mobility, ability, parents' employment, school size and type, family structure, and type of disability. The legal definition of an individual with severe disability was applied in this study: individuals who have a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities (34 CFR 350.5, as cited in U.S. Public Law, 2011). Each student's disability was classified by level of its severity using this definition (see Appendix D), and the classification was validated by a professional school counselor. Federal legislation identified 13 categories of disabilities applicable to students: autism, deafness, blindness, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, mental retardation, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairments, other health impairments, recognized learning disabilities, speech/language impairments, brain trauma, and visual difficulties (Siegel, 2011). These categories were used to identify, classify,

and code the participants' disabilities. These terms were distinguished by the coding using different numbers to represent the categories.

The transcription and coding of the journaling, interviews, and field notes from observations provided ways to identify issues that needed to be addressed. It was also used to examine factors that were not fixed and could be changed, which were therefore "the focus of efforts to increase school completion" (Lehr et al., 2004, p. 12). Identifying issues and concerns of students with disabilities dropping out of school depended on what the participants were willing to share, and thus the openness of subjects was a limiting factor in the study. For instance, stressful life events are incidents in their lives that are very personal. If the participant elected not to disclose these painful experiences, the instances were not available for analysis.

The characteristics and factors commonly associated with the act of dropping out were grades, disruptive behavior, absenteeism, school policies, school climate, parenting, sense of belonging, attitudes toward school, educational support in the home, retention (i.e., having to repeat a grade), and stressful life events (Lehr et al., 2004, pp. 12–13). Some variables were easy to identify, and some required careful observation and access to private information. For instance, personal problems disclosed in confidential or sealed environments, such as juvenile delinquency, may have had an impact on the decision to drop out but may not have been voluntarily disclosed.

Definition of Terms

Disability: The Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990 defines disability as "a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities" (Jacob, Decker, & Harsthorne, 2010, p. 130).

Dropout: A student who has officially dropped out of school. Dropouts usually have not attended school for 1 year, with the intention of not graduating.

Dropout prevention: Strategies, techniques, and programs that have the objective of decreasing dropout rates or result in decreased dropout rates.

Dropping out: Finn and Dynarski (2007) defined the concept of dropping out as a slow process of disengagement that usually begins early in a student's school career and is manifested in warning signs such as absenteeism and low grades. The process ends in the decision to ultimately quit school with the intention of not graduating.

Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA): IDEA is a law that guarantees that children with disabilities are provided with early intervention, special education, and other related services that aim to give them equal opportunities.

Inclusion: The act and concept of including students with disabilities in regular classrooms and schools without special treatment, with the intention that they will feel they belong and that they can immerse themselves in general society.

Individualized Education Plan (IEP): A program specifically designed to address the distinctive needs of children, especially those with disabilities. IEPs are mandated by IDEA and are subject to federal regulations.

No Child Left Behind Act: A law was enacted by the US Congress to upgrade US primary and secondary education by holding states, school districts, and schools accountable for achieving academic standards and by providing parents more freedom of choice when their local schools are not producing acceptable student achievement.

Qualitative data analysis: A flexible process of noticing things, collecting data, and contemplating what the data suggest.

Response to Intervention (RTI): A method of academic intervention used in the United States to provide early, systematic assistance to children who are having difficulty learning.

Special education: Specialized instruction for students with disabilities (Conderman & Pedersen, 2005, p. 90).

Student engagement: Active student participation in school activities (both academic and extracurricular), which typically leads to positive attitudes and behaviors regarding school and a desire to perform well in school (Harris, 2008).

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This review of the literature summarizes prior research into dropping out of American public schools, with particular emphasis on the population of students with disabilities (Boeije, 2009). Students with disabilities experience a range of challenges during their education; therefore, their reasons for considering dropping out are varied. The nature of a particular student's disability is sometimes cited as the primary barrier to completion, while in other cases, institutional and programmatic factors are cited (Sass & Feng, 2012). Despite substantial efforts to improve educational outcomes for students with disabilities at the secondary level (Bello, 2006; Schulte & Villwock, 2004; Woods, 2007), dropout rates remain high.

The need for this study is well documented in the literature. Reschly and Christenson (2006) explained that once educators and policymakers can identify the reasons for the high dropout rate among students with disabilities, they will be able to more effectively prevent students at risk from dropping out of school. A meta-analysis of 16 qualitative case studies conducted by Cobb, Sample, Alwell, and Johns (2006) suggested that identifying the reasons why a student with disabilities might drop out will also help to direct appropriate intervention strategies. The studies conducted by Cobb et al. (2006) involved interventions among 791 students with various disabilities. Cognitive intervention strategies were used in each case, with encouraging results with respect to dropout prevention (Cobb et al., 2006). Thus, exploring the reasons for the dropout rates in the literature can lead to improved identification of at-risk students and corresponding strategies for preventing or reducing dropout rates.

An example of a similar phenomenology was conducted by Chirtes (2010). Chirtes conducted a phenomenology during the school year 2008–2009 involving 682 students from a specific town. The relevant data collected were from students' family members, and the

school environment was observed. The study identified 15 school dropouts whose attendance records predicted that they would eventually drop out of school (Chirtes, 2010).

An example of a qualitative phenomenology similar to the current study was conducted by Shah, Alam, and Baig (2012). Shah et al. conducted a phenomenology of students in a school district in Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan. Twenty-four students participated in semistructured interviews intended to reveal the students' sense of belonging relative to the personality of teachers. Research findings established a possible link between a student's sense of belonging and the likelihood of the student dropping out of school (Shah et al., 2012).

An example of a qualitative phenomenology in which participant journaling was a part of the data collection was conducted by Quinn (2010). The purpose of the research was to determine the extent to which female participation in education and increasing feminist ideology influenced universities' culture and curriculum and how those factors interacted with the lived experiences of women graduating from universities in social contexts (Quinn, 2010). Thus, journaling was perceived as a method by which the lived experiences of the persons experiencing a particular phenomenon could share those experiences freely.

This chapter will review the study's theoretical framework and related literature to uncover existing gaps in knowledge about the factors that influence students with disabilities to drop out. The reasons for the dropout rate will be explored, and programs implemented to support retention will be discussed.

Theoretical Framework

The research literature proposed various reasons why students with disabilities exceed the nation's high school dropout rate. The main reasons relate to their own abilities and to the ability of social and education institutions to effectively respond to the students' disabilities (Bloom, 2010; Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010; Stearns & Glennie, 2006). These themes fall

within the theoretical framework of social cognitive theory, which assumes that beliefs about "self-efficacy" function together with "cognized goals, outcome expectations, and perceived environmental impediments and facilitators" in directing how humans are motivated to act and how their "well-being" is regulated (Bandura, 1998, p. 623). In other words, an individual's belief in his or her ability to succeed (self-efficacy) affects learning outcomes. According to Zimmerman, Bandura, and Martinez-Pons (1992), self-efficacy, in the context of social cognitive theory, is related to student motivation to learn and student engagement in the learning process.

Themes in the literature confirm the view of social cognitive theory, underscoring engagement by demonstrating that students underachieve as a result of a lack of motivation to learn, a significant causal factor in the student dropout rate (Zimmerman et al., 1992). Motivation is described as related to engagement, or how the student's "cognitions, behaviors, and affects are energized, directed, and sustained" for the duration of the in-school experiences or activities (Schunk & Mullen, 2012, p. 219). Within the theoretical framework of social cognitive learning, motivation refers to processes that are affected by the person's emotions and perceptions, as well as the contexts in which their perceptions are formed, including peer relations, classrooms, community, and home (Schunk & Mullen, 2012).

Student engagement is also captured by the theory of self-determination, which argues that opportunities for adjustment to conditions that influence self-motivation and student engagement correspond with engagement in learning (Wehmeyer, Agran, Palmer, Martin, & Mithaug, 2003). Because students with disabilities have to make adjustments to regulate what they are capable of learning and what they want to learn, opportunities for adjustment are important (Wehmeyer et al., 2003). Argan, Wehmeyer, Calvin, and Palmer (2008) argued that promoting "self-regulated learning" techniques among students with cognitive disabilities is especially useful for helping these students achieve better academic outcomes (p. 106). Self-

determination theory assumes that, when students have a feeling of connection to and involvement with teachers, they are more likely to feel that they are in control and therefore "more likely to display autonomous reasons for engaging in academic activities" (Close & Solberg, 2008, p. 32).

The current study examined motivation and engagement from the perspective of both social cognitive theory and self-determination as a means of understanding how perceptions of self-efficacy and motivations for retention are directed by opportunities for controlling one's own learning outcomes. In addition, McNeely and Falci (2004) found that students who had difficulty processing information from oral presentations and written materials and who showed evidence of low self-esteem were more likely to leave school than their peers without those characteristics.

Literature Review

Dropping Out Among Students With Disabilities

Students with disabilities are not the only ones at risk of dropping out. Dropout rates have increased for all students, and studies have identified a subgroup of students, termed "at-risk," as being more likely than others to drop out (Mayya, Rao, & Ramnarayan, 2004). However, the dropout rates among students with disabilities and special needs far exceed that among students enrolled in general education programs (Murray & Naranjo, 2008). It makes sense to examine institutional responses to and treatment of students with disabilities to identify the failures.

Researchers have consistently indicated that students with disabilities struggle to graduate from high school. D'Angelo & Zemanick (2009) found that only 52% of students in special education graduate from high school. Moreover, while 57% of students with specific learning disabilities and 59% of those with other health impairments graduate, the rates are

only 37% for students with mild intellectual disabilities and 35% for those with behavioral or emotional disabilities.

Kortering (2009) noted that these figures stand in stark contrast with the 69% graduation rate of students who are blind or deaf. These figures belie the original goals of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, which sought to provide special education that would enable students with disabilities to become productive members of society. The high dropout rates indicate that something is wrong with the special education system. Kortering (2009) questioned the validity of the individualized education plan (IEP), the very basis of special education, asking if its application fails to improve outcomes for students with disabilities in high school.

Public School Issues Associated With Dropping Out

Despite the protections and support measures provided to students with disabilities in the public school system, this population of students remains significantly at risk for dropout prior to high school graduation. Public schools disenfranchise these students and lead them to withdraw prior to graduation. Given the significant and lifelong consequences of dropping out of high school, understanding these factors and addressing them is critical.

In many cases, high schools continue to struggle with offering full and appropriate special education services for students with special needs (Bello, 2006; Schulte & Villwock, 2004; Woods, 2007). Bello (2006) noted that Catholic high schools had no formalized system for special education and that private schools have no legal requirement to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Bello found that most private schools employed special educators, but that most special education was undertaken through accommodations in inclusive classroom situations and that other, more specialized services were lacking. Most schools in Bello's study also reported experiencing conflicts between the college preparatory mandates of the curriculum and finding ways to accommodate students with disabilities while still

fulfilling achievement standards. The schools in Bello's (2006) study tended to limit admissions to those who needs were deemed manageable within the framework of their standards.

Although Bello (2006) faulted Catholic and other private schools for inconsistencies and discriminatory practices, Maag and Katsiyannis (2010) found similar issues with federally mandated and approved early intervention programs that permit the identification of students with special needs and their placement in differentiated programs. According to Maag and Katsiyannis, many of these programs are inconsistent with the policy for early intervention, as the criteria for identification and placement are impossible for preschool children to meet. For the most part, only students with a longer history of struggling with behavioral and emotional disorders will meet the criteria for early intervention (Maag & Katsiyannis, 2010).

This situation is unfortunate, because early intervention in preschool can remove a number of the problems that contribute to the dropout phenomenon. For instance, early intervention can treat the behavioral and emotional disorders that contribute to underachievement and poor performance. Similarly, early intervention can prevent the need for students to repeat a grade later on. However, since intervention can occur only after it is well established that the student is struggling or has emotional or behavioral disorders or both; the student may already be alienated from the school environment and well on the way to dropping out before anyone notices the problem, making it difficult to reengage the student.

Teacher Training and Implementation of Inclusion

Wasburn-Moses (2005) worried that teachers are asked to do too many things for too many diverse students and that they therefore find it difficult to do anything well, including special education inclusion. To determine how realistic it is for teachers to adopt inclusion,

Wasburn-Moses surveyed special education teachers, finding that most of them taught courses in several different context areas, usually in self-contained settings, and held numerous nonteaching roles. These multiple requirements were placed on novices as well as experienced teachers. All teachers had to instruct reading, writing, and other basic skills; work with all students; make accommodations where needed; work with parents, general education teachers, and administrators; and do an enormous amount of paperwork. As a result, less than half of the special education teachers spent more than one hour each week working directly with any special needs student one-on-one. Additionally, researchers results were interpreted as confirming a linkage between multiple teacher roles and attrition, arguing that inclusion was compromised through placing too many varied responsibilities on special educators Wasburn-Moses, 2005). Release time, less demanding roles for novice teachers, and other ways to allow special education teachers to have more one-on-one time with their students were recommended (Wasburn-Moses, 2005).

Wasburn-Moses (2006) also found that most service delivery remains fragmented and that the curriculum and quality of instruction offered to students are inadequate. Not only did students with disabilities have limited options but inclusion programs also lacked coherence. Furthermore, special education teachers were more likely to focus on basic skills than on content-area instruction and they tended to teach science and social studies rather than the core topics of reading and math. The teachers in Wasburn-Moses' study further indicated that most courses offered in inclusive classrooms remained too rigorous and were inappropriate for special needs students. They also stated that too few accommodations were offered (Dynarski et al., 2008). Outside agency support for vocational training was deemed poor as well, with few courses focusing on the functional life skills that students with severe mental retardation or emotional, behavioral, or language deficit would need following graduation.

Teachers gave effectiveness-of-transition planning the lowest ratings, indicating lack of training and poor collaboration between stakeholders in charting a course for students.

The general findings of lack of program coherence and limited choices for students with disabilities confirmed findings in the literature as to the continuing weakness of special education at the secondary school level. More than focusing on inclusion for its own sake, Wasburn-Moses (2006) argued that school districts need to focus on program coherence and program choice to improve the academic outcomes of students with disabilities.

Inclusion policy is limited because it did not consider that general education teachers lacked the training necessary to teach students with disabilities (Laprairie, Johnson, Rice, Adams, & Higgins, 2010). In a study of graduates from preservice teacher training in Texas, most were found to be unprepared to teach students with special needs in general education classrooms; the teachers overwhelmingly stated that they needed more training in this regard (Laprairie et al., 2010). According to Maddox and Prinz (2003), while general education teachers should never be expected to master all of the adaptive techniques used to manage special needs children, they can and should learn the basic principles of special education. Laprairie et al. listed 10 issues that general education teachers should know about special education, including a full understanding of IDEA and its stipulations, especially IEPs. General education teachers should also know the principle of least restrictive environment, the various types and severities of disabilities that they may encounter in their inclusive classroom, what a section 504 plan is and how to apply for it or help the student's family apply for it, their role in meeting the stipulations of the student's IEP; how and by whom the IEP was developed, current best-practice findings with regard to inclusion, the role of special education teachers in general classrooms, the kinds of modifications and accommodations that can be fairly offered to special needs students, and the availability of additional school personnel to help in addressing issues related to special needs children. Overall, Laprairie et

al. (2010) argued that, if preservice training informed all teachers on these 10 points, most general education teachers would be able to manage inclusion with the help of special education teachers. Unfortunately, few general education teachers appear to have mastered this basic level of understanding.

While acknowledging that many of the reasons that inhibit positive outcomes for students with disabilities derive from factors that are beyond the control of teachers, including socioeconomic factors, Cook, Tankersley, and Landrum (2009) argued that special educators' teaching practices themselves may be a source of problems. A research-to-practice gap exists in special education and many teachers use practices that have been shown to have little positive effect on students while ignoring research-based or evidence-based practices that have demonstrated positive impact on student outcomes. As a result of this persistent gap, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) and other legislation have increasingly called on special educators to adopt evidence-based practice. Nonetheless, Cook et al. (2009) argued that most special educators still do not have a clear sense of which strategies are evidence-based practices (EBPs) and which are not. Therefore, Cook et al. conducted a phenomenology that examined the extent to which special educators were using EBPs. They compared the field of clinical psychology to the field of school psychology, finding in general that, while clinical psychology had established a solid grounding in EBP, school psychology had a much less firm basis. Many of the criteria used in school psychology and in general educational practice remain comparatively fuzzy and uncertain. Because establishing EBPs in education appeared to remain controversial, Cook et al. offered some guidelines on how to introduce a concern for EBP in school psychology as an underpinning for improved special education practice. While acknowledging that EBPs can never take the place of professional judgment, Cook et al. concluded that special education practice must seek to adhere more diligently to EBPs and thereby close the research-to-practice gap.

Teacher Disengagement

Teachers play a vital role in supporting all students, including those with disabilities. Lack of engagement and support from teachers can have a detrimental effect on student motivation and persistence. Murray and Naranjo (2008) conducted a qualitative research study by interviewing 11 students with disabilities who were about to graduate from an urban school in an area where 80% of the students had either repeated a grade or failed to complete school altogether. The interviews were framed to identify the factors that the students had to overcome to complete school successfully. One interviewee identified a systematic failure relative to the school's practices, stating that

> Some teachers just give you work, and when you ask them to help you, they get an attitude and say 'you gotta do it yourself' or 'ask your mama to help you.' (Murray & Naranjo, 2008, p. 150)

Another interviewee noted that it was difficult to sit in a classroom with others when one cannot understand or complete the lesson and that teachers were not observant of or responsive to students who struggled. In such a situation, the student could either continue to come to school and sit there doing nothing or drop out of school altogether (Murray & Naranjo, 2008). Those students who were able to complete school did so largely because of their own personal drive and determination, parental assistance, and their willingness to actively seek assistance from other adults; teachers were not considered a source of support (Murray & Naranjo, 2008).

It follows from Murray and Naranjo's (2008) study that those special education students in high-risk schools who do graduate had extraordinary ambition. The school environment offered little if any assistance in terms of engaging or supporting the student with disabilities. The study drew attention to the fact that there are at-risk *schools,* not just at-risk students and that the dropout phenomenon is in part a public school issue. The at-risk

student is a combination of individual risk factors and a school's inability to adequately identify and respond to those risks. However, public school issues appear to carry the bulk of the responsibility for the dropout phenomenon in at-risk schools.

Technical Support

The effectiveness of an intensive on-site technical assistance model to improve inclusive practice at the middle and high school levels has been examined in research. Clark, Cushing, and Kennedy (2004) identified that a case study approach with 16 teachers from one middle school and two high schools, helping the special educators to improve their practice through ongoing, collaborative technical support. Clark et al. developed their own technical assistance model entailing skills-based assessment, workshops on specific skills, and on-site feedback regarding the implementation of the newly learned skills. A teacher checklist and a program quality measurement tool were used as instruments to measure outcomes. The results indicated that most inclusion activities failed to focus on individual student skills and were not offered based on student preferences, adaptations were not linked to adaptations on the students' IEPs, instruction often took place using the same people and same materials, and parents played a minor role in the process. Recommendations for addressing these shortfalls included more use of informal assessments, better implementation of IEPs, and more planning of meaningful adaptation to the general curriculum. The study also found that intensive, on-site technical assistance resulted in higher-quality assessments, implementation of better IEPs, and improving access of students with disabilities to the general curriculum. It also found an overall improvement in the quality of the inclusion program at the schools studied. Clark et al. concluded that inclusion of high school students with disabilities often failed to engage students, because it was not implemented according to best practices and that intensive technical assistance provided to special educators at the school can in fact improve

overall program quality, student outcomes, and student engagement (resulting in fewer dropouts).

Self-Attitudes and Understanding

Bloom (2010) examined whether or not there was a link between the overall school climate of a secondary school and teacher and staff attitudes toward inclusion. Bloom determined that teacher attitudes toward inclusion often determine the quality of inclusion that is undertaken at a school. A questionnaire was distributed to the staff of a mainstream secondary school in Tel Aviv, Israel, with in-depth interviews conducted for qualitative follow-up. The study found that, in schools experiencing change, the change itself appeared to have damaged the school climate and that staff members tended to accept changes and innovations only if they were controlled and supervised by the head teacher. Because inclusion was viewed as yet another difficult change to implement, Clark et al. (2004) found a correlation between school climate in changing schools and the level of indifference toward inclusion. Exceptions to this situation occurred when inclusion was championed by a head teacher as a mission, involving hands-on supervision. Overinflated claims for the benefits of inclusion led to cynicism, skepticism, and suspicion among the teaching staff, especially if accompanied by a lack of guidance on how to implement the new policy. There was little collaboration between teachers in implementing inclusion. Overall, the study found that a climate of organizational change can breed disassociation among staff when supervisors exhibit a hands-off approach that creates a gap between supposed benefits and actual results.

Standards for IEP Programming

To examine the effectiveness of the process of creating and monitoring student progress through an IEP, Martin, Marshall, and Sale (2004) studied the interactions between stakeholders at IEP meetings over 3 years from middle to high school. IDEA mandates that both parents and students be involved in IEP planning and meetings, as well as in decision

making regarding educational goals. A study of transition planning involving IEP meetings also found that parental and student involvement improves outcomes (Quinn, 2010). However, other studies found that most IEP meetings faltered in trying to reach these involvement goals and that most IEP meetings remained dominated by special education teachers (Schunk & Mullen, 2012). Moreover, high schools provided too few opportunities for students to develop the leadership skills necessary to participate productively in their IEP meetings. Martin et al. (2004) studied 1,638 participants at 393 IEP meetings held over 3 years to measure the level of participation by parents, students, and educators. They found that special educators essentially ran the IEP meetings. The students often did not know the reasons for the meetings, what to do at the meetings, and whether or not the meeting did them any good, although the meetings were more interactive and meaningful when students attended. IEP meetings were not standardized, and they differed greatly depending on which stakeholders attended. Thus, while student participation is in fact important to the quality of the IEP, the fact that special educators continue to dominate meetings and that student participation is limited represents a persistent gap between theory and practice. Because the study found that most IEP meetings are inconsistent with best practices, it suggested the possibility that student disengagement from the IEP process contributed to their overall loss of a sense of belongingness at school.

Weishaar (2010) argued that IEP planning for special needs students could be vastly improved using a strengths-based approach. This approach has been used in counseling for more than a decade but has only recently been introduced into special education. Weishaar demonstrated how a strengths-based approach can improve the preparation, presentation, and documentation of the IEP process. Practical advice was offered on how to include parents and students in the IEP process more fully. Indeed, Weishaar argued that the primary goal of a strengths-based program is to expedite the creation of a trusting relationship between school

and parents so that both can help a student with disabilities to transition more successfully to postschool life.

Exit Exams and Nontraditional Graduation Certificates

A primary barrier to graduation for students with disabilities is the exit exams contained in a standardized educational paradigm. Students who fail to earn a standard diploma are less likely to gain employment after school or to attend college (Erickson, Kleinhammer-Tramill, & Thurlow, 2007). The fact that exit exams routinely prevent special needs students from receiving standard diplomas, often causing them to graduate with nontraditional completion certificates, presents problems. While these certificates often enable qualified students with disabilities who have pursued alternative routes to more or less equitable achievement levels to graduate, they may also be used to push students out of school without the proper skills required for success in life (Erickson et al., 2007). Special education certificates are one of the primary nontraditional exit options among the 15 types of certificates of graduation offered by high schools. However, whether or not they are worth the paper they are written on, or whether they in fact condemn students to long-term negative outcomes, remains a question (Erickson et al., 2007).

Erickson et al. (2007) stated that data on the number of students with disabilities who drop out before exit exams or accept a nontraditional completion certificate are scarce. Even less is known about the dynamic between the two options, that is, the degree to which the increased use of exit exams has resulted in increased use of nontraditional exit certificates. If exit exams themselves generated more alternative forms of graduation, then there would be reason for concern that policy is driving too many students out of high school who are unqualified for adult life. For that reason, Erickson et al. examined the relationship between graduation testing and the use of alternative high school completion documents for students with disabilities. The study found that (a) students with disabilities graduate with

nontraditional certificates far more often than mainstream students; (b) students with disabilities are more likely to receive these certificates in states that mandate exit exams; (c) students with mental impairment were far more likely to be offered nontraditional diplomas than students with learning disabilities, speech-language disabilities, and emotional disabilities; (d) students who lived in states with exit exams were more likely to be offered the alternative certification; and (e) the overall percentage of students receiving nontraditional diplomas has remained the same over the past decade.

Giving nontraditional diplomas to students with disabilities may compromise their postschool opportunities. In spite of the rhetoric supporting inclusion, most states still see the pursuit of alternative educational goals through special education as failing to qualify students for a standard diploma (Erickson et al., 2007). The correlation between the use of exit exams and nontraditional exit certificate rates proves that the exit exam regime has undermined the goal of inclusion, which was to graduate all students according to standards and prepared to be productive citizens. In other words, the nontraditional diploma may be a way of papering over what in fact is a kind of dropping out, in the sense that the student is released from high school without being fully qualified for life after school. In any case, offering special education nontraditional exit certificates appears to be causing students long-term harm. In this way, the standardized-test, accountability-based bureaucracy that has emerged in U.S. public education has worked to undermine the value of inclusion, preventing dropout rate spikes in name only.

Woods (2007) also found that exit exams remain a major hurdle for students with disabilities, because in their current implementation, few accommodations are made for special education students. The teachers in Woods' study recommended that students with special needs be given extra time, allowed to use word processors, and offered more test preparation to prepare them to pass the exit exams at levels comparable to the general student

population. Such accommodations are often not acceptable within the rules of standardized testing.

Indeed, a number of researchers question whether the goals of special education and those of standardized testing are compatible. Many fear that they are not. Schulte and Villwock (2004) found that standardized tests are not a fair measurement for those who are in special education, because some students are not even capable of reading without help. Using data derived from elementary school standardized test scores, Schulte and Villwock (2004) examined whether increased percentages of students with disabilities were reaching reading proficiency levels, attaining expected growth in reading each year, or demonstrating longitudinal growth over several grades.

Schulte and Villwock (2004) found variations in results based on the extent to which schools offered pull-out or inclusive special education, how they defined disabilities as a criterion for special education, and the degree to which their special-education population varied from year to year. Schulte and Villwock argued that standardized testing did not provide an accurate picture of student progress and that schools should develop value-added assessments of progress so that test results could be combined with special education information to assess progress more meaningfully. They noted that creating standards so that results would be generalizable is another problem to be addressed. Schulte and Villwock concluded that, for the scores obtained by students with disabilities on standardized tests to be useful for evaluating progress, they must be combined with other data from additional assessments. They contended that, at present, standardized tests fail to provide a clear sense of the progress of students with disabilities.

However, other researchers acknowledged that there are two sides to the argument about the utility of exit exams (e.g., Reardon, Arshan, Atteberry, & Kurlaender, 2010). On one hand, supporters argue that the exit exams reflect the shift toward raising standards of

achievement and accountability in schools. The exams are also intended to motivate students to work harder in order to pass, thus improving overall standards in U.S. schools (Reardon et al., 2010). On the other hand, critics claim that exit exams do not serve a useful purpose for students who are already struggling in school. These students are not likely to be motivated, because their past experiences with exams and schoolwork already cause them to expect to fail. Therefore, rather than confront more failure, these students will simply drop out of school (Reardon et al., 2010).

Reardon et al. (2010) conducted a qualitative research study of four large school districts in California. The study analyzed how failing an exit exam in Grade 10 affected the student's academic performance, course selection, retention, and graduation (Reardon et al., 2010). Results indicated that there was no appreciable effect on course selection, performance, staying in school, or graduation rates, because students who failed and students who passed the exit exams behaved in vastly similar ways. Reardon et al. therefore concluded that failing exit exams would likely affect only those who were severely underachieving academically. However, they did not take into account the possibility that students may have already dropped out of school in anticipation of the exams, because the study sample included only students who were still in school.

