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FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO YOUNG MEN OF COLOR DROPPING OUT OF HIGH SCHOOL AND EXPERIENCING INCARCERATION: WHAT INFLUENCED THEIR DECISION TO RETURN TO SCHOOL AND GRADUATE?

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THEIR DECISION TO RETURN TO SCHOOL AND GRADUATE?

By

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education
Educational Leadership

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

May, 2020

Dedication

I dedicate this work first to God, my husband, children and grandchildren who are my inspiration for everything I accomplish in life. I also want to dedicate this work to my parents and grandparents who instilled in me the importance of education, and strong morals and values to live my life by. I also appreciate the love and support from the rest of my family and all my friends and colleagues who have encouraged me throughout this process over the years and have inspired me to finish this important work.

This work is also dedicated to all my professors who believed in my passion for this study and encouraged, supported and helped me to persist through completion. Additionally, I want to dedicate this work to the late Dr. John Mondragon, Professor Emeritus from the University of New Mexico who planted the seed that started me on this journey of pursuing my doctorate in Educational Leadership.

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ABSTRACT

Dropping out of high school is an issue that disproportionately affects the lives of young men of color in New Mexico and across the country. While there are multiple reasons that impact a student's decision to drop out of school, it is often compounded by other factors that also lead to incarceration.

This study focused on young men of color who dropped out of school, experienced incarceration, and through this process made the decision to return to school and earn a high school diploma. This study was performed at a charter high school in a southwestern state. The mission of this high school focuses on working with incarcerated adults on probation, regardless of their age, who are interested in earning their high school diploma.

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Chapter One:

Introduction

Dropping out of high school is an issue that disproportionately affects the lives of young men of color in New Mexico and across the country. While there are multiple reasons that impact a student's decision to drop out of school, it is often compounded by other factors that also lead to incarceration.

The National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) *Condition of Education 2016 Report* states:

The adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) for New Mexico measured the graduation rate gap between Black students 62% and White students 75%, and there was a 13% difference in graduation rates (2016, p. 185). For Hispanic students, the graduation rate gap measured 67%, and it was measured at 75% for White students. The difference in the graduation rates of these two groups of students was 8%. The data confirm that Black and Hispanic students are still lagging behind their White peers in graduating on time with a high school diploma. (2016, p. 187)

Nationally, nearly 50% of African American youth and nearly 40% of Latino youth attend high schools from which graduation is not the norm. High school dropouts are three and a half times more likely than high school graduates to be arrested and eight more times as likely to be in jail or prison. (Christeson, 2008, p. 1)

This study will focus on young men of color who have dropped out of school, experienced incarceration, and through this process have made the decision to return to school and earn a high school diploma. This study will be performed at a charter high school in a southwestern state. The mission of this high school focuses on working with incarcerated adults on

probation, regardless of their age, who have chosen to enroll at this charter school and are interested in earning their high school diploma. This chapter provides the background for the study, information on the researcher, the problem statement, the significance of the study, the purpose statement, and the research questions that have inspired my motivation to perform this study. It also includes the assumptions, limitations, and delimitations of the study as well as definitions relevant to the study.

Background

The New Mexico Public Education Department (2017) states on its website under the tab "Graduation Requirements,"

> Dropping out of high school is no longer a viable option. High school dropouts in New Mexico face a 13 percent unemployment rate and earn an average income of $11,426. Nearly every good job requires some certification, license, apprenticeship, associate degree, or other advanced credential.

Also, according to the New Mexico Indicator-Based Information System (NM-IBIS), the New Mexico Public Education Department reports the most recent information on high school graduation rates for 2016 reflects that only 67% of male high school students who entered high school as freshmen, in what is called a *4-year cohort,* graduated with a high school diploma (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2016). All students entering New Mexico public high schools in any grade become members of an *on-time cohort.* Graduates are students who graduate with a standard diploma.

Today, thanks to a 2005 graduation rate compact supported by all 50 governors, the National Governors Association, and a 2008 federal regulation that adopted and improved that calculation, all 50 states report the same four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate

(ACGR). The AGCR is no longer an estimate, but a calculation that accounts for every single student with an individual student identifier. This increased the nation's confidence in its ability to measure progress and challenges across schools, districts, and states. The four-year ACGR is the number of students who graduate in four years with a regular high school diploma divided by the number of students who form the adjusted cohort for the graduating class. ACGR is the first graduation rate that adjusts the size of a cohort, which allows for an accurate calculation on the percentage of students who are graduating from high school on time (Civic Enterprises, 2017, p. 9). The national high school graduation rate hit 83.2% in 2015. This was the highest rate ever recorded. However, for the second year in a row, graduation rates rose by less than 1%. To reach a 90% high school graduation rate by the class of 2020, the nation will need to achieve and maintain an annual rate of growth of 1.36 percentage points for each of the next five years (Civic Enterprises, 2017, p. 15).

In the *2016 Diploma's Count Report* "State Maps" tab, where graduation rates are reported by state and student groups, New Mexico is still ranked among the states with the lowest graduation rates in the country at 69%. Similarly, the state rankings in the *2016 Quality Counts Report*, also produced by the Education Week Research Center in January 2016, places New Mexico 49th in the United States ahead of only Nevada and Mississippi. New Mexico scored an overall grade of "D," which is unchanged from 2015 when the state also ranked 49th.

Status dropout rates. National data continues to confirm that the sub-groups with the lowest achievement rates across the country predominantly consist of young men of color. According to the National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) *Condition of Education 2016 Report*, between 1990 and 2014 the male status dropout rate declined from

12.3% to 7.1%, with nearly the entire decline occurring after the year 2000 when it was still 12% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016, p. 190). The status dropout rate represents the percentage of 16- to 24-year-olds who are not enrolled in school (public or private) and have not earned a high school credential or an equivalency credential, such as the General Educational Development (GED) certificate (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016, p. 190). From 1990 to 2015 NCES reports that the Hispanic status dropout rate declined from 32% to 12%, while Black and White status dropout rates decreased by 6% and 4%, respectively. Nevertheless, the Hispanic status dropout rates in 2015 remained higher, at 12%, than White (5%) and Black (7%). The status dropout rates were lower for Whites than for Blacks and Hispanics (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015, p. 178).

The dropout crisis in America. Dropping out of high school is an issue that disproportionately impacts the lives of young men of color. "The Silent Epidemic" (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006) highlights the seriousness of the dropout crisis in America from the voices and perspectives of a representative group of high school dropouts. This report describes the reasons these students dropped out and what could have helped them finish high school. Each year, almost one-third of all public high school students and nearly one-half of all African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans fail to graduate from public high school with their class (Bridgeland et al., 2006). This tragic cycle has not substantially improved during the past few decades when educational reform has been high on the public agenda. Dropouts are much more likely than their peers who graduate to be unemployed, living in poverty, receiving public assistance, in prison, on death row, unhealthy, divorced, or single parents with children who drop out from high school

themselves. The central message of this report is: "While some students drop out because of significant academic challenges, most dropouts are students who could have, and believe they could have, succeeded in school" (Bridgeland et al., 2006, p. iii).

The survey and the results of the four focus groups in this report suggest these young people left high school without graduating despite career aspirations that required education beyond high school. A majority of these students reported having grades of a "C" or better. Also, the circumstances in these students' lives and an inadequate response to those circumstances from schools led to dropping out (Bridgeland et al., 2006, p. iii). This report views the dropout problem from the students' perspective, a viewpoint that has not been considered much in the past. Although these data are not a nationally representative sample, they do reflect a broad cross section of the people most affected by this issue (Bridgeland et al., 2006, p. 22). As stated in the report:

> There is no single reason why students drop out of high school. Respondents reported different reasons, a lack of connection to the school environment; a perception that school is boring; feeling unmotivated, academic challenges; and the weight of real-world events. (Bridgeland et al., 2006, p. iii)

In addition, the authors assert:

> This report's student survey and other national studies show that dropping out is a slow process of disengagement and that problems predictive of dropping out often emerge early in a student's life. Many of these problems appear to go unnoticed. (Bridgeland et al., 2006, p. 15)

In a report published in 2004 titled *Locating the Dropout Crisis: Which High Schools Produce the Nation's Dropouts? Where Are They Located? Who Attends Them?* authors Balfanz and Legters write,

> Every child has the capacity to succeed in school and life. Yet far too many children fail to meet their potential. Many students, especially those from poor and minority families, are placed at risk by school practices that sort some students into high quality programs and other students into low quality education. They believe that schools must replace the "sorting paradigm" with a "talent development" model that sets high expectations for all students and ensures that all students receive a rich and demanding curriculum with appropriate assistance and support. (p. iii)

The central findings for this study are:

- Nearly half of our nation's African American students and nearly 40% of Latino students and only 11% of White students attend high schools in which graduation is not the norm;

- Between 1993 and 2002, the number of high schools with the lowest level of success in promoting freshmen to senior status on time (a strong correlate of high dropout and low graduation rates) increased by 75%, compared with only an 8% increase in the total number of high schools;

- There are currently between 900 and 1,000 high schools in the country in which graduating is at best a 50/50 proposition;

- A majority minority high school is five times more likely to have weak promoting power (promote 50% or fewer freshmen to senior status on time) than a majority White school;

- Poverty seems to be the key correlate of high schools with weak promoting power, and most are located in northern and western cities and throughout the southern states;

- High schools with the worst promoting power are concentrated in a sub-set of 15 states where nearly 80% of the nation's high schools that produce the highest number of dropouts are located. Those states are Arizona, California, Georgia, Florida, Illinois, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Texas;

- While 20% of high schools that enroll more than 300 students are located in large and medium sized cities, 60% of the nation's high schools with the lowest levels of promoting power are found in these cities. Many cities have high concentrations of schools with weak promoting power;

- More than half of African American students in Illinois, Ohio, Michigan, New York, and Pennsylvania attend high schools in which the majority of students do not graduate on time, if at all. Five southern states (Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Florida, and Texas) collectively lead the nation in both total number of and level of concentration of high schools with weak promoting power. (Balfanz & Legters, 2004, p. vi)

The authors conclude with: "These findings are a call to action, and we must no longer tolerate the squandered potential, limited life chances and social malaise that result from poorly educating our nation's youth" (Balfanz & Letgers, 2004, pp. vi).

In 2004, Gary Orfield published a book titled *Dropouts in America* that revealed only half of our nation's minority students graduate from high school along with their peers. For

many groups, such as Latino, Black, or Native American males, graduation rates are even lower (Orfield, 2004, p. 21). Orfield writes,

> As states hasten to institute higher standards and high stakes tests in the effort to raise student achievement, this situation is likely to worsen, particularly among minority students. Yet this educational and civil rights crisis remains hidden from public view. (2004, p. 36)

A 2008 article titled "Avoidable Losses: High-Stakes Accountability and the Dropout Crisis" revealed in its study findings that in the state of Texas, whose standardized, high-stakes, test-based accountability system became the model for the nation's most comprehensive federal education policy in 1993, more than 135,000 youth are lost from the state's high schools every year (McNeil, Coppola, Radigan, & Heilig, 2008, p. 2). Dropout rates for African American and Latino youth were more than 60% for the students they followed in this seven-year study. An extensive ethnographic analysis of life in schools under federal education policy show the state's high-stakes accountability system has a direct impact on the severity of the dropout problem. This study carries great significance for national education policy because its findings show that disaggregation of student scores by race does not lead to greater equity but puts our most vulnerable youth (the poor, English language learners, and African American and Latino children) at risk of being pushed out of their schools so the school ratings can show "measurable improvement." High-stakes test-based accountability leads not to equitable educational possibilities for youth but to avoidable losses of these students from our schools (McNeil et al., 2008, p. 1).