Ineffective Transition Programming

Griffin (2010) argued that the lack of transitional programs for students with disabilities contributes to dropout rates. In most high schools, all general education students begin to receive college admissions counseling in Grades 10 and 11. Students with disabilities rarely receive comparable counseling. In addition to the value of the program itself, the strong relationships that develop with counselors who engage in transition programming often contribute to a student's sense of belonging and lack of marginalization as his or her peers prepare for admission to college. By improving the sense of belonging as

well as motivation to succeed in special education programs, college admissions counseling may improve retention and graduation rates. The fact that many high schools balk at the difficulties involved in counseling students with disabilities about college admissions, sometimes even assuming that their education will end with Grade 12, represents a programmatic shortcoming rooted in institutional practice (Spring, 2008).

An exemplary transition program for students with emotional disabilities should entail rigor, relevance, and attention to the whole child and should involve students and families in goal-driven transition planning (Wagner & Davis, 2006). Using data from a national longitudinal study of students with emotional disabilities in their transition into postschool life, the authors found that more students are in fact being exposed to best practices and that their care is equal to that care offered to students with other disabilities. This means that they are receiving more social and life-skills training and are working with peers more often, although they still often do not participate in inclusion and are thus limited in their contact with general education students. They are increasingly exposed to mainstream curriculum but still have limited access to vocational programs that might improve their transition chances.

Because the primary deficit in students with disabilities is social, Wagner and Davis (2006) concluded that more small school settings were preferable to support their needs. They indicated that, although services for students with disabilities had improved over the past generation, there remains room for further improvement, especially regarding transition needs. Mellard (2005) also called for transition programming that encourages students to set goals beyond secondary education and that, therefore, necessitate the completion of secondary education. Mellard cited research showing that learning-disabled students who graduated from high school were ill-prepared to succeed in college and generally did not transition effectively to college settings. While the notion of transition has informed special education policy since the 1970s, schools still struggle to assemble the necessary

multidisciplinary team to make transition work for students. While federal legislation requires transition services to integrate the activities of a number of stakeholders, actual implementation remains problematic. Decisions about what kind of transition to promote—to community college, 4-year college, work, or none of the above—are also complex and are often made without student awareness of the consequences of the decision. In addition, while transition planning was originally conceptualized as student centered, it is still difficult to involve students meaningfully in the process.

Too few programs address all the aspects of what constitutes "living well beyond secondary school," and most fail to alert students to the differences between high school and college. Among the barriers to effective transition to college for students with disabilities were their lack of preparation to be college students, the negative attitudes of faculty members, and the lack of comprehensive support programs at the college level. Variations in standards for identifying learning disabilities between high school and college can also cause transition problems. Mellard (2005) found that students who delay entry into college more than 1 year after leaving high school were much less likely to transition successfully. Learning disabled (LD) students who take college-preparation courses in high school were also more likely to move on to college. Realistic IEPs, specific plans to gain graduation certification from high school, participation in extracurricular activities, and community involvement were all correlated with greater probability of success in transitioning to college. Mellard proposed an ideal transition program to help learning disabled students both complete high school and make an effective transition to college. A good transition plan must teach students effective study skills and learning strategies, offer job tryouts, address needed accommodations for college entrance exams, identify target colleges, and provide assistance in the application process and preparation of documentation. Mellard said that it is also important to choose colleges with coordinated services and structured programs for

addressing the needs of students with disabilities. Mellard concluded that transition programming is critical in giving students with disabilities a sense of belonging to their high school.

Although special education has been in place for some time, only in the 1980s did special educators at the high school level begin to worry more directly about the postschool outcomes and high dropout rates of these students (Edgar, 2005). While acknowledging that many special educators have worked hard to improve the outcomes and reduce the dropout rates of learning disabled children, Edgar (2005) argued that the situation is worse than it was in the 1980s. Although the 75% postschool employment rate of these students was about the same as a generation earlier, the fact that only 25% go on to college remains a problem.

Edgar (2005) expressed opposition to legislative involvement in educational reform, recommending that decisions about students should be left in the hands of their educators. Edgar further argued that, with the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001), the purpose of school has become "truncated to a sole focus on preparing workers for the global economy" (p. 173). Edgar blamed institutional issues for the failure of special education to reduce dropout rates. He also stated that the singular focus on obtaining employment, regardless of the quality of the work, has limited the scope of special education with regard to preparing students to lead full lives after school.

Like Edgar (2005), Curtis, Rabren, and Reilly (2009) studied the degree to which students who received special education in high school integrated themselves successfully into postschool life. Using Halpern's quality-of-life scale, they examined postschool outcomes such as employment, financial security, educational attainment, and integration into society. All of these items were considered in three broad domains: physical and material well-being, performance of a variety of adult roles, and sense of personal fulfillment. This

unique model encompassed factors such as mobility, community access, leisure and recreation, career, relationships, social networks, satisfaction, and general well-being.

Curtis et al. (2009) argued that, in the past, too many transition models focused on jobs and assumed that if the graduate of special education had a job in adult life, his or her life was therefore satisfying. Curtis et al. surveyed 1,888 students using the Alabama Post-School Transition Survey and held focus groups to add a qualitative aspect to the results. While 82% of respondents indicated that high school had prepared them for life, fewer than 15% continued their education. More than 90% were satisfied with their current living situation, though only 67% were employed, with only 60% working full-time.

Many postschool youths with disabilities continued to live with their families, stalling their progress to independent living. Respondents also did not appear to have enough mobility in their lives; when they participated in social situations, it was usually in segregated activities designed only for persons with special needs. While respondents expressed satisfaction with regard to living arrangements, they shared greater discontent about transportation and independence (Curtis et al., 2009). The authors generally detected a split between subjective appraisals of satisfaction with their lifestyles and the actual degree of independent living in respondents' postschool lives. For this reason, they expressed concern that high school special education fails to properly prepare students with disabilities to live independently after school.

For a number of years, researchers have suspected that the overrepresentation of African Americans in referrals to special education indicated that the system had been abused or used conveniently to shuttle troublesome students into a nongraduation track (Gravois & Rosenfield, 2006; Hart, Cramer, Harry, Klinger, & Sturges, 2010; Smith & Kozleski, 2005). Various studies detected institutional discrimination in referrals to special education. Blanchett, Mumford, and Beachum (2005) argued that urban schools in particular tended to

practice “structural racism and discrimination” in which poor and African American students were systematically referred to special education (p. 71).

Although IDEA established new guidelines for the referral, assessment, and placement of students in special education, regardless of ethnic background, some researchers suspected that these reforms still did not corrected the implementation of the process (Hart et al., 2010; Shealey, Lue, Brooks, & McCray, 2005). To measure the degree to which IDEA reforms improved the process, Gritzmacher and Gritzmacher (2010) surveyed Native American students as to their satisfaction with special education. They also attempted to derive a model of best practices from their results. Participants were more satisfied with the referral and placement processes in special education than with assessment, where they suggested that teachers needed more training. Many respondents felt that there remained a great deal of cultural insensitivity in the assessment process, with the test instruments, for example, failing in many ways to reflect the cultural preferences and values of Native Americans. Gritzmacher and Gritzmacher suggested various ways in which bias in the current assessment process could be reduced. The fact that general education teachers viewed the process in a more positive light than special education teachers, however, remained worrisome. Overall, Gritzmacher and Gritzmacher noted that the absence of a distinct set of best practices in special education referral, assessment, and placement has resulted in significant inefficiencies, patterns of over referral, and possible discriminatory practices. This appears to be yet another example of the systemic failures that have affected students with disabilities, both within and outside of special education. Insofar as incorrect, bias-based placement of students is a leading cause of dropout, best practices in this area should be identified and applied quickly.

Inclusion Practice

The primary paradigm that emerged to improve the outcomes of high school students with disabilities is inclusion (Carter & Hughes, 2006; Mattson & Roll-Pettersson, 2007; Rice & Yen, 2010; Rouse & Florian, 2006; Wasburn-Moses, 2005, 2006). The goal of increasing participation by students with disabilities in mainstream classes has been extended to severely disabled students as well. However, various barriers limit the opportunities for inclusion at the high school level. Indeed, the inclusion of severely disabled students in high school classrooms has been slow, sporadic, and uneven. A recent study found that 72% of high school students with multiple disorders, 58% of students with mental impairment, and 60% of students with autism spent most of their school day outside the general education classroom (Carter & Hughes, 2006).

Educational placement patterns have not changed significantly over the past 15 years, and in some cases, they have become even more restrictive. Carter and Hughes (2006) conjectured that this disconnect may be due to lack of input from teachers and other school staff regarding whether inclusion of students with severe disabilities is practicable. These views can be context specific and related to the specific disabilities of various special education students. Carter and Hughes (2006) also acknowledged more recent findings indicating that successful inclusion requires a school-wide effort and is unlikely to occur without meaningful support from the administration and all other stakeholders. Finally, there appears to be a divergence of opinion between general and special educators as to the viability of inclusion.

To clarify these issues, Carter and Hughes (2006) interviewed general and special educators at the high school level to learn their perceptions about inclusion of students with severe disabilities. They found general agreement across all groups as to the overall value of inclusion on both academic and social grounds, even though actual enrollment of these

students in general education classrooms was low. Carter and Hughes concluded that, while support for inclusion in principle is important, such a conviction alone does not appear to change practice.

Despite giving their philosophical endorsement, the teachers in Carter and Hughes's (2006) study also addressed the challenges of effective inclusion. Most teachers pointed to lack of collaboration time, lack of resources and personnel, and behavioral challenges as barriers to inclusion. Special education teachers seemed more aware of and sensitive to the barriers to optimal inclusion, compared with general education teachers. Finally, all participants reported the need for more training. Thus, Carter and Hughes uncovered gaps both between general positive espousal of the goals of inclusion and actual inclusion practice and between general and special educators as to their perceptions of the seriousness of the gap.

According to Stein et al. (2008), inclusion has also become popular internationally as the best way to guarantee progressive response to diversity in all schools. The general philosophy behind inclusion is that students with disabilities will learn better and experience less stigma and isolation if they learn in mainstream classrooms. Inclusion also has a cost savings motivation, as studies have found that students with disabilities placed in special classrooms or schools do not necessarily make any more progress than in regular schools. According to Srivastava & Hopwood (2009) inclusion can work if accompanied by curriculum differentiation and optimal teaching strategies. At the same time, students with special needs can experience bullying in mainstream classrooms that compromises the social advantages of inclusion. These findings have led to the development of teaching strategies designed to build positive social relationships between special education students and their typical peers in inclusive classrooms. Such strategies include social interaction exercises, the use of peer tutors, generalized learning time, group work, and part-time involvement in

pullout classes. Teachers who have positive attitudes about inclusion tend to implement these policies more effectively.

School organizational structures can also affect the quality of inclusion efforts undertaken. For instance, Stevens and Van Houtte (2011) found that teachers who were able to demonstrate flexibility in adjusting instruction to students' abilities and interests had better outcomes in the inclusion setting. In both of the schools they examined, teachers who performed such adjustments generally had satisfactory results in terms of student persistence and academic achievement (p. 59). Thus, if inclusion is constructed in a way that flows naturally with student interests and abilities, it should not perpetuate the kinds of negative feelings that tend to alienate students with special needs.

Gibb, Tunbridge, Chua, and Frederickson (2007) examined the factors that facilitated or hindered inclusion. They examined a case of limited inclusion in which special needs schools collaborated with neighboring mainstream schools. They found that the use of an inclusion team greatly expedited the process, in that the team members maintained close contact between schools and had the specialized knowledge to allow for optimal inclusive practice. Inclusion often faltered due to the failure of proper training for the personnel implementing the policy at local schools, and because lack of modeling or feedback during the inclusion process made the guidance shallow rather than intense. Efforts that paid more attention to the reality principle of particular classrooms were more successful. Parental anxiety, unqualified teachers, and student bullying were all identified as barriers to inclusion. Peer acceptance was generally recognized as one of the key goals of successful inclusion programs (Gibb et al., 2007).

Among the most common methods of adjusting inclusion to accommodate the needs of students with any kind of learning problem are responses to intervention (RTI) approaches (Spring, 2008). First developed to help students in mainstream classrooms whose reading

problems could not be addressed effectively in these classrooms, RTI involves creating three tiers of increasing accommodations. Thus, in tier 1 the intervention may still occur in the inclusive classroom, while tier 2 interventions take place in an alternative room, and tier 3 interventions alone entail assignment to special education or alternative schools.

Thomas and Dykes (2011) argued that RTI, with its multiple tiers and proactive approach to developmental problems, can be applied to ensure that all issues facing students with disabilities as they transition to college or postschool life are addressed. Fusing RTI and transition programming can provide better support at an early stage and pay ongoing attention to transition issues. Thomas and Dykes (2011) also found that RTI also enhanced the student's sense of self-determination by providing mechanisms for students to express their needs.

While RTI has been found to lead to positive outcomes in elementary school, studies of its effectiveness in high school have been disappointing. Fuchs, Fuchs, and Compton (2010) argued that the elementary RTI framework is better structured and contextualized into primary school contexts. In addition, deficits are relatively fresh in younger students. By the time special education students make it to high school, the shortfalls are much worse and deeply ingrained; however, a lot of times they fly up under the radar. Deficits at the high school level may, for example, make students resistant to second-level interventions, and they may reject outright the stigma of third-level interventions. By this point, the fact that most low-achieving high school students also have low levels of motivation and poor academic self-confidence may further undermine the efficacy of this approach at the high school level. Fuchs et al. proposed a modified form of RTI for use in high schools, allowing for the placement of severely discrepant students immediately in third-tier special education courses. This is due to the likelihood that, by high school, learning disabled students are three or four years behind the standard. While RTI focuses primarily on at-risk students, its continuum

from regular to special education classes is often utilized as an overall framework for high school practice. Fuchs et al. argued that improving RTI for high school use will reinvigorate the framework for improving the outcomes of all students with deficits, whether they are served in general, remedial, or special education classrooms.

Some stakeholders at inclusive schools continue to worry that inclusion of special needs students in general education classrooms will compromise the quality of learning by mainstreamed students, thus blunting their success rate on standardized tests. To explore the compatibility of inclusion and achievement on standardized testing, Rouse and Florian (2006) compared student outcomes in schools based on the number of students with disabilities included in general classrooms. Data were derived from the performance of 11th-grade students in several coeducational comprehensive high schools in economically deprived communities in England. They found that the presence of a greater number of students with disabilities in a comprehensive school had no negative effect on the outcomes of mainstream students. Rouse and Florian thus confirmed that inclusion helps students with disabilities and does not hinder the quality of mainstream education.

While IDEA calls for inclusion of all students with disabilities at all levels of education, its applicability for students with various degrees of disabilities remains contested. IDEA allows for some individual accommodations but mandates that all students be exposed to the general curriculum, so that students with disabilities can be exposed to the life and social world of mainstream students (and vice versa), as well as receive the same education as all students, allowing them to meet academic standards. Even alternative assessments allowed by IDEA are nonetheless still tied closely to state academic standards. Dymond, Renzaglia, Gilson, and Slagor (2007) examined the extent to which inclusion is applicable to high school students with significant cognitive disabilities. They interviewed general and special educators involved in offering inclusive education to this group of students. Although general

educators agreed that students with disabilities should be exposed to standards-based education in general education classrooms, 88% felt that they should be graded according to different performance standards, and only 47% felt that their schools had clear plans for how this was to be done.

Dymond et al. (2007) found that it remained quite difficult to reconcile inclusion with standards, especially for students with severe cognitive disabilities. While the special education teachers felt that access involved adapting the general curriculum to the needs of students with disabilities, the general educators defined access as offering students with disabilities that same general curriculum offered to mainstream students. That is, the general educators were more concerned with the content of the general curriculum, while the special educators were more likely to address the need for individualization of the curriculum for their students. About a quarter of special educators felt it necessary to supplement the general curriculum to make the goal of learning to standards accessible to students with disabilities.

The fact that teachers in Dymond et al. (2007) study conceived of access differently and acknowledged variations of practice to accommodate standards to students with disabilities strongly suggests that high schools under the regime of standardized accountability are struggling to maintain or offer inclusion in ways that reinforce student engagement. Many teachers felt that they needed more training in inclusion, suggesting that the current quality of implementation may be a contributing factor to the high dropout rate of students with disabilities. Thus, some degree of dropout increase may be attributable to problems with administrative frameworks (Dymond et al., 2007).

In some cases, particular types of disability may prove especially difficult to resolve. For example, Rice and Yen (2010) studied the outcomes of students with emotional disturbance (ED), finding that, even after interventions, they continued to demonstrate below-average grades on reading and math achievement tests. In reviewing why interventions had

not been helpful in bringing students with ED up to standard, Rice and Yen (2010) noted that these students may have had multiple areas of long-term academic deficit. Data from the Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study database were used to explore the degree to which gender can predict academic performance in ED students. The data showed that students with externalizing as opposed to internalizing problems were more likely to show long-term deficits. The authors suggested that it is likely for this reason that boys far outnumber girls in ED programs. Rice and Yen found that in fact boys and girls with ED differed only slightly in their outcomes and that both groups did demonstrate growth in skills over time.

Reschly and Christenson (2006) made the point that once educators and policymakers get involved, they will be able to do more when it comes to the dropout rate. Policymakers are the ones that can change the laws and make sure that nothing is being overlooked when it comes to students with disabilities; they will be more able to identify students at risk and prevent them from dropping out of school. A meta-analysis of 16 qualitative case studies conducted by Cobb et al. (2006) suggested that identifying the reasons that a special education student might drop out could also direct appropriate intervention strategies. Cognitive intervention strategies were used in each of these studies, with encouraging results with respect to dropout prevention.

Overview of Factors That Support Retention to High School Graduation

The key factors that support retention until high school graduation are often the same for students with disabilities as for the general high school population. One of these factors is the level of belongingness to school and engagement in learning. Bartick-Ericson (2006), who reported that school-aged youth with disabilities are at "an increased risk for school failure" and that students with disabilities with "emotional disturbances have the highest dropout rate of any disability" (p. 49), asserted that the underlying problem is often a lack of

security in relationships. Ericson suggested that these students need a secure base for engaging and meeting the challenges of the school environment. Although the failure to gain a connection to other students is often considered a failure of the individual, Maddox and Prinz (2003) argued that this is an institutional failure.

Scanlon, Saxon, Cowell, Kenny, Perez-Gualdron, and Jernigan, (2008) argued that, during the early years of high school, students should be in a position to identify their goals and how to go about achieving them. If many students are not able to do so, this is an institutional failure that will cause students who have no real goals or sense of direction to drop out (Scanlon et al., 2008).

In eight qualitative case studies at high schools in Kentucky, Christle, Jolivette, and Michael (2007) found a correlation between institutional failure and school dropout rates. Their study compared the institutional support given to students in four schools with high dropout rates and four schools with relatively low dropout rates. The results indicated that schools with systems for engaging and improving the learning and social environment for students with special needs and at-risk students generally had a lower dropout rate (Christle et al., 2007).

With students with disabilities comprising such a large percentage of all dropouts, institutional influences are a pivotal area of investigation. Among the institutional reasons cited for high dropout rates are lack of leadership and lack of provision of time and access to resources so that teachers can effectively implement programming for students with disabilities. Heckman and Masterov (2007, p. 446) argued that schools should be responsive to the “adverse environments” that create dropout risks for some children. Schools can take the initiative by reducing inequities and improving productivity (Heckman & Masterov, 2007). For instance, in a qualitative phenomenology, Converse and Kraft (2009) found that a middle school mentoring program that targeted at-risk students significantly reduced the

number of office referrals for behavioral problems and significantly improved attitudes toward school.

Although, as noted earlier, inclusion has become the norm for serving students with disabilities at the high school level, it has been compromised by teacher attitudes, inadequate teacher training, lack of collaboration between general and special education teachers, and other logistical problems (Idol, 2006). Moreover, some populations of students with disabilities present so many challenges to schools that inclusion is not a realistic model for effective student support. This contention was confirmed by a qualitative study by Prather-Jones (2011), who interviewed special education teachers with more than 6 years of experience teaching students with behavioral and emotional disorders. The teachers indicated that working with children with disabilities requires a personal and differential approach to teaching and that inclusion's one size model made the practice almost entirely undesirable for some students (Prather-Jones, 2011).

A number of programs have been developed to improve the level of belonging and engagement among high school students with disabilities (Adelabu, 2007; Booker, 2006; Maddox & Prinz, 2003; McNeely & Falci, 2004; Palladino, 2006; Steele, 2007; Wiggan, 2008). Some best-practice programs have emerged along these lines, focusing on students' social as well as their academic outcomes (Roessler & Foshee, 2010).

Many programs are very beneficial when it comes to helping special education. Program models that have shown success include the Individualized Education Program and Child and Adolescent Functional Assessment Scale (Quinn & Poirier, 2006). Such programs focus on the child's daily functioning, encourage parental involvement, and target the student's special circumstances while closely monitoring progress and responding accordingly (Quinn & Poirier, 2006). Kortering (2009) found three approaches with promise for reducing dropout rates among students with disabilities. The first was early intervention

and engagement efforts, which are supported by a great deal of literature linking engagement and school completion. The second approach entailed the development of transition programs to help high school students with disabilities manage the difficult steps from high school to real life. The third approach involved evidence-based transition practices, starting as early as Grade 9.

Researchers have strongly urged schools to cease requiring students to repeat a grade as a dropout prevention strategy, replacing it with a mix of academic and extracurricular approaches to provide a support atmosphere for at-risk students (Frey, 2005). Murray and Naranjo (2008) found that being required to repeat a grade was a leading contributor to dropping out, as leaving school was perceived as an alternative to facing the public embarrassment of failure. Voltz and Fore (2006) concluded that grade retention is a shaming and labeling technique, at least from the perspective of the affected student; as such, it leads to disengagement and increases the likelihood of dropping out.

Counseling

Counseling has also frequently been recommended as a good way to increase student engagement. However, Kemp (2006) found little empirical evidence to support this claim. Kemp examined the dropout policies and programs of secondary school principals in the Midwest to determine how they calculated the number of dropouts and what they were doing to reduce the problem. Kemp found that 87% used the ineffective event method to calculate dropout rates, that academic failure was the primary reason cited for dropping out, and that absenteeism was seen as a predictor of dropping out. The study also found that students without disabilities who eventually dropped out had much more serious absenteeism problems than students with disabilities. Moreover, whatever programs the schools developed to combat dropping out were aimed at students without disabilities; programs directed specifically at students with disabilities were rare. The fact that many students with

disabilities have experienced early intervention since elementary school would seem to blunt the impact of the most common antidropout approach, namely early intervention. Other programs cited by principals as ways to improve student engagement included career awareness, counseling, vocational and technical training, and extracurricular activities. However, the principals' view that these programs reduce dropout rates had no empirical support. Counseling does not have much of an effect on students when it comes to the dropout rate. Kemp (2006) concluded that too many high schools calculate the dropout rate of students with and without disabilities in ways that minimize the problem and remain satisfied with programmatic responses that have not been proven to be effective. This attitude itself contributes to the dropout rate, especially among students with disabilities (Kemp, 2006).

Simpson and colleagues (2011) found that counseling alone had limited effect on improving student engagement among students with behavioral and emotional disorders. However, when counseling was combined with other programs, it increased student retention and thus reduced the dropout rate. These other programs may include behavior management, efforts to improve social skills and relationships, academic support, parent and family involvement, and ongoing evaluation of student progress (Simpson et al., 2011).

Small School Programs

In one sense, all special education programs are a form of dropout prevention (Dukes & Lamar-Dukes, 2006; Griffin, 2010; Mellard, 2005; Tangen, 2005; Thomas & Dykes, 2011; Wagner & Davis, 2006; Weishaar, 2010), in that without any accommodations, most of these students would not succeed in the traditional, comprehensive U.S. high school. Comprehensive high schools were developed with several tracks, allowing students to choose between academic and vocational paths, take advanced or remedial courses, and work toward different types of diplomas. While big high schools have become the norm in U.S. secondary education, Dukes and Lamar-Dukes (2006) argued that large schools also breed problems

such as student disengagement, violence, and fragmentation of educational lives. Large, comprehensive schools may also fail to serve the needs of diverse students, especially those with learning or behavioral disabilities. The standardized infrastructure of the comprehensive school makes it difficult to develop support models for students with disabilities. As a result, a small school reform movement has emerged, based on the concept that creating smaller schools within a large school can better support the needs of diverse groups, including special needs students, through graduation. Separate schools within the same building, serving the needs of at-risk or special youths, have been developed to focus the curriculum and to build remedial activities into instruction. Small schools reduce costs, improve student attitudes toward school, and improve student behavior.

Small schools have also led to the creation of learning communities in which teachers and students know each other, interact more often, and reinforce student engagement on a daily basis. Dukes and Lamar-Dukes (2006) argued that small schools created within large schools, while not returning to the former practice of segregated special education rooms, can help to tailor an inclusive educational model to the particular needs of students with disabilities. That is, inclusive education can be maintained, but carried out in small school settings within large schools, with learning in mainstream classrooms and in small schools "braided" together during a special needs student's everyday life. Learning communities, collaborative learning, social interaction, and a remedial focus can be combined in small schools to improve student engagement and reduce the risk of dropping out. Dukes and Lamar-Dukes (2006) concluded

> The "natural fit" of inclusive education in small schools deserves a critical look as a number of students with disabilities as well as low performing students can benefit from effective instruction delivered in a more personalized environment like that of a small school. (p. 7)

Alternative programs and schools have also been developed to prevent at-risk students from dropping out, with findings indicating that these alternatives have resulted in 66% graduation rates among students who formerly would have dropped out. D'Angelo and Zemanick (2009) described a program called the Twilight Academy, created at a large urban high school in Pennsylvania to help students who were struggling in mainstream classrooms and to reduce the dropout rate. Accommodating 60 students in each of Grades 9–12, the Twilight Academy provided intensive intervention-style alternative education plans to help students catch up with their grade levels and return to traditional classrooms. The plan allowed for individual attention, constant monitoring, and a focus on the social and post school aspects of learning. A transition-to-life element was built into the program to refocus students on the practical use of their education beyond school. Guidance counselors served as go-betweens among students and employers to give these students work experience during high school.

The results of the program indicated success, with most of the students graduating from high school and achieving full-time employment (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). The authors conceded that the learning curve for such programs is steep but that the improved results justify the effort. Such programs can also serve as models for dropout prevention programs directed at students with disabilities.

The Good High Schools Model

Acknowledging that too many high schools are failing to meet the social and academic needs of learning disabled students, Morocco, Aguilar, Clay, Brigham, and Zigmond (2006) conducted a study to find good high schools. They defined such schools as urban high schools that had achieved excellent academic outcomes with an inclusive policy serving a diverse student body, at least 10% of the students had to have IEPs, a substantial number of learning disabled students had to have taken state standardized tests, inclusion had

to be practiced regularly, more than 25% of the student body had to be in the free lunch program, and at least 40% of the student body had to be of a minority background.

The three good high schools selected by Morocco et al. (2006) all had a theory of inclusion that was shared by all stakeholders and realized through a range of school-wide strategies for improving personal growth and academic achievement among all students. Staff at all three schools believed that students with learning disabilities could be just as successful in reaching these goals as other students. All the schools avoided negative tracking and provided all students with choices of classes. They provided an ensemble of school-wide support programs to support students both academically and socially, established strong teacher student relationships to communicate a sense of caring to the students, maintained a school wide antibullying program, built up an adult community to make the school feel physically and emotionally safe, and had a committed leadership dedicated to the full inclusion of students with disabilities. Moreover, the schools had developed programs that correspond with best practices derived from special education research, including a rigorous core curriculum for all students, personalized learning environments, a balance between academic and social supports for students, and alignment of curriculum within the K–12 system and with college preparation (Morocco et al., 2006).

Response to Intervention

The Apalachee High School Model

Brigham, Parker, Morocco, and Zigmond (2006) described the special education programs at Apalachee High School in Florida as best practice in the field. While the high school does not serve a large population of low socioeconomic status students, it has achieved an almost perfect graduation rate (with a dropout rate of less than 1%) and has become known for its use of school spirit programs to enhance student belongingness. In reviewing the program, Brigham et al. (2006) found a highly trained teaching staff with a

strong ethos of collaboration between general and special education in providing inclusive learning for all students with disabilities.

The students with disabilities were described as highly integrated into school culture (Brigham et al., 2006), with one survey reporting that 92% believed that school was important and only 13% ever expressed a desire not to go to school. In fact, on most school climate variables in the study, students with disabilities gave more favorable responses than did students without disabilities. Inclusion is the norm and is extended even to extracurricular activities. Teachers' use of cooperative learning, roleplaying, project-based instruction, and small group discussion is believed to improve the sense of belongingness of students with disabilities in regular classrooms.

Brigham et al. (2006) detailed four different pathways (similar to tracks) that tailored offerings to student needs and then ensured that all students on each pathway received all the support needed to succeed. For special needs students, this often involved co-teaching efforts to ensure success in basic English and math skills required to pass standardized tests. Constant monitoring of all students was accomplished through collaboration between special and general education teachers. Four case studies of how special needs students successfully followed various pathways to graduation were provided. The researcher's careful examination of these case studies found teachers' engaging these students through project-related activities, prompting, and conversation before or after class. They taught note-taking strategies, co-taught courses using interactive instruction, engaged in intensive reading counseling, and carefully adhered to IEPs. The school also offered students with disabilities added help in passing standardized tests. Brigham et al. (2006) thus documented a strongly inclusive culture that refused to allow the emergence of alienation or disconnection between the school and students with disabilities and that exemplified the benefits delivered by committed, collaborative professionals.

The Life-Centered Career Education Model

Roessler and Foshee (2010) described an occupationally based special education program called Life-Centered Career Education at a small, rural high school instructing 23 students with disabilities. The program was built on the assumption that graduation rates for students with disabilities can be improved through transition studies that focus on vocational preparation and personal identity. The program was developed in response to the difficulties that students with disabilities faced in finding work after graduating from high school. It was argued that, along with vocational skills, these students need help in acquiring a self-image conducive to developing and maintaining vocational aspirations. The low expectations communicated to students by parents, teachers, and peers often compromised these students' ability to develop a positive self-image about the possibility of working. As a result, this program combined vocational skills with daily living skills, personal and social skills, and occupational guidance and preparation, with particular attention to the challenges of working in a rural context.

The curriculum's instructional materials had a positive effect in enabling students to achieve mastery on targeted competencies. Roessler and Foshee (2010) recommended that additional instruction and more family and community activities be added to the curriculum to further improve outcomes. They made this suggestion because, while the students reported improved self-image as potential vocational workers, they remained somewhat fuzzy as to how to actually get work and what they would do after school. Overall, however, Roessler and Foshee (2010) highlighted the importance of transition programs that focus not only on academic support, but on social support as well.

Addressing Dropout Risk

The idea that school engagement and belongingness contribute to better student outcomes did not originate in special education studies but has expanded to include special

education (Adelabu, 2007; Steele, 2007). Engagement has been viewed as a remedy for the problems of a number of overrepresented at-risk student groups. Wiggan (2008), for example, examined the positive effect of engagement on the secondary school success of high achieving African American students. The study generally found that positive teacher practices had the most beneficial effect on school engagement. More particularly, key teacher practices included an engaging pedagogy and good communication between teacher and students. Engagement was also reinforced by participation in extracurricular activities and by the performance incentives embodied in state scholarship programs.

After academic difficulties, the second most common reason for dropping out of school among both general education and special education students is disengagement from school (Mihalas, Morse, Allsopp, & McHatton, 2009). This too has been found to be a longitudinal problem, with signs of lack of involvement in school activities emerging as early as first grade (Bost & Riccomini, 2006; Christle et al., 2007). Absence is often used as a measure of engagement, with studies finding that disabled students with fewer than 10 absences per year have double the chance of graduating.

Balfanz et al. (2007) worked with a number of public schools with high populations of students from lower-income backgrounds. Their work focused on identifying and developing talent and helping these schools implement models of educational reform. In the course of working with these schools, Balfanz et al. gained significant insight into the connection between truancy, engagement, and attrition among students. They reported that students who drop out of school have generally become disengaged and that signs of their disengagement commence long before the decision to drop out. Early signs of disengagement were manifested in frequent absenteeism, which led to further disengagement because the students fell behind academically; for students with disabilities, the effect can be especially severe (Balfanz et al., 2007).

The literature on the high dropout rate of special education students builds on the findings in the literature relative to the dropout rate in schools generally. For all students, the dropout phenomenon is typically associated with underachievement and poor performance (Bost & Riccomini, 2006). Thus, studies of this phenomenon among general student populations can also give insight into the issues facing students with disabilities. Christle et al. (2007), conducted a qualitative study, which examined reasons for the high dropout rates in 20 Kentucky high schools and compared them with 20 other schools with low dropout rates, is instructive. The study defined dropping out as the culmination of a gradual process of student disengagement from school. Early school failure was linked to dropping out, because it marked the beginning of a long process of disengagement from school. School-level variables accounted for differences in the dropout rates at different high schools (Christle et al., 2007). In particular, clear, professional, but cordial, teacher–student relations were strongly associated with student engagement, which in turn translated into lower dropout rates.

Interviews with high school dropouts confirmed that dropping out is the culmination of a gradual process involving loss of interest and boredom at school. Finnan and Chasin (2007) reported that there is a domino effect of boredom as students lose interest in one class, then begin to miss more classes in all areas due to skipping school, and eventually stop attending at all. Finnan and Chasin found that engagement was supported when students' strengths rather than their weaknesses were highlighted. Essentially, the application of a gifted-education philosophy to students with disabilities resulted in higher levels of engagement and motivation, with the accelerated learning paradigm placing an emphasis on depth and engagement in one's studies. When special education students start focusing on strengths, it helps them become motivated. Finnan and Chasin's study was done to determine what would motivate special education students to stay in school. In effect, what Finnan and

Chasin described was a small school paradigm with an additional focus on individualization and strengthening of bonds in the context of a learning community. Such an approach supports a greater sense of belonging at school as well.

School Belonging

Empirical support for the idea that a sense of belonging at school correlates with higher academic achievement levels was first developed in studies of at-risk students. Adelabu (2007), for example, examined the degree to which time perspective and school membership (i.e., one's sense of belonging, acceptance, or rejection) correlated with achievement levels among African American adolescents. The results showed that school belonging and acceptance were strongly correlated with better outcomes. This study was based on Finn's (2007) model, which found that school belonging motivates students to achieve academically. In addition, students who feel that they belong to the school are more likely to participate in extracurricular activities and have better attendance records. Finn theorized that these linkages lead students to develop an emotional connection to school, which in turn motivates them to value academic achievement. Others have adapted Finn's model to address the possible reasons African American students failed in school, positing that minority students often failed to make a connection at school and psychologically insulated themselves from the low expectations and limited support that they received at school by "disidentifying with the academic culture of school" (Adelabu, 2007, p. 528). If African Americans were doing poorly in math, then, they would disidentify with math and focus on other activities as a source of self-esteem and self-worth. Adelabu tested this model on 232 African American adolescents in an urban high school using the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale regarding their acceptance in school. The study found that school belonging correlated positively with improved academic outcomes.

The notion that belonging keeps youth in school was reflected in the development of social control theory in the 1960s. According to this theory, individuals develop a variety of bonds with others in society, entailing attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief. (Quinn, 2010) In school contexts, attachment was separated into two constructs: attachment associated with general school experience and attachment associated with establishing a group of friends in school. Attachment to school refers to students' general feeling that they belong to the school and that it cares about them; it can also entail a sense of pride in the school and a feeling of safety when at school. Respect and regard for educators and other staff reinforce this sense of attachment, with studies finding that connections with teachers are particularly important. Attachments to teachers and school have been generally correlated with reduced dropout rates. By contrast, feelings of detachment or lack of belonging can lead to dropping out.

March and Gaffney (2010) conducted a qualitative phenomenology involving the educational pathways of two students from preschool to their final year in an alternative high school. The study involved interviews with the students, which were triangulated with school records, special education documentation, and interviews with teachers and parents or guardians. March and Gaffney identified "events, decisions, and experiences that shaped the students' pathways" (p. 3). They found that the educators played a primary role in developing strong relationships connecting students and their families with the school's environment, and in generally cultivating a feeling of belonging to the school among the students and their families. March and Gaffney suggested that, when students foster a sense of belonging relative to the school environment, they are more committed to completing school.

In their phenomenology of a high school dropout, Frankham and Edwards-Kerr (2009) found that one of the primary causes of dropping out was the fact that the student began to feel excluded from all aspects of school life. As soon as students fell behind in their

work, they became construed as threats to classroom discipline. This problem developed into a general wariness of their presence in class, which led to the students becoming oppositional to school and to others, and eventually to their decisions to exclusion. As Frankham and Edwards-Kerr (2009) documented, the students felt that their actions were misrepresented, that the school reacted disproportionately to the actual problem involved in the educational experience, and that this response was likely due to institutionalized racism. The downward spiral exhibits how the educational system itself often propels students, who may be unaware of the consequences of their reactions to negative experiences, toward dropping out.

Eisenman (2007, p. 2) theorized that teaching all students "self-determination" skills has the advantage of promoting two key traits that foster persistence in school and thus reduce the risk of dropping out. Those two traits are engagement and a feeling of belongingness. Self-determination both engages the student and promotes a feeling of belongingness because the student is actively involved in setting goals and pursuing them and thus shares in controlling and directing the educational pathway (Eisenman, 2007).

The burden for special education teachers is particularly exacerbated by students' emotional and behavioral disorders (Mihalas et al., 2009). However, teachers who exhibit sensitivity and caring toward the needs of these students can play an essential role in fostering a sense of belongingness among struggling students. Mihalas et al. (2009) acknowledged that there is a paucity of research on the role of caring teachers in promoting belongingness among students with disabilities. However, relationship science suggests that forming responsive and caring relationships will foster feelings of belongingness amongst the vulnerable (Mihalas et al., 2009).

Additionally, researchers like Thomas and Dyke (2011) have demonstrated how RTI interventions can address transition issues from early grades. They identified a model by which an even smoother transition model for special education is created than currently

exists. RTI and transition programs together can effectively serve the transition needs of secondary level students with disabilities.

School Commitment and School Bonding

School commitment refers to a student's personal commitment to school activities and to "the priority the school holds for youth" (Maddox & Prinz, 2003, p. 33). School involvement has been measured by the number of times that a student attends extracurricular activities and the degree to which he or she endorses school activities by belonging to clubs. Similarly, school bonding has been linked to achievement motivation, motivation to learn and attitude toward school generally.

Social control theory was first developed to explain juvenile delinquency (Quinn, 2010). The theory posited that only social bonds keep individuals from acting on their most impulsive wishes. It was later revised to include self-control as a positive restraining force, acknowledging that people differ based on their ability to control themselves (Spring, 2008). Eventually, social control theory evolved into self-control theory. This theory made the point that social control is maintained by promoting self-control through monitoring, reinforcement, and punishment.

A study done in Florida schools found that adolescents with established prosocial bonds completed school, whereas those who established antisocial bonds dropped out. Similarly, many of the constructs of social development theory have been linked to staying in school, and absence of them to dropping out (Maddox & Prinz, 2003). Practical research discovered determined that the importance of school bonding develops in middle school and becomes essential in high school. Since the establishment of these theories, several instruments have been developed to measure involvement in school, including the Effective School Battery, the What About You scales, the People in My Life scale, and the Psychological Sense of School Membership scale (Thomas & Dykes, 2011). The Effective

School Battery measures the psychosocial climate of the school as well as the nature of the school population. Factors measured include a student's educational expectations, social integration, attachment to school, belief in rules, and school effort. The What About You scale measures risk and protective factors for problem behavior and substance abuse, including attachment to school, commitment to education, belief in rules, educational self-efficacy expectations, and social integration. The People in My Life scale is generally used for middle school students but also measures levels of affiliation with teachers, dissatisfaction with teachers, bonds with school, and school dangerousness. Finally, the Psychological Sense of School Membership scale focuses on school belonging and has generally found significant effects for social standing, involvement, commitment and belongingness. In terms of more practical uses of the scales, the researchers found a relationship between low levels of school bonding and substance abuse, delinquency, risky behavior, self-esteem, and (with somewhat less consistent results), dropping out and negative life outcomes. School belonging has also been strongly related to academic performance. Studies have found that parental influences, family climate, familial bonds, gender, socioeconomic status, school context, age group, and culture all can mediate the effect of social bonding on these factors, and that these mediating effects often interacted to provide complex protective factors for some populations of students. Differential effects have been generally found for high school students and for African American and other ethnic group students. A well-designed program supporting school bonding "has the opportunity to affect school wide changes and promote positive life outcomes" in all students, including special education students (Maddox & Prinz, 2003, p. 48).

McNeely and Falci (2004) examined the variables linking school connectedness to various factors of adolescent outcomes. They focused on two dimensions of school connectedness—perceived teacher support and social belonging—and how these two factors

interacted with six negative adolescent health behaviors. McNeely and Falci hypothesized that teacher support would delay the initiation of health-risk behavior in adolescents. A sample of students in Grades 7 to 12, drawn from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, was surveyed on six questions related to connection to school, with three additional questions focusing solely on the student relationship with their teacher. The health-risk behaviors studied were smoking, alcohol use, marijuana use, suicidality, transition to sexual intercourse, and weapon-related violence. Student demographic features were factored into the results. The results showed that adolescents who perceived their teachers as supportive, fair, and caring were less likely to initiate health-risk behaviors. McNeely and Falci said that these conclusions were

> consistent with previous research showing that when students think their teachers care about them personally and care about their learning, they are more likely to be engaged in school, to do better academically and to participate in fewer health-risk behaviors. (p. 291)

Additionally, teacher support does not protect students from initiating these behaviors, but only from continuing these behaviors to the point that they cause risk or danger (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). In explaining this finding, McNeely and Falci (2004) argued that the impact of school connectedness depends on whether the student develops a conventional (prosocial) or unconventional (antisocial) connection to school and that which type of connection develops is what is determined by whom the student connects with. Insofar as connecting with teachers would represent a prosocial connection, this connection delays onset of risky behavior. McNeely and Falci (2004) found that teacher connection also had little influence on risky behavior if the student has already developed an unconventional connection to school and initiated the behavior. Overall, then, teacher connection is conceptualized as a core

element of conventional student connectedness to school, which generally acts as a protective factor against the early onset of risky behavior.

Booker (2006) conducted a review of the literature on the connection between school belonging and improved student outcomes. The research on this issue had variously recognized identification, engagement, relatedness, and belonging itself as correlated with improved student outcomes. This line of research derives from a sociological perspective of the educational process, which argued that a student needs a sense of community or connection to others to become motivated to learn and succeed in learning. Booker found patterns of agreement in the literature, including the importance of defining the shifting nature of what constitutes belonging, with some studies describing belongingness as consisting of teacher warmth, level of classroom participation, or camaraderie with other students. Belongingness associated with teacher warmth leads to improved outcomes, with decreased likelihood of dropping out. Participating in classroom discussion was also found to be a strong indicator of overall student achievement.

Negative interactions with majority group members, including low teacher expectations and being singled out as different in class, may compromise a sense of belongingness among minority students (Booker, 2006). Booker (2006, p. 4) stated that Finnan and Chasin's participation-identification theory is ideally applicable to high school, because it argues that "active participation occurs concomitantly with identification and facilitates student's involvement and connection with their educational environment." Finnan and Chasin in particular argued that the resulting increase in student connection and sense of belonging "could help to decrease student disengagement and subsequently moderate dropout rates" (Finnan & Chasin, 2007). Thus, the best way for educators to help at-risk students is to find ways for them to become more identified with the larger student body. Focusing on African American students, but with relevance to students with disabilities as well, Booker

suggested that at-risk students may require a different approach to improve their sense of belongingness to school, helping them to see the long-term value of school so that they will value the experience of school itself. This goal of demonstrating the lifelong value of school should be central in transition programs for students with disabilities.

Insofar as school engagement appears to falter during Grade 9, many school engagement interventions have been created for ninth graders. Smith, Rook, and Smith (2007) demonstrated a school engagement intervention developed for ninth grade history students that involved asking them metacognitive and reflective questions that they would answer in journals and then discuss in class. The results showed that students who responded to the metacognitive questions retained the material better and were more engaged in the class. The authors suggested that metacognitive strategies for improving student engagement in learning improve outcomes. It was conjectured that the mechanism at work involved promoted thinking and discussion, which also involves making personal connections, and that these processes have a positive effect on student achievement. Smith et al. (2007) thus provided an example of a classroom pedagogy intervention that could improve student engagement and achievement.

School Belonging and Engagement and Students With Disabilities

Steele (2007) examined school engagement in high school social studies classes, finding that appropriate accommodations and modifications, modeling, support for organizational strategies, and time for practice all supported higher levels of engagement among special education students. All of these added elements break down the barriers presented to special education students by standard instructional means, thus increasing their engagement. Steele also described how activities including roleplaying and group projects also greatly increased the level of involvement of special education students in inclusive

classrooms. Field trips and Internet search projects were also used to engage special education students in projects.

There are many different approaches to education when it comes to transition programs in schools. For example, there is the more holistic approach to special education that has also informed the increased attention given to transition programs in high school. These programs were created due to the acknowledgment that, in spite of special education, many special education students were not prepared for life after school. Research has shown that, too often, special education services for high school students lack any systematic transition program, and some believe that this problem contributes to high dropout rates (Baugher, Manila, & Nichols, 2006). Baugher et al. (2006) described the implementation of the Know No Bounds transition model, developed to identify the skills that special education students will need for life after school. Elements of the program were based on research into the particular needs of rural adolescents in career development and postsecondary transition. Baugher et al. described the implementation of the transition fair (in which schools arrange for local employers to come to the school to meet prospective special education student employees), pointing out various best practices including linking the fair to student IEP goals, encouraging an inclusive atmosphere for the fair, and targeting industries most receptive to employment of special education students. Based on a survey administered to participants, the fair examined in this study was a success and did in fact lead to a better employment rate for special education graduates.

Various specific interventions have been developed for students with severe disabilities in high school to promote improved school outcomes through better social interaction. This programming was based on research evidence that positive peer relationships in high school positively correlated with improved outcomes among students with severe disabilities. The research also found that these students, especially those with

autism or other intellectual disabilities, generally interact less with peers without disabilities and have few friendships during their high school years (Baugher et al., 2006).

Despite the practice of inclusion, there is ample evidence that students with severe disabilities "may be among the most socially isolated students in schools" (Schulte & Villwock, 2004). Consensus has also emerged that teachers must play a leading role in promoting social opportunities for these students with their peers, and the literature on this issue contains 16 possible interventions (Carter & Pesko, 2008). According to Spring (2008) a strong body of empirical research has begun to find positive outcomes from such interventions. However, Quinn (2010) argued that less is known about the degree to which the teachers undertaking the interventions accept them as valid. The social validity of interventions therefore could be measured, assessing such factors as teachers' sense of the feasibility of their implementation in classrooms, whether or not teachers believe they are effective, and whether the teachers actually chose to implement them.

The pressure placed on teachers by inclusion policy may also affect the degree to which they can devote time to such interventions. For this reason, Carter and Pesko (2008) examined the acceptability of social interaction interventions at the high school level as viewed by teachers who must carry them out. Some 34 general educators and 29 special educators in 11 high schools in an urban school district were surveyed using an instrument developed by the researchers to assess the perceived effectiveness, feasibility, and actual use of social interaction intervention strategies. The interventions studied included teaching social skills, how to use a communication system, self-monitoring, pairing peers with special education students, rotating multiple classmates to work with disabled students, using teaching assistants, bringing in special education teachers, including special needs students in cooperative learning groups, and conducting disability awareness sessions. The results indicated only moderate use of any intervention strategies in general education classrooms,

while the strategies received the most use by special educators or paraprofessionals. A quarter of the teachers reported never helping special needs students with self-monitoring interactions or communication systems, nor did they conduct disability awareness sessions with all students. While the results found teacher support for some interactions, disability awareness sessions and communication system approaches received low ratings.

Most respondents in the Carter and Pesko (2008) study believed that peer-mediated strategies such as buddy programs, pairing peers, and cooperative learning groups were helpful for inclusion, especially when managed by paraprofessionals and special educators themselves. Carter and Pesko noted that teacher preferences for these programs may be based on the convenience of having programs delivered by other adults. At the same time, the literature on intervention effectiveness shows an overreliance on adult-delivered support models, suggesting that self-monitoring models, even though receiving little support at present from teachers, may be more effective in the long term (Bloom, 2010). Self-monitoring, while found to be effective, may be meeting resistance because it not perceived by teachers as being practical, easy to use or fitting easily into current classroom structure or practice. Carter and Pesko concluded that the situation for severely disabled high school students is not yet approaching best practice.

Palladino (2006) examined seven programs developed by special education teachers for adolescent foster children with learning disabilities at the high school level. This study found that collaboration does not align with best practice in special education, insofar as IEP meetings routinely excluded any number of stakeholders. The complex, multidimensional nature of caring for special education students is even more complex when the students are foster children, resulting in a wide variability in practice and in levels of compliance. Palladino sought to determine how schools conducted IEP meetings with special needs students, how the teachers sustained communication in the meetings, how they explained

their motivation for collaboration with others, whether mentoring was undertaken, and what advice the teachers would give to help special educators better prepare their students for college. The results showed that the teachers lacked full awareness of the needs of foster children and that their collaborations to address the youths' behavioral and vocational needs had limitations. The teachers reported that much of the programming was in reaction to problems that developed and was poorly supervised by leadership. They also reported uneven case management, generally of a one-size-fits-all nature with little individualization, little knowledge of the foster care system, and a lack of resources.

At the same time, the teachers in the Palladino (2006) study reported high level of parent participation, high expectations for all students, inclusion both in principle (holding special education students to standards) and practice, and a general ethos of equal treatment for all students. However, closer investigation determined that parental participation was forced. Moreover, the tenure level of the teacher had no measurable impact on whether or not teachers engaged in policy passively or actively, collaboration between teachers and parents was often compromised by persistent focus on negative behavior, and the special educator remained in control of what was in fact a one-sided collaboration. Palladino further detected that parental promotion of vocational solutions to their learning disabled children's issues remain at odds with the school system's approach to special education students. While not wanting to dismiss parental demands as outdated, Palladino nonetheless concluded that teacher–parent collaboration on behalf of foster children in special education was likely compromised by the fact that the two parties were not on the same page.

Carter, Sisco, Melekoglu, and Kurkowski (2007) examined the effectiveness of adult-delivered individual support of students with severe disabilities in high school science and art classrooms, comparing this approach to peer support interventions. Their research was based on studies finding that, even if included, students with severe disabilities rarely interacted

with mainstream students. As a result, many of the students with disabilities remained disengaged from the classroom, resulting in negative outcomes. Moreover, Carter et al. (2007) noted that the use of paraprofessionals to guide students with severe disabilities in mainstream classrooms was unsupported by empirical findings.

Peer support interventions was strongly supported by Carter et al. (2007) as part of a wider, multicomponent intervention model that was first introduced at the middle school level but is applicable in high school settings as well. Previous studies have found that peer support caused students with severe disabilities to have more interaction with peers and feel more engaged and connected to classroom life. Carter et al. (2007) looked at classrooms serving severely disabled ninth graders and found that all the students with severe disabilities engaged in substantially more peer interactions when working with peer support as opposed to direct support from an adult paraprofessional. This increase in social interaction, moreover, was gained without any compromise of the students' level of academic engagement. In addition, the interactions resulting from peer support were more or less balanced and reciprocal and not socially passive.

These results indicated that restricted interaction opportunities, not social-related skill deficits, present barriers to special education students' engagement with their classrooms (Carter et al., 2007). The study also found that a wide range of topics were discussed in interactions, both social and academic, further supporting the potential for special education students' engagement in the larger school community. Insofar as one of the fears linked to peer support is that the interactions would be one-sided and passive, these results present peer support as approaching best practice in terms of improving severely disabled student outcomes through engagement (Carter et al., 2007). Finally, the findings indicated that, far from reducing academic engagement, peer support reinforces academic engagement and improves overall student outcomes (Carter et al., 2007).

Conclusion

This review examined the reasons for the high dropout rate among special education students at the secondary level. Among the various reasons identified and reported in the literature review were personal, student-related reasons and institutional and programmatic reasons (Bello, 2006; Schulte & Villwock, 2004; Woods, 2007). The latter category included problems with specific school programs, lack of institutional support or leadership, and lack of support of teachers through training and accommodation to special education for students with disabilities.

Because inclusion has become the primary method by which special education services are delivered to secondary students, inclusion was examined closely, with case studies finding that inclusion remains problematic for many students with disabilities. Both general education and special education teachers need more training to offer optimal inclusive practice, and some populations of students with disabilities do not seem able to be instructed properly in inclusive environments (Carter & Hughes, 2006) IEPs and transition planning were also reviewed in the context of dropout prevention programs (Dukes & Lamar-Dukes, 2006) Overall, the literature strongly suggested the presence of institutional and programmatic shortcomings.

The literature review highlighted studies that have shown the value of improving these students' senses of belonging or engagement with school. A number of programs have emerged that focus on increasing special education students' sense of belonging and engagement with school and with learning, as a way to improve their school completion rate (Adelabu , 2007; Steele, 2007). Belongingness and engagement has also been infused in IEP management and transition planning, calling for more collaborative involvement of all stakeholders, especially students, in the process. The review closed with case studies of

emerging best practices in engagement of secondary level special education students (Roessler & Foshee, 2010).

Chapter 3 will focus on the methodology used in the current study. The methods of study are discussed by expounding on the procedure of gathering data and a much more detailed approach of how the data will be analyzed. Possible assumptions that are connected to the study are also examined throughout this chapter.

CHAPTER THREE: METHOD

Overview

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of students with disabilities who chose to drop out of high school. Through examining the insights shared by the participants in this study, strategies can be derived to reduce the dropout rate among high school students with disabilities.

To accomplish the objectives of this study, a qualitative case study was conducted with an emphasis on the experiences of a specific population of students with disabilities who did not complete high school. Through a qualitative phenomenological paradigm, the study created a case study as defined by Creswell (2013, p. 43): "a bounded system (a case)" via "detailed, in-depth data collection" that involves a number of information sources, such as observations, interviews, reports, and documents.

Research that adopts a phenomenological philosophy is "an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon" such as a program, an institution, a person, or a social unit (Merriam, 2009, p. x). The present research effort corresponds with the definition of a qualitative phenomenology, because it involves an intensive analysis of a phenomenon, namely a social unit of students with disabilities who did not complete high school.

The study took a qualitative approach because it involved the detailed and in-depth collection and analysis of information collected from interviews, student journaling, and observations of students in real-world social contexts. Journaling is a popular method of data collection in qualitative case studies, because it allows participants to express their own perceptions and experiences as they live through them (Creswell, 2013). These data sources were combined with secondary sources, such as reports and records relative to the dropout rate at a specific school during a specified time period.

Stake (1995) and Yin (2003) based their approach to case study research on a phenomenological paradigm. The approach involved the description of multiple views of reality, which enabled them to better understand the factors that affect participant action (Lather 1992; Robottom & Hart, 1993). According to Yin (1994), a case study is a study in which the "case" is a clear object of the research. Yin also argued that the case study assessment procedure involves a complex functioning unit assessment wherein the natural context of the case is discussed using different methods and addressing the key research question. In this qualitative case study, a case study approach was designed to study a specific phenomenon in context from the perspective of those with direct experience of it. The details were used to provide generalized conclusions relative to the real-life experiences of students with disabilities and the reasons they drop out of high school. The meaning of phenomena can be understood through the experiences of those who are involved (Merriam, 2009).

Design

The study used purposive sampling, which "groups participants according to preselected criteria relevant to a particular research question" (Mack, Woodsong, Macqueen, Guest, & Namey, 2005, p. 5). In this case, the sample was limited to third- and fourth-year high school students with disabilities who dropped out of Ridgeville High School during the 2010–2014 academic school years. The sampling showed students who represented the dropout population in a specific school district, but consisted of varying members of a specific group so that all possible elements of the reasons of high school dropout rates among students could be identified and analyzed.