Crime rates of high school dropouts. According to Christeson (2008):

A good education is not only critical to a young person's success in life; it is also one of the most fundamental crime prevention tools available. Kids who stay in school and graduate are more likely to become productive citizens and less likely to turn to crime. (p. 1)

Christeson's report (2008) references a bipartisan anti-crime organization, Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, with members in all 50 states. Members include over 4,000 police chiefs, sheriffs, prosecutors, and crime victims who promote greater public investment in programs proven to direct kids onto better paths in life, paths that lead them away from crime and towards success. An estimated three out of ten high school students do not graduate from high school on time. And of the more than 4.2 million Americans who turn 20 each year, 805,000 do not have a high school diploma or General Equivalency Development (GED) certificate. Nationally, nearly 50% of African American youth and nearly 40% of Latino youth attend high schools from which graduation is not the norm. Christeson adds, "High school dropouts are three and a half times more likely than high school graduates to be arrested and eight more times as likely to be in jail or prison" (2008, p. 1). This report maintains that the dropout crisis poses a significant threat to public safety. Throughout the country, 68% of state prison inmates have not received a high school diploma (as cited in Christeson, 2008, p. 2).

Economists Moretti and Lochner (as cited in Christeson, 2008), contributors to this report, say, "Staying in school even one year longer reduces the likelihood that a youngster will turn to crime; graduating from high school has a dramatic impact" (p. 2). Moretti and Lochner studied the relationship over time between changes in graduation rates and crime

and concluded that a 10% increase in graduation rates would reduce murder and assault rates by about 20% (Christeson, 2008, p. 3).

The consequences of high school dropouts to the national economy. The Alliance for Excellent Education (2010) reports that each year approximately 1.3 million students fail to graduate from high school, and more than half are students of color (p. 1). Approximately 2000 high schools (about 12%), known as the nation's lowest performing high schools, produced nearly half the nation's dropouts (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010, p. 2).

The nation's lowest performing high schools also produce 58% of all African American dropouts and 50% of all Hispanic dropouts, compared to 22% of all White dropouts (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010, p. 2). The report states, "Dropouts suffer from reduced earnings and lost opportunities; there are also significant social and economic costs to the rest of the nation" (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010, p. 3). The following examples of costs are cited:

- Over the course of his/her lifetime, a high school dropout earns, on average, about $260,000 less than a high school graduate;
- Dropouts from the class of 2010 alone will cost the nation more than $337 billion in lost wages over the course of their lifetimes;
- In the United States, if the likely dropouts from the class of 2006 had graduated, the nation could have saved more than $17 billion in Medicaid and in expenditures for uninsured healthcare over the course of those young people's lifetimes;
- If U.S. high schools and colleges were to raise the graduation rates of Hispanic, African American, and Native American students to the levels of White students

by 2020, the potential increase in personal income would add more than $310 billion to the U.S. economy;

- Increasing the graduation rates and college matriculation of male students in the United States by just 5% could lead to a combined savings and revenue of almost $8 billion each year by reducing crime-related costs. (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010, p. 3)

Information on the Researcher

I began my journey in education nearly 30 years ago. I am an educator who has always been known for doing things differently in the classroom to help kids succeed. I was chosen to open a new charter middle school in 2006. My work with kids for nearly three decades, in third grade through eighth grade both as a teacher and a middle school principal, has led me to understand what students need to be successful in school. My sole purpose in becoming a middle school principal was to experience the opportunity of having a greater influence on a larger number of students than I could have as a classroom teacher. My passion for teaching boys and understanding how they learn and what helps them to be successful in school and in life has been inspired by my own children. As a parent, I have learned it doesn't matter what path your children take to complete their high school diplomas. The path they choose has to fit who they are as individuals. As an educator, I have learned that the "one size fits all" approach in our traditional education system does not meet the needs of all students, especially those who are at the highest risk for failure in school.

At the end of the day, what really matters in education is that all students have the skills they need and the opportunity to be supported and guided in their school experiences so they can graduate and go on to college or career training to support themselves and their

families with dignity. I am inspired daily in my work by the strength of human spirit and the individual potential for success in the students with whom we work. They are resilient, and they have the resolve to overcome the challenging life and school experiences that have caused them great hardship and put them at-risk for failure in school.

Most of my career has been spent working in high-poverty schools with students of color and their families. As a classroom teacher, I was always given the most difficult boys in the school simply because no one else wanted them. I loved teaching, and it was natural for me to create a positive, nurturing, and supportive learning environment that was a safe place, open to all students and their families. I accepted and valued each of my students for who they were and the gifts and talents they brought with them into the classroom. I encouraged and guided their learning. I also helped them to understand their potential for success through their efforts and hard work. I worked individually with them to develop their academic skills, self-esteem, and confidence as learners and as young people of character. Throughout my years in the classroom, those "difficult" boys grew to trust me, and they opened up their hearts and minds to learning. My experiences with them were tough at times, as well as fun, with lots of hard work too. They just needed someone to take the time to care, to teach them, and to do so with respect, patience, kindness, and compassion. They also learned that their best chance for success was to invest in their futures by staying in school and graduating.

Outside of my classroom at several of the schools I taught, I frequently spoke with teachers who were frustrated with their students and their lack of grade-level skills. Year after year, I became increasingly dismayed and concerned with our traditional education system and the practice of social promotion. Social promotion tends to increase the risk of failure in school, particularly among young men of color who are not performing

academically at their grade level. While there are many factors that contribute to a student's decision to drop out of school, I believe the practice of social promotion during the past three decades has contributed to the high school dropout rates among young men of color.

Problem Statement

Some progress has been made in the past few years in the effort to increase the number of young men of color graduating from high school, but young men of color are still at the highest risk for dropping out and school failure. Educators and experts alike have come to realize that academic factors alone do not tell the whole story of what it means to drop out of high school. Academic, social, and environmental factors all play a significant role in the decision students make to drop out of school. As a result, young men of color are often limited in the opportunities they have to be gainfully employed to provide for themselves and their families. The probability also remains high that many dropouts will turn to crime, gangs, and drugs to earn a living. This creates unsafe family situations for children and adults, unsafe neighborhoods, and unsafe communities. Again, while dropping out of high school doesn't always lead to incarceration, the probability is high that a young man of color who doesn't have the skills or a high school diploma to pursue college or career training to enter the workforce will turn to a life of crime. This precarious journey changes their lives forever. For too many years, the educational system has, through various means including discriminatory practices and ill-designed interventions, enabled and tolerated students making poor choices about completing their high school education. The decision to drop out affects everyone. This familiar scenario for young men of color speaks loudly to the persistence of this dilemma and the negative impact it has on all citizens, communities, and

taxpayers. Until substantial progress is made to resolve this issue, it will also continue to

diminish the economic base of our local, state, and national economies.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is to understand the phenomenon of young men of color

dropping out of school and experiencing incarceration and the negative impact it has had on

their lives. It is also important to know what experiences influenced their decision to return to

school and graduate with a high school diploma.

My hope is that the results of this study will contribute to a set of recommendations

that help address the dropout problem and that its findings will also be helpful to educators

supporting young men of color, in particular, to graduate from high school. This study may

reveal ways to change the trajectory for young men of color, from dropping out of school to

returning to school and becoming more motivated, more confident in their abilities, and more

likely to graduate. To inspire young men of color to stay in school and graduate may require

teachers and school leaders to interact with them in a manner that more fully respects, values,

encourages, and supports their academic and personal success, starting with their preschool

experiences. I also hope that this study contributes in a positive way to the existing literature

in the field.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to research the factors and the experiences of young men

who dropped out of high school and failed to graduate, experienced incarceration, and then

made the decision to return to school to earn a high school diploma. Although some gains in

graduation rates have been made among the sub-groups of Hispanic, Native American, and

African American young men of color, high dropout rates and the ensuing low achievement

and under achievement of many young men of color still exists in disproportionate numbers.

Young men of color are dropping out of school and in many cases experiencing

incarceration, which leaves them without the knowledge and skills employers require in the

workforce. This ongoing crisis has a negative impact on the economic success of young men

of color and it also has lasting implications for their quality of life as productive citizens.

Research Questions

The research questions that direct this study are:

1. What academic, environmental, and social factors lead young men of color to

     their decision to drop out of high school?

This question is designed to explore the academic, environmental and social factors

young men of color experience in their lives that leads them to dropping out. The National

Dropout Prevention (2007) report establishes similar findings to Pallas, Natriello, and McDill

(1989) in that dropping out of school is related to a variety of factors that can be classified in

four areas or domains: individual, family, school, and community. There is no single risk

factor that can be used to accurately predict who is at risk of dropping out; instead multiple

risk factors across multiple domains and the complex interactions among the risk factors with

each other are cited. Dropouts are not a homogenous group. Many subgroups of students can

be identified based on when risk factors emerge; the combinations of risk factors experienced

and how the factors influence these students are also evidenced. Dropping out of school is

often the result of a long process of disengagement that may begin before a child enters

school, and as these factors build, they oftentimes are compounded over time (Pallas et al.,

1989, pp. 1-2).

2. What factors lead them to incarceration?

This question is designed to explore the risk factors young men of color experience after dropping out of school that leads them to incarceration. Sutherland (2011) studied young people in three New Zealand youth justice facilities. She explored the compulsory school experience as perceived by young people who went on to commit serious criminal offenses. Sutherland identified the risk factors that contribute to the developmental pathways towards criminal offending. A significant finding was that although the school experience does not cause a young person to commit crimes, the cumulative effect of negative school experiences can result in a student's alienation from the education system, aggravating pre-existing risk factors that lead a vulnerable person towards chronic criminal offending. What also emerged from her research was the unique opportunity that schools provide to interrupt the pathway to youth offending through a process of early identification and timely intervention.

3. What changes occur in the lives and experiences of young men of color to influence their decision to return to school and graduate?

This question addresses the relationship between young men's experiences and the changes in their thinking or in their circumstances that motivates them to return to school and earn a high school diploma. In the article "Changing the Odds for Young People: Next Steps for Alternative Education," Conrath (2001) states, "Public education in the U.S. is certainly based on an ideology of equality, but that equality is still unrealized in practice" (p. 585). Conrath continues,

If alternative educators are to help children of poverty develop personally and obtain a high-quality education, they must show other educators what to do and persuade

them that the agenda of alternative schools is consistent with the ideology of public

education. (2001, p. 585)

The author maintains that, "Home is the most unequal environment in education, and school

should be an arena of equity" (p. 586). Conrath suggests, from his own experiences as an

educator, that of all the measurable differences there are between successful and unsuccessful

students, it is their family income that trumps all others. Conrath proposes all educators need

to be consistent regarding the desired outcome for youth, which is successful learning, but he

also comments that educators must be flexible in their strategies to accomplish that goal.

Conrath concludes that students differ in their intellectual and emotional attributes and in

their family and economic backgrounds. Treating them as if they are all the same simply

guarantees that some students will fall by the wayside. Conrath believes true equity in

schools calls for using different means to bring everyone to the same end... graduating with a

high school diploma.

Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations

Before research begins, I will analyze my own limitations as an insider who

understands the challenges faced by males of color. I will constantly remind myself to stay

open to new perspectives, to be true to the process and to follow the ethical guidelines of

researchers in every step of the study. I am committed to being open and ethical through this

process and I have no preconceived assumptions regarding the future findings for this study.

The delimitations of this study are specific to investigating the factors and

experiences related to young men of color dropping out of school, becoming incarcerated,

and graduating with a high school diploma. The charter high school located in a southwestern

state was chosen as the site to perform the research because of its population of students and

the fact that the students had all experienced these phenomena. The survey instrument was not limited to only men of color; it was administered to all men enrolled at the high school not currently incarcerated, with no preferences being made for their ethnicity. The survey was anonymous and voluntary. I also chose close-ended Likert scale responses for the majority of the questions in the survey instead of open-ended response questions in hopes of more people being willing to complete the survey. The audio-recorded interviews were limited to eight volunteer participants who were young men of color who meet the criteria of the study. I chose this course of study to help improve the educational outcomes for young men of color who continue to have the highest dropout rates in New Mexico and the nation.