The target sample size was 10; to ensure that the target was met, 30 former students were invited to participate in the study. I was personally aware of 30 former students who met the study criteria. The availability of 30 initial candidates provided some room for

missed appointments or for students who did not wish to participate. If a person missed three appointments, they were dropped from the study. Consent was obtained directly from former students. All students were at the age of consent. Ridgeville High School was chosen for this study because it has a relatively high percentage of dropouts among students with disabilities (approximately 35%). This sample was representative of the students in the specific school district.

Yin's (2013, p. 13) comprehensive definition of case study was very relevant to this research methodology: A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.

Yin argued that a case study design is most ideal when certain conditions are met: (a) The focus of the research is to answer a "how" or "why" question (e.g., how experiences of disabled students affected their school performance and dropout rates), (b) the research covers contextual situations that directly affect the phenomenon under study (e.g., teacher support, school support and others), and (c) the boundaries of the phenomenon (i.e., disabled student experience) and context (school environment) overlap. For example, a study of decision making of the proposed student population with disabilities cannot be discussed without the context (i.e., the high school environment) and more specifically the classroom setting and teacher interaction. Yin (2003) further argued that the settings directly affect the phenomena and that without assessment of the settings and the phenomena, it is difficult for any researcher to make the final decision.

Additionally, Yin (2011) argued that a key feature of case study research is addressing the research questions in a natural context. By conducting a case study, researchers choose to systematically assess the situations wherein there is limited control over the overall behavior of the respondents or the sequence of events. Therefore, as Anderson, Crabtree, Steele, and

McDaniel (2005) argued, a case study is suitable for research that involves complex settings wherein a single cause and effective relationship cannot be attained. This view of case study is supported in this research, wherein the dropout rate of the students with disabilities can be linked to a myriad of experiences, institutional or environmental factors, and personal characteristics.

According to Stake (1995), the use of a case study research can involve either single cases, single cases embedded within multiple units, or multiple cases. This research adopted a single case embedded with multiple units approach. Rich analysis can be carried out wherein the subunits can be analyzed separately (within case analysis) or between different subunits (cross-case analysis). Clearly, the adoption of a single case study approach (high school context) wherein embedded units (multiple students with different case studies) helps arrive at a generic perception of all factors affecting dropout rates.

Another reason to adopt a case study approach is the fact that case studies can help enrich and transform a reader's understanding of a phenomenon (Donmoyer, 1990). Yin (2013) argued that a case study researcher can analyze multiple social interactions to analyze or examine factors that are inseparable and that the researcher aims at articulating multiple relationships within a given context. The purpose of this approach is to ensure that these relationships in the context strongly address the proposed phenomena. Therefore, although the examination of disabled student views involves a specific context (i.e., some high schools), the same context can be extended to other high schools across the country.

Finally, as Stake (2013) argued, case study research involves multiple sources of information. By adopting a multiple source perspective, it is possible to converge lines of inquiry and facilitate triangulation of the data collection methods (Stake, 2013). This will ensure that the findings are more reliable and accurate. In the current research, the use of

student journals, observation, and detailed, semistructured interviews as part of a single case analysis helped address this perspective.

The current qualitative case study approach restricted the topic of examination by focusing on a specific school with a high dropout rate among students with disabilities as a means of finding meaning and understanding of the high dropout rate at that location. By analyzing the reasons for the specific individual's decision to drop out, I was able to suggest solutions for this particular school and provide some insights for further research and to help others understand more generally why students with disabilities might be predisposed to dropping out of high school. Moreover, a qualitative research project was the best way to uncover unanticipated findings or new combinations and relationships (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Specifically, qualitative research methods shed light on why certain students with disabilities dropped out of school or why students with disabilities may be disproportionately predisposed to dropping out of high school in geographical area of study.

Research Questions

This investigation of the high school dropout rates of students with disabilities was guided by four research questions:

1. What are the general educational experiences of students with disabilities who drop out of school?
2. What are the special educational experiences of students with disabilities who drop out of school?
3. What factors lead to the decision to drop out of school for students with disabilities?
4. How does dropping out of school impact the quality of life of students with disabilities?

This chapter discusses the proposed research methodology used for investigating the research questions and the methods used to analyze the results. A qualitative methodology using a phenomenological philosophy was selected, because it is appropriate for providing an in-depth understanding of human behavior through direct experience. Qualitative research achieves a "contextual understanding" of a social and human phenomenon (Willis, 2007, p. 181).

This study required a flexible research design because it addressed a human phenomenon that needed to make space for behavioral factors. As Merriam (2009, p. 16) suggested, a qualitative study should be "flexible" and "emergent" in that the methodology should be "responsive to changing conditions of the study in progress." Hence, the researcher's objectives of describing and explaining variations, relationships, individual experiences, and group norms made it the most suitable approach for this study. The qualitative researcher becomes a research instrument, observing and interpreting complex human behavior and adjusting research techniques to correspond with new situations and discoveries. For instance, when one is observing and interviewing participants, the set of interview questions determined beforehand should allow enough room for follow-up questions. This will be accomplished by using a semistructured format (Merriam, 2009).

Likewise, analyzing the data involves flexibility, because unanticipated categories may arise and factors that might at first appear to be inconsequential may become significant, requiring adjustment of the coding process to present accurate and comprehensive results. Coding in this regard is defined as the manner in which the "data are broken down, conceptualized and put back together in new ways" and is particularly compatible with qualitative studies (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996, p. 144).

Setting/Site

All study participants were former students at Ridgeville High School in Virginia. All interviews were conducted in person to permit observation of the participants' demeanor and to access uncertainty or confusion during the course of the interview. Thus, the interviews were a combination of active interviews and active observation.

Participants

Identifying the primary reasons why students with disabilities drop out of high school involved identifying and interpreting social phenomena and human behavior. Thus, a number of personal and environmental factors were analyzed and interpreted. Each reason given was personal to the individual student, even if multiple students shared similar experiences. For this reason, a description of the specific students is provided, and this personal context was incorporated into the data analysis by using factors such as their age, gender, grade, and race.

The participants in the study included 10 male and female high school dropouts with disabilities, ages 18 to 24, who dropped out of Ridgeville High School (pseudonym for a Virginia high school) during the 2010–2014 academic school years, while in their third or fourth year of high school. The decision to focus on third- and fourth-year high school students was based on the assumption that students so close to graduation should have the most compelling reasons for finishing; therefore, the factors that led to their dropping out must have been particularly influential. It was presumed that students at this specific school provided important input into the main and most compelling reasons why students with disabilities make the decision to withdraw from school.

Freshmen and sophomores may have the same significant reasons for dropping out of school; however, these students have the benefit of more time to return to school compared with older special education students who have less time. The decision to leave school at this early stage may be more difficult to reverse than for students who are near completion. After

all, the closer a student is to completing high school, the easier it may be to convince that student to continue (Spencer, 2009). This would be particularly true if students who drop out near graduation do so for reasons relative to the domestic or economic environment, exit exams, or other concerns related to academic performance. Moreover, when juniors and seniors drop out of school so near completion, their action necessarily raises the question of the gravity of the issue of dropping out of school that compels such students to discontinue rather than finish high school.

Research shows that the students who drop out of school near graduation are generally representative of the entire population of dropouts (Spencer, 2009). It was assumed that these students at a specific school district were contemplating dropping out of high school for some time before finally dropping out and that they can provide a timeline summarizing their decision-making process. This study identified the students' high school experiences and how those experiences culminated in the decisions to finally drop out of school rather than continue to graduate.

These experiences should not be viewed as a diagnosis or as the opinion of psychological professionals as the sole reasons they dropped out of school. The study did not delve deeply into the participants' personalities; its focus was on the lived experiences of the individuals. The purpose of gathering the students' experiences was to improve the identification of at-risk students and to support the development of intervention programs that address their needs and ultimately support persistence to graduation.

The demographics of the student sample population were determined before the preliminary data collection procedure, at which point the participants' school records were accessed with the permission of school administration (see Appendix A). Age, gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic background, native language, region, mobility, ability,

disability, parental employment, and family structure were the categories of demographic data that were identified for each participant.

Procedures

The administrators at Ridgeville High School expressed willingness to cooperate with this study. A letter of inquiry was sent to the school administrators describing the study's purpose; their consent was obtained with the understanding that their participation was entirely voluntary.

Once I secured Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, I personally contacted the prospective former students. I sent written invitations to each student and then followed up by phone 3 to 7 days after the letters were mailed, personally inviting the students to participate. The participants were asked to sign agreement forms (see Appendix B) if they agreed to take part in the study. Consent was accepted only after a clear explanation of their rights as human participants and the protections afforded to them in that role (see Appendix C).

After the acquisition of consent, the qualitative data were obtained from these participants. Ten students were selected for face-to-face interviews; once these students were selected, the other 20 were kept on standby in case some of those chosen were unable to keep their appointments. Interviews were documented using the questionnaire, a tape recorder, and field notes. The identities of the participants were kept confidential. The identities remain in my custody and control, and I will take precautions so that I am the only one with access to this information. None of the participants is identified by name in the research; instead, they will be reported as data in the aggregate, using selected quotes identified by pseudonym only.

The Researcher's Role

I have been a special education teacher for 15 years, with a master's degree in Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment from Walden University and in a master's degree in Educational Leadership from the University of Scranton. I also have an Educational

Specialists Degree in Educational Leadership from Liberty University. Additionally, I also coordinated a program called WALK (Work Achieves Lasting Knowledge) that helps at-risk students, many of whom have special needs, to graduate on time. This program reinforced my aspiration to provide a better quality of special education for students with disabilities and, therefore, to improve their graduation rates.

I was responsible for gathering primary data (interviews, student journaling and observations), as well as secondary data (dropout rates, school records, and other background data). I was accountable for all procedures in the study, which include obtaining approval from the IRB, cooperating with Ridgeville High School staff, gaining consent from the participants, and implementing the strict confidentiality guidelines. I validated and triangulated the results of the study, tabulated the results, and made recommendations based on these results. I attempted to execute all of the tasks involved with the study with an unbiased and objective perspective, although complete freedom from bias is impossible. I limited the potential for bias by remaining neutral at all times, setting aside my personal perceptions and experiences.

Data Collection

I gathered data in several ways. The process involved keen observation and accurate research, as well as good communication skills. Qualitative research is open ended, but it must be somewhat semistructured to ensure alignment of the data with the problem under study (Spencer, 2009). The questions were intended to explore the timing of the decision to drop out, the help that they may or may not have received from teachers and parents, and the school experience and environment. These questions were constructed by reference to findings such as inadequate special education programming and institutional failures in the existing literature regarding indicators that might predict students at risk of dropping out of school (Spring, 2008).

The responses to initial questions led to additional questions, and qualitative research methods were consistent with this approach because they do not seek to confirm, disprove, or predict causalities. I relied on in-depth interviews, the collection of field notes taken during observations and interviews, other notes taken while conducting research, and student journaling. These tools are discussed in detail in the following paragraphs.

In-Depth Interviews

Because the study was personal in nature, in-depth interviews were the primary data collection method. Interviews have been proven "very effective in giving a human face to research problems" (Mack et al., 2005, p. 29). In this case, the dropouts themselves were asked to describe their lived experiences and, if possible, to articulate their reasons for dropping out shortly before graduation. For these interviews to produce useful, reliable, and accurate data that could be analyzed, certain steps needed to be taken. I framed interview questions as semistructured. Semistructured interviews follow a basic pattern, but the interviewer has the freedom to pursue any emergent lines of discourse as they arise. This is part of the core of flexibility that enables qualitative research to realize its potential to thoroughly probe a phenomenon (Mack et al., 2005).

As information came up or responses revealed information that called for further exploration, I went off script. In writing the interview questions, I considered the following issues: influences, home environment, any type of assistance provided, and experience that contributed to their decision. These core areas were identified by Lehr et al. (2004, p. 13).

I started with easy, nonthreatening, short answer questions like demographic questions so that no follow up was needed. Active observation within the interview directed the progress of questioning. During the interviews, I watched for, interpreted, and responded to verbal and nonverbal cues. The questions were semistructured so that the interaction felt

informal but contained embedded cues intended to elicit the needed information from the interviewees (Mattson & Roll-Pettersson, 2007). Interviews lasted at least 25 minutes.

Informality in the conversations was important, because informal conversations gave students opportunities to express freely their thoughts and experiences related to classes, homework, teachers, the school, and friends. When participants' responses were unclear or incomplete or led to another question, follow-up questions to clarify the answers were pursued by phone.

I was vigilant during interviews, looking for both verbal and nonverbal cues that may prompt follow-up questions (or hint at questions that should not be asked) and, more importantly, to "avoid saying the wrong things that might spoil the data" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 2).

Face-to-face interviews are highly interactional and thus capable of extracting significant information. Active observation helps to steer the trajectory of the interview and permits "maximizing the flow of valid, reliable information while minimizing distortions of what the respondent knows" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 3). Face-to-face interviews become the "productive site of reportable knowledge itself" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 3), allowing questioners to identify and interpret the veracity of responses to interview questions in a way that cannot be achieved through surveys and questionnaires (Appendix J).

The interview questions are presented in Appendix J. They were deliberately open to reduce interviewer bias by offering the participants the widest possible scope for their answers. This type of approach is important in qualitative research, one of the defining features of which is the flexibility and unpredictability of the research journey. The language was neutral so as to not guide the participants toward a particular response, designed instead for its malleability. As Maykut and Morehouse (1994, p. 91) noted, the interview does not replace the human input as the research instrument. Instead, the "qualitative posture is one of

flexibility and responsiveness to the expected emergence of unanticipated twists and turns in the content of the interview." This means that it may be necessary to change the direction of the interview if unexpected aspects emerge. Therefore, the interview questions remain primarily a guide.

Observations

Observations were conducted in real-world social contexts, such as at work or social gatherings. These observations followed "a nonstructured format to allow for maximum flexibility" (Morocco et al., 2006, p. 140). The active observation was designed to be prospective in that it searched for "true facts and feelings residing within" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 2). The purpose of active observation was to triangulate the data obtained during interviews, identifying the common experiences of students who drop out of school near graduation. For instance, students who made the decision to drop out of school may have had a social disconnect that influenced their level of engagement with school. If so, some evidence of this disconnect should be observable in the students' postdropout experiences. More importantly, active observations provide a direct source of data evidencing the common experiences of students with disabilities who drop out of school near graduation. These observations were documented as they were made by the use of field notes.

The intent of active observations is to observe and utilize all sources of information during the interaction. As Merriam (2009) noted, observations are important when combined with interviews; they will help me to take note of patterns, events, and phenomena to investigate further.

Throughout the course of the interviews, observations, and interpretation of journaling together with transcription, I took notes indicating what I deemed important based on analytical, diagnostic, and active observation. Field notes (attached as Appendix H) were highly important, especially during data analysis, because they highlighted events and

statements that proved to be significant to the study. Active observation and analysis also directed me to insights that I missed initially.

As can be seen in Appendix H, the aim of the field notes was to guide the critical reflection in the dissemination period. These were used during the research process to jot down observations as they occurred, whether these thoughts were in word or diagram form. They recorded the behaviors, activities, and events that occurred in the research arena. During the analysis phase, these notes added an additional dimension to the research process by providing context against which to explore the answers from the interviews and journaling.

Observations are at the more extreme end of qualitative research and have their roots in anthropology. They have multiple potential problems, such as the presence of the researcher having an influence on the behavior of the individuals being observed. However, as De Walt and De Walt (2010) noted, observation, when performed correctly, can enable the researcher to gain a deep and rich understanding of a situation. In this case, there is a high chance that students would not give truthful answers in their interviews; therefore, observation was a useful backup to remove the pressure from the participants.

Student Journaling

Student journaling was collected as a qualitative data collection. It provided a third source of data triangulation. Journaling occurs when participants are asked to keep a record of their thoughts and feelings and can provide a very effective way of getting participants to think deeply about their responses, according to Saldaña (2011, p. 62). It is a little-used qualitative research technique. The main drawback is the risk of participants not completing their journals; however, if participants are able to complete the reflexive process, journals can generate rich data.

Students with disabilities participating in this research study were asked to provide a written reflection of no more than one page relating their own perceptions of how their

decision to not complete school has affected their life. This journaling exercise gave students the freedom to express themselves without prompting or constraints. This approach allowed students to share their thoughts more freely, away from the presence of an outside source.

Data Analysis

Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis involves a flexible process of noticing things, collecting them, and thinking about them (Merriam, 2009). Noticing things pertinent to the topic involves the observations made during the course of research. In this study, these observations were translated into field notes and used to supplement interview transcripts, journals, and field notes, which are carefully reviewed. More specifically, qualitative data analysis was used to analyze the themes common to participants' stories and to organize the data by themes that emerged. The responses were organized to identify patterns of consistency or differences. All the data derived from each question were aggregated and segregated accordingly. A similar approach was taken integrating data from the student journals into the themes.

The data gathered were interpreted and analyzed through the use of a coding system that was made to fit the design of the study. Essentially, a phenomenological reductionist approach was applied to the data (Spencer, 2009). Phenomenological reductionism is an approach whereby the act of judgment is suspended so as to focus on the processes of the mind. It is most commonly utilized in psychology, but has now also spread through social sciences research as a whole (Jones, 2000). Applying a novel lens to education has helped to broaden the discourse in this particular field.

By using a phenomenological approach, researchers are able to encounter actual experiences. In this qualitative phenomenology, the actual experiences of students with disabilities who chose to leave high school were captured. By taking a phenomenological

approach, I studied and interpreted all aspects of the participants' lived experiences so that I could understand how these experiences contributed to the decision to drop out of school (Merriam, 2009).

A reductionist component was added to the phenomenological approach by bracketing personal impressions and feelings (Merriam, 2009). In other words, I will reserved judgment on the data and looked instead for all probable interpretations of the phenomenon of dropping out among students with disabilities. Bracketing is common in phenomenology. The original developer of the philosophy, Edmund Husserl, argued that bracketing involves deliberately ignoring the concept of the real existence and all associated questions. The object is, in effect, put into brackets and removed from the problem. It is arguably qualitative research in its most pure form in that it is the exact antithesis to quantitative research. The researcher takes on the role of a jury, examining the situation from multiple angles of subjectivity to arrive at a solution that has undergone multiple modes of analysis (Merriam, 2009).

The Coding Process

Once the data were collated, sorted, and bracketed pursuant to a phenomenological reductionist method, they were coded. This step involved "searching for types, classes, sequences, processes, patterns or wholes [that will] assemble or reconstruct the data in a meaningful or comprehensible fashion" (Jorgensen, 1989, p. 107). In this regard, I looked for common themes and trends in the data and assigned codes that segregated these themes into identifiable categories. Themes and trends that created variables or were not common among the respondents but appeared to be important indicators of the postdropout experience, were coded and placed in identifiable categories. Both common themes and deviations from these themes were coded. In the event that data do did fit any categories identified, data were coded separately by reference to the more common themes from which they deviated. The coded data were thus organized and categorized into meaningful groups of information for further

analysis. Subcategories were created when necessary throughout the course of sifting through data.

Analysis of the coded data had three main objectives: (a) to classify data found on various categories and subcategories, (b) to identify patterns and relationships between categories and subcategories and between various types of general categories, and (c) to examine these relationships in search of new findings (Merriam, 2009). This part of the analysis was the most difficult and effort-intensive, because I needed to exhaust all possibilities and pinpoint significant correlations. This coding process was iterative and progressive, recursive, and holographic in nature (Merriam, 2009) and led to the development of final results, which were supported by researched data and intensive analysis.

Iterative and Progressive

The qualitative coding process was iterative; each step was repeated over and over again until I had exhausted all analytical possibilities. It was progressive, because each step brought me closer to attaining the final results. An iterative and progressive approach enabled me to move between categories and subcategories of responses until no further information and themes in the responses could be identified. Iterative, progressive data analysis is not regarded as "repetitive" but rather as "a reflexive process" and is the "key to sparking insight and developing meaning" (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009, p. 76).

Iteration is reflexive, because it engages examining and reexamining the data in search of keener insight and the development of meaning. Through this repeated examination, connections are made that progressively lead to a more narrow focus and more refined insight and understanding. For example, an initial point of inquiry might be this: "What is the data telling me?" This would be followed by inquiring, "What do I want to know?" This point of inquiry is in turn followed by asking, "What is the connection between what I want to know and what the data is telling me?" Once these questions are answered, the point of inquiry is

repeated until a point of saturation is reached and there are few or no gaps between what the data are telling me and what I want to know.

Recursive

This process is recursive, because no single succession of procedures needs to be followed. It was not essential for the first step coding data to be fully completed before I progress to collecting data. A recursive approach to the data is not fixed and does not follow a prescribed sequence. Instead, it is a cycle that involves reflecting and refining (Maxwell, 2005). As the qualitative data analysis progressed, I went back to noticing things and coding or recoding data if needed.

Recursion permits revisiting any conclusions at will and developing, refining, and revising decisions, where appropriate. This approach was particularly important to the current research topic, because it involved a diverse group of people bound only by a common human behavior. Determining the main reasons why different individuals decided to drop out of high school required making connections and disconnections and then refining them into a workable theme.

Holographic

This method of analysis was also holographic, in that all steps during the research analysis and collection phase were collated to contribute to the overall research and results. For instance, while collecting and sorting through coded data, I noticed new things and recoded and analyzed them. In this regard, any small or fragmented part of the data contributed to the "whole picture" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 262).

The holographic analytical approach to a phenomenology allows for finding contextual meaning in a specific social context (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). In this case analysis, I looked for behavioral patterns in a common social context (high school dropout patterns and experiences of students with disabilities) and in a specific location, identifying

commonalities that might provide a basis for future generalization of the results. In other words, the holographic analytical approach permitted transferring the results to similar social contexts.

Merriam (2009, chapter 3) suggested the use of a coding process that is iterative, progressive, recursive, and holographic in nature and that allows the researcher to examine the coded data by reference to a series of reflexive questions:

1. Am I drawing conclusions based on actual data collected, or based on my own bias or information obtained from outside sources? (p. 78)
2. Am I drawing conclusions based on information obtained in the literature? (p. 78)
3. Am I able to confirm my findings by virtue of my own observations? (p. 78)
4. What the circumstances in which my observations were made? (p. 78)
5. Are the data prioritizing and sorting mechanisms reliable? (p. 78)
6. Can the information obtained from the participants be trusted? (p. 78)
7. Was there a danger of bias in the observation process or the preparation of reports? (p. 78)

Trustworthiness

Data Analysis Trustworthiness

To validate the data gathered in the study, I ensured trustworthiness in terms of data analysis. Creswell (2013) noted that, in qualitative research, the data collected for analysis must inspire "confidence in the outcome of the study" so that others will believe what is reported (p. 133). Trustworthiness includes credibility, dependability, and triangulation of the data as well as member checking and an audit trail (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Techniques for ensuring credibility, dependability, and triangulation of the data are necessary to control bias. However, it is impossible to eliminate all bias, particularly with respect to situations in

which participants are required to recall experiences (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Trustworthiness is a component of reliability. Joppe (2000, p. 1) defined reliability as

> The extent to which results are consistent overtime and an accurate representation of the total population under study is referred to as reliability and if the results of a study can be reproduced under a similar methodology, then the research instrument is considered to be reliable.

Transferability

Applying the result of a research to another situation similar to the one in which the research was done is called *transferability.* The readers of the research are involved in this process. In this process, readers compare the situation in which the research was done to a situation familiar to him or her, applying or "transferring" the information derived from the research to this situation. To be able to do this successfully, it is important that the readers have a complete picture of the original research situation so that they can determine whether it is similar to their own. Therefore, a detailed description of the research situation is a prerequisite for the process of transferability to be carried out effectively (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000).

Triangulation

To ensure that the qualitative data gathered are both reliable and valid, more than one method needs to be applied (see Appendix F). This use of multiple methods, called triangulation, operates under the logic that the results can be strengthened by checking the data from a variety of angles (Punch, 2009, p. 160). In this case, the study's main data collection method was intensive interviews; one weakness of the use of interviews is that the participant may decide not to answer the questions for personal reasons. To partially address this risk, school records were accessed to confirm the statements made by each participant. For instance, if a participant said that he or she dropped out because of bullying from other

students, this claim was confirmed by reference to school records to control for bias and enhance trustworthiness. In addition to semistructured interviews, two other sources of data were used: active observation and student journaling. Thus, three forms of data collection provided direct evidence of the students' experiences in the postdropout world. Reinterviewing of participants achieved further triangulation.

Credibility

Because I have been involved in educating students with disabilities, I understand, firsthand, the monumental challenges that these students face, and I am experienced in communicating with them. For this reason, I was able to formulate interview questions in a focused manner that could reach participants and gain maximum input from their responses. Personal interviews were conducted with a high degree of professionalism to encourage detailed, honest responses and to ensure the richness of the data gathered.

Another method of ensuring or improving credibility is to compare the facts and circumstances of the respondents' particular experiences to look for discrepancies and consistencies. Confirmation and substantiation can come from school records made available to me.

One way to eliminate potential bias and improve credibility is member checking, which can be conducted in a tactful way during the interview by asking the respondent if the reviewer is interpreting the response correctly: "Am I on the right track? Did I understand this the same way you meant it?" (Carlson, 2010, p. 1105). This is an effective method for testing the plausibility or accuracy of a response (Carlson, 2010, p. 1105). Member checking was used within this study to further support credibility of the data.

Dependability

To guarantee the accuracy of interview data, all interviews were recorded using a portable tape recorder and subsequently transcribed; therefore, any biased results were

avoided. Contemporaneous field notes were taken during the interview and then juxtaposed with the transcripts and other interview data.

Replication of the Study

A study's ability to be replicated strengthens its trustworthiness. In qualitative research "a rich and complex understanding of a specific social context or phenomenon typically takes precedence over eliciting data that can be generalized to other geographical areas or populations" (Mack et al., 2005, p. 2). Qualitative studies can usually be replicated only with groups who have similar characteristics—not with larger populations. Because this study described lived experiences and normative outcomes arising out of those experiences, a qualitative phenomenology using a specific population sampling was desirable. Furthermore, because an objective of this study was to help schools better understand the experiences of students who drop out of school, it was hoped that the study could help schools implement more effective preventative measures, particularly with respect to students with disabilities. While the study provided results tailored to a specific school's demographics, it should be highly replicable.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical guidelines were followed to safeguard the rights of all the individuals who took part in the study. Because the former students were all at least 18 years old, they we able to give consent directly. For all participants, the issues of privacy and confidentiality also arose.

Informed Consent

The participants were made fully aware of the nature of the study before the interviews were conducted. All of those participants were informed of the risks and benefits of participating in the study. It was vital that the participants gave their informed consent.

Hence, a concise consent form was provided to the participants before scheduling the interviews.

The participants were also asked where and when they preferred to be interviewed to minimize the inconvenience of participating in the study. Participants were able to decline participation in the study or to withdraw at any point.

Confidentiality

I guaranteed that the participants' identities would remain confidential. The student participants were assigned pseudonyms. Personal information that might make them identifiable will remain confidential. Also, to protect their confidentiality, the school name will be fictional. All data associated with the study will be stored in a secure location accessible only to the researcher. The data will be kept for 3 years after the completion of the research and will be destroyed by shredding and waste disposal.

Summary

Chapter 3 described the method used in this study, including design, research questions, setting, participants, procedures, the researcher's role, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations. Chapter 4 will discuss the relevant findings of the study, and Chapter 5 will provide a discussion, conclusions, and recommendations.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

The current qualitative phenomenology research restricts the topic of examination by focusing on a specific school with a high dropout rate among students with disabilities as a means of finding meaning and understanding of the high dropout rate at that location. Qualitative research is related to a subjective assessment of opinions, attitudes, and behaviour. Research in such a case is a role of investigator insights and impressions. This approach produces findings either in nonquantitative style or those findings that cannot be managed by precise quantitative analysis (Kothari, 2004, p. 5). By learning the reasons for the specific individual's decision to drop out, this research aimed to suggest solutions for this particular school and to provide some insights for further research or to help others understand more generally why students with disabilities might be predisposed to drop out of school. Moreover, a qualitative research project is the best way to uncover unanticipated findings or new combinations and relationships (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Specifically, qualitative research methods can shed light on why certain students with disabilities dropped out of school or on why students with disabilities may be disproportionately predisposed to drop out of high school in geographical area of study.

The detailed research methodology was provided in Chapter Three, where it was observed that three different data collection methods could help arrive at answers to the research questions including an in-depth interview process, observation, and student journaling.

Research Questions

This qualitative research study was guided by four research questions:

1. What are the general educational experiences of students with disabilities who drop out of school?
2. What are the special educational experiences of students with disabilities who drop out of school?
3. What factors lead to the decision to drop out of school for students with disabilities?
4. How does dropping out of school impact the quality of life of students with disabilities?

Document Assessment

All interviews were recorded using a digital recording device and lasted 20 to 40 minutes each. The interviews took place over a period of 60 days. After every interview, I transcribed the interview responses and made clear notes on any additional remarks made by the participants. I did not edit the interview responses during the transcription process. I did add context in terms of missing words or nouns, where needed, to make the answers clear. I took care to ensure that the respondents did not digress from the research interview questions. The opinions of those respondents who did digress were analyzed, and only relevant information was included as part of the research. The themes were organized based on the interview question pattern. The respondents were given specific pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

The participant identification (i.e., their core characteristics) was entered in a tabulated form to arrive at frequency and descriptive statistical parameters. Two documents were created as part of the research: “Dissertation Transcriptions” and “Final Themes.” The transcript documents were examined for errors in spelling and verbal pauses, and such

information was deleted. The data were then analyzed manually using a thematic analysis approach. I used the Microsoft Word highlighting tool to combine different themes and organize them into categories for every question.

Participant Summary

The study was conducted with a population of 10 respondents. The assessment of the sociodemographics of the respondents indicates the results presented in Table 1. The majority of the respondents were female (60%) with a mean age of 20.3 (±2.16). The respondents were predominantly white (40%) and African American (50%). The respondents were predominantly from large families with more sisters than brothers. Only one respondent was an only child. Furthermore, the majority of the respondents were the oldest child (40%), followed by those who were a middle child (30%).

The employment status of the parents showed that many mothers (40%) were employed in retail stores, manufacturing units, and transportation services. Thirty percent of the mothers were on disability assistance, and 20% of mothers were not in contact with the children. The employment status of the fathers showed that 50% of them were employed as service personnel, including electricians, truck drivers, and employees of the government. Compared with the mothers, a larger percentage of the fathers (40%) were not in contact with their children or had passed way. Fifty percent of the families received a certain degree of disability assistance.

The majority of the respondents had learning disabilities (50%), whereas others had emotional disabilities (40%). The majority of the respondents had moderate disabilities (80%). The detailed coding used to arrive at the above socio- demographics is provided in Appendix I.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Criteria	*n*	Percentage
Gender		
Female	6	60
Male	4	40
Age		
18–20	6	60
21–23	2	20
23–25	2	20
Ethnicity		
White	4	40
African American	5	50
Biracial	1	10
Number of siblings		
Number of sisters	13	–
Number of brothers	6	–
Position in the family		
Eldest	4	40
Youngest	2	20
Middle	3	30
Only child	1	10
Maternal employment		
Disability assistance	3	30
Employed	4	40
Home maker	1	10
Passed away/ Not in contact	2	20
Paternal employment		
Disability assistance	0	–
Employed	5	50
Prison	1	10
Passed away/ Not in contact	4	40
Receiving assistance		
Received assistance	5	50
Did not receive assistance	5	50
Type of Disability		
Specific learning disability	5	50
Emotional disability	4	40
Other health impairment	1	10
Level of disability		
Moderate	8	80
Moderate to severe	2	20

Participant behavior was observed during the interviews using a checklist of common behavior traits (Appendix Q). A summary of the frequency of these observed behaviors is presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Participant Behavior Checklist

Behavior	Frequency
Appropriate nonverbal greeting	5
Appropriate nonverbal listening	3
Appropriate eye contact	6
Lacking appropriate eye contact	2
Ignoring not responding to others	4
Engaged in conversation	10
Withdrawn/keeps to self	6
Confused, seems to be in fog	4
Sudden change in mood	5
Irritability	5
Fearfulness/anxiety	3
Hyperactivity	4
Self-consciousness/embarrassment	2
Quiet, mumbling speech	5

Interview Results: Thematic Analysis

The following table presents a summary of the different themes identified through interview analysis. The questions and responses were categorized into four different sections: school climate, sense of belonging, attitude of the students, and educational support in home environments. Each of these themes was further categorized into organizing and basic themes. For example, the school climate assessment was categorized into three themes: general experience in school, teacher and school attention, and provision of tools and facilities offered by the school. Four parameters are associated with the respondents' sense of belonging in school: participation and enjoyment of extracurricular activities, ability to make friends, sense of belonging in school, and views toward going to school each morning. Furthermore, four parameters are associated with the respondents' attitude towards school: views on the goals they have in life, the importance of achieving the dream, perception of

being a good student, and grade quality perception. Finally, three parameters are associated with the support received at home and in stressful environments: personal and family influence on education, decisions to quit, and the consequences associated with not finishing GED.

Table 3

Overview of Different Themes Identified From Interview Analysis

Open Codes	Enumeration of Open Code Appearance	Organizing Theme	Overall Theme
Peer support	3	General Experience	School Climate
Enhancement of learning	2		
Interaction with others	2		
Good experience which morphed into a bad one	3		
Negative perception of authority - Teachers	1		
Negative perception of authority - Principal	1		
Anxiety and self-consciousness	2		
Difficult being different from others	2		
Being in a special class	1		
School provided support, but not teachers	1	Teacher and school attention	
Some teacher attention, but not most	2		
Good experience with the school	1		
Negative views on socio-demographics – Gang affiliation	1		
Negative views on socio-demographics – Question of living environment	1		
Inability to pay attention	2		
Lack of patience – Facilitating SEN education at all levels	4		
Lack of involvement			
Presence of tools and facilities which were not used	3	Provision of tools and facilities	
Lack of resources	1		
Presence of tools and facilities but not enough time	2		
More help in reading and math	1		
Focus on extra-curricular activities	2		
Focus on more attentive teachers	3		
More resources	3		
More special education teachers	4		

Open Codes	Enumeration of Open Code Appearance	Organizing Theme	Overall Theme
Took part	2	Participation in extracurricular activities	Sense of Belonging
Did not take part	5		
Enjoyed participating- Positive interaction	1		
Enjoyed participating- Work and exercise	1		
Enjoyed participation- Learning maps	1		
Did not enjoy participating- Rules	2		
Small group of friends- More effective social circle	2	Ability to make friends	
Small group of friends- Others made fun of disability	3		
Small group of friends- Uncomfortable to talk to people	1		
Outgoing and friendly	1		
Got along with everyone	1		
Helpful	2		
Willing to stand up to others	1		
Familiarity	1	Sense of belonging within the campus	
Positive environment	1		
Discrimination – Based on learning disabilities	2		
Discrimination – Based on sexual orientation	1		
Isolation from the peer group - Fear	2		
Isolation from the peer group – Feeling like an outsider	1		
Peer group	1	Views toward going to school	
Positive environment	7		
Ridicule based on appearance	2		
Ridicule from peers	1		
Cope with learning	1		
School is a waste of time	1		
Unwillingness to see teachers	2		

Open Codes	Enumeration of Open Code Appearance	Organizing Theme	Overall Theme
Getting GED	2	Goals in Life	Attitude of the Student
Making money	1		
Professionals, government employee or social and health service sectors	6		
Lack of confidence	2		
Need to look for alternatives due to learning disability	2		
Continued uncertainty	1		
Help others	3	Importance of achieving the dream	
Making money	1		
Hard work to achieve future success	3		
Serve as role model	1		
Personal growth and positive emotional wellbeing	2		
Followed the rules and did not get into trouble	4	Perception of being a good student	
Getting good grades	2		
Listening to the teacher	3		
Tendency to get into trouble	1		
Not worth the trouble	1		
Fair grades	5	Grade Quality Perception	
Getting good grades in most subjects	3		
Grading for result rather than the effort	2		
Lack of additional teaching	1		
Focus on material not extensively taught	1		
Support and encouragement from families	3	Personal and family influence on education	Educational Support in Home Environment
Drug abuse	1		
Sexual and emotional abuse	3		
Pregnancy	1		
Additional responsibilities	3		
Positive influence	2		
Parental educational status	1		
Relationship problems	3	Decision to quit school	
Childcare and family needs	2		
Lack of motivation	3		
Lack of self-confidence	3		
Additional responsibility	2		
Teacher attitude	1		
Management issues	2		
Fear of harassment from authority	1		
Inability to take classes locally	2	Consequences of not finishing GED	
Lack of options to go to big colleges	2		
Lack of career growth	3		
Lack of high earning power	4		
Uncertainty of future	4		

School Climate

This section will examine three parameters associated with the respondents' experience of education in the school. These include their general experience in the school, teacher attention and provision of tools and facilities by the school. Appendix I presents a detailed coding of how the following themes and subthemes were identified.

General Experience

The respondents were questioned first about their general experience in the school. The views of respondents were initially categorized as positive, negative, or ambivalent. Six respondents had a positive general experience, two respondents had an overall negative experience, and two had an ambivalent experience. The main themes, subthemes, and basic themes associated with general experience in the school are shown in Table 4.

An examination of the subthemes associated with the general experience showed that students' positive response was largely associated with the ability to enhance their learning, ability to interact with others, friends and peer support, and the general environment. One respondent also indicated liking some of the teachers. A good representative positive response is

> "Yes, I like my peers and my classes and the environment all together. Most of the time, I enjoy school." ("Mason," personal communication, November 7, 2014)

However, an examination of the negative response of the students depicts negative perceptions about authority. Many respondents strongly indicated bad experiences with their teachers as well as principals and security guards. Some respondents were hesitant about school, because they found it difficult being different from the others and difficult coping with the classes; they also suffered from social anxiety. A good example of a negative experience is

> "No … I did not like the teachers or the security guards or the principals because I would get harassed all the time by them." ("Thomas," personal communication, November 13, 2014)

Table 4

School Climate—Theme I

Main theme	Subtheme	Examples of Basic Themes
Positive experience	Peer support	"I like my peers and my classes" ("Mason," personal communication, November 17, 2014).
	Enhancement of learning	"… because I was learning" ("Brody," personal communication, December 4, 2014).
	Interaction with others	"Get along with everybody" ("Aaliyah," personal communication, December 10, 2014).
	Positive general environment	"My classes and the environment all together" ("Mason," personal communication, November 17, 2014).
Ambivalent experience	Good experience which morphed into a bad one	
Negative experience	Negative perception of authority - Teachers	
	Negative perception of authority - Principal	"I did not like the teachers or the security guards or the principals because I would get harassed all the time by them" ("Thomas," personal communication, November 13, 2014).
	Anxiety and self-consciousness	"I had issues with anxiety really bad and felt really self-conscious" ("Audrey," personal communication, December 11, 2014).
	Difficult being different from others	"Being different from other kids" ("Brody," personal communication, December 4, 2014).
	Being in a special class	"I felt kind of bad being in learning disabled classes" ("Brody," personal communication, December 4, 2014).

Two participants who had an ambivalent experience were initially happy in school but, due to problems of difficult classes and bad experiences with the teacher, soon indicated that the positive experience shifted to a negative one.

In general, the experience of the respondents in the school were negative due to anxiety, self-consciousness, being different, and having negative views of teachers and others in a position of authority. However, the general school environment, peer support, and learning opportunities presented some positive perspectives.

Teacher and School Attention

The main themes, subthemes, and basic themes associated with teacher and school attention are seen in Table 5.

Table 5

School Climate—Theme II

Main theme	Subtheme	Examples of Basic themes
Ambivalent experience	School provided support, but not teachers	"The school sort of provided me with a good education but the teachers should have helped me more than they did" ("Hannah," personal communication, December 4, 2014).
	Some teacher attention, but not most	"Yes, some of them [teachers] did, some of them didn't, like my math teacher" ("Aaliyah," personal communication, December 10, 2014).
Positive experience	Good experience with the school	"Yes the school did pretty good with providing me my education" ("Mason," personal communication, November 17, 2014).
Negative experience	Negative views on socio-demographics – Gang affiliation	"No, they were always looking for a reason to write me up like my shirts, they would say my shirts were gang related" ("Thomas," personal communication, November 13, 2014).
	Negative views on socio-demographics – Question of living environment	"I did not like the teachers or the security guards or the principals because I would get harassed all the time by them" ("Thomas," personal communication, November 13, 2014).
	Inability to pay attention	"They would act like they didn't hear me" ("Amelia," personal communication, November 19, 2014).
	Lack of patience – Facilitating SEN education at all levels	"but once you get to a certain age, I feel that they just want to push you out the door" ("Victoria," personal communication, November 5, 2014).
	Lack of involvement	"They just come in to get a paycheck and it doesn't really matter to them how kids do in school" ("Brody," personal communication, December 4, 2014).

When questioned about the provision of good education in schools, the respondents had predominantly presented mixed views (five respondents) and negative views (four respondents). There was only one respondent who presented a positive view. The respondents were questioned about the level of attention provided by teachers to enhance the learning needs and identify some key barriers associated with positive teacher attention. These

included the lack of patience (four respondents), inability to pay attention (four respondents), lack of involvement (two respondents), and negative views on the sociodemographic background of the participant (two respondents).

The lack of patience and inability to pay attention to the needs of the participant appeared to be linked to the teacher's inability to provide additional support. A key representative statement of this view is as follows:

> "I would tell them that I would need help with something and they would act like they didn't hear me." ("Amelia," personal communication, November 19, 2014)

The respondents also indicated that although schools provided them with the necessary tools for education, the teachers often had less involvement. For some teachers, teaching was a job rather than a vocation, where they handed out work rather than teaching the children. A key representative statement of this view follows:

> "No, I don't think they helped me, they just come in to get a paycheck." ("Khloe," personal communication, November 24, 2014)

Finally, a few respondents indicated that they were often judged based on their sociodemographic background. One respondent argued that he was judged based on his shirts (which were considered to have gang affiliations), while another indicated that teachers were more interested in the neighborhood in which she lived.

From these views, it is clear that the respondents had mixed feelings about the level of attention given by teachers. Although they felt that the school provided them with support, the indications of no clear support from the teachers due to lack of support, inattention, unwillingness to teach, and possible bias were negative parameters.

Provision of Tools and Facilities

The main themes, subthemes and basic themes associated with provision of tools and facilities are seen in Table 6.

The respondents were questioned about the tools and facilities that were made available to them. In general, most respondents were positive about the provision of tools and facilities that they needed (five respondents), with a few having a negative experience (two respondents) or having an ambivalent view (two respondents).

The general positive comments that were made include provision of facilities that were needed. However, one respondent indicated that the provision of such facilities was not very effective, when the timing of provision was limited. An effective representative view follows.

> "I just need more time to get my work and stuff done. It took me longer to do work than others. They were lacking by not giving me more time to do stuff." ("Victoria," personal communication, November 5, 2014)

The respondents felt that some of the key areas that needed to be identified included provision of better resources for reading and teaching mathematics (four respondents). Three respondents felt that if they had better help in these two areas of learning, they would be in college rather than a GED program. A representative view of this opinion follows:

> "Like in math, I feel like if they were better at helping up in math then I probably wouldn't be where I am at now." ("Aaliyah," personal communication, December 10, 2014)

Table 6

School Climate—Theme III

Main theme	Subtheme	Examples of Basic themes
Lack of provision	Presence of tools and facilities which were not used	"They had it all but they did not use it. I feel like they just didn't teach period" ("Thomas," personal communication, November 13, 2014).
	Lack of resources	Khloe: "No, I think they needed some more, like some more resources. The school didn't have a lot of special education teachers" ("Khloe," personal communication, November 24, 2014).
Some provision	Presence of tools and facilities but not enough time	"They provided me with everything, I just need more time to get my work and stuff done" ("Victoria," personal communication, November 5, 2014).
Positive provision but requires more attention to details	More help in reading and math	"I just had a really hard time in math and needed more help. It's the main reason I am so bad in math" ("Hannah," personal communication, December 4, 2014).
	Focus on extra-curricular activities	"I just wish I had gotten more stuff out of school like sports and that kind of stuff" ("Audrey," personal communication, December 11, 2014).
	Focus on more attentive teachers	"Teacher could have helped you more instead of just passing out work all of the time" ("Brody," personal communication, December 4, 2014).
	More resources	"I think they needed some more, like some more resources" ("Amelia," personal communication, November 19, 2014).
	More special education teachers	"The school should have provided students in special ed. like me more help" ("Hannah," personal communication, December 4, 2014).

Another area found to be lacking was the inability to provide good special education teachers (three respondents):

> "The school didn't have a lot of special education teachers and I think they needed some more." ("Amelia," personal communication, November 19, 2014)

The respondents also identified the need for more resources, more attention from teachers, more time, and the need to focus on extracurricular activities. Therefore, although most respondents were positive about current tools and practices, they identified the lack of support for special education, extracurricular activities, more resources and, most

importantly, more training tools for reading and math as key areas to be addressed in the future.

Sense of Belonging

This section will examine four parameters associated with the respondents' sense of belonging in the school. These include their participation and enjoyment of extracurricular activities, ability to make friends, sense of belonging in the school, and views toward actually going to the school every morning.

Participation in and Enjoyment of Extracurricular Activities

The main themes, subthemes, and basic themes associated with participant enjoyment and participation in extracurricular activities are seen in Table 7.

The respondents were questioned about the types of activity they were involved in, including clubs, and their enjoyment of the activities. Predominantly, most of the respondents did not participate or were not members of clubs (six respondents). Four respondents were part of extracurricular activities, of which the most common was the Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC; three respondents) and the student council (one respondent).

When questioned about their enjoyment of extracurricular activities, ROTC was considered to be one that helped with interaction with others, learning how to read maps and putting on uniforms, and exercising (two respondents):

> "Yes, I liked the putting on the uniform and exercising and learning how to read maps and the different things on the map." ("Amelia," personal communication, November 19, 2014)

Table 7

Sense of Belonging—Theme I

Main theme	Subtheme	Examples of Basic Themes
Participation	Took part	"Yes, I was in the student counsel and Student Government Association and ROTC" ("Victoria," personal communication, November 5, 2014).
	Did not take part	"No, no sir" ("Khloe," personal communication, November 24, 2014).
Enjoyment	Enjoyed participating- Positive interaction	"Liked the people in my ROTC class and in SGA" ("Victoria," personal communication, November 5, 2014).
	Enjoyed participating- Work and exercise	"I liked the putting on the uniform and exercising" ("Hannah," personal communication, December 4, 2014).
	Enjoyed participation- Learning maps	"Learning how to read maps" ("Hannah," personal communication, December 4, 2014).
	Did not enjoy participating- Rules	"I just didn't like it, too many rules" ("Hannah," personal communication, December 4, 2014)

Conversely, the primary reason the respondents did not like taking part in ROTC was because of the rules (two respondents):

> "JROTC, no, I did not like it because it was too many rules to follow and they were strict. I was only in it for one year." ("Hannah," personal communication, December 4, 2014)

Therefore, in general, the respondents did not take part in activities because they felt that clubs and extracurricular activities had too many rules. It was also observed that most respondents considered ROTC to be the only club in which they could participate. Therefore, a clear lack of diversity in participation was observed.

Ability to Make Friends

The main themes, subthemes, and basic themes associated with participants' ability to make friends and socialize are seen in Table 8.

The respondents were questioned about their social life, specifically their ability to make friends. The majority of the respondents indicated that they had a number of friends at

school (seven respondents), whereas the others felt that they had a limited circle of friends. The respondents who felt that they had a wide circle of friends often attributed it to their personality. For instance, respondents believed that they got along with everyone (three respondents), were helpful (three respondents), and were friendly and approachable (three respondents). One respondent also remarked that he had more friends because he was willing to stand up for himself:

> "I mean, when you got to know me I was a nice kid and would talk to you about anything or help you with anything. It's one of those things, if you disrespected me or did something wrong, I was ready to fight you." ("Thomas," personal communication, November 13, 2014)

Some respondents also indicated that they did not have a number of friends. The respondents felt that having a smaller group was more beneficial (two respondents) and that having many friends was difficult because peers often picked on their disability (two respondents):

> "People would say we [she and her friends] were slow and retarded and stuff." ("Aaliyah," personal communication, December 10, 2014)

The respondents therefore had mixed feelings about making friends. In general, it was observed that respondents who had friends attributed the same to their positive personality. However, those who did not have friends were found to suffer due to the feeling of being different and due to peer ridicule.

Table 8

Sense of Belonging—Theme II

Main theme	Subtheme	Examples of Basic Themes
Absence of friends	Small group of friends- More effective social circle	"I would rather have one or two good friends than a whole big group of friends" ("Amelia," personal communication, November 19, 2014).
	Small group of friends- Others made fun of disability	"I had a little group of friends but in another way a lot of people picked on you because you have a disability" ("Aaliyah," personal communication, December 10, 2014).
	Small group of friends- Uncomfortable to talk to people	"I had a select few friends that I hung around but I always felt so uncomfortable" ("Audrey," personal communication, December 11, 2014).
Significant number of friends	Outgoing and friendly	"Yes, I was outgoing and nice to everyone" ("Mason," personal communication, November 17, 2014).
	Got along with everyone	"Yes, because that's who I chill with when we have time in the hallway and I get along with everybody" ("Carter," personal communication, November 17, 2014).
	Helpful	"I was a nice kid and would talk to you about anything or help you with anything" ("Thomas," personal communication, November 13, 2014).
	Willing to stand up to others	"It's one of those things, if you disrespected me or did something wrong, I was ready to fight you" ("Thomas," personal communication, November 13, 2014).

Sense of Belonging in the School

The main themes, subthemes, and basic themes associated with participant ability to feel a sense of belonging are seen in Table 9. The respondents were questioned about their feeling of "belonging" in their schools. Predominantly, most respondents did not feel like they belonged to the school (six respondents), with a very few respondents reporting positive views.

The respondents who felt positively about their belonging to the school indicated reasons including the positive environment of the school and teachers (one respondent) and familiarity (three respondents). The most common factor that enhanced the sense of belonging was the ability to "fit in" with the rest of the class

> "Yes, because I fit in with everyone." ("Amelia," personal communication, November 19, 2014)

The respondents who felt at home in the school and were part of the same peer group had a positive experience.

Conversely, the respondents who felt that they did not belong to the school indicated reasons associated with discrimination (two respondents) as a key factor. For instance, discrimination with respect to peer views on learning disability and sexual orientation were highlighted. Furthermore, the respondents also highlighted a theme of isolation as a factor affecting their sense of lack of belonging (two respondents), associated with views of being different from their peers and the feeling of being an outsider within their school:

> "They would do this because they did not want me to sit beside them and because they were scared of me." ("Thomas," personal communication, November 13, 2014)

Therefore, although positive factors, including positive environment and peer support, were identified, there was domination by negative factors that did not promote a sense of belonging in the school. The negative sense of belonging associated with the respondents was largely linked to possibilities of isolation and loneliness and possible discrimination.

Views Toward Going to the School

The main themes, subthemes, and basic themes associated with participant views toward going to school every morning are seen in Table 10. Their views on school when they woke up every morning were questioned. The majority of the respondents were unwilling to go to school (seven respondents), with the few others open to the idea of going to school (three respondents).

Table 9

Sense of Belonging—Theme III

Main theme	Subtheme	Examples of Basic Themes
Positive sense of belonging	Familiarity	"I know a lot of people who go there and I like it most of the time" ("Mason," personal communication, November 17, 2014).
	Positive environment	"I loved the way school was and the teachers in the school" ("Victoria," personal communication, November 5, 2014).
Negative sense of belonging	Discrimination – Based on learning disabilities Discrimination – Based on sexual orientation	"No, because in school people used to pick on me and talk about me and say she's in those LD (learning disabled) classes and she is slow" ("Khloe," personal communication, November 24, 2014).
	Isolation from the peer group - Fear	"I would have to find an empty seat and sit by myself. They would do this because they did not want me to sit beside them and because they were scared of me" ("Victoria," personal communication, November 5, 2014).
	Isolation from the peer group – Feeling like an outsider	"I felt I was always on the outside of school looking in. I was always so nervous about school" ("Audrey," personal communication, December 11, 2014).

Those respondents who were positive about school indicated that they did not mind going to school, because they liked the environment (one respondent) and liked seeing their friends (one respondent).

Those respondents who had negative views toward going to school every morning give a myriad thoughts. First, some respondents believed that they would be picked on or ridiculed by their peers (one respondent) or by the school security or the teachers for their appearance (two respondents). The respondents were also unwilling to go to school because they did not want to see their teachers (three respondents). Some felt that teachers did not exude positive views toward disabled students, which made them have negative thoughts:

> "The teachers had a very disrespectful demeanor towards certain people and they just talked to you any type of way and I just didn't like it at all." ("Khloe," personal communication, November 24, 2014)

Table 10

Sense of Belonging—Theme IV

Main theme	Subtheme	Examples of Basic themes
Positive attitude toward going to school	Peer group	"I know a lot of people who go there and I like it most of the time" ("Mason," personal communication, November 17, 2014).
	Positive environment	"I loved the way school was and the teachers in the school" ("Victoria," personal communication, November 5, 2014).
Negative attitude toward going to school	Ridicule based on appearance	"Because I know as soon as I walked into school I was going to have a security guard stop me and make me turn my shirt inside out or say something to me" ("Thomas," personal communication, November 13, 2014).
	Ridicule from peers	
	Cope with learning	"but was not ready for the math. I always got bad grades in math and could not pass those tests" ("Victoria," personal communication, November 5, 2014).
	School is a waste of time	"I don't make any money in school and if I was at work, I would be getting paid" ("Mason," personal communication, November 17, 2014).
	Unwillingness to see teachers	"The teachers had a very disrespectful demeanor towards certain people" ("Khloe," personal communication, November 24, 2014).

Other respondents indicated that they did not want to go to school because they found it difficult to cope with their math and did not want to get low grades (one respondent) and that they would rather work, because they could make money (one respondent).

Some respondents felt that they did not belong in their schools predominantly due to lack of perceived support and possible ridicule from peers, teachers, and those in a position of authority.

Attitude of Students

This section will examine four parameters associated with the respondents' attitude toward the school. These include their views on the goals they have in life, grade quality, perception of being a good student, and the importance of achieving specific goals.

Goals in Life

The main themes, subthemes, and basic themes associated with participant views on achieving their goals in life are seen in Table 11.

The respondents were asked about their dreams and their goals in life, and three categories of future aspirations are observed including government service (police/investigative career, fire fighter), social service career (counsellor, nurse, school teacher, run a day care) and a professional (architect/designer, dental hygienist).

However, most respondents set their immediate goals at getting their GED and long-term goals were considered to be quite uncertain. They believed that their dropping out of school had affected their chances. Some respondents indicated that they needed to get the courage and the guidance to achieve what they wanted from life. Some others indicated that because they have been unable to complete their schooling on time, they may have to look for other options. For instance, one respondent not only understood the reason why she could not pursue a specific career path but also identified alternative career paths and had specific goals.

Although some respondents expressed positive plans toward achievement of goals, most had a sense of uncertainty and were looking for ways to build their confidence. Most respondents were interested in pursuing a social or healthcare sector career or one as a professional.

Table 11

Attitude of Students—Theme I

Main theme	Subtheme	Examples of Basic Themes
Immediate goal	Getting GED	"To finish school and get my GED and then go to college" ("Carter," personal communication, November 17, 2014).
	Making money	"Well, to make money. I don't know what kind of job I want but I know…" ("Mason," personal communication, November 17, 2014).
Long term goals	Professionals, government employee or social and health service sectors	
Challenges in achieving long term goals	Lack of confidence	"I just need to get the courage to like start volunteering and doing things to make my dream happen" ("Aaliyah," personal communication, December 10, 2014).
	Need to look for alternatives due to learning disability	"I want to pass [ASVAB] test to get into the Navy but could not pass the math part. This slowed me down and why I did not get into the service. Now, my future is looking to do criminal justice crime scene investigation" ("Victoria," personal communication, November 5, 2014).
	Continued uncertainty	"… I don't know if that is going to happen. I would like for it to happen but I just don't know" ("Audrey," personal communication, December 11, 2014).