The limitations of this study consist of participants being from only one study site: a charter high school located in a southwestern state. This is a co-ed high school serving students in grades nine through twelve. The female students at this high school were not included in this study. Limitations in qualitative research analysis involve the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data that are not easily reduced to numbers. The survey provided quantitative data to analyze but was limited in terms of giving the participants the opportunity to share more in-depth insights of their life experiences. The interview questions in this study were self-reported, meaning that the information came directly from the participants with no assistance from the researcher. This process allowed the participants to describe their life experiences and the behaviors that led to their decision to drop out of school, become incarcerated, and to graduate with a high school diploma. The time constraints of performing the research were limited to the 2018-2019 school year at this high school site. During this time, the researcher had unlimited access to the participants. The findings from this study cannot be generalized to the larger population because the definition

of the population is specific to young men of color. As a result, different researchers can reach different conclusions for the same observation.

Definition of Terms

At-risk – At-risk students are those children at any grade level who are at-risk of being unsuccessful at school. In the early grades, these children can be identified by their lack of success, either academically, because they cannot read or do math as well as other students, or socially, because their behaviors seem aberrant or out of the mainstream. These attributes describe children at-risk from the early grades through high school (Westfall & Pisapia, 1994).

Dropout – A term used to denote a student who failed to graduate from high school and who did not earn a high school diploma (Bowers, Sprott, & Taff, 2013).

Graduate – A term used to describe students who begin as freshmen with their cohort and graduate on time, in four years, with a high school diploma (Zaff et al., 2016).

Incarceration – A term used to describe the experience of a person being isolated from mainstream society, losing their freedom, having their communication severely limited, being forced to conform to a rigid routine, and experiencing a loss of identity (Wildeman, Turney, & Schnittker, 2014).

Status dropout rate – The status dropout rate represents the percentage of 16- to 24-year-olds who are not enrolled in school (public or private) and have not earned a high school credential or an equivalency credential such as the General Educational Development (GED) certificate (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015).

Conclusion

My hope is that this study will increase our knowledge and understanding as educators about the underlying factors that contribute to the decision young men of color make to drop out of school. We also need to learn about the circumstances that lead them to incarceration and whether or not dropping out was related to that experience. What changes occur in their lives when they make the decision to return to school and graduate? These are pressing questions that will help us to deepen our understanding of the serious life challenges that many young men of color face, from early childhood and well beyond adolescence that puts them at risk for school failure. Hopefully, the findings from this study will help us to find ways to better support young men to stay in school and graduate.

For many years there has been a public call to increase the accountability of schools, to reform education, and to seek solutions addressing low student achievement, particularly among sub-groups of students. Since 2005, with the reform efforts we have seen in education thus far, some gains have been made in high school graduation rates in New Mexico and the nation; however, these gains are not significant enough to change the outcomes for many minority students, especially young men of color.

Chapter Two:

Literature Review

This study examines the factors that contribute to the decision young men of color make to drop out of high school. In many cases this decision leads them to incarceration and into the criminal justice system. Through these difficult experiences, many of these young men endure changes in their lives that motivate them to return to school and graduate. Young men of color who drop out of high school and become incarcerated are often deprived of the opportunities to experience success in their lives and to become productive and contributing citizens of their communities and our country. Unfortunately, the probability is high that many dropouts will turn to crime, gangs, and drugs to earn a living. This creates unsafe family situations for children and adults, unsafe neighborhoods, and unsafe communities. While dropping out of high school doesn't always lead to incarceration, the probability is high that a young man of color will turn to crime if he doesn't have a high school diploma to pursue college or career training or the skills to enter the workforce.

Search Description and Conceptual Framework

The search description for this literature review will help answer the research questions:

1. What academic, environmental, and social factors lead young men of color to their decision to drop out of high school?

2. What factors lead them to incarceration?

3. What changes occur in the lives and experiences of young men of color to influence their decision to return to school and graduate?

A number of different search results were useful in identifying the factors and influences related to the study. Investigations of critical race theory and cultural capital were selected as the theoretical and conceptual frameworks for this study. The ideology of critical race theory (CRT) provides a theoretical framework that examines how conceptions of citizenship and race interact and shifts the lens away from a deficit view of communities of color as full of poverty and disadvantage. The tenets of cultural capital provide a conceptual framework of capital nurtured through cultural wealth that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged. Recognizing cultural capital is important because it emphasizes valuing the resources and strengths of students and what they bring to the classroom from their homes and their communities. Historical literature informs the discussion on how the terms *educationally disadvantaged* and *at-risk* were developed to identify students and the factors that can lead to the decision to drop out of school. Current peer-reviewed research articles and books were also used to examine the lives and educational experiences of minority populations, including the impact of poverty on learning and how critical care implemented through transformative leadership can change the outcomes for students in high poverty schools.

The History of Critical Race Theory

Ladson-Billings (1998) writes:

Critical race theory (CRT) first emerged as a counter-legal scholarship to the positivist and liberal legal discourse of civil rights. This scholarly tradition argues against the slow pace of racial reform in the United States. Critical race theory begins with the notion that racism is normal in American society. It departs from mainstream legal scholarship by sometimes employing storytelling. It critiques liberalism and

argues that Whites have been the primary beneficiaries of civil rights legislation. Since schooling in the USA purports to prepare citizens, CRT looks at how citizenship and race might interact. (p. 7)

Critical race theory is an outgrowth of and a separate entity from an earlier legal movement called critical legal studies (CLS). Critical legal studies are a leftist legal movement that challenged the traditional legal scholarship that focused on doctrinal and policy analysis (Gordon, 1990) in favor of a form of law that spoke to the specificity of individualized groups in social and cultural contexts. Critical legal studies scholars also challenged the notion that "The civil rights struggle represents a long, steady march toward social transformation" (Crenshaw, 1988, p. 1334). According to Crenshaw (1988), "Critical [legal] scholars have attempted to analyze legal ideology and discourse as a social artifact which operates to recreate and legitimate American society" (p. 1350). Scholars in the CLS movement decipher legal doctrine to expose its internal and external inconsistencies and to reveal the ways that "legal ideology has helped create, support, and legitimate America's present class structure" (Crenshaw, 1988, p. 1350).

Ladson-Billings (1998) contends one of the places to begin understanding CRT is to examine how conceptions of citizenship and race interact. CRT scholars assert that the USA is a nation conceived and built on property rights (Bell, 1987; Harris, 1993). In the early history of the nation, only propertied White males enjoyed the franchise. The significance of property ownership as a prerequisite to citizenship was tied to the British notion that only people who owned the country, not merely lived in it, were eligible to make decisions about it. African Americans represented a particular conundrum because not only were they not accorded individual civil rights because they were not White and owned no property, but

they were constructed as property. However, that construction was only in the sense that they could be owned by others. They possessed no rights of property ownership. Whites, on the other hand, according to Harris (1993), benefited from the construction of whiteness as the ultimate property.

Possession – the act necessary to lay basis for rights in property – was defined to include only the cultural practices of Whites. This definition laid the foundation for the idea that whiteness – that which Whites alone possess – is valuable and is property (Harris, 1993, p. 1721).

In the modern era, the intersection of school and law provided fertile ground for testing and enacting civil rights legislation. The landmark Brown v. Board of Education decision in 1954 generated a spate of school desegregation of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas; the New Orleans Public Schools; the University of Mississippi; the University of Alabama; and the University of Georgia. One recurring theme that characterized the school/civil rights legal battles was equal opportunity. This notion of equal opportunity was associated with the idea that students of color should have access to the same school opportunities (i.e., curriculum, instruction, funding, and facilities) as White students. This emphasis on sameness was important because it helped boost the arguments for equal treatment under the law that were important for moving African Americans from their second-class status (Ladson-Billings, 1998, pp. 17-18).

Ladson-Billings (1998) uses the areas of curriculum, instruction, assessment, school funding, and desegregation as exemplars of the relationship that can exist between CRT and education as follows:

- Curriculum – CRT sees the official school curriculum as a culturally specific artifact designed to maintain a White supremacist master script. The rigor of the curriculum and access to what is deemed enriched curriculum also need to be considered;

- Instruction – CRT suggests that current instructional strategies presume that African American students are deficient, cast in a language of failure. Instructional approaches for African American students typically involve some aspect of remediation;

- Assessment – CRT sees intelligence testing as a movement to legitimatize African American student deficiency under the guise of scientific rationalism. Traditional assessment measures fail to tell us what students actually know and are able to do;

- School funding – CRT argues that inequality of school funding is a function of institutional and structural racism. Almost every state fund schools based on property taxes. Those areas with property of greater wealth typically have better funded schools (pp. 18-21).

CRT relates to the research questions of this study in terms of trying to understand how racism, inequality in the treatment of young men of color, lack of support, and the delivery of inadequate educational services may contribute to the decision to drop out of high school.

Cultural Capital and Critical Race Theory

The conceptual framework to understand and explain the phenomena for this study draws upon cultural capital and critical race theory. In the article "Whose Culture has Capital? A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community and Cultural Wealth," Yosso (2005) challenges the ways race and racism implicitly and explicitly impact social structures,

practices, and discourses. Critical race theory (CRT) shifts the research lens away from a

deficit view of communities of color as places full of cultural poverty disadvantages and

instead focuses on the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed by

socially marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged. Various forms

of capital nurtured through cultural wealth include:

1. *aspirational capital* – Refers to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the

   future, even in the face of real or perceived barriers;

2. *linguistic capital* – Includes the intellectual and social skills attained through

   communication experiences in more than one language and/or style;

3. *familial capital* – Refers to cultural knowledge nurtured among *familia* (kin) that

   carry a sense of community history, memory, and cultural intuition;

4. *social capital* – This can be understood as networks of people and community

   resources;

5. *navigational capital* – Refers to skills of maneuvering through social institutions;

6. *resistant capital* – Refers to knowledge and skills fostered through oppositional

   behavior that challenges inequality. (Yosso, 2005, pp. 77-81)

These forms of capital draw on the knowledge students of color bring with them from

their homes and communities into the classroom. The CRT approach to education involves a

commitment to develop schools that acknowledge the multiple strengths of communities of

color (Yosso, 2005, p. 30). Yosso (2005) states,

To document and analyze the educational access, persistence and graduation of

underrepresented students, I draw upon my interdisciplinary training and those

theoretical models whose popularity may have waned since the 1960s and 1970s, but

whose commitment to speaking truth to power continues to address contemporary

social realities. (p. 73)

She cites Solórzano and Solorzano (1995) and Solarzano and Villalpando (1998) who

identified five tenets of CRT that should inform theory, research, pedagogy, curriculum, and

policy. These five tenets of CRT are:

1. *The intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination* – CRT

   starts from the premise that race and racism are central, endemic, and permanent

   and a fundamental part of defining and explaining how US society functions

   (Bell, 1992; Russell, 1992).

2. *The challenge to dominant ideology* – CRT challenges White privilege and refutes

   the claims that educational institutions make toward objectivity, meritocracy,

   color blindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity.

3. *The commitment to social justice* – CRT is committed to social justice and offers a

   liberatory or transformative response to racial, gender, and class oppression

   (Matsuda, 1991).

4. *The centrality of experiential knowledge* – CRT recognizes that the experiential

   knowledge of people of color is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to

   understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination (Delgado-

   Bernal, 2002). CRT draws explicitly on the lived experiences of people of color

   by including such methods as storytelling, family histories, biographies,

   scenarios, parables, *cuentos* [stories], *testimonios* [testimonies], chronicles, and

   narratives.

5. *The transdisciplinary perspective* – CRT goes beyond disciplinary boundaries to analyze race and racism within both historical and contemporary contexts, drawing on scholarship from ethnic studies, women's studies, sociology, history, law, psychology, film, theatre, and other fields (Yosso, 2005, p. 74).

Yosso (2005) posits while these five themes are not new collectively, they represent a challenge to the existing modes of scholarship. This acknowledges the contradictory nature of education, wherein schools most often oppress and marginalize while they maintain the potential to emancipate and empower. When the ideology of racism is examined and racist injuries are named, victims of racism can often find their voices. Those injured by racism and other forms of oppression discover they are not alone and moreover they are part of a legacy of resistance to racism and the layers of racialized oppression. They become empowered participants hearing their own stories and the stories of others, listening to how the arguments against them are framed, and learning to make the arguments to defend themselves (Yosso, 2005, p. 75).

The Deficit Thinking Model as it Relates to School Failure

The work of Richard Valencia (2010) on the deficit thinking model is explored in this study. In his book *Dismantling Contemporary Deficit Thinking: Educational Thought and Practice,* Valencia focuses on how scholars, educators, and policymakers have advanced the deficit thinking model to explain school failure, particularly among low socioeconomic status (SES) students of color. Minority students suffer substantial overrepresentation among those who experience academic problems and school failure. These students continue to be targets of the deficit thinking model. Intellectual discourse blames the students, their cultures, and their families for diminished academic success (Valencia, 2010, p. xvi).

Valencia (2010) also examines the historical and contemporary discourse of the *at-risk* notion. The at-risk notion was popularized in the 1980s, and policymakers (and later researchers) utilized the term in a predictive scheme to identify students (generally low SES pupils of color) who were prone to experience school failure, particularly dropping out of school. Valencia also asserts that the deficit thinking model overlooks any strengths and potential that students bring to the classroom. A student who is labeled *at-risk* draws attention to the presumed personal and familial shortcomings of the individual. As such, being *at-risk* has become a person-centered explanation of school failure. The at-risk notion fits under the rubric of deficit thinking; the construct pays little, if any, attention to how schools are institutionally implicated in ways that exclude students from optimal learning (Valencia, 2010, p. xvii).

Another example of the deficit thinking model in education and the impact it has on teaching and learning was written in a 2010 article by author Henry Giroux, who examines the reasons for the declining role of the tradition of public school teaching that was once embraced in the past as an important public service. He writes that, "Teachers provided a crucial foundation for educating young people in the values, skills, and knowledge that enabled them to be critical citizens capable of shaping and expanding democratic institutions" (Giroux, 2010, p. 709). He proposes in this article that in recent years a poisonous transformation of both the role of the public school and the nature of teacher work abound due to the passage of laws promoting high stakes testing for students and the use of test scores to measure teacher quality. He continues that both have limited the autonomy of teacher authority and devalued the possibility of critical thinking and visionary goals for student learning. He asserts: "Removed from the normative and pedagogical framing of

classroom life, teachers no longer have the option to think outside of the box, to experiment, be poetic, or inspire joy in their students" (Giroux, 2010, p. 710). Giroux cites David Price (2003),

> Today a lucrative industry of test designers estimated to be worth between $700 million and one billion dollars a year is followed by a kowtowing curriculum industry rolling across America like a fleet of ambulance chasers – pitching textbooks, worksheets and bric-a-brac designed to help districts more effectively 'teach to the test.' These tests are no longer diagnostic aids helping teachers identify the status of individual students – they have become ends unto themselves. (Price, 2003, p. 718)

> Giroux (2010) proposes that if the right-wing educational reform being championed by the Obama administration and many state governments continues unchallenged, America will become a society in which a highly trained, largely White elite will continue to command the techno-information revolution while a vast, low-skilled majority of poor and minority workers will be relegated to filling the McJobs proliferating the service sector. The children of the rich and privileged will be educated in exclusive private schools and the rest of the population, mostly poor and non-White will be offered bare forms of pedagogy suitable to work in the dead-end, low-skill service sector of society, assuming these jobs will be available. In conclusion, he writes that students deserve more than being trained to be ignorant and willing accomplices of the corporation and the empire. Teachers represent a valued resource and are one of the few groups left that can educate students in ways that enable them to resist the collective insanity that now threatens this country (Giroux, 2010, pp. 709-714).

In a 2006 article titled "Challenging Deficit Thinking," Lois Weiner writes about the need for urban teachers to question unspoken assumptions about the sources of their students' struggles. She says that we know from research on urban schools that impersonal, bureaucratic school culture undercuts many of the teaching attitudes and behaviors that draw on student strengths (Weiner, 2006, p. 42). She also states, "This bureaucratic culture fosters the pervasive assumption that when students misbehave or achieve poorly, they must be 'fixed' because the problem inheres in the students or their families, not in the social ecology of the school, grade, or classroom" (Weiner, 2006, p. 42). She believes the deficit paradigm is so deeply embedded in urban schools that it mirrors a proclivity in national debates about a range of problems from childhood obesity, hyperactivity, and student behavior to other school assumptions and practices. Weiner says these issues emerge from the deficit paradigm that often hides student and teacher abilities. These assumptions are especially powerful because they are unspoken. We overlook our taken-for-granted ideas and practices to an extraordinary degree. She explains that educators may become discouraged when they come face-to-face with unquestioned practices and conditions because they know they cannot eliminate these practices on their own. She suggests what we can all do is acknowledge deficit explanations and examine them critically. This illuminates possibilities that have eluded us, including strategies that focus on student strengths (Weiner, 2006, p. 43).

Weiner (2006) gives two examples of real-life problems in the classroom with students who are disruptive and students who are using inappropriate language toward each other. Both strategies that she offers to reinforce students' strengths in a positive and supportive way result in improved student behavior and language usage in the classroom. She articulates that there are two variations of deficit thinking. The first variation casts "student

and family deficits" as the cause of poor achievement. Teachers find this seductive because it locates responsibility outside their classrooms. The second variation presents "teacher characteristics and deficits" as the only factor that really counts in undermining student learning. In these real-life situations, Weiner suggests that the students and the teachers taught each other in a synergistic way. They were able to work through the assumptions reinforced by school practices, traditions, and political and social conditions which initially obscured both student's and teacher's strengths. Their success in altering their classrooms to capitalize on the strengths possessed by the students and the teachers has implications far beyond schools that serve primarily poor, minority, or urban students. She concludes the article by stating, "As social and political changes alter the face of public education, it becomes increasingly important that all educators scrutinize and challenge tacit assumptions" (Weiner, 2006, p. 46).

Minority students continue to be the focus of school failure today and are disproportionately represented as the sub-group who experiences the highest level of academic problems leading to dropping out of school. The deficit thinking model illuminates the issues with this line of thought and advocates to diminish the persistence of the conversation that blames students, their families or their cultures for school failure.

The Historical Perspective of the Concepts *Educationally Disadvantaged* and *At-Risk*

It is important to understand from a historical lens how the terms *educationally disadvantaged* and *at-risk* came to be and how the nature of these terms provide insight about the environmental, academic, and social factors that impact young men of color and their decision to drop out of school. In this section, a descriptive account of the historical research studying the challenges of the economically disadvantaged helps us to understand this earlier

point of view and the challenges students, their families and schools face in meeting the

needs of this population as it relates to this dilemma. The research of Pallas, Natriello, and

McDill (1989) provides an interesting perspective on the state of the economically

disadvantaged population in the United States, pre-No Child Left Behind policy. The authors

use the term *educationally disadvantaged* to describe a projection of the socio-demographic

changes in the disadvantaged population between the years 1986-2020. They also consider

the challenges likely to be present in U.S. schools during this period (Pallas, Natriello, &

McDill, 1989, p. 16). Their concern, in 1986, was that our education system wasn't ready

then, and still wouldn't be ready in 2020, to deal effectively with the much higher number of

educationally disadvantaged students. The experiences of disadvantaged students in U.S.

schools received attention from policymakers, practitioners, and researchers. There was

concern for the continued plight of the disadvantaged youth in American schools. The

authors were working to formulate a definition for the educationally disadvantaged, review

their current socio-demographic characteristics, and project the likely changes in the

disadvantaged population over the next generation (Pallas et al., 1989,

p. 16).

Since the 1960s, various definitions by analysts have been proposed for the term

educationally disadvantaged. Pallas et al. (1989) borrowed from the work of previous

analysts and placed their definition within an emerging understanding of education as a

process that takes place both inside and outside of the schools. They viewed experiences as

coming not only from formal schooling but also from the family and the community.

Educationally disadvantaged students are likely to have been exposed to inappropriate

experiences in at least one of the three institutional domains of family, school, and

community (Pallas et al., 1989, p. 16). Although the first assessment of the consequences of such experiences may surface in the schools, where student performance is formally assessed, the source of the problem may rest with the school and/or the family and in the community where the student is raised. The authors assert:

> First, families and communities may be viewed as educationally deficient without necessarily being socially deficient. Second, the deficiencies in any or all of these three domains may continue as students mature and move through the school system. Their definition of 'educationally disadvantaged' allows for some variation in the disadvantaged population. Their realization that the sources of the deficiencies may rest with the school, the family, or the community or all three sensitized the authors as they moved to identify the size and location of the educationally disadvantaged population. (Pallas et al., 1989, p. 16)

Not all poor children are educationally disadvantaged, nor are all non-White children or all children from single-parent households. On average, each of these measurable characteristics is associated with low levels of educational achievement. Measures such as poverty status, racial/ethnic group identity, and family composition may signal not only limitations on family resources in support of education but also the limitations on the resources available to and used by students from their schools and communities. Some indicators, such as poverty, may be associated with inadequate resources for education in all of the major educating institutions to which young people are exposed: the family, the school, and the community. Pallas et al. (1989) consider five key indicators associated with the educationally disadvantaged: 1) minority racial/ethnic group identity, 2) living in a

poverty household, 3) living in a single-parent family, 4) having a poorly educated mother, and 5) having a non-English background (p. 17).

Each indicator is correlated with poor performance in school, although not always for commonly understood or agreed upon reasons. These indicators are not independent, in that a child living in a single-parent family also is likely to be living in a poverty household. Some children may be classified as educationally disadvantaged based on several of these indicators, which the authors believe put them at greater risk of educational failure than if only one indicator applied to them (Pallas et al., 1989, p. 17).

Minority racial/ethnic group status is perhaps the best-known factor associated with being educationally disadvantaged because, historically, members of certain minority groups have performed more poorly in schools than White children (Pallas et al., 1989, p. 17). Hispanic and Black youth are less likely to complete high school than White youth (Pallas et al., 1989, p. 17). In 1983, the anecdotal evidence suggested that, in some central cities, the school dropout rate of Black and Hispanic youth exceeded 60%. A key source of the educational disadvantages faced by Black and Hispanic children is that so many live-in households below the poverty line. In 1984, the poverty rate for White children was 16.1%, whereas 38.7% of Hispanic children were living in poverty households, and 46.2% of Black children were living in poverty (Pallas et al., 1989, p. 17).

The primary caretaker for most children is the mother. Hence, mothers' characteristics, including their own schooling experiences, are especially important in structuring the educational environment of the home. Children of poorly educated mothers do worse in school and leave school earlier than children of better-educated mothers. In part, this is because better educated mothers have more knowledge of their children's schooling,

have more social contact with school personnel, and are better managers of their children's academic careers (Baker & Stevenson, 1986, p. 17).

There are two important implications to be drawn from the analyses of Pallas, Natriello, and McDill (1989). First, the magnitude of the problem suggests that considerable additional public resources must be devoted to schooling if we hope to be able to address the problems of disadvantaged youth. Such resources will be necessary on an unprecedented scale if we are to mount a serious attack on the problems of the educationally disadvantaged. The second implication is that it will require a new means for delivering educational services to the disadvantaged. Pallas et al. (1989) conclude:

> Policy makers and educators will require new theoretically grounded approaches to delivering educational services to students with varied and unpredictable educational problems. A variety of approaches must be developed to make schools more responsive to the needs of students. These approaches might include a re-examination of traditional features of schools such as rules and procedures, special programs, the distribution of authority and decision-making, and the setting of goals and standards. (p. 21)

Educators must become more aware of and involved in the family and community contexts of their students to understand the problems these contexts present for the education of students and to learn to draw on the strengths of families and communities to enhance the education of students. This will require a major effort on the part of educators who in recent years have often withdrawn from involvement with the families and communities of their students (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987).