Importance of Achieving the Dream

The main themes, subthemes, and basic themes associated with participant views on achieving the dream are seen in Table 12.

The respondents were questioned about the importance of getting a GED and achieving their dreams. Five subthemes associated with positive attitude were observed from the responses. First, the respondents wanted to get their GED as they believed it would enable them to help others in their pursuit for future career growth (three respondents) The respondents also believed that the achievement of a GED would help them gain long-term success (three respondents) while bringing about personal growth through positive self-esteem (two respondents). Finally, the respondents also indicate the need to gain a GED as a way of setting positive examples to siblings.

Table 12

Attitude of Students—Theme II

Main theme	Subtheme	Examples of Basic Themes
Positive outlook toward achieving dreams	Help others	"I think it is important to help others and help other people, that's why it is important for me to make this happen" ("Thomas," personal communication, November 13, 2014).
	Making money	"Yeah, because making money and stuff, yeah, it's important" ("Carter," personal communication, November 17, 2014).
	Hard work to achieve future success	"I would really like to do it just to prove to myself that I can do it" ("Victoria," personal communication, November 5, 2014).
	Serve as role model	"It's important to show them that school is important" ("Audrey," personal communication, December 11, 2014).
	Personal growth and positive emotional wellbeing	"Yes, because it's like beneficial and good for your self-esteem" ("Hannah," personal communication, December 4, 2014).

Therefore, respondents were positive toward achieving their goals for multiple purposes, and most of them were positive toward their personal and social well-being and development.

Perception of Being a Good Student

The main themes, subthemes, and basic themes associated with participant views on perceiving themselves as good students are seen in Table 13.

The respondents were questioned as to whether they were good students. Most respondents (five respondents) felt that they were good students because they did not get into trouble. The most common themes associated with the perception of being a good student included getting good grades, listening to the teacher, and never getting into trouble. Two respondents felt that though they attempted to be good, at times they could be bad students because they did not apply themselves or they got into trouble. Two respondents felt that they were not good students because they had the tendency to get into trouble at times or did not feel that it was worth the trouble to go to school.

Those respondents who were considered as good students exhibited positive behavioral traits along with moderate to good grades.

Table 13

Attitude of Students—Theme III

Main theme	Subtheme	Examples of Basic Themes
Good student	Followed the rules and did not get into trouble	"Yes, I wasn't really getting into trouble" ("Mason," personal communication, November 17, 2014).
	Getting good grades	"My grades were pretty good most of the time" ("Victoria," personal communication, November 5, 2014).
	Listening to the teacher	"Yeah, because I always did what the teacher asked me to do" ("Brody," personal communication, December 4, 2014).
Bad student	Tendency to get into trouble	"No, I wasn't a good student because I always got in trouble in class" ("Hannah," personal communication, December 4, 2014).
	Not worth the trouble	"I did not want to do the work and I didn't do the work" ("Thomas," personal communication, November 13, 2014).

Grade Quality Perception

The main themes, subthemes, and basic themes associated with participant views on grade quality perception are seen in Table 14.

The respondents were questioned about the fairness of their grades. Most of the respondents (five respondents) felt that they received a fair grade. IA key theme linked to the determination of a fair grade was one that showed a sense of personal responsibility. Three respondents strongly indicated that if they got a bad grade, it was largely their mistake.

However, four respondents felt that the grades that they received were not good. The common theme linked to the lack of a good grade is grading on the final result rather than the effort and grading when no additional support was given to the student to enhance his or her understanding. One respondent also indicated that testing was done on sections that were not taught in detail, and this resulted in a fail grade.

Table 14

Attitude of Students—Theme IV

Main theme	Subtheme	Examples of Basic Themes
Positive grade	Fair grades	"For the way I acted and the way I started acting, I think they were fair, even the bad grades" ("Thomas," personal communication, November 13, 2014).
	Getting good grades in most subjects	"my math could have been a little better but as far as that I got As and Bs and some Ds and Fs in math" ("Victoria," personal communication, November 5, 2014).
Negative grade	Grading for result rather than the effort	"I could understand my grade if I wasn't trying but I was, I just couldn't get it. I would have been fine with a C because I tried, but a D and an F was not fair" ("Aaliyah," personal communication, December 10, 2014).
	Lack of additional teaching	"…get grades for taking notes or you got graded on something that they really did not teach in detail" ("Khloe," personal communication, November 24, 2014).
	Focus on material not extensively taught	

Educational Support in the Home and Stressful Life Events

This section examines three parameters associated with the support received at home and in stressful environments. These include personal and family influence, decisions contributing to quitting school, and the consequences and future directions faced by the participants.

Personal and Family Influences on Education

The main themes, subthemes, and basic themes associated with participant views on personal and family influences on education are seen in Table 15.

The respondents were questioned about the factors that negatively and positively affected one's personal life. The positive factors affecting the students' studies include support and encouragement from the families (two respondents). A significant number of negative factors were highlighted by the respondents. Some key factors included (a) drug abuse during high school (one respondent); (b) sexual abuse and emotional abuse in the form

of rape (two respondents), as well as in the form of emotional abuse from those around; (c) increasing responsibility within the house (one respondent), including the need to take care of siblings; (d) pregnancy (one respondent); and (e) lack of a good relationship with the parents (one respondent).

The respondents were also questioned about the value given to education by their family. The respondents unanimously indicate a positive attitude toward

Table 15

Educational Support in Home Environment—Thematic Analysis I

Main theme	**Subtheme**	**Examples of Basic Themes**
Positive impact	Support and encouragement from families	"My parents were very supportive of me" ("Thomas," personal communication, November 13, 2014).
Negative impact	Drug abuse	"Drug abuse really messed me up when I was in school" ("Mason," personal communication, November 17, 2014).
	Sexual and emotional abuse	"… was raped when she was 14 years old. I also use to see my mom get beat up by her boyfriend all of the time which affected me, because it made me want to be at home because I was worried about my mom" ("Amelia," personal communication, November 19, 2014).
	Pregnancy	"Negatively, I got pregnant when I was 17" ("Hannah," personal communication, December 4, 2014).
	Additional responsibilities	"Having to take care of my younger brother and sister and take grown-up roles over the house" ("Victoria," personal communication, November 5, 2014).
Family values	Positive influence	"I think my parent valued all of our education equally" ("Thomas," personal communication, November 13, 2014).
	Parental educational status	"Yes, my daddy takes education seriously, and he pushes me when I was like why do I have to do this or when I want to stop going to school. Daddy said no, school was good for you and you need to go back" ("Victoria," personal communication, November 5, 2014).

education. Two respondents identified greater focus on education by parents who themselves did not have a high school diploma. Most of the respondents also indicated that all the children were encouraged to pursue higher education with no favoritism. Two

respondents identified some favoritism from one parent. All the respondents conclude that there was a positive attitude toward education as a value in their family.

Decision to Quit School

The main themes, subthemes, and basic themes associated with participant views on the decision to quit school are seen in Table 16.

The respondents were first questioned about the decisions associated with dropping out of school. The decision to drop out of school was largely made independently (eight respondents), with only two respondents indicating that they got additional support from their mother for the decision.

The respondents were then questioned about the factors that contributed to the decision to quit school. The respondents identified personal reasons, institutional reasons and social reasons as factors impacting their decision to quit. An assessment of personal reasons that contributed to the decision to quit included lack of patience (one respondent), relationship problems (one respondent), pregnancy (one respondent) and lack of motivation to go to school (two respondents). The key focus was on the lack of motivation to continue due to the need to earn money, or to support pregnancy, or trying to achieve results without positive outcomes. The institutional attributes include the perception of the school as harassing the student, lack of organization, and the decision to retain the student (two respondents). The respondents became exasperated with the choices given to them by

Table 16

Educational Support in Home Environment—Thematic Analysis II

Main theme	Subtheme	Examples of Basic themes
Personal reasons	Relationship problems	"My relationship with my mom would be another reason because that was just a hot mess in itself" ("Audrey," personal communication, December 11, 2014).
	Childcare and family needs	"Having a baby, not graduating with my class (being held back a year) and wanting to be with my boyfriend who was not in school" ("Hannah," personal communication, December 4, 2014).
	Lack of motivation	"I didn't think I had it in me to finish or the patience and stuff you know, trying to work and get things done" ("Victoria," personal communication, November 5, 2014).
	Lack of self-confidence	"My self-esteem issues and the way I worried about everything, I was so self-conscious about everything" ("Audrey," personal communication, December 11, 2014).
	Additional responsibility	"Taking care of my younger brother and doing stuff around the house also kept me busy" ("Victoria," personal communication, November 5, 2014).
Institutional reasons	Teacher attitude	"I quit because I just didn't like my teachers, I really didn't like them. I think teachers would be the biggest reason out of the three because they always have an attitude towards somebody" ("Brody," personal communication, December 4, 2014).
	Management issues	"The main thing that happened was the fact that they (the school) were very unorganized. I was going to have to re-do my same grade next year or start in the middle of the school year" ("Khloe," personal communication, November 24, 2014).
	Fear of harassment from authority	"Teachers, principals and security guards. I feel that the principals and security guards were always looking for something to get on me" ("Thomas," personal communication, November 13, 2014).
Learning inhibiting factors	Lack of individualized support	"The fact that there was no individual attention if you needed extra help" ("Khloe," personal communication, November 24, 2014).
	Inability to clear tests and quizzes	"I didn't like all of the tests and quizzes the school made us take. I felt like every time I turned around, I was taking them and I just didn't like it" ("Aaliyah," personal communication, December 10, 2014).
	Feeling that the student is unable to cope	"… getting a teacher or someone to explain things to me where I could understand it better" ("Victoria," personal communication, November 5, 2014).

the school. Finally, respondents also felt the peer pressure of being unable to graduate with their class and being ridiculed by their classmates as the main reasons to quit.

The respondents were asked to give their view on the top three reasons that affected their decisions to drop out of school. The most commonly observed reasons were personal reasons, including personal relationship issues, responsibilities at home and childcare (five respondents). Another key factor indicated was the inattention or negative attention given by schools and teachers. Respondents felt that teachers did not teach, had a negative attitude toward the student, and the student did not like the teachers (four respondents). Other views included emotional well-being issues like lack of self-esteem and confidence (two respondents), lack of individualized attention (two respondents), inability to clear tests and quizzes (three respondents), and the general feeling that they would be unable to do all the work (four respondents).

Consequences of Not Finishing GED and Future Plans

The main themes, subthemes, and basic themes associated with participant views on consequences and future direction are seen in Table 17.

The respondents were questioned about the consequences associated with their dropping out of high school. Three primary reasons were identified. First, the respondents felt that they were unable to get into college and pursue higher education (two respondents). They believed that they will be unable to pursue higher education as a result of the lack of their not having a high school diploma:

> "I went over to the community college to see about taking a few classes to become an electrician and they said I could not take any classes because I did not have a high school diploma." ("Thomas," personal communication, November 13, 2014)

Another key theme associated with the consequences of dropping out is the uncertainty and the lack of possibilities for a positive future. One respondent argued that the process had resulted in a truly negative view, where bad choices made by an individual can negatively affect their life in a domino effect. Finally, the respondents strongly identified with the inability to get a job that pays well (four respondents). They believed that without the GED, it would be possible to get jobs; however, a job with good pay and good career growth would not be possible.

The respondents were questioned about their need to study and graduate, as well as their future plans. Clearly, most respondents wanted to graduate because they felt that it would be requisite to pursue future education and achieve their career aspirations. Of the 10 respondents, only 2 had completed their education and only 2 were ambivalent toward their future plans for education.

Student Journal Assessment: Reflective Thematic Assessment

Participants

The research examined the views of the 10 respondents from their journal entries. The respondents were requested to maintain a log of their responses for a week and were asked to make an entry at least once every 3 days. Most respondents presented a minimum of three responses.

Teacher and School Attention

Some respondents believed that the high school did not provide them with clear knowledge regarding the repercussions associated with their actions. One respondent indicated that if he had better knowledge about his future options, then a better course of action would have been possible. For instance,

Table 17

Educational Support in Home Environment—Thematic Analysis III

Main theme	Subtheme	Examples of Basic themes
Lack of a college education	Inability to take classes locally	"My parents were very supportive of me" ("Thomas," personal communication, November 13, 2014).
	Lack of options to go to big colleges	"I went over to the community college to see about taking a few classes to become an electrician and they said I could not take any classes because I did not have a high school diploma" ("Thomas," personal communication, November 13, 2014)
	Lack of career growth	"Jobs, dropping out makes it hard for you to find a job period. I think you could still get a job, but it won't be one you probably like as much" ("Mason," personal communication, November 17, 2014).
Lack of good paying job	Lack of high earning power	"… most likely you are not going to find a good paying job" ("Carter," personal communication, November 17, 2014).
Lack of positive future	Uncertainty of future	"It delays you getting your life going and your career started" ("Carter," personal communication, November 17, 2014).

> "This really pissed me off because I feel that the high school should have told me that before I left or at least explained to me what I could and could not do not finishing high school." ("Thomas," personal communication, November 13, 2014)

GED for Future Education Options

One of the key themes that many of the participants expressed as part of their journal entries was the need for a GED to advance in their careers. Some respondents argued that they had a job but were unable to work in more well-established organizations or were unable to become managers because they did not have the necessary qualifications. They believed that by getting a GED, it would become possible to ensure that they had a positive career in the future. Some respondents decided to pursue their GED after being advised by community colleges to pursue and obtain a GED in order to take courses:

> "I went to the local community college and they told me that I could not enrol in any classes or programs until I had completed high school so that's why I decided to come here to the GED program and try to get my GED so I can go to college." ("Victoria," personal communication, November 5, 2014)

Importance of Achieving the Dream

A key theme that many participants indicated as part of their journal entry was the inability to reach their potential and gain better opportunities in their workplace. There were many instances of respondents identifying the employer insistence on a high school diploma, as well as evidences of being unable to take up specific occupational opportunities due to the lack of a GED. They believed that, even with experience, they were unable to have better career options:

> "They [the employers] want to see that you have finished high school and they want to see that diploma. I can only find fast food work and I am a good cook and should be cooking at a nice fancy place that would pay me a lot of money." ("Carter," personal communication, November 17, 2014)

Some journal entries also identified the inability to reach a managerial position, as well as the inability to get jobs even after having multiple interviews:

> "I applied for a shift supervisor position at work for the evening shift and they gave it to a guy who has only been working there for a few months. I think he got it over me because he did finish school and is taking a couple classes over at National Business College." ("Thomas," personal communication, November 13, 2014)

> "I recently had two job interviews and both of them asked me about not finishing high school." ("Victoria," personal communication, November 5, 2014)

Uncertainty

An assessment of the journal responses indicated that many of the entries showed significant uncertainty associated with completing the GED. The participants of the study understood the need for a GED but were uncertain about their ability to succeed in completing it. Some participants indicated the possibility of quitting their GED, because it would be extremely difficult to get the diploma:

> "I am still having a hard time passing those pre-tests and am thinking about just quitting. I am frustrated not being able to find a job and not being able to do better on these tests." ("Victoria," personal communication, November 5, 2014)

Some respondents also wrote about uncertainty by relating their current job experiences to missed opportunities. One participant, who worked as a nursing assistant, indicated that although the participant helped train new RNs, without a GED, the participant would not be able to move forward:

> "Today at work, I had to help train a new RN on some of the policies and procedures that we do here. I could not help but think that I could be the RN and it could be me making more than twice what I make now." ("Audrey," personal communication, December 11, 2014)

Family Support

A key trend observed as part of the journal entries was that most participants had positive familial support. The respondents were encouraged by their parents to go back and finish their GED:

> "My mom didn't finish high school either and she tells me that I should look at getting my GED because that would help me get a job." ("Carter," personal communication, November 17, 2014)

> "It bothers me that my dad is really disappointed in me for not finishing school. My dad keeps pushing me to go back and get my GED." ("Brody," personal communication, December 4, 2014)

Family Need

More than familial support, a key need highlighted as part of the journal entries was the need to support family members. The journal entries showed the familial expectations to earn more money to help pay the bills:

> "My mom keeps telling me to go out and get a job so I can help out with the bills at the house." ("Carter," personal communication, November 17, 2014)

Conversely, others felt that the lack of a GED was making them depend on others to meet the needs of those dependent on them:

> "I had to get help again this year to give my kid a good Christmas and it bothers me that I cannot provide for my kid without other people helping me out." ("Khloe," personal communication, November 24, 2014)

Some respondents indicated conflict within the family and pressure to complete the GED. Some participants felt pressure to enter the family business, while others felt that if

they did not get the GED, their families would be unable to support them any further and that they would have to move out.

> "Me and my dad keep getting into it [arguments] because he wants to know when I am going to get this GED so I can start taking classes at the community college to become an electrician." ("Thomas," personal communication, November 13, 2014)

> "She [my grandmother] said all I do is sleep late and play video games all day and she is tired of it. She said if I had graduated high school like I was supposed to, I would not be in this position." ("Mason," personal communication, November 17, 2014)

Consequences of Not Finishing GED and Future Plans

A key response given by most participants regarding their decision to quit school was the inability to reach a position in their employment that could provide them with good pay. One respondent indicated that without finishing high school, the options available relating to a high paying job were limited:

> "It has also been tough finding a good paying job without finishing high school and not being able to go to college. I tried to go into the military and some of the branches would not take me because I did not have a high school diploma." ("Victoria," personal communication, November 5, 2014)

The respondents also believed that the options available to them were minimal and that the lack of the GED would determine that they would always have low-paying jobs that would pay minimum wages.

> "I dropped out my senior year and got a job at Burger King and worked full time. I hated that job." ("Audrey," personal communication, December 11, 2014)

Negative Feeling

The respondents also exhibited a feeling of helplessness and lack of self-esteem as a result of being unable to earn their high school diplomas. They believed that their inability to finish high school or get a GED resulted in a general negative path in life that affected their positive outlook on life. Some respondents indicated that the strongest effect was on their self-esteem:

> "I can't do what I want to do because I didn't finish high school and it messes with my self-esteem a little bit. ("Amelia," personal communication, November 19, 2014)

Some respondents also believed that the lack of family understanding and support contributed to their lack of positive feeling about the subject:

> "I always had my siblings tell me that I am dumb and I was never going to amount to anything. They weren't in those special classes like I was when I was in school, so they don't know what it's like. When you're told you're dumb, slow and stupid all of the time, it really does something to you." ("Amelia," personal communication, November 19, 2014)

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The essence of this chapter is to synthesize, scrutinize, and construe the findings of this particular study based on the research questions, which act as the basis of guiding this study. It is believed that from the information collected from the research participants of this study, exclusive discussions, conclusions, and recommendations for future studies will be addressed. This brief summary will provide the plan of this study, including a discussion of the findings, limitations, and methodology with recommendations for future research.

Summary

The purpose of this study as earlier stated in Chapter One is to explore the lived experiences of individuals with disabilities who dropped out of the selected public high school in Virginia between 2010 and 2014 and to evaluate the effectiveness of the special education program with special education students who are at high risk for dropping out of high school. Specifically, its main aim was to help in understanding the experiences of students of disabilities who never completed their high school education. Actual students with disabilities provided the relevant information, making it possible for the research study to be in line with the research questions. The research questions guiding this study tended to focus more on the general relationship between students with disabilities and their experiences dropping out of school or the education system. Four questions were formulated from the related literature, which helped in forming the basis of undertaking this research:

1. What are the general educational experiences of students with disabilities who drop out of school?
2. What are the special educational experiences of students with disabilities who drop out of school?
3. What factors lead to the decision to drop out of school for students with disabilities?

4. How does dropping out of school impact the quality of life of students with disabilities?

A phenomenological approach was selected to help in deducing the general experiences that students with disabilities who dropped out school undergo, as well as the possible factors that could lead to this particular phenomenon. For the purpose of consistency with the phenomenological methodology selected, the collective voice of the research subjects was captured through a number of reflective documents, standard open-ended interviews, and observations. Interviews, which contained a total of 9 standard-structured questions, were the main means of data collection. These questions were vital in this study because they assisted in establishing the experiences that students with disabilities underwent, as well as the feelings and the thoughts that they had regarding the experiences of dropping out of school.

Theoretical Implication

The theoretical basis for this particular study relied on the work carried out by Bandura (1998) regarding social cognitive theory. Basically, the themes for this study revolved around social cognitive theory, which has an assumption that beliefs about "self-efficacy" function together with "cognized goals, outcome expectations, and perceived environmental impediments and facilitators" in directing how humans are motivated to act and how their "well-being" is regulated (Bandura, 1998). This fundamentally implies that the self-belief that an individual has toward his or her own abilities play a major role in determining the results of learning they are undertaking. Cognitive theory suggests that a student can choose to stay motivated when learning, regardless of whether he or she has a particular type of disability, and ultimately succeed in life.

It further affirms that self-efficacy can make it possible for the student with a disability to actively engage in a number of learning activities, thus enabling them to

participate in such activities and gain academically to become successful in this particular ground. According to this theory, motivation is a great element in ensuring that individuals succeed in any kind of affair that they are participating. This is because, in this case, the relationship of how cognitions, behaviors, and affects is strengthened, directed, and sustained during the period of which the students experience various activities while studying makes it clear that there is a need for self-motivation in achieving individual success. This theory primarily places the importance of motivation to an individual's success in different areas.

Correspondingly, significant to this study is the self-determination theory. It is closely linked to social cognitive theory, and it places primacy on opportunities for adjustment to conditions that influence self-motivation and student engagement, which correspond with engagement in learning (Wehmeyer et al., 2003). The self-determination theory also emphasizes the need to ensure that students with disabilities make adjustments to regulate what they are capable of learning and what they want to learn, hence making opportunities of adjustments ideal (Wehmeyer et al., 2003). The theory of self-determination also stresses the fact that promoting techniques that focus on self-regulated learning among students with cognitive disabilities is indispensable in assisting these kinds of students in attaining desirable academic results (Argan et al., 2008). This theory assumes that there is a feeling of connection in students and involvement with teachers, which makes them feel like they are in control, thus making it possible for them to demonstrate different reasons for taking part in academic activities (Close & Solberg, 2008).

These theories correlate to the experiences of those with disabilities who have dropped out of school in several ways:

1. The element of self-efficacy helps determine whether the student, regardless of his or her disability stature, can still excel in the academic front.

2. Because these students have dropped out of school due to disabilities, these theories affect understanding how perceptions of self-efficacy and motivations for retention are directed by opportunities for controlling one's own learning outcomes.
3. The findings of this study might show how self-efficacy and motivation can lead to achievement of desirable results; however, the theories also affect the failure of attaining ideal self-efficacy and relevant motivation, because this would lead to a sharp decline in academic performance that would also lead to dropping out due to comparatively low self-esteem.

Discussions of Findings

The argument regarding inclusion of students with disabilities has been ongoing for many years and is still continuing (Aikman, 2012; Hurley & Horn, 2010; Martin & Speer, 2011). Most researchers are of the opinion that students with disabilities should be amalgamated with peers in one educational setting (Cumming, 2012; Miles & Singal, 2010).

Many factors can be attributed to why there is rampant school dropout among students with disabilities. One of these factors is certainly the attitude that the special education teachers have toward these students. Many researchers have deduced that the attitude special education teachers' display toward such students is one of the greatest features that can lead to such students dropping out of school. Different special needs teachers have different perceptions toward the manner in which they view students with disabilities that they have been tasked to educate. There are also a wide range of studies that suggest the kind of training and experience the special education teacher has undergone has a huge influence on beliefs and their intentions related to teaching students with special needs.

The experiences of students with disabilities who quit high school vary from one student to the other. However, there are some commonalities that cut across most of these

students in the sense that some of these reasons affect a considerable number of these students. Student attitudes toward themselves, especially their disabilities, was another aspect found to be a great determinant of high dropout rates for students with disabilities. The interviews and observations made during data collection process showed that there is a big problem and a gap that needs to be addressed to find appropriate approaches to help understand the actual reasons that lead to dropouts among students with disabilities. The beliefs, attitudes, feelings, and experiences of teachers dealing with students with disabilities make it easy for all the concerned parties to understand the behavioral intervention approaches and results, thus enhancing the knowledge of the experiences of students with disabilities who drop out. This study revealed several themes useful in interpreting the findings:

1. School climate
2. The sense of belonging
3. Attitude of students
4. Education support in home environment

School Climate

The general setting of the school was a major factor in determining the experiences of students with disabilities who did not complete high school. The setting of the school was viewed in terms of the general experience of these students while in school, the particular kind of attention that they got from their teachers, and the availability of appropriate tools and facilities by the school. The participants who took part in this study were generally satisfied with the general school environment in terms of the support that they received from their fellow peers, improvement of learning interaction with their peers, and perception toward the overall school setting. This simply means that their experiences while in school were very positive. Some respondents also felt that the perception of the authority of the school was not

supportive to them. Some research participants displayed a sense of dissatisfaction with their security officers, teachers, and principals, stating that they had bad experiences with them. From the observations that I made, it was evident that due to social anxiety, students with disabilities may have bad experiences. This is because some were very doubtful about school because it can be difficult being different from others and difficult to cope with the classes. Therefore, anxiety, self-consciousness, being different and negative views of teachers and others in a position of authority were the contributing factors to general negative experiences that the interviewed students with disabilities had while in school.

The level of attention that students with disabilities who dropped out of school got from their teachers was also another fundamental aspect that came into scrutiny. There are elements that are believed to be key barriers related with positive teacher attention, such as impatience, lack of involvement, inability to pay attention, and negative views on the sociodemographic background of the participants. Some respondents asserted that they rarely received necessary support from the teachers that would cater to their needs. However, it is also plausible to state that many participants who were interviewed regarding the support they obtained admitted that they received necessary support from the school toward improvement of their learning experiences while in school. Generally, the respondents demonstrated mixed feelings about the level of attention they received from their teachers. This implies that unclear support from the teachers, unwillingness to teach, and the possibility of biasness were major negative parameters that students with disabilities who dropped out of school experienced while in school.

Questions as to whether these students had suitable tools and facilities to enhance their studies also arose. Most of these students reported having appropriate tools and facilities that would facilitate their learning experiences in their respective schools. The responses from most of the interviewees were positive regarding the availability of these tools and

facilities in line with their studies. The participants who had contrary opinions; however, based their argument on the efficiency, limitation, and timing of the provision of these tools and facilities. These were the barriers to use of these items, thus causing the negative experiences that they possibly had. Most of the respondents agreed that the tools were important in helping them realize their academic achievements; however, they suggested that more of these training tools should be addressed in the future.

Students' retention is also another parameter that reflects on the general environment of the school. From the study, most of the students with disabilities asserted that they experienced retention on a number of occasions while in school. This may have contributed their dropping out of school, considering that a large percentage of their peers did not necessarily experience this particular occurrence. Several factors could have led to student's retention; however, it is recommended that somewhat insignificant elements should not tie students with disabilities from moving forward to the next level.

The Sense of Belonging

Four parameters were examined when analyzing the thematic subject of the sense of belonging: participation in and enjoyment of extracurricular activities was the first. Most of the students with disabilities who dropped out of school did not take part in many extra curriculum activities while in school. There is need to embrace diversity when it comes to extracurricular activities. The results of this study indicated that most of students with disabilities who were interviewed never took part in extracurricular activities because they felt that these activities had so many rules that compromised their participation.

The ability to make friends was the other parameter examined when analyzing the sense of belonging. The result for this particular parameter was found to be based on personality. This implies that making friends revolves around the personal attributes of an individual. Some students had a relatively small circle of friends and some students had a

larger circle of friends. These depended on the mannerisms that each student socialized with his or her peers to make friendships. It also depended on the benefits the student got from friendship. For instance, some students had large circle of friends because they believed that they would benefit in a number of ways from the friendship. Conversely, some students did not necessarily value having large circle of friendship because in their view, the small circle that they have was enough in terms of benefiting from friendship. In summary, the ability to make a good number of friends was attributed to a positive personality, which was evident in the participants who had many friends. This finding was contrary to those who had few friends, which can also be attributed to feelings of dejection because of a disability.