Henry Levin wrote a working paper in 1985 titled *The Educationally Disadvantaged Are Still Among Us*. In this paper he wrote, "All student populations include substantial individual variations in educational performance. However, by virtue of the accident of birth, some groups of students are likely to experience only the most limited educational progress in the present school system" (Levin, 1985, p .10). He proposed that persons from non-White, Hispanic, and immigrant families and from households where parents have low income and little education tend to complete fewer years of schooling. They also are more likely to drop out of high school and show lower test scores in virtually all academic subjects than their more advantaged peers. These are the educationally disadvantaged (Levin, 1985, p. 10).

Levin (1985) maintained it wasn't until the 1960s that schools began to explicitly recognize that disadvantaged students needed to be provided with a tailored educational program in order to succeed. He stated, "Up to that point, the blame for educational failure of students fell on the students and their families, with schools taking little responsibility" (Levin, 1985, p. 12). He predicted the disadvantaged population would increase in numbers and they would become the majority in the public-school population. He suggested that the potential consequences of inaction would lead to reduced economic competition of the nation, states, and industries. He also anticipated higher costs of public services associated with poverty and crime, massive disruption in higher education, and the emergence of a dual society with a large and poorly educated underclass (Levin, 1985, p. 16).

As Westfall and Pisapia (1994) assert in their characterization of disadvantaged students:

At-risk students are those children at any grade level who are at-risk of being

unsuccessful at school.... In the early grades, these children can be identified by their

lack of success, either academically, because they cannot read or do math as well as

other students, or socially, because their behaviors seem aberrant or out of the

mainstream. These attributes describe children at-risk from the early grades through

high school. In the later grades, at-risk students are those whose behaviors can

typically result in their dropping out of school. (p. 1)

Westfall and Pisapia (1994) suggest that three central groups of factors are

characteristic of at-risk students: 1) social and family background, 2) personal problems, and

3) school factors. Westfall and Pisapia concede that successful school programs work to meet

the needs of a child by developing programs and strategies to create a sense of belonging for

the child and by having a strong, committed, and unified staff and administration to work

effectively with these students. They name the attributes of successful school programs as: 1)

early intervention; 2) positive school climate; 3) effective school personnel; 4) small class

sizes to provide personalized and individualized attention; 5) parent involvement; 6) self-

esteem and support building; 7) guidance and mental health counseling; 8) social skills, life

skills, and vocational education; 9) peer involvement and extra-curricular activities; and 10)

easing grade level transitions (Westfall & Pisapia, 1994, p. 2). While they propose these are

the attributes of any strong school program, these elements may be especially crucial to those

students for whom school does not come easy. Schools that work well for every student

would also work well for those students who are typically labeled "at-risk" (Westfall &

Pisapia, 1994, p. 3).

Frazer (1991) writes that research on the dropout issue suggests that the number one predictive factor for school dropouts is being older than average for their grade. Similar to other studies, this research finds that poor and minority students are at the greatest risk of failure because such a wide gap exists between home and school.

Despite the presence of several risk factors, some students have developed characteristics and coping skills that help them. These "resilient" students can recover from or adapt to stress or life's problems. Also, when a student's culture does not match the school culture, that student will be at risk. We all want to believe that we work in a good school that provides equitable opportunities for success for all students. Research clearly indicates that students of differing cultural backgrounds benefit differentially from the efforts, methods, and culture of the instructor. It should be no surprise that schools "fit" the personality of the franchised and the wealthy better than they fit the culture of those without such socio-cultural benefits. Research suggests that it is also generally true that minorities benefit the least from the educational system. The task for schools is to allow the culture of all students to flourish without cramping the learning of any child. Teachers need to pay attention and think about their school's values and suppositions with reference to educational goals and objectives (Pransky & Bailey, 2002, p. 2).

Garard (1995) believes that educators and researchers need to acknowledge the importance of the environment as a factor in students being identified as "at-risk." He suggests that "at-risk" should be conceptualized as an intersection of external factors (socio-cultural context, community, schooling processes, and family) with internal factors emanating from the student's inner being. Such a model suggests that the hope of helping at-

risk students lies in creating environments that support success and in overcoming those environments that shape students who become at-risk (Garard, 1995, p. 2).

Duttweiler (1995) echoes other researchers in reminding us that every aspect of children's lives affects their ability to learn and succeed in school. However, conditions associated with poverty environments are major factors when students drop out. Children reared in home environments or in social backgrounds that result in developmental differences that mold them outside of the mainstream culture enter school with distinct educational disadvantages. It is more often that the school does not tolerate the children, than the children do not fit the school (Duttweiler, 1995, p. 2).

Schwartz (1991) critiques the idea that there is, in fact, an increased number of "students at risk." Such terminology, he notes, includes students who drop out, who become teenage mothers, or who are illiterate. He sees the use of the phrase "at-risk" as, itself, part of the greater problem, because the use of the "at-risk" label generates its own stigma, prejudice, segregation, and self-fulfilling validation (Schwartz, 1991, p. 2).

Poverty and Educational Inequity

How the education system is addressing the needs of impoverished students reveals the systemic issues that continue to plague schools today. Gorski (2007) reminds us that the education system and its inequities are the greater problem and that schools and teachers have a responsibility to create educational equity, to possess a willingness to be responsive to the needs of children, and to support students' success in the classroom (p.30).

Gorski (2007) states, "Educators' approach to understanding the relationships between poverty, class and education has been framed by studying the behaviors and cultures of poor students and their families" (p. 30). He writes:

It's all too easy, for even the most well-meaning of us, to help perpetuate classism by buying into that mindset, implementing activities and strategies for working with parents in poverty or teaching students in poverty that suggest we must "fix" poor people instead of eliminating the inequities that oppress them. (Gorski, 2007, pp. 30-31)

Gorski (2007) suggests that by not examining our own class-biased prejudices, we avoid the messy and painful work of analyzing how classism pervades classrooms and schools, never moving forward toward an authentic understanding of poverty, class, and education. He proposes that inequitable classroom conditions, high teacher turnover, overcrowded classrooms, less rigorous curriculum, and poor building conditions ["savage inequalities" in Jonathan Kozol's (1991) words] have nothing to do with a mindset or culture of poverty, nor with any other supposedly intrinsic or inherent value held by the people these conditions most impact. They are wholly disconnected from any measure of intelligence, eagerness to learn, or effort. Yet these conditions deeply influence learning and inhibit our most underserved students' access to equitable education (Gorski, 2007, p. 31).

According to Gorski (2007), regardless of whether a child living in poverty wants to learn, he/she must first overcome enormous barriers to life's basic needs—the kinds of needs that middle-class people take for granted: access to healthcare, sufficient food and lodging; and reasonably safe living conditions. He says none of these conditions speak to values or desires of students in poverty, although they may speak to the values of a nation that can afford to eliminate these inequities but chooses not to (Gorski, 2007, p. 32). Gorski proposes that injustices exist within education, which is considered the great equalizer. He believes the U.S. education system denies students in poverty the access and the opportunity it affords

other students. He asserts: "We must recognize that people living in poverty are fully aware of these discrepancies" (Gorski, 2007, p. 32).

Gorski (2007) also believes we should recognize "the resilience of a community that overcomes such insurmountable odds and continues to push, to strive, to learn and achieve" (p. 32). He suggests we must acknowledge that students and parents from poverty don't have the same access to material resources that their economically advantaged peers have. Gorski supports plans of action that reshape school and classroom practices to counter class inequities and injustices, that put the onus of responsibility for change on us and the system and not on the students and parents so historically underserved by U.S. schools. On an institutional level, this means fighting for systemic reform, insisting on a more equitable distribution of resources and opportunities in and out of school (Gorski, 2007, pp. 32-33).

This article revealed the institutional problems that students of color are exposed to because of poverty that undermines their achievement and emphasizes the barriers they must overcome to graduate from high school.

Drop Out Issues and Dropout Factories

In October 2011, author Russell Rumberger published a book titled *Dropping Out: Why Students Drop Out of High School and What Can Be Done About It.* He recounts that public high schools in the United States reported 607,789 students, or 4% of all students enrolled in grades 9-12, dropped out in 2008-09, and a higher number than that failed to graduate. It's estimated from the class of 2010 that 7000 students dropped out from public high schools across America each school day. The information on this issue is not new. In 1990, President George H. W. Bush adopted six National Education Goals for the year 2000. One of the goals was to increase the high school graduation rate to 90% and to eliminate the

gap in high school graduation rates between minority and non-minority students. Rumberger (2011) writes, "Sadly, as the figures above demonstrate, the nation fell well short of that goal" (p. 3).

Numerous studies and programs focusing on this issue have been performed at the national, state, and local levels. Since 1988, the federal government alone has spent more than $300 million on dropout prevention programs. Rumberger (2011) writes that there are a number of reasons why there is so much concern about this issue, including:

1. Dropping out of school is costly both for dropouts themselves and for society as a whole. Dropouts have difficulty finding jobs;

2. If they find a job, dropouts earn substantially less than high school graduates. Dropouts' poor economic outcomes are due in part to their low levels of education. Dropouts sometimes can and sometimes do return to school;

3. Dropouts experience other negative outcomes such as poorer health and higher rates of mortality than high school graduates. They are more likely than graduates to engage in criminal behavior and be incarcerated over their lifetimes;

4. The negative outcomes from dropouts generate huge social costs to citizens and taxpayers. Federal, state, and local governments collect fewer taxes from dropouts and the government subsidizes poorer health, higher criminal activity, and increased public assistance of dropouts;

5. The demographics of the dropout problem is a growing concern due to the proportion of students who are racial, ethnic, and linguistic minorities; who come from poor families; and who live in single-parent households. These are all factors associated with school failure and dropping out;

6. There is a growing push for accountability in the nation's public schools that has produced policies to end social promotion and to institute high school exit exams that could increase the number of students who fail to complete high school;

7. There is widespread concern over dropping out and that it is related to a host of other social problems facing adolescents today. (p. 6)

Rumberger (2011) states that dropouts report a wide variety of reasons for leaving school, reasons related to school, family, and work. "If many factors contribute to this phenomenon over a long period of time, it is virtually impossible to demonstrate a causal connection between any single factor and the decision to quit school" (Rumberger, 2011, p. 6). He notes that empirical research from a number of social science disciplines has identified two types of factors that lead students to drop out of school:

1. Individual factors associated with students themselves, such as their attitudes, behaviors, school performance, and prior experiences; and

2. Contextual factors found in students' families, schools, and communities (Rumberger, 2011, p. 7).

Rumberger (2011) stresses that dropping out is more of a process than an event. Students don't suddenly drop out of school. Many dropouts show patterns of early school failure, disruptive behavior, failing grades, and repeating a grade that eventually leads them to give up or be pushed out of school. He writes that if dropout prevention strategies are going to be effective, they must be comprehensive, providing resources and support in all areas of students' lives. Because dropouts leave school for a variety of reasons, services provided to them must be flexible and tailored to meet their individual needs, and dropout prevention strategies can and should begin early in a child's educational career. He notes that

often dropout prevention programs target middle school or high school students who may have already experienced years of educational failure or unsolved problems, and he reiterates that early intervention may be the most powerful and cost-effective approach to dropout prevention (Rumberger, 2011, p. 11).

According to Rumberger (2011), there are three alternative approaches used for improving dropout and graduation rates, and all three have a limited record of success. They are: 1) programmatic approaches which involve creating programs that target those students who are most at risk for dropping out or have already dropped out; 2) comprehensive approaches which involve school-wide reforms that attempt to change school environments to improve the outcomes for all students; and 3) systemic approaches which involve making changes to the entire educational system (Rumberger, 2011, p. 12). In the end, Rumberger argues that, "Substantially improving the nation's graduation rate will require more fundamental reforms, such as redefining high school success to include a broader array of skills and abilities that have been shown to improve labor-market performance and adult well-being" (2011, p. 16).

Cindy Long (2017) of *neaToday*, which is a National Education Association website, interviewed Deborah Feldman one of the authors of a book titled *Why We Drop Out; Understanding and Disrupting Student Pathways to Leaving School* (Feldman, Smith & Waxman, 2017). In this December 2017 online article, Feldman discusses the experiences and patterns of behavior that lead students to drop out of school. The authors interviewed 50 students who dropped out of high school. Feldman notes that the overwhelming majority of students they interviewed liked elementary school, and they regretted dropping out (Feldman, et al. 2017, p. 2). She notes that there is a "lack of interventions" by schools and by parents,

as recalled by students, for things such as truancy. She also discusses the distinct patterns many students had, such as the academic challenges they faced that undermined their faith in themselves as learners, and which eventually led to helplessness and hopelessness regarding their ability to be students. Math and algebra, specifically, seemed to be a common academic trip wire. Feldman asserts in the interview with Long: "There's often a tipping point that brings them to the edge — a bullying incident, feeling hopeless academically, like in math, or a suspension or expulsion or some kind of social problem that gets out of hand" (Feldman, et al. 2017, p. 3).

Feldman continues in the interview with Long (2017) that dropping out can be a long process. There are other issues students' face, such as moves to multiple schools where sometimes kids just give up trying to adjust. Many students start having problems with truancy in late elementary and early middle school, which eventually leads to dropping out. She also notes that students who come from damaging backgrounds, have mental health problems, problems at home, or drug or alcohol problems would be a challenge for schools to work with. Feldman also maintains:

> The majority of students who drop out are lower income, not necessarily living in poverty but come from struggling families. Many are kids of color. But the most common through line is having some kind of learning challenge that doesn't get addressed and the student feels academically abandoned. (Feldman, et al. 2017, p. 3)

Feldman recommends the following interventions in the interview to help students be more successful:

- Stabilizing kids at school who are experiencing major problems in their lives;

- Establishing an early warning system based on student absences, grades, or discipline issues and having a plan to respond to those students;

- Having school-wide orientations toward getting to know students and taking steps to make them feel they are an important part of everything, that they belong, and their voices are valued;

- Improving educators' awareness of their language and how it could be interpreted by kids as snide or sarcastic toward them;

- Helping kids feel like educators have their backs no matter what, and creating a solid school culture where students are listened to and valued;

- Having schools' partner with or host community centers where kids and families are welcomed and offered a place to be better connected to the school, especially for families who speak a different language. (Feldman, et al., 2017, p. 6)

Feldman concludes the interview by saying that homework is not necessarily a critical element of learning, and in order to help those students who may not have a home environment where they can effectively do homework, carving out time in class to do it and pairing students who can help each other is more effective (Long, 2017). She also recommends professional development for teachers to relinquish control of being the sole source of information in the classroom and instead have teachers be a guide for learning. Lastly, she states, "Traditional discipline creates dropouts. Restorative justice helps prevent them" (Long, 2017, p. 6).

In a Brookings paper on economic activity, Kearny and Levine (2016) cite "economic despair" (p. 1) as a possible contributor for low-income boys dropping out of school if they believe they don't have the ability to achieve middle-class status. Greater income gaps

between those at the bottom and middle of the income distribution lead low-income boys to drop out of school more often than their equally economically disadvantaged counterparts living in lower inequality areas, suggesting there is an important link between income inequality and reduced rates of upward mobility. This finding has implications for social policy, implying a need for interventions that focus on bolstering low-income adolescents' perceptions of what they can achieve in life (Kearny & Levine, 2016, p. 1).

Kearny and Levine (2016) observe that if low-income youth view middle-class life as out of reach, they might decide to invest less in their own economic future. The authors look specifically at high school dropout rates through a geographic lens, noting the link between highly variable rates of high school completion across the country. One quarter or more of those who start high school in the higher inequality states of Louisiana, Mississippi, Georgia, and the District of Columbia fail to graduate in a four-year period, as compared to only around 10% in the lower inequality states of Vermont, Wisconsin, North Dakota, and Nebraska. Their econometric analysis goes on to show that low-income youth, boys in particular, are 4.1% more likely to drop out of high school by age 20 if they live in a high-inequality location relative to those who live in a low-inequality location (Kearny & Levine, 2016, p. 1).

Kearny and Levine (2016) examined a number of potential explanations for this link, including differences in educational inputs, poverty rates, demographic composition, and other factors. Ultimately, the evidence suggests that there is something specific about areas with greater income gaps that lead low-income boys there to drop out of school at higher rates than low-income boys elsewhere. The authors' research suggests that adolescents make educational decisions based on their perceived returns on investment in their educational

development: a greater distance to climb to get to the middle of the income distribution could lead to a sense that economic success is unlikely, what they refer to as "economic despair" (Kearny & Levine, 2016, p. 2).

Kearny and Levine (2016) conclude that there are important policy implications for what types of programs are needed to improve the economic trajectory of children from low socio-economic backgrounds. Successful interventions would focus on giving low-income youth reasons to believe they have the opportunity to succeed, providing mentoring programs that connect youth with successful adult mentors, creating community programs that focus on establishing high expectations, and improving pathways to graduation. Also, there is a need for early childhood parenting classes to work with parents on providing nurturing home environments, which build self-esteem and engender positive behaviors for success in school. Expanded opportunities could focus on improving the actual return on investment for staying in school and could also focus on improving perceptions by giving low-income students a reason to believe they can be the "college going type" (Kearny & Levine, 2016, p 2).

The National Impact of Dropout Factories

High schools that graduate 60% or less of their students are called dropout factories. These schools produce 50% of the nation's dropouts, and two-thirds of these students are minority dropouts according to a report by the Alliance for Excellent Education (2010). These dropouts are highly influenced by poverty in the school locations. Dropout factories are mainly found in 15 states, primarily in the northern, western, and southern regions of the United States. These schools are only 12% of the national total, yet they are estimated to produce about half of the nation's dropouts, overall, according to the research of Balfanz and Legters (2004, p. 2). Balfanz and Legters (2006) also wrote that ethnic minority students who

are fortunate enough to attend middle-class or affluent high schools are promoted to the 12th grade at similar rates as their White peers. Again, a strong link exists between poverty and high school dropout rates. Students from low-income families dropped out of school five times more often than students from middle-to high-income families (Balfanz & Legters, 2006, p. 2).

The Achievement Gap and Low Expectations

Low expectations and low-level assignments have a direct negative impact on student success and the achievement gap. Haycock (2001) addresses issues related to the achievement gap. She writes that the performance of African American and Latino youngsters improved dramatically during the 1970s and 1980s but dropped in the 1990s (Haycock, 2001, p. 7). Staff from the Education Trust questioned both adults and young people on what they suspected were the causes of the achievement gap. Adults, no matter where in the country, made the same comments such as: "They're too poor," "Their parents don't care," "They come to school without an adequate breakfast," and "They don't have enough books in the home" (Haycock, 2001, p. 7). Young people talked about teachers who didn't know the subject they were teaching or counselors who consistently underestimated their potential and placed them in lower-level courses (Haycock, 2001, p. 7). They also talked about principals who dismissed their concerns, and they spoke about a curriculum and a set of expectations that felt so miserably low-level they bored the student's right out the school door (Haycock, 2001, p. 7). Haycock writes:

> The truth is that the data bear out what the young people are saying. It's not that the
> issues like poverty and parental education don't matter. Clearly, they do, but we take

the students who have less to begin with and then systematically give them less in school. (2001, p. 8)

Over the years, the Education Trust worked with teachers to improve the achievement levels of students, but they were stunned to come away from schools with the knowledge of how little was expected of students in high-poverty schools and how few assignments they received in a given school week or month. They were also stunned by how low-level the assignments were. Both research and experience show that what schools do matters greatly. Here are the four lessons Haycock (2001) emphasizes about what works in schools: 1) standards for what students should learn at benchmark grade levels are a crucial part of solving the achievement gap, 2) all students must have a rigorous curriculum aligned with state standards, 3) students need extra help; ample evidence shows that almost all students can achieve at higher levels if they are taught at higher levels, but equally clear is that some students require more time and instruction, 4) teachers matter; if students are going to be held to higher standards, they must have teachers who know their subject areas and how to teach (pp. 8-10).

The Multiplicity and Interactions of Risk Factors Related to the Dropout Issue

So far, the literature in this review supports the existence of a dropout crisis and the population of students most affected by multiple factors that gradually increase over time in a student's educational career. It is the multiplicity and interactions between risk factors that sets a student on the path to dropping out of school.

In a technical report titled, *Dropout Risk Factors and Exemplary Programs* written by Hammond, Linton, Smink & Drew (2007) declare in their findings and overall trends that dropping out of school is related to a variety of factors that can be classified in four areas or

domains: : 1) individuals (e.g., truancy, poor school attitude); 2) families (e.g., low-income, lack of parental involvement); 3) schools (e.g., negative school climate, low expectations); and 4) communities (e.g., high crime, lack of community support for schools) (p. 6). There is no single risk factor that can be used to accurately predict who is at risk of dropping out (p. 1). The accuracy of drop out predictions increases with the combination of multiple risk factors are considered. Dropouts are not a homogenous group; many subgroups of students can be identified based on when risk factors emerge, the combination of risk factors experienced, and how the factors influence them. Students who drop out often cite factors across multiple domains and there are complex interactions among risk factors. Dropping out of school is often the result of a long process of disengagement that may begin before a child enters school. Dropping out is also often described as a process, not an event with factors building and compounding over time. The authors also found in their research that "Dropout rates correlate with high poverty rates, poor school attendance, poor academic performance, grade retention (e.g., being held back), and disengagement from school" (Hammond, et al. 2007, p. 2). The findings in this technical report are similar to the findings of Pallas, Natriello, and McDill (1989) in that dropping out of school is related to a variety of factors that happen over time in tandem.

Gleason and Dynarski (2002) also support the research that there is no single risk factor predicting dropout. Rather, there are numerous risk factors that in combination with each other raise the probability of youth leaving school early (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002, p. 1). The authors cite the work of Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe, and Carlson. (2000) who assert:

Dropping out is better conceptualized as an evolving process rather than an event. It is a process that starts prior to the child entering school. Along the way the process

manifests itself in a variety of forms. Truancy, disciplinary problems, failing grades

in high school are late manifestations of the process and immediate markers of

dropping out behavior, while behavior problems and low school achievement are

mid-course markers that provide additional time for prevention and intervention

strategies to work. (p. 2)

This conceptualization suggests the need for communities and schools to have strategies to

respond to the dropping-out process at each stage of development, rather than waiting until

late manifestations of the process are evident (Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe, & Carlson, 2000,

p. 2).

Peer associations also have an important effect on academic outcomes. Peer

relationships can create a set of norms and values that either promote or undermine academic

achievement. Meaningful or positive relationships with peers that promote psychological

skills and life skills may promote academic achievement and motivation; however, negative

peer pressure or social disapproval toward schoolwork might lead some students to drop out

of school (Nichols & White, 2001, pp. 2-4; Stewart, 2008).

In his work on dropout prevention, Robert Balfanz (2007) similarly finds that poor

grades, poor attendance, and disengagement from school become particularly threatening to

the completion of high school, and he identifies four major high school dropout categories.

These categories are: 1) life events – dropout is prompted by something that happens to the

student outside of school (e.g., teen pregnancy, foster care placement, high school mobility);

2) fade outs – dropout is prompted by frustration and boredom with school even though the

student has not repeated or failed any grades; 3) push outs – dropouts are subtly or explicitly

encouraged to withdraw or transfer away from school because they are perceived to be

difficult or detrimental to the success of the school; 4) failing to succeed – dropouts leave school after a history of academic failures, absenteeism, or lack of engagement (Balfanz, 2007, p. 3). The best dropout prevention strategies engage students in school and teach them the skills they need to cope with difficult times in school and in their lives (Balfanz, 2007, p. 3).