The third parameter under this theme was a sense of belonging in the school. A fundamental element for successful school experience is healthy human relationships (Glasser, 1993). Most of the participants did not feel like they belonged to the school because they perceived that their differences played a role. The sense of belonging in such instances can be realized only if the students with disabilities establish ways and approaches of fitting in with the rest of the school. They can interact with and engage with other students in carrying out academic and co-curricular activities to develop a sense of belonging. Discrimination, can never be dismissed as one of the major contributing factors to the unwanted feeling among students with disabilities. Some respondents categorically stated that they faced discrimination and isolation from their peers who never wanted to sit beside them and seemed to be scared of them. The majority of students with disabilities who dropped out of school interviewed experienced a number of aspects that did not promote a sense of belonging in the school. Discrimination, loneliness, and isolation were among some of the aspects that generated a negative sense of belonging in schools among students with disabilities, which led to them dropping out.

The last parameter under the theme of sense of belonging is the view that the students with disabilities had toward going to school. Major steps need to be taken to ensure that students with disabilities go to school willingly. From the results of this study, an overwhelming number stated that they were usually unwilling to go to school every morning. The reasons varied. To be consistent with the self-determination theory, it is essential that ideal approaches be formulated to help students find it to be easy to go to school every day as expected. Ridicule, discrimination, negativity toward students with disabilities, the possibility of attaining relatively low grades, and many more are some of the experiences that these students had, which consequently deprived them of self-esteem when waking up every morning to go to school.

Attitude of Students

The beliefs and attitudes of an individual can be influenced greatly by their successes or failures (Romney, Smith, Freeman, Kagan, & Kline, 1997). This fundamentally means that a constant defeat or failure in a particular undertaking will certainly lead to an eventual defeated and negative attitude that would cause an unwillingness to try again. This kind of occurrence is usually referred to as "learned helplessness," which can affect both children and adults but is common in students or people who are trying to learn new skills and concepts (Dweck, 1973). When students with disabilities are discriminated against and isolated, lack moral support, and are not given suitable tools and facilities to enhance their education, they tend to develop negative attitudes toward undertaking their studies, and they ultimately drop out. All the participants in the study concurred that a negative attitude was the greatest barrier to attaining any kind of academic achievement and a leading factor in their decision to drop out of school.

When asked about their goals in life, most of the participants asserted that they only focused on the short-term goals of achieving their GED. This is because they were uncertain

of their long-term goals, which arguably were dented by the fact that they had not completed high school. It is with this respect that appropriate guidance and confidence needs to be instilled in these students who dropped out of school to make it possible for them to realize that there is hope. It is important that alternative career paths be identified for students who have dropped out of school and feel that it is probably too late for them to go back. Providing guidance and restoration of confidence to these students would help in enabling them to understand that they can set and achieve long-term goals.

Achieving a GED is as important because it provides an array of inspirations to their aspirations. For instance, almost all the participants agreed that if they obtained a GED, it would inspire others in attempting to get a GED and pursue their future career opportunities. Others also positively noted that attaining a GED would help them in achieving their long-term goals, enhance self-esteem, bring about personal growth, and set positive examples for their siblings.

As to whether they believed they were good students, respondents asserted that they believed they were because they rarely got into trouble with the authority figures in school. In school, the measures of a good student should revolve around a number of elements, such as level of discipline demonstrated, grades in academic activities, participation in extracurricular activities, and other related aspects. Apparently, most of the students who dropped out of school were good students, because they exhibited positive behavioral traits along with moderate to good grades.

Personal responsibility also should be taken into account, especially regarding the quality of grades. These types of students need to own up to the quality of the grades that they attain after particular tests are conducted. The participants for this study concurred that they felt the grades they earned were fair. As long as relevant support was provided and all

the areas tested were taught, the students said that they had always taken responsibility for any kind of unwarranted results.

Supporting students with disabilities should not essentially be left for teachers alone but it should rather be an all-encompassing affair involving a variety of stakeholders. Parents should play major role in providing support to students with disabilities, especially at home. Special guidance should also come from parents and guardians to help make it possible for students to make ideal decisions in life. The respondents who were interviewed regarding personal and family influences on education agreed that there were some positive factors, which included encouragement and support from the family that ideally pushed them during school. At the same time, there were negative elements that derailed their efforts, including drug abuse, sexual abuse, lack of proper correlation with parents, and emotional abuse among others. They also unanimously assented that their families generally had a positive attitude toward education.

Issues surrounding relationships, family needs, lack of self-confidence, teacher's attitudes, and increased responsibility are some of the things that students with disabilities faced, which apparently influenced their decision to quit school. The factors varied from one student to another due to differences in lifestyles and backgrounds. However little to no action was taken by the relevant stakeholders to ensure that they were working toward preventing the dropping out from happening.

Dropping out of school should not be the end of life or halt any other prospective education plans. Yet in this society, without completing high school, it is very difficult to enroll in a program or school of higher education, such as a trade school or community college. One of the respondents clearly stated that after dropping out of school, he tried enrolling in a community college for an electrician course, but was denied admission because he did not possess a high school diploma. The findings also revealed that most of the students

with disabilities who dropped out of school sought training opportunities that would help them in realizing their career aspirations, but the only way of attaining this was by going back to school to earn his or her GED.

Limitations

The emphasis of this study was to understand the lived experiences that influence students with disabilities to drop out of high school. This study focused on giving a rich and descriptive voice to students with disabilities who share the phenomenon by identifying their feelings, experiences, and thoughts. The study had limitations in scope, because it involved only students with disabilities from Ridgeville High school who dropped out during their junior or senior years. This led to confining the study, which had a very limited sample. Furthermore, the students and their experiences and perceptions represented only a small population from this particular school, which, when compared with other schools, could probably reflect another different setting.

Implications

The significance of this study was to primarily help in understanding the experiences that students with disabilities underwent during the period in which they were in school as well as the aspects that might have led to their decision to quit school. The researcher fundamentally wanted to help in interpreting these occurrences by presenting the meanings of the shared experiences of these particular students (Moustakas, 1994). This study was therefore significant because it helped to explore and address the lived experiences that students with disabilities underwent while in high school, as well as the core factors that led to their dropping out of school (Cannella-Malone, Tullis, & Kazee, 2011).

The implications of the study were significant in the following ways:

1. It explored and addressed a wide range of issues regarding the essence of understanding and considering the experiences of students with disabilities who dropped out of school.
2. It studied the gap that exists in the literature linked to inclusion and the emerging growing trend of a considerable number of students with disabilities dropping out school due to varied reasons.
3. It provided an additional source of information for understanding the experiences of students with disabilities with an emphasis of accentuating ideal approaches that need to be taken to help in curbing this particular growing trend.
4. It has helped in establishing the voice of these students with regard to assisting future scholars in carrying out relevant studies related to this particular area of study. The data collected is evidence or a resource that could help in supporting future studies related to this particular area.

Recommendations

Students with disabilities in classrooms present some of the hardest challenges for teachers and peers. It is, however, vital to understand that there is dire need to address these problems, because failure to do so presents a greater possibility of diminishing the future of students with disabilities (Gumpel & Sutherland, 2010). In this section of this study, I attempt to provide relevant recommendations that could help in providing positive changes for ensuring that the rate at which students with disabilities drop out of school is reduced. I address how different approaches that need to be taken when dealing with these students.

Teacher Support

Teaching students with disabilities is not an easy task, and making them understand different aspects of learning is even more daunting. It requires a teacher who is certified in

emotional behaviors to handle this caliber of students effectively (Albrecht et al., 2009). This explains the need of additional teachers to help the students realize their academic objectives and ultimately their career aspirations. The attitude that teachers have toward the students with disabilities is the greatest core that determines whether or not they will be able to successfully complete their education. There are several ways in which teachers can support these students and prevent them from dropping out of high school. Showing concern and love and motivating these students will go miles toward ensuring that their students do not drop out of school. Teachers can also support these students by engaging them in both curricular and extracurricular activities to give them the sense of belonging and assurance that they are indeed appreciated, not only in school setting but also in society as a whole.

Student Need

There are many students with disabilities in current school systems, which can be challenging to the education system. Most students with disabilities present difficulties in building and maintaining satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers (Janney & Schoenfeld, 2008). Students with disabilities usually demonstrate inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances. This research suggests that specific approaches can be undertaken to help in preventing negative experiences in schools among students with disabilities and to reduce or stop these students from dropping out. Effective involvement requires a holistic approach, including risk evaluation, early identification, and monitored interventions. Consistent with Bandura's 1998 social cognitive theory, self-efficacy plays a great role in making it possible for these students to alleviate some of the negative experiences that they faced while in school.

Additionally, other interventions, such as government guidance on how to handle students with disabilities, would be of great help in reducing the number of high school dropouts among students with disabilities. Providing flexible training that would not

necessarily require that students possess a high school diploma to warrant admission to a trade school or certification program is also another manner of intervention.

Future Research

The aim of this research was to explore the lived experiences of individuals with disabilities who dropped out of school and to evaluate the effectiveness of the special education program with special education students who are considered at high risk of dropping out. The majority of research suggests an optimistic future for students with disabilities, should administrators and educators reverse the current perceptions, attitudes, and thoughts toward these students. Quantitative research is needed to assess the efficiency of teacher–student interaction and its effects on behavioral and academic outcomes of students with disabilities. This kind of study is important, because it would provide empirical evidence for the proper placement of students with disabilities in society by finding the actual course of why they drop out of school and determining possible solutions to the problem.

Further research concerning the particular types of training that students with disabilities who have dropped out school can undertake should be conducted. A strong body of research confirms the need for these students to undertake different types of training, because the current job market cannot embrace a disabled person who does not have relevant qualifications in a particular area or specialization.

Multiple factors inhibit school completion among students with disabilities who dropped out between their third and fourth year of high school during the 2010 to 2014 school years. Based on evidence from this study, it is clear that most of the participants felt a low sense of belonging. Therefore, designing and implementing interventions for school completion should target not only academic characteristics but also overall student physical and emotional well-being. The participants, while being aware of the constraints of their disabilities, believed that a negative attitude from the peers or teachers contributed to their

decisions to leave school. The participants also requested better resources and infrastructure be implemented by the school, along with more instructional assistance from teachers. Therefore, this research indicates that developing strategies aimed at reducing dropout requires additional support, tutoring, and risk indicator monitoring to help guide intervention.

This research concludes with the view that there is a need for more research on possible interventions that target school climate, student attitude, and teacher and school provision to increase the graduation rate of students with disabilities. Implementing studies that have rigorous research designs, including quantitative data, can help improve effectiveness. This research also showed that including information on the nature of the disability of the student and the interventions to which the student responds can help tailor specific interventions for specific groups.

This research concludes with the view that interventions that focus on the needs of students with disabilities and the unique problems they face will help reduce the dropout rate. Students with disabilities who drop out need to be targeted by providing them with a school environment that does not stifle their ability to graduate. Therefore, both school- and policy-level actions are needed. If these actions are balanced and accomplished, the overall dropout rate of students with disabilities can be reduced.

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APPENDIX A: APPROVAL FROM SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

Date:

To: Researcher

From: School Authorized Agent

Address

I [school authorized agent] an authorized administrator with [redacted] Schools, grant [name of the researcher] permission to carry out research with the assistance of [redacted] High School as specified herein. [Name of researcher] is granted permission to contact administrative staff at [redacted] High School to aid in the identification of students with disabilities who dropped out of high school and to further aid the researcher in establishing contact with the identified students with a view to requesting that they participate in face-to-face interviews, student journaling and social observations pursuant to an academic research project: "Understanding the Experiences of Students with Disabilities Who Did Not Complete High School." Permission is also granted to seek assistance from administrative staff in reviewing and using student records.

Signed _____

School Administrator

APPENDIX B: LETTER REQUESTING STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION IN THE STUDY

Date: *[Insert Date]*

[Recipient]
[Title]
[Company]
[Address 1]
[Address 2]
[Address 3]

Dear *[Recipient]:*

As a graduate student in the Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Education Degree. The title of my research project is "Understanding the Experiences of Students with Disabilities Who Did Not Complete High School." The purpose of my research is to gain some insight into the link between the experiences of students with disabilities and their decision to drop out of high school near graduation. It is hoped that by understanding their experiences, this research will help to determine what can be done to alter those experiences and therefore reduce the dropout rate among students with disabilities.

I am writing to request your permission to conduct my research at [redacted] High School and solicit the assistance of administrators and staff at the school, to aid in the identification and recruitment of students to participate in my research study and to access and utilize student records.

Participants will be asked to participate in a face-to-face interview, keep a journal of experiences in social interaction, and allow researcher to observe them in a real-life social situation, such as work. They may be asked to participate in a follow-up interview after completing the initial interview, which will be done by phone. The data will be used to identify and analyze whether the student's experiences in social settings and school are

related to their decisions to drop out of high school. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please provide a signed statement on approved letterhead indicating your approval.

Sincerely,

Richard Wieringo
Doctoral Student

APPENDIX C: SAMPLE CONSENT FORM

Consent Form

Identifying the Most Common Reasons

Why Special Education Students Drop Out of High School

Postgraduate Dissertation

Richard W. Wieringo

Liberty University

Education Department)

You are invited to be in a research study of ascertaining the top reasons why high school students with disabilities drop out. You were selected as a possible participant because you dropped out of [redacted] High School during the 2010 to 2014 academic school years. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Richard Wieringo, Doctoral Student

Background Information

The purpose of this study is: to be able to obtain specific and accurate data on the most common reasons why high school special education students drop out.

Procedures

If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following things:

1. Subject yourself to an intensive interview surrounding your personal and family background, as well as your disability, in order to pinpoint the variables for more accurate dropout characteristics. Follow-up questions may be done by phone if deemed necessary.
2. Answer questions pertaining to the real reasons why you dropped out of high school.
3. Allow for the entire interview to be recorded.
4. Write a short summary on how you feel about how not completing high school has affected you.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study

The study has several risks: First, you may need to open old wounds with regards to the difficult decision you have had to make in dropping out of high school and thus, suffer emotionally; second, you may need to confront the sad reality of the negative consequences of dropping out of high school and thus, suffer emotionally and mentally.

The benefits to participation are: When considering the option of going back to school in order to graduate, the author of this paper will provide whatever assistance he can give you in within the school system.

Compensation

You will receive payment: A small token of our appreciation in the form of a gift card upon competition of the interview/survey. For surveys sent by mail, participants will receive the gift card once survey is mailed back in the postage paid envelope that will be provided.

Confidentiality

The records of this study will be kept private. In our official records, codes will be used to keep the identity of all participants confidential. The people that all participants will personally meet will not, in any way, try to take a photo or take anything that will prove the participant has been part of the study.

Research records will be stored securely and only researchers will have access to the records. In any sort of report we might publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject.

Voluntary Nature of the Study

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the Liberty University or with [redacted] City Schools. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting these relationships.

Contacts and Questions

The researcher conducting this study is Richard Wieringo. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact him at 436 Pinecrest Drive, Danville, VA 24541, (434) 251–2255 E-mail: rafting173@yahoo.com. Also, you may contact his advisor Dr. Verlyn Evans at vevans@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, Dr. Fernando Garzon, Chair, 1971 University Blvd, Suite 2400, Lynchburg, VA 24502 or email at fgarzon@liberty.edu.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature:_____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator:_____ Date: _____

APPENDIX D: INDIVIDUALS WITH A SEVERE DISABILITY [EDUCATION] LAW AND LEGAL DEFINITION

According to 34 CFR 350.5 [Title 34 – Education; Subtitle B -- Regulations of the Offices of the Department of Education; Chapter III -- Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, Department of Education; Part 350 -- Disability and Rehabilitation Research Projects and Centers Program; Subpart A – General] the term individual with a severe disability means—

"(1)(i) An individual with a disability who has a severe physical or mental impairment that seriously limits one or more functional capacities (such as mobility, communication, self-care, self-direction, interpersonal skills, work tolerance, or work skills) in terms of an employment outcome;

(ii) Whose vocational rehabilitation can be expected to require multiple vocational rehabilitation services over an extended period of time; and

(iii) Who has one or more physical or mental disabilities resulting from amputation, arthritis, autism, blindness, burn injury, cancer, cerebral palsy, cystic fibrosis, deafness, head injury, heart disease, hemiplegia, hemophilia, respiratory or pulmonary dysfunction, mental retardation, mental illness, multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, musculoskeletal disorders, neurological disorders (including stroke and epilepsy), paraplegia, quadriplegia, other spinal cord impairments, sickle cell anemia, specific learning disability, end-stage renal disease, or another disability or combination of disabilities determined on the basis of an assessment of rehabilitation needs to cause comparable substantial functional limitation; or

(2) An individual with a severe mental or physical impairment whose ability to function independently in the family or community or whose ability to obtain, maintain, or advance in employment is substantially limited and for whom the delivery of independent living services will improve the ability to function, continue functioning, or move towards

functioning independently in the family or community or to continue in employment, respectively."

(Authority: Section 7(15)(C); 29 U.S.C. 706(15)(C))

(USLegal, Inc., 2011)

APPENDIX E: PERSONAL INFORMATION TO BE REQUESTED FROM PARTICIPANTS

I will request the following personal information from each subject interviewed:

Name

Gender

Age

Birthdate (This serves as a form of data triangulation to test the reliability of the information presented in the age section.)

Ethnicity

Native Language

Number of Siblings

Parental Employment (both mother and father)

Family Income

Type of Disability

Level of Disability

School Record

- Grades. I will take note of failing marks in what subjects and if the student has been retained by a year
- Absenteeism
- Behavior: especially disruptive and emotionally unstable behavior

This is an intensive interview, and I will let students answer freely and then code and analyze the data into categories later.

School Climate (follow-up questions may be needed depending on the answers given):

1. Please describe your general experience in school. Are you happy to be in that school? Why or why not?
2. How do you feel about your teachers' attention to your learning needs? Do you feel that the school was able to provide you with a good education?
3. Do you feel that the school has all the tools and facilities that you needed? What was lacking or what was great about the facilities?

Sense of Belonging (follow-up questions may be needed depending on the answers given):

1. Were you a member of clubs? What types of clubs? What other extracurricular activities were you involved in?
2. Did you enjoy these activities? Why or why not?
3. Can you say that you have a lot of friends? Why or why not?
4. Do you feel that you belong in the school? Why or why not?
5. When you wake up in the morning to get ready for school, what's the first thing that comes to mind? Why do you think that is?

Attitude toward School (follow-up questions may be needed depending on the answers given):

1. What is your dream? What's your goal in life?
2. Do you think it's important to go to school to achieve this dream? Why or why not?
3. Can you say you're a good student? Why or why not?
4. Do you think you got the grades that you deserved? Why or why not?

Educational Support in the Home and Stressful Life Events (follow-up questions may be needed depending on the answers given):

1. What aspects of your personal life do you think negatively affected your studies? Positively?
2. Can you say that your family values education? Your education? (Sometimes parents tend to be biased, valuing the education of one son or daughter while ignoring the other)
3. Was the decision to drop out your decision or that of your parents?
4. Did anything happen that contributed to your decision to quit school?
5. What are the top three reasons that you can say contributed to your dropping out of high school? Why?
6. What consequences do you think dropping out has? Do you think you'll still get a good job?
7. Do you still want to study and graduate? How about college?

APPENDIX F: TRIANGULATION MATRIX

Research Question	Data Source 1	2	3
1. What are the common experiences of students with disabilities who drop out of school?	• Student interviews • Follow-up interviews • Active observations during all interviews	• Real-world observation of students either at work or in some other social setting	• Student journaling/one-page reflection of how dropping out of school impacts life today
2. How are these experiences related to the decision to drop out of high school?	• Student interviews • Follow-up interviews • Active observations during all interviews	• Real-world observation of students either at work or in some other social setting	• Student journaling/one-page reflection of how dropping out of school impacts life today

APPENDIX G: SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How would you describe your relationships with your peers leading up to your decision to drop out of high school?
2. How would you describe your relationships with your teachers leading up to your decision to drop out of high school?
3. How did you feel about assessments and other standardized tests?
4. How did you score on those tests?
5. Did those test results influence your decision to drop out of high school?
6. Did you have difficulties at home that interfered with your ability to go to school regularly? (If the answer is yes, the difficulties will be explored further with follow-up questions such as “What specifically happened to you at home that made it difficult for you to go to school regularly?”)
7. Did you have problems that made you uncomfortable in school? (This question will be involving follow-up questions such as “What were the problems? Why did you feel uncomfortable?”)
8. Did you have help at school with those problems?
9. Did you know where to go for help at school?

APPENDIX H: SAMPLE FIELD NOTES

Sample Field Notes on Student AG

Student AG appears to be a bit nervous and anxious. Relaxes after introductory exchanges and reassurances of privacy and identity protection. A bit hesitant to answer the first question: "How would you describe your relationship with your peers leading up to your decision to drop out of high school?" Also asked: did you feel comfortable with other students? AG indicated that some students did isolate her, others were good. AG was asked to talk about her experiences with students that isolated her. Body language, good. Seemed animated and a bit emotional recalling experiences with students who isolated her. Was asked if this treatment made it difficult to come to school every day. AG said it played a part in discomfort at school, but there was support from her friends that made it bearable. Wishes she didn't have to deal with it, but accepts that it was a part of the whole school experience since the beginning.

Sample Field Notes on Student Journaling

Student AG's notes were neat, but lacking in detail. The journal reads more like a schedule and offers a list of activities with very little detail about AG's experiences. AG's notes indicate, however, that she is under constant supervision. Unfortunately, she does not explain how this makes her feel. She notes that she takes lunch alone. May have difficulties forming social relationships at work. Appears to be in an uncomfortable work environment, but AG does not specifically state this.

Sample Field Notes on Observations

AG works as a cashier at a convenience store. She reports to work at 7 and leaves at 1. During the work day, she has experienced some difficulties with customers at the checkout counter and had to call the manager out a few times. On one occasion the manager asked, "What is it now?" He appeared to be annoyed and AG appeared too indifferent to this reaction while explaining the problem. The manager spoke firmly and AG did not appear to

be engaged or interested. She appeared to be going through the motions. When it was time to take a lunch break, AG was more animated and enthusiastic than she had been at any time during the day. This experience appears to be what AG has become accustomed to: work, perhaps like school: something she has to tolerate. Not something she enjoys or is committed to.

APPENDIX I: CODED SOCIODEMOGRAPHICS

Participant No.	Gender	Age	Race/ Ethnicity	No. of Brothers	No. of Sisters	Birth Order	Maternal Employment	Type of Employment of Mother	Paternal Employment	Type of Employment of Father	Income	Disability Type	Disability Level
1	F	23	B	1	1	Eldest	1	Retail sales clerk	1	Truck driver	1	LD	1
2	M	21	A	1	2	Youngest	2	Homemaker	2	Electrician	1	ED	2
3	M	18	A		1	Eldest	3	Disability	3	Disability	2	O	1
4	M	18	A	1	2	Middle	4	Passed Away/no Contact	4	Passed Away/no Contact	2	ED	1
5	F	22	A		3	Middle	1	School bus driver	4	Passed Away/no Contact	2	LD	1
6	F	18	A		2	Youngest	1	Manager at retail store	4	Passed Away/no Contact	1	ED	2
7	F	20	W	0	0	Only child	4	Passed Away/no Contact	1	City power company	1	ED	1
8	M	19	W		1	Eldest	4	Passed Away/no Contact	1	Septic tank business	2	LD	1
9	F	20	A	1		Eldest	3	Disability	4	Passed Away/no Contact	2	LD	1
10	F	24	W	2	1	Middle	1	Local manufacturing	1	City gas and electric company	1	LD	1

Note. All native English speakers. Race/Ethnicity: Gender: F = female, M = male; A = African American, B = biracial, W = White; Maternal Employment: 1 = working, 2 = homemaker, 3 = on disability, 4 = passed away/no contact; Paternal Employment: 1 = working, 2 = prison, 3 = disability, 4 = passed way/no contact; Income: 1 = did not receive assistance, 2 = received assistance; Disability Type: LD = specific learning disability, ED = emotional disability, O = other; Disability Level: 1 = moderate, 2 = moderate to severe.

APPENDIX J: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Demographic Information

Name: _____

Gender: ❒ Male ❒ Female

Age: _____

Birthdate: _____

Race/Ethnicity:

❒ White ❒ African American ❒ Biracial

Native Language: _____

Number of Siblings: _____

Parental Employment (mother): _____

Parental Employment (father): _____

Family Income: _____

Type of Disability:

❒ LD ❒ ED ❒ Other Health Impairment

Level of Disability:

❒ Moderate ❒ Moderate to severe

School Climate

1. Please describe your general experience in school. Are you happy to be in that school? Why or why not?

_____

_____

2. How do you feel about your teachers' attention to your learning needs? Do you feel that the school was able to provide you with a good education?

3. Do you feel that the school has all the tools and facilities that you needed? What was lacking or what was great about the facilities?

Sense of Belonging

4. Were you a member of clubs? What types of clubs? What other extracurricular activities were you involved in?

5. Did you enjoy these activities? Why or why not?

6. Can you say that you have a lot of friends? Why or why not?

7. Do you feel that you belong in the school? Why or why not?

8. When you wake up in the morning to get ready for school, what's the first thing that comes to mind? Why do you think that is?

Attitude Toward School

9. What is your dream? What's your goal in life?

10. Do you think it's important to go to school to achieve this dream? Why or why not?

11. Can you say you're a good student? Why or why not?

12. Do you think you got the grades that you deserved? Why or why not?

Educational Support in the Home and Stressful Life Events

13. What aspects of your personal life do you think negatively affected your studies? Positively?

14. Can you say that your family values education? Your education? (Sometimes parents tend to be biased, valuing the education of one son or daughter while ignoring the other)

15. Was the decision to drop out your decision or that of your parents?

16. Did anything happen that contributed to your decision to quit school?

17. What are the top three reasons that you can say contributed to your dropping out of high school? Why?

_____

_____

18. What consequences do you think dropping out has? Do you think you'll still get a good job?

_____

_____

19. Do you still want to study and graduate? How about college?

_____

_____

APPENDIX K: SCHOOL CLIMATE THEMES

Please describe your general experience in school. Are you happy to be in that school? Why or why not?

(This color indicates ambivalent experience.

This color indicates positive overall experience.

This color indicates negative overall experience.

This color highlights negative experiences independently.

This color highlights positive experiences independently.)

1. I was happy to a point. It was starting to get really bad off and I got to the point where I did not like it anymore.
2. No, I was not because I did not like the teachers or the security guards or the principals because I would get harassed all the time by them.
3. Yeah, I liked some of the people in school and some of the teachers.
4. Yes, I like my peers and my classes and the environment all together. Most of the time, I enjoyed school.
5. It was alright, I felt kind of bad being in learning disabled classes and being different from other kids which made it kind of hard.
6. No, the teachers were very disrespectful and I did not get along with them.
7. I was I mean it was interesting I was happy because I had a lot of friends. The teachers did not make me happy, but I did like my friends. For the most part, I was happy to be in school.
8. Yes, because I was learning but no because I didn't like my classes and stuff. I didn't like some of my teachers too.
9. Yes, I was happy in school and really liked it a lot. I was happy because I had a lot of friends and get along with everybody.
10. Not really because I has issues with anxiety really bad and felt really self-conscious. If I had gone to see a doctor back when I was in school they with have probably said I had some type of social anxiety. It was like torture being in school a lot of the time.

How do you feel about your teachers' attention to your learning needs? Do you feel that the school was able to provide you with a good education?
(This color indicates ambivalent experience.
This color indicates positive overall experience.
This color indicates negative overall experience.
This color highlights socio-demographic focus.
This color highlights lack of attention.
This color highlights parental complaint.)