Valenzuela (1999) identifies the struggles and barriers of U.S. Mexican youth to obtain a culturally responsive education in a Texas public high school. This modified ethnographic study on the relationship between schooling and achievement underscores the pervasive thinking and ensuing failure of many capable young people. Her work emphasizes the importance of the caring relationships students have with their teachers and other school personnel. Valenzuela discusses the subtractive elements of caring and cultural assimilation that Mexican youth experience in U.S. schools:

> Schools subtract resources from youth in two major ways. First, by dismissing their definition of education, which is not only thoroughly grounded in Mexican culture, but also approximates the optimal definition of education advanced by Noddings (1984) and other caring theorists. Second, subtractive schooling encompasses assimilationist policies and practices that are designed to divest Mexican students of their culture and language. A key consequence of these subtractive elements of schooling is the erosion of students' social capital evident in the presence and absence of academically oriented networks among U.S. born youth. (1999, p. 20)

Valenzuela also writes:

> The operant model of schooling for acculturated, U.S. born youth structurally deprives them of social capital that they would otherwise enjoy were the school not so

aggressively assimilationist. Stated differently, rather than students failing schools,

schools fail students with a pedagogical logic that not only assures the ascendancy of

a few, but also jeopardizes their access to those among them who are either

academically strong or belong to academically supportive networks. (1999, p. 30)

Racialized social control in the form of mass incarceration is also directly attributed

to the astonishing widespread incarceration rates in communities of color where the

consequences of poverty and inadequate educational opportunities are generally evidenced.

Alexander (2012) reveals that, as a civil rights lawyer, she thought her job was to join

with the allies of racial progress to resist attacks on affirmative action and to eliminate the

vestiges of Jim Crow segregation, including our still separate and unequal system of

education. Her understanding was that the problems plaguing poor communities of color,

including the problems associated with crime and rising incarceration rates, were due to the

function of poverty and the lack of access to quality education. These, she thought, were the

continuing legacy of slavery and Jim Crow. She never considered the possibility that a new

racial caste system was operating in this country. She states, "Quite belatedly, I came to see

that mass incarceration in the United States had, in fact, emerged as a stunningly

comprehensive and well-disguised system of racialized social control that functions in a

manner strikingly similar to Jim Crow" (Alexander, 2012, p. 4).

Alexander (2012) further asserts:

Those of us who have viewed that world from a comfortable distance, yet sympathize

with the plight of the of so-called underclass, tend to interpret the experience of those

caught up in the criminal justice system primarily through the lens of popularized

social science (Alexander, p. 30).

The Cost of Juvenile Incarceration

In a study titled "Juvenile Incarceration, Human Capital and Future Crime: Evidence from Randomly-Assigned Judges," Aizer and Doyle (2013) write,

Crime is a social problem with enormous costs. At the end of 2011, over 2.2 million people were incarcerated in the US, and an additional 4.8 million were under the supervision of correctional systems [Glaze & Parks, 2012]. Federal, state, and local expenditures on corrections exceeded $82 billion annually, with the direct expenditures on the wider justice system totaling over $250 billion (Kennelman, 2012). (p. 1)

In a life-cycle context, incarceration during adolescence may interrupt human and social capital accumulation at a critical moment leading to reduced future wages and greater criminal activity. More generally, interventions during childhood are thought to have greater impact compared to interventions for young adults due to propagation effects (e.g., Cunha et al., 2006), and criminal activity is a particularly important context to consider such effects due to the negative externalities associated with it (Aizer & Doyle, date, p. 1).

The excessive cost of juvenile incarceration and the long-term effect of lower high school completion rates should lead us to find more effective measures to rehabilitate juvenile offenders and support their educational needs.

Aizer and Doyle (2013) write that, "More than 130,000 juveniles are detained in the United States each year at an average annual direct cost of $88,000. Juvenile incarceration alone is expensive. The expenditures on juvenile corrections alone total $6 billion annually in the US". Juvenile incarceration results in "substantially lower" high school completion rates and higher adult incarceration rates (Aizer & Doyle, 2013, p. 28). Once incarcerated, a

juvenile is unlikely to ever return to school, suggesting that even relatively short periods of incarceration can be very disruptive and have severe long-term consequences for this population. Moreover, for those who do return to school, they are more likely to be classified as having a disability due to a social or behavioral disorder, likely reducing the probability of graduation even among those who do return to school and possibly increasing the probability of future criminal behavior" (Aizer & Doyle, 2013, p. 28).

> Aizer and Doyle (2013) assert:
>
> If juvenile incarceration either enhanced human capital accumulation or deterred future crime and incarceration, a tradeoff could be considered. Rather, we find that for juveniles on the margin of incarceration, such detention leads to both a decrease in high school completion and an increase in adult incarceration, and it appears welfare enhancing to use alternatives to juvenile incarceration. (p. 28).

This study offers several alternative forms of punishment to incarceration, including electronic monitoring and well-enforced curfews, which have the potential to increase high school graduation rates and reduce the likelihood of adult crime (Aizer & Doyle, 2013, p. 28). The authors conclude with:

> If this is the case, then the results suggest that a continued move toward less restrictive juvenile sentencing would increase human capital accumulation and lower the propensity of these juveniles to become incarcerated as adults without an increase in juvenile crime. (Aizer & Doyle, 2013, p. 28)

> In a 2011 report written by Richard Mendel and published by the Annie E. Casey

Foundation titled *No Place for Kids: The Case for Reducing Juvenile Incarceration*, Mendel writes,

Excluding the roughly 25,000 youths held in detention centers daily awaiting their

court trials or pending placement into a correctional program, the latest national count

of youth in correctional custody, conducted in 2007, found that roughly 60,500 U.S.

youth were confined in correctional facilities or other residential programs each night

on the order of a juvenile delinquency court. (p. 2)

Though juvenile violent crime arrest rates are only marginally higher in the United

States than in many other nations, a recently published international comparison found that

America's youth custody rate (including youth in both detention and correctional custody)

was 336 out of every 100,000 youth in 2002; nearly five times the rate of the next highest

nation; 69 per 100,000 in South Africa (Mendel. p. 2).

Mendel (2011) continues that we now have overwhelming evidence showing that

wholesale incarceration of juvenile offenders is a counterproductive public policy. While a

small number of youthful offenders pose a serious threat to the public and must be confined,

incarcerating a broader swath of the juvenile offender populations provides no benefit to

public safety. It wastes vast sums of taxpayer dollars and more often than not, it harms the

well-being and dampens the future prospects of the troubled and lawbreaking youth who get

locked up Mendel, 2011. (p. 3)

The main body of Mendel's (2011) report contains six pervasive flaws in the states'

long-standing heavy reliance on large, prison-like correctional institutions. These flaws are

that the institutions are:

1. Dangerous – America's juvenile corrections institutions subject confined youth to

   intolerable levels of violence, abuse, and other forms of maltreatment (p. 5);

2. Ineffective – The outcomes of correctional confinement are poor. Recidivism rates are almost uniformly high, and incarceration in juvenile facilities depresses youths' future success in education and employment (p. 9);

3. Unnecessary – A substantial percentage of youth confined in youth corrections facilities pose minimal risk to public safety (p. 13);

4. Obsolete – Scholars have identified a number of interventions and treatment strategies in recent years that consistently reduce recidivism among juvenile offenders (p. 16);

5. Wasteful – Most states are spending vast sums of taxpayer money and devoting the bulk of their juvenile justice budgets to correctional institutions and other facility placements when non-residential programming options deliver equal or better results for a fraction of the cost (p. 19);

6. Inadequate – Despite their exorbitant daily costs, most juvenile correctional facilities are ill-prepared to address the needs of many confined youth. Often, they fail to provide even the minimum services appropriate for the care and rehabilitation of youth in confinement (Mendel, 2011, p. 22).

The report also provides recommendations on how states can go about reforming juvenile corrections, including reducing incarceration rates and closing youth corrections facilities. These recommendations ensure reform efforts are safe, responsible, constructive, and cost-effective. Mendel's (2011) recommendations for reform are:

1. Limit Eligibility for Correctional Placements – Commitment to a juvenile correctional facility should be reserved for youth who have committed serious offenses and pose a clear and demonstrable risk to public safety (p. 28);

2. Invest in Promising Non-Residential Alternatives – In every jurisdiction, juvenile justice leaders must erect a broad continuum of high-quality services, supervision programs, and dispositional options to supervise and treat youthful offenders in their home communities (p. 30);

3. Change Financial Incentives – States must eliminate counterproductive financial incentives that encourage overreliance on correctional placements (p. 31);

4. Adopt Best Practice Reforms for Managing Youth Offenders – In addition to better programmatic alternatives, every jurisdiction must adopt complementary policies, practices, and procedures to limit unnecessary commitments and reduce confinement populations (p. 32);

5. Replace Large Institutions with Small, Treatment-Oriented Facilities for the Dangerous Few – The limited number of youthful offenders whose serious and chronic offending demand secure confinements should be placed into small, humane, and treatment-oriented facilities (p. 34);

6. Use Data to Hold Systems Accountable – Strong data collection must be a central pillar of efforts to reform juvenile corrections systems and to reduce overreliance on incarceration and residential placement (p. 36).

This report makes clear that, except in cases where juvenile offenders have committed serious crimes and pose a clear and present danger to society, removing troubled and delinquent young people from their families is expensive and often unnecessary with results no better and often far worse on average than community-based supervision and treatment. Likewise, the evidence makes clear that throwing even serious youth offenders together in large, prison-like, and often abusive institutions provides no public safety benefit,

wastes taxpayers' money, and reduces the odds that the young people will mature out of their delinquency and become productive law-abiding citizens (Mendel, 2011, p. 38).

Recidivism and Jail Based Education Programs

"Prison-based education is the single most effective tool for lowering recidivism" (Karpowitz, Kenner, & Initiative, 1995, p. 1). According to Merriam Webster, recidivism is defined as a tendency to relapse, especially into criminal behavior or activity. Very few jails have established schools within their walls. In a charter high school established circa 2009 to serve the needs of incarcerated adults at a jail facility located in the largest city in a southwestern state. Christopher Pauls (2011) master's thesis focuses on student perceptions of a charter school experience at a jail facility. This study is relevant because it highlights the success of correctional education and the profound implications for improving literacy and reducing recidivism among inmates.

The purpose of this study was to determine what inmates' initial impressions, motivations, and expectations were regarding participation in educational services provided by a local charter high school located in a jail facility and to follow-up at three weeks to determine if students' impressions regarding these factors changed with increased participation in the program. Additionally, graduates were interviewed to determine their impressions regarding earning their high school diplomas and whether that accomplishment influenced their lives. This qualitative study lays the foundation for further research regarding the long-term effects of participation in educational services provided by a local charter high school located in a jail facility. At the time of this study, there were no known peer-reviewed articles addressing charter high schools located within jails in the United States. Attempting to assess what factors make participants more likely to succeed at this

charter high school is a critical public service and may help to shape future public policy in this southwestern state (Pauls, 2011 p. 2).

Pauls' (2011) master's thesis, indicates that this charter high school was only one of two charter schools nationwide located inside a jail. This charter high school also has a satellite campus located downtown in this large city. This location is used for students in the Community Custody Program (CCP) and/or students released from the jail who wish to complete their high school diplomas. They also have services available for any student who would like to complete their high school diploma. Unlike most jail-based education programs, this charter high school offers students a high school diploma and not a General Equivalency Diploma (GED). According to the Correctional Education Association (1997) simply attending school while incarcerated reduced the likelihood of re-incarceration post-release by 29%. For every dollar spent on education behind bars, over two dollars were returned to citizens in reduced costs for imprisonment. With charter schools facing increased scrutiny in this southwestern state it is important to communicate the benefits of educating prisoners in the state (Pauls, 2011 p. 1).

Early in its development, the staff at this charter high school realized that the typical manner in which a high school curriculum was delivered to students was inappropriate for a jail setting. The curriculum was modified to revolve around a series of twelve mastery packets that staff expected would take most students a week per packet to complete. A series of mastery tests were also created for each of the twelve packets. Students worked at their own pace and at different places within the curriculum simultaneously. These changes produced 85 graduates in its third year of operation (Pauls, 2011 p. 3).

Based on a review of the literature, the founders of this charter high school determined that some form of cognitive therapy was needed if students were to make changes in their criminal and addictive behaviors. Moral Recognition Therapy (MRT) a widely recognized and effective program was implemented at this charter high school. Many correctional facilities across the country use MRT effectively. The intent of MRT is to help inmates recognize that their thoughts are often at the root of their addiction issues. By raising the moral awareness of inmates, it is hoped that they will make different decisions after they are released from jail. Because of widespread drug use in jails and prisons many inmates are able to put the concepts taught in MRT into action while attending this charter high school (Pauls, 2011 p. 3).

> Pauls, 2011 in referring to Sedgley, Scott, Williams and Derrick (2010) cites that,
> Over the past two decades expenditures on corrections have grown more rapidly than any other spending category of state budgets with the exception of health care.… Recidivism is a significant issue when one considers that over 630,00 prisoners are released each year and that more than 95% of all state prisoners will eventually be released from prison. (p. 497)

Hall and Killacky (2008) conclude that 90% of the two million prisoners in America's prisons will be released without basic literacy and job skills. They write that, "The importance of education in the criminal justice system has not been given adequate recognition" (Hall & Killacky, 2008, p. 301). Consequently, states should seriously consider educational programming and its effects when examining budget concerns and making decisions regarding prison education. Many jails and prisons are overcrowded, including the jail located in the largest city of this southwestern state. Preparing inmates for reintegration

needs to be of paramount importance according to Pauls. If education proves to be a positive factor in reducing recidivism it should be considered a front-runner for state funding (Pauls, 2011 p. 6).

In an examination of inmates in an education program in Texas prisons, Karpowitz et al. 1995, found that as education increased, recidivism decreased significantly. Recidivism rates by degree were reported as follows: associate's degree 13.7%, bachelor's degree 5.6%, and master's degree 0%. In other words, as an incarcerated individual becomes more educated, his or her likelihood of recidivating reduces toward zero (Karpowitz et al. p. 7).

Hrabowski and Robbi (2002) strike at the heart of the issue, stating,

It is impossible to overstate the importance of education to people who have gotten in trouble with the law… Acquiring their high school degree can mean the difference between returning to society and becoming a positive role as a citizen or becoming a career criminal. (p. 95)

Leone, Krezmien, Mason and Meisel (2005) write,

Reading is likely the single-most important skill acquired through formal schooling, an essential foundation for educational progress and mastery. In today's world, a basic level of reading proficiency is no longer sufficient for the demands of the workplace. Reading failure contributes to a host of long-term negative outcomes, including frustration which may lead to more generalized academic and behavior problems, high rates of suspension and limited access to employment opportunities in adulthood. Youth with pronounced reading difficulties are vulnerable to marginalization in their schools and communities and at lifelong risk of involvement in both the juvenile and criminal systems. (p. 96)

Vacca (2004) found that literacy skills are important to prisoners both in and out of prison:

Inmates need these skills to fill-out forms, to make requests and write letters to others in the outside world. In addition, some prison jobs require literacy skills and inmates can use reading as a way to pass their time while they are behind bars. (p. 320)

Similarly, Coulter (2004) found for every month incarcerated students spent in an intensive reading program in a youth detention center in Southern Colorado, those students improved nine months in terms of their reading levels.

While research has proven that literacy is one of the most important skills an inmate can develop while incarcerated, other benefits of literacy also include future employment and employability. Reading skills are increased via direct instruction, and increased literacy skills positively influence an inmate's lifelong attitude toward education. High consideration of literacy programs in prisons must be considered of utmost importance. Findings also suggest that programming is a critical factor in the success of prison-based education programs. Unruh, Povenmire-Kirk, and Yamamoto (2009) interviewed juveniles in various educational programs in correctional facilities, and they found that keeping inmates busy and focused in positive ways to pass their time was a major factor in inmate success Forman (2008), who also interviewed students and staff at a charter school for adjudicated youth, found that teachers who care, a rigorous curriculum, small classes, and high expectations were critical in achieving success with at-risk youth. These findings suggest that simply offering a program of study is not enough. In order to be successful, quality programming and caring relationships are requisite in prison education (Forman, 2008, p. 11).

Another factor in successful prison education is the inclusion of cognitive/behavioral elements in programs. Unruh et al. (2009) surmise that because criminal activity is due to a myriad of factors, psycho-social function of inmates enrolled in educational programs must be addressed through cognitive behavioral therapy because this type of therapy targets self-regulation and self-control and teaches their students that their behaviors are plastic enough to be self-regulated. O'Neill, MacKenzie, and Bierie (2007) also report that therapeutic programming is important for success with prison populations. Many of these programs build self-esteem and self-efficacy toward problematic behaviors that have plagued participants, and they teach inmates that they can lead a crime-free life outside of prison. Vacca (2004) found that treating inmates as "whole people" who have value and the ability to improve combined with teaching morality and critical-thinking skills was vital to correctional education success (p. 11). Incarcerated students need the addition of psycho-social training and therapy in order to meaningfully change their lives.

As the above findings suggest, any correctional program, when evaluating its successes and failures, must consider the quality of its programming as well as the make-up of the program. Teachers must be motivated and engaged in what they are doing and creating meaningful and caring relationships is critical to their work with at-risk students. Pauls, 2011 states, "Many prisoners felt disenfranchised from traditional school when they were in school prior to incarceration. The damage done by this disenfranchisement is profound and long-lasting, and simply providing traditional education does little to counteract this" (p. 12). Involvement in the prison system is normally due to a constellation of causes and prisoners must be taught that they can positively affect their own behaviors (Pauls, 2011 p. 12).

Correctional education is an alternative practice in terms of setting, curriculum, peers, staff, age, and transience. When these factors are put together, they create a non-traditional environment that has been proven to be effective in many regards. Even short-term interventions have a pronounced effect on literacy. Correctional education is also most effective when there is "follow-up" post-incarceration (Wilson et al. 2000, p. 13). Foreman (2008) recognizes that, by any measure, investment in educating at-risk populations, like prisoners, benefits society as a whole because a one-million-dollar investment in incarceration will prevent about 350 crimes. The same investment in education will prevent more than 600 crimes. Translated into savings, every dollar spent on education returned more than two dollars to the citizens in reduced prison costs (Karpowitz et al., 1995, p. 14).

Pauls (2011) study concludes that correctional education works. Research indicates that correctional education has a profound effect on literacy, and literacy may be the most important skill a prisoner can acquire. Not only does literacy lead to success in jobs and in education in and out of prison, literacy can lead an inmate to self-realization and self-actualization. Education lowers recidivism and as a result, tens of millions of dollars can be saved nationwide on the cost of incarceration and the cost in lower crime rates. There is still work to be done in correctional education programs to improve their focus on relationships, rigorous and relevant curriculum, and post-incarceration follow-up.

The Effectiveness of Online Credit Recovery Classes

The path to graduation can be arduous for many students and failing core academic courses during the first year of high school is a strong signal of trouble to come. Research indicates that academic performance in core courses during the first year of high school is the strongest predictor of eventual graduation (Allensworth & Easton, 2005, 2007). The stakes

for students who fail courses have become even higher as districts around the country adopt

college and career readiness standards and more rigorous high school graduation

requirements. Students who fail key academic courses need effective opportunities to learn

the content they did not master the first time around and recover credits required for

graduation. Many states, districts, and schools use online courses to allow students to retake

failed classes in an effort to help get students back on track and keep them in school (Powell,

Roberts, & Patrick, 2015). Schools and districts report they perceive online courses to be a

flexible and cost-effective option for credit recovery, whether they are offered during the

regular school day or at other times during the school year (Picciano & Seaman, 2009, p. 1).

Picciano and Seaman (2009) state,

> Despite the belief that online courses can and have boosted graduation rates, there is
>
> limited evidence available to show whether online credit recovery is as effective, or
>
> even more effective, for improving students' long-term outcomes as traditional face-
>
> to-face credit recovery courses. (p. 2)

In another study titled, "The Struggle to Pass Algebra: Online vs. Face-to-Face Credit

Recovery for At-Risk Urban Students," Heppen et al. (2017) compares longer term

outcomes, including graduation for students in online and f2f (face-to-face) credit recovery.

Heppen et al. reviews what is currently known about online credit recovery including the

short-term evidence from the randomized controlled trial comparing an online and f2f course

in Algebra I. The authors present new evidence from the same study about longer-term

outcomes, including total math credits earned through years of high school and rates of on-

time graduation. The authors write that the Heppen et al. study comparing online and f2f

credit recovery for Algebra I in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) is the only experimental

study of online credit recovery to date. The study included 1,224 students who failed second-semester Algebra I in their first year of high school and sought to recover the credit over the summer in 2011-2012 (Heppen et al. 2017, p. 2). It focused on second-semester Algebra I because it has one of the highest failure rates among ninth graders and covers content students typically need to master to succeed in other courses in math, science, and physics. The online course was provided by Aventa Learning/K12 which is now Fuel Education. Most of the communication was asynchronous, meaning that online teachers and students were not necessarily online at the same time. Students in the online classes were provided an in-class mentor, which is recommended and strongly encouraged by many online course providers (Stewart, Goodson, Miertschin, Norwood, & Ezell, 2013). The f2f classes were taught by district teachers who were certified to teach high school mathematics. Unlike the online classes, which shared a common curriculum, teachers in the f2f classes had discretion about what to teach and how to teach it (Stewart et al. 2013, p. 3). To determine whether the short-term negative effects of online credit recovery relative to f2f actually had longer term implications for students' progress toward high school completion, this study examined whether the Algebra I online credit recovery course affected students' academic performance by the end of their fourth year of high school relative to the f2f Algebra I course. The main analysis of this study focuses on the overall effect of both instructional platforms (Stewart et al. 2013, p. 4).

Of the 1,224 students who participated in the study, 38% were female, 57% were Hispanic, 33% were African American, 8% were White, and 2% were of other races/ethnicities. Most (86%) were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, 12% were eligible for special education services, and 47% spoke Spanish as their home or native language. In

addition to failing second semester Algebra I in their first year of high school, study students generally had low academic performance overall. On average, they failed 4.5 semester courses during their first year of high school, and their prior mathematics scores were 0.29 deviations below the district average. Study students also showed signs of disengagement during their first year of high school; 40% were suspended at least once during the year, and the students missed an average of 30 days of school during the year (Stewart et al. 2013, p. 5).

The findings of the impact study analyses of short-term outcomes reported in Heppen et al. (2017) suggest that students in the f2f course were more likely than students in the online course to successfully recover algebra credit during the summer between their first and second years of high school, but this effect did not translate into a significant difference in math course credit accumulation by the end of the students' second year of high school. Likewise, this study shows of total math credits earned through students' third and fourth year of high school there was no statistically significant difference between students who took the online and the f2f Algebra I credit recovery courses. By the end of their fourth year, students in the online and f2f groups were still an average of approximately one to two semesters short of the six semester math credits (three year-long math courses) required for high school graduation. In both groups, just under half (47% in the online group and 47% of the f2f group) of the students graduated from high school within four years (Stewart et al. 2013, p. 6).

Many high schools are turning to online credit recovery courses to get students back on the path to graduation. The Heppen et al. 2017 study tested only one online course model and one content area. The pattern of findings from this study raises questions about the rush

to online courses for credit recovery, especially without giving careful consideration to the specifics about how the online course will be implemented, the bundle of instructional features that comprise implementation of an online course, and the academic and social-emotional needs of at-risk students. In the short term, Heppen et al. found that students may benefit more from a f2f course than an online course because they are more likely to recover credit and learn more in a f2f course. An online course may not provide the same degree of personal support as a f2f class, which may be particularly important for students who have already failed the course in the past. In this study, students in the online course found the course more challenging and instruction less clear than students in the f2f class. Thus, there is no evidence