1. The teachers were pretty good but once you get to a certain age, I feel that they just want to push you out the door.
2. No, I don't think the teacher paid attention to me or my learning needs. No, they were always looking for a reason to write me up like my shirts, they would say my shirts were gang related.
3. Some of the teachers paid attention to my learning needs but not all of them did. Yes, the school did provide me with a good education at times.
4. Yeah, yes the school did pretty good with providing me my education.
5. No, I would tell them that I would need help with something and they would act like they didn't hear me. When I didn't do my work the teachers would call my mom and tell her that I am not doing my work. When I got home I would tell my mom that they (teachers) would not help me when I said I needed help. No, I don't think the school provided me with a good education.
6. No, I don't think they helped me, they just come in to get a pay check and it doesn't really matter to them how kids do in school. I think some of the teachers cared about us but most of them no, not at all.
7. No, I don't think teachers did a good job in teaching me because every time I needed help and asked for it the teachers told me to just figure it out myself. The school sort of provided me with a good education but the teachers should have helped me more than they did.
8. Sometimes I felt that they paid attention to me and helped me but other times, they didn't. Not really because they just hand you work and not teach you.
9. Yes, some of them (teachers) did, some of them didn't, like my math teacher. She would just sit there at the computer and if we asked each other for help she would look like she would get upset. The other teachers were really fine and helped us when we needed it. Yes, I feel like the school was able to provide us with a pretty good education.
10. Yes and no, some of them were really great and like tried, but I just kind of would not cooperate at times and made it difficult for the teachers and myself. Some of the teachers could really just care less to be honest. I had one teacher that was more interested in the neighborhood I grew up in because it was considered a rough neighborhood. My English teacher was interested in how it affected me living in a bad neighborhood and was shocked that I was white living in the neighborhood that I lived in. I feel that the school would have provided me with a good education if I would not have been so hard headed and took advantage of the opportunities they were trying to give me. I was so afraid to talk to anyone about my issues so I just kept to myself.

Do you feel that the school has all the tools and facilities that you needed? What was lacking or what was great about the facilities?
(This color indicates ambivalent perception.
This color indicates positive provision.
This color indicates negative provision.
This color highlights no efforts undertaken.
This color highlights need for math and reading help.
This color highlights need for extra-curricular.
This color highlights need for special education teacher.
This color highlights better teacher attention.)

1. They provided me with everything. I just need more time to get my work and stuff done. It took me longer to do work than others. They were lacking by not giving me more time to do stuff.
2. They had it all but they did not use it. I feel like they just didn't teach period. I feel like I did not learn anything in high school. I did not learn anything until I started going to the GED program.
3. Yeah, I feel like they gave me everything I needed. I think they could improve on reading. I am not really good in reading and they could have helped me more so I could read better.
4. Yes, I can't think of anything they can improve on. The teachers were pretty nice and helped you.
5. No, I think they needed some more like some more resources. The school didn't have a lot of special education teachers and I think they needed some more.
6. No, they lacked some helping individuals with learning disabilities. I think the school could have done a better job helping kids with learning disabilities.
7. Somewhat, the school was lacking in math, I just had a really hard time in math and needed more help. It's the main reason I am so bad in math (because the school did not provide her with the proper help). The school should have provided students in special ed. Like me more help.
8. Yes, I feel that they had what they needed. Lacking, teacher could have helped you more instead of just passing out work all of the time and expecting you to do it all with no help.
9. Yes, I just wish I had gotten more stuff out of school like sports and that kind of stuff. I think this would have helped me more. Math, they were lacking in math. Like in math, I feel like they were better at helping up in math then I probably wouldn't be where I am at now (GED program). I think if my math grades had not been so bad then I wouldn't be here at GED and I would be in college right now or something like that. Math and reading were hard for me in school but I am good at reading now and don't think is it a big problem like it was.
10. Yeah, I think so. I really wasn't in a place (mentally) to hear it or take part in it even if it was to help me. The only think lacking was me, they tried to help me but I just didn't care to help myself.

APPENDIX L: SENSE OF BELONGING-THEMES-CODING

Were you a member of clubs? What type of club? What other extra-curricular activities were you involved in?

This color is for participation.
This color is for nonparticipation.
This color denotes ROTC participation.
This color denotes student government participation.

1. Yes, I was in the student counsel and Student Government Association and ROTC.
2. No, no
3. No, no
4. No
5. No, I was in ROTC
6. No, no sir.
7. JROTC.
8. No, wait, I was in ROTC.
9. No, I wish I had been.
10. No

Did you enjoy these activities? Why or why not?

This color is for enjoyment.
This color is for did not enjoy.
This color is for no comment.

1. Yes, I liked the people in my ROTC class and in SGA. ROTC was also neat and fun and we did a lot. It was something I did not think (ROTC) I could do at first and was surprised that I could do it.
2. N/A
3. N/A
4. N/A
5. Yes, I liked the putting on the uniform and exercising and learning how to read maps and the different things on the map.
6. N/A
7. JROTC, no, I did not like it because it was too many rules to follow and they were strict. I was only in it for one year.
8. No, I just didn't like it, too many rules.
9. N/A
10. No, like staying after school for detention, does that count?

Can you say that you have a lot of friends? Why or why not?

This color is for presence of friends.
This color is for fewer friends.

1. Yes, I had a lot of friends at school, some that were a little higher and some that were a little lower. (academically)
2. Yes, I did. The people that fit in the group that I was in, I don't know how to say it, but I mean when you got to know me, I was a nice kid and would talk to you about anything or help you with anything. It's one of those things, if you disrespected me or did something wrong, I was ready to fight you.
3. Yes, because that's who I chill with when we have time in the hall way and I get along with everybody.
4. Yes, I was outgoing and nice to everyone. Everyone liked me and I liked them.
5. I had one best friend. I would rather have one or two good friends than a whole big group of friends.
6. Yes, I was just a very approachable person and outgoing.
7. Yes, because my friends said I was a friendly person and got along with everybody.
8. Yeah, because a lot of people talked to me. I had a lot of people to hang out with.
9. I kind of feel like I did have a lot of friends because I had a little group of friends but in another way a lot of people picked on you because you have a disability. People would say we (her and her friends) were slow and retarded and stuff. Me and my friends had to deal with that, we tried too.
10. I had a select few friends that I hung around but I always felt so uncomfortable I didn't really try to speak to people or anything like that. I just was very quiet and kept to myself. I had the same best friend for like 14 years until she got her first boyfriend and forgot I existed.

Do you feel that you belong in the school? Why or why not?

1. Yes, I loved the way school was and the teachers in the school. I loved the things the school had to offer.
2. I feel like I did belong but only to a certain group, but the way I dressed I did not belong with everybody. I would get on the bus and everyone would scoot over or put their book bag in the seat to take up the seat so I could not sit beside them. I would have to find an empty seat and sit by myself. They would do this because they did not want me to sit beside them and because they were scared of me.
3. No, it just wasn't the school for me. I didn't like it at all.
4. Yes, because it's my hometown and its where my mom went to school. I know a lot of people who go there and I like it most of the time.
5. Yes, because I fit in with everyone.
6. No, because in school people use to pick on me and talk about me and say she's in those LD (learning disabled) classes and she is slow.
7. No, honestly because I could not join the basketball team and did not feel like I fit in because of my sexual orientation.
8. No, because they held me back a year and I didn't like that, it wasn't fair.
9. Yes, I guess because it was high school and my friends from middle school were in my same classes at high school.
10. No, I always felt different or out of place when I was in school. I felt I was always on the outside of school looking in. I was always so nervous about school and had my first

anxiety attack at school was I was 10 years old. I didn't know what it was then (the attack) but I did later on as I got older.

When you wake up in the morning to get ready for school, what's the first thing that comes to mind? Why do you think that is?

Color for ready to go to school.
Color for not willing to go to school.
Color for learning issues.
Color for earning money.
Color for ridicule for appearance.
Color for peer ridicule.
Color for facing teachers.

1. I was ready to go to school but was not ready for the math. I always got bad grades in math and could not pass those tests.
2. I thought I don't want to go to school. I just did not enjoy the school and people in the school. I mean being in that school and being around the teachers and stuff because I know as soon as I walked into school I was going to have a security guard stop me and make me turn my shirt inside out or say something to me. I think they singled me out and looked for stuff to get on me about.
3. I looked forward to school and seeing my friends. I wanted to make sure I looked good before leaving the house every day. I think it is important to look your best every day.
4. I don't want to get up this early and go to school. I would rather work and make money. I don't make any money in school and if I was at work, I would be getting paid.
5. First thing I thought was, I don't want to go to this school. People was cruel to me, I mean you had some of the kids that I was going to school with that would walk up to you and pick on you and call you all kinds of names. They would pick on me about my clothes because of what I had on. I had to wear what I had.
6. I don't feel like going, I do not want to go! The teachers had a very disrespectful demeanor towards certain people and they just talk to you any type of way and I just didn't like it at all.
7. I don't want to go to school because it was too early in the morning and my brain wasn't ready to work. I had to get up too early to get ready for school and I just didn't like it.
8. I don't feel like going because I didn't feel like sitting in those classes listening to them teachers.
9. I'm not sure to be honest. I didn't mind going to school and I liked it most of the time. At times, I could not wait to go to school.
10. I would be worried about if I had time enough to wash my hair or not. Honestly, that's the first thing that came to my mind every morning when I would get up to get ready for school. Sometimes, I just didn't want to go to school in the mornings but I knew I had to go and my parents made me go so that's why I mainly just worried about my hair.

APPENDIX M: ATTITUDE TOWARD SCHOOL

Q: What is your dream? What's your goal in life?

Government sector.

Service sector.

Professional.

1. I want to pass (ASVAB) test to get into the Navy but could not pass the math part. This slowed me down and is why I did not get into the service. Now, my future is looking to do criminal justice crime scene investigation. I watch four different NCIS shows and that's made me want to get into criminal justice. I also watch a lot of criminal minds because there are a lot of things that could happen in your own town and you could just be blind to it.
2. Right now I want to become a full time fire-fighter and an electrician.
3. To finish school and get my GED and then go to college to get my degree for counseling.
4. Well, to make money. I don't know what kind of job I want but I know I want to work and make money.
5. I want to get my GED and be a school teacher or be a nurse.
6. I want to be a business person and I want to do a lot like design homes and sell homes.
7. I always wanted to be a nurse.
8. I wanted to be a dental hygienist but now that I have dropped out of school, I just don't know anymore.
9. That's a tough question because right now, as I am 24, I think I should have got my goal in life and not be where I am at today. I feel like someone is standing on me, holding me down and keeping me from doing what I want to do. I would like to improve my writing and open up my own day-care because I like working with little kids. I just need to get the courage to like start volunteering and doing things to make my dream happen.
10. I would like to be a nurse but I don't know if that is going to happen. I would like for it to happen but I just don't know.

Q: Do you think it's important to go to school to achieve this dream? Why or why not?

(Help others.
Make money.
Hard work to achieve future success.
Serve as role model.
Personal growth and positive emotional wellbeing.)

1. It's important because I never really like stuck with anything and always kind of gave up. I always gave up on myself and anything that I was trying to do or accomplish at the time. I would really like to do it just to prove to myself that I can do it and to make my dad proud too.
2. I think it is important to help others and help other people, that's why it is important for me to make this happen.
3. Yeah, because making money and stuff, yeah, it's important.
4. Yes, because I can help sick people and go on with my dreams and my future.
5. Yes, because I feel like if you have a dream you should like try your best to at least get close to it, but I really want to get there.
6. Yes, because everybody needs a dream that they can achieve and be proud of it.
7. Yes, because it's like beneficial and good for your self-esteem.
8. Yes, because it will help me in the long run in life that's what I am thinking, plus I can help other people.
9. Yes, because if you don't have a goal in life you basically are not going anywhere.
10. Yes, it's important and if you have younger sisters and stuff, it's important to show them that school is important.

Q: Can you say you're a good student? Why or why not?

1. Yes, because I done mostly what the teacher asked. My grades were pretty good most of the time. I listened to the teachers' and did not talk back or be disrespectful.
2. No, because most of the time I did not want to do the work and I didn't do the work, because I thought it was childish because we do the same thing over and over again, so I just quit doing everything and just sat there.
3. Sort of good, because I did get in trouble in school sometimes.
4. Yes, I wasn't really getting into trouble that much and I got along with the teachers and stuff.
5. Umm yes, I did not get into trouble and stayed to myself.
6. I was a good student but I just had the tendency to feel the need to speak up for myself which would get me in trouble a lot.
7. No, I wasn't a good student because I always got in trouble in class.
8. Yeah, because I always did what the teacher asked me to do and I never got in any trouble.
9. Yeah, I feel like I was a good student because I don't even bother nobody. I am not the kind to start a drama and I didn't pick on anybody because people always picked on me and stuff. I always liked to joke around and still do sometimes and like to help others. I was also the kind of shy type and still am at times.
10. When I applied myself I think I was a good student, and when I didn't, I was not.

Q: Do you think you got the grades that you deserved? Why or why not?

1. Umm, halfway - my math could have been a little better but as far as that I got As and Bs and some Ds and Fs in math.
2. For the way I acted and the way I started acting, I think they were fair, even the bad grades.
3. Yeah, because sometimes I just didn't try so those bad grades were on me. I just didn't feel like doing the work a lot of the times and just didn't do it.
4. Yeah, I think they were fair, even the bad ones.
5. Some yes and some no. Some of the stuff that I knew how to do I would do it but I need the extra boost to do it but some of the teachers wouldn't help me. If I did it on my own, I just got the grade I got which was sometimes bad.
6. No, not really because you get grades for taking notes or you got graded on something that they really did not teach in detail.
7. No, when I did the math I did the problems right, I just didn't have the answers right so they just failed me. The teachers did not help me. The good grades I worked for and did deserve them.
8. Yeah, because I either did the work or I didn't. Good and bad grades I deserved them both.
9. No, like I was saying in math, even though I tried I couldn't understand it. I could understand my grade if I wasn't trying but I was, I just couldn't get it. I would have been fine with a C because I tried but a D and an F was not fair. My other grades were fine and I think they were fair. I did make As and Bs and some Cs, but not in math.
10. Yeah, because when I had an attitude that I just didn't care, the grades I got were not good and it was nobody's fault but mine. I was a hot mess in class lots of times and just didn't care about my grades.

APPENDIX N: EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT IN THE HOME AND STRESSFUL LIFE EVENTS

Q: What aspects of your personal life do you think negatively affected your studies? Positively?

Positive support from family.
Drug abuse.
Sexual abuse.
Emotional abuse.
Additional responsibility.
Pregnancy.
Lack of good relationship with parent(s).

1. Basically moving, parents getting split up once and having to take care of my younger brother and sister and take grown-up roles over the house. Negatively, because I didn't have much time to study between getting supper done and clothes done and studying. It didn't help when my mom was working so I was at home being the second mother.
2. My parents were very supportive of me and my older brother and sister were too. They helped me to stay in school as long as I did.
3. None, it was just me with the problem.
4. Drug abuse really messed me up when I was in school. Positively, my grandmother really tried to get me to do right and go to school.
5. Negatively, was raped when she was 14 years old. I also use to see my mom get beat up by her boyfriend all of the time which affected me because it made me want to be at home because I was worried about my mom. Positively, I can't think of any.
6. Negatively, the fact that it is very hard for me to pay attention sometimes. Positively - I am a very competitive person and I feel like I have to get there where someone is better than me to better myself. It doesn't really bother me if someone makes a better grade than me or scores better on a test, it makes me more competitive.
7. Negatively, I got pregnant when I was 17. Positively, I can't think of anything.
8. I can't think of anything for either one of these questions. Nothing stands out.
9. Not that I know of.
10. Me and my mom had a really tough relationship and still have a difficult relationship to this day but I tend to overlook a lot of things so it has gotten better as I have gotten older. I had to go through therapy because of my mom and I have learned that she has her own issues as well. Even though she has seen a shrink for years, I still don't think she is working on what she needs to be working on. My dad was a positive influence on me, he was always telling me I could do it.

Q: Can you say that your family values education? Your education? (Sometimes parents tend to be biased, valuing the education of one son or daughter while ignoring the other.)

Equal.

Biased.

More focus when parent did not have a choice in their own education.

1. Yes, my daddy did not have a choice to his education. He drove a bus when he was in school and don't even have a high school diploma or GED. My mom does have a college degree but there is a lot of difference between his family and her family. He (her father) had to take an older role over his brothers and help his mother out because at that time she (her mother) doesn't drive. His daddy passed away when he was really young. Yes, my daddy takes education serious and he pushes me when I was like why do I have to do this or when I want to stop going to school. Daddy said no, school was good for you and you need to go back.
2. They do, but I don't think they valued the high school I was at. I think my parent valued all of our education equally.
3. Yes, yes, no I think she cares equally about me and my sister's education.
4. Yeah, yes. No, I think she (his grandmother) wanted my brother and sisters to do well.
5. Yes. Yes and my mom is proud of me going back to get my GED. I think my mom cared about all of our education the same.
6. Yes, yes. My mom equally cared about me and my sisters' education.
7. Yes, yes. My family feels that education is important.
8. Yeah, yeah, I feel like they think school is important. I feel like my dad showed favoritism over my education over my sisters.
9. Yes, I think my parents pushed me to do better and they wanted me to do good in school. They valued both of our educations equally. I use to ask my mom if she favored one of us over the other and she always said no, that she would never do that to us. She always said she loved us both the same. My mom said she always felt like the black sheep of our family and that why she always treated us the same.
10. Yes, my dad really does and my mom actually quit going to school in the 7th or 8th grade so she had the attitude of just because I am from the country and didn't finish school does not mean I am stupid. My mom favored my brothers' education over me and my sisters without a doubt but my dad wanted all of us to do well in school and graduate.

Q: Was the decision to drop out your decision or that of your parents?

Independent decision.

Parental impact.

1. It was basically mine.
2. I didn't want to finish but they were trying to get me to finish it and I later just quit.
3. It was my decision.
4. Mine
5. Mine and my mom's decision
6. It was both me and my mom's decision.
7. My decision.
8. Mine
9. It just kind of happened. It was my decision but my parents have talked me into going back to get my GED which is why I am here now.
10. It was mine. I was supposed to go back and finish I only had one more semester to go until I graduated.

Q: Did anything happen that contributed to your decision to quit school?

Personal reasons.
Institutional reasons.
Social reasons.

1. I didn't think I had it in me to finish or the patience and stuff you know, trying to work and get things done. I had too much to do.
2. The reason I was mostly ready to quit is because I got tired of being harassed by the security guards and principals.
3. I just didn't feel like going to school anymore and doing all the work.
4. No, just got tired of getting up early and going to school. I was ready to make money.
5. It's just that I didn't want to go anymore and I got tired of people making fun of me and saying mean things to me.
6. It was a combination of different things but the main thing that happened was the fact that they (the school) were very unorganized. I was going to have to re-do my same grade next year or start in the middle of the school year. The school lost my credits and that's what really did it for me and they said that they lost my files.
7. It was just because they held me back a year and I didn't want to go to school longer and I wanted to graduate with my class. Also, being pregnant did not help me to stay in school.
8. No, I was just ready to quit. I was tired of it all.
9. I was sent to another school to finish high school later on during my junior year and I didn't like it so I just decided to quit.
10. Me and my mom got into a huge fight and she kicked me out of the house and that was the main reason I quit.

Q: What are the top three reasons that you can say contributed to your dropping out of high school? Why?

1. Me not really having the patience, not having the time if I got in trouble with something to get the help I need and getting a teacher or someone to explain things to me where I could understand it better. Taking care of my younger brother and doing stuff around the house also kept me busy.
2. Teachers, principals and security guards. I feel that the principals and security guards were always looking for something to get on me about and the teachers just didn't really teach me that much. I don't think I started to learn anything until I went over to the GED program.
3. Getting up early in the morning, all of the testing and work and getting in trouble at school a lot.
4. Having to get up early in the morning, the school work and tests, and not getting good grades. I just got tired of it and didn't think I was going nowhere.
5. One of them was I did not like my teachers, the second one would be I always had my mind on rather my mom was going to be ok and I worried about her when I was not at home and in school. I would rather be at home than in school to know that she is alright. The third one, people use to pick on me a whole lot.
6. The fact that there was no individual attention if you needed extra help, the teachers because they have very bad attitudes and how very unorganized the high school was. I feel that there is no reason a school should lose an entire file and not be able to find it.
7. Having a baby, not graduating with my class (being held back a year) and wanting to be with my boyfriend who was not in school. These were important things to me.
8. I quit because I didn't feel like getting up early in the morning and things like that. I quit because I didn't feel like I could do all of the work. I quit because I just didn't like my teachers, I really didn't like them. I think teachers would be the biggest reason out of the three because they always have an attitude towards somebody.
9. Math and reading but I think my reading is fine now. I might need to work on my reading a little bit but I think I am doing much better. Third, I didn't like all of the tests and quizzes the school made us take. I felt like every time I turned around, I was taking them and I just didn't like it
10. The top main reason would definitely be my self-esteem issues and the way I worried about everything, I was so self-conscious about everything. My relationship with my mom would be another reason because that was just a hot mess in itself. I can't think of a third reason because it's mainly just those two because they affected everything.

Q: What consequences do you think dropping out has had? Do you think you'll still get a good job?

Lack of college.
No clear career.
No paying job.

1. It's got a hold on to me you know, a lot of colleges won't take me because I don't have a high school diploma. You can't get into a college if you don't have the right education. This is why I am here at the GED center to finish so I can go to college. I still think I can get a good job but not pay as much as once I finish school.
2. It delays you getting your life going and your career started. I went over to the community college to see about taking a few classes to become an electrician and they said I could not take any classes because I did not have a high school diploma. I told them that I did not want a degree but just needed some classes and that is when they told me to get my GED and then come back to take classes. I think I can still get a good job but not as good as being an electrician.
3. Less job findings and it can affect your dreams for the future. I think it is difficult to find a good job that pays a lot. Some jobs will take you if you have not finished high school but most likely you are not going to find a good paying job. They (employers) are looking for people with a high school diploma, that's what they are looking for.
4. Jobs, dropping out makes it hard for you to find a job period. I think you could still get a job but it won't be one you probably like as much.
5. It has made it harder on me to find a good job and after I finish this (her GED) I want to help my momma take care of my kids. I think you could still get a job but not a good paying job unless you have a high school diploma or your GED. Nowadays, you need something to get a job that pays good.
6. At first, I felt that a diploma was better than me getting my GED and the whole high school experience that I was going to miss out on such as games, dances, hanging out with friends, the prom and that stuff. I think I could still get a good paying job not finishing high school.
7. I can't find a good job. No.
8. Well, I have a job (fast food), so I think I am doing pretty good. No, I don't think I could get really good job but at least I have one now.
9. I was frustrated at having to come to GED and was doing good, can't score where I need to be on the pretest. If I had finished high school, I wouldn't have to keep taking all of these tests (GED pretest) and would have to come over here anymore. I am not really looking for a job right now but I think I could find one making decent money.
10. Oh my gosh, I feel like it changed my whole life and not for the good. I dropped out of school and got a job at Burger King which was a horrible job that I worked for two and a half years. I truly understand now how one bad choice can affect your entire life. I understand the domino effect now. Honestly, I didn't think about if I could get a good paying job or not after dropping out. I just did what I had to do to get by.

Q: Do you still want to study and graduate? How about college?

1. I am working on my GED and took the test but my grades weren't high enough and I have to take it again. I am going to have to still keep working on it. They (the state of Virginia) started a new GED test so it is a little harder and I need to keep working on it. A lot of it is a lot of things that I haven't never had in school so it's hard, especially the math.
2. Yes, I still want to get my GED and graduate from there. I want to go to college and become an electrician so I can take over the family business.
3. Yes, I want to finish school and go to college to study counseling and also take up cooking. I enjoy cooking and make some real good ribs.
4. Yeah, I would like to go to college and do maybe something like construction or trade work.
5. Yes, I want to get my GED and go to college to be a teacher from somewhere from kindergarten to first or second grade and I want to teach special kids like the classes I was in, that's the main thing that gets to me is kids that need special attention. The nursing part I would like to work with elderly people.
6. Yes, I just finished my GED. I plan to start at community college and then transfer to another school but I am just not sure exactly which school yet.
7. Yes, I am working on getting my GED right now. I want to finish (GED) and start taking nursing classes to be an LPN.
8. Maybe, I am not interested in going to college. I started working on my GED and just quit going to classes because I wanted to work more.
9. I want to finish here (GED) and I kind of don't. I am not a quitter and that's why I keep coming back and I am still here pushing myself. Yes, I see myself going to college and working with kids, which is one of my goals also. I see myself working with little kids and stuff in the future. I wouldn't mind teaching pre-school.
10. Yes, I just recently finished my GED and would like to become a nurse at some point in the future.

APPENDIX O: SCHOOL APPROVAL LETTER

April 30, 2014

Dr. Verlyn Evans, Assistant Professor
School of Education
Liberty University
1971 University Blvd.
Lynchburg, VA 24502

Dear Dr. Evans:

This letter is being sent to notify you that Mr. Richard (Rick) Wieringo, Ed.D. candidate at Liberty University, has permission to conduct his research/study entitled, "A Case of the Experiences of Students with Disabilities Who Did Not Complete High School," in our school division. I have met with him, reviewed his basic protocol, and found all to be in order thus far.

Please contact me at [redacted] if you need additional information and/or clarification.

Yours truly,

[redacted]
Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources

APPENDIX P: LIBERTY UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

June 24, 2014

Richard Warner Wieringo
IRB Approval 1868.062414: A Case Study of the Experiences of Students with Disabilities Who Did Not Complete High School

Dear Richard,

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

Please retain this letter for your records. Also, if you are conducting research as part of the requirements for a master's thesis or doctoral dissertation, this approval letter should be included as an appendix to your completed thesis or dissertation.

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

Sincerely,

[redacted]

Professor, IRB Chair
Counseling

(434) 592-4054

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APPENDIX Q: GUIDELINE AND BEHAVIOR CHECKLIST FOR USE DURING PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Date: _____

Participant ID: _____

Time Observation Began: _____

Time Observation Ended: _____

Observer: (Maybe not necessary if the researcher is the sole observer)

Location:_____

How often does the participant visit this location?

❒ Daily ❒ Several times/month

❒ Several times/week ❒ Monthly

❒ Weekly ❒ Other

For what purpose does the participant visit this location?

❒ Work ❒ Social ❒ Other

Indicate in the table below behavior observed during the observation period.

Behavior Checklist:

Behavior	**Observed**	**Comments**
1. Appropriate nonverbal greeting (e.g., smiling, waving)		
2. Appropriate nonverbal listening (e.g., nodding)		
3. Appropriate eye contact		

Behavior	Observed	Comments
4. Lacking appropriate eye contact (e.g., looking down)		
5. Ignoring/not responding to others (e.g., failure to greet, listen)		
6. Engaged in conversation		
7. Speech problems/difficulty communicating		
8. Included by other(s)		
9. Ignored by other(s)		
10. Withdrawn/keeps to self		
11. Day dreaming		
12. Inattentiveness/distraction		
13. Stares blankly		
14. Confused, seems to be in fog		
15. Negative affect		
16. Positive affect		
17. Smiling		
18. Lack of affect		
19. Sudden change in mood or feeling		
20. Irritability		
20. Sulking		
21. Argumentative with other(s)		
22. Swearing or inappropriate language		
23. Hostility or aggression		
24. Disliked by other(s) (e.g., others express frustration, irritability)		
25. Fearfulness, anxiety		
26. Restlessness, fidgeting, or nervous movements		
27. Hyperactivity		
28. Overtired, low energy		
29. Complaint or expression of physical ailment (e.g., aches, pains, nausea, headache)		
30. Nose picking/picking other parts of the body		
31. Poor coordination/ clumsiness		
32. Self-consciousness/ embarrassment		
33. Shyness		

Behavior	Observed	Comments
34. Quiet, mumbling speech		
35. Loud talking		
36. Attention-seeking behavior (i.e., showing off or clowning)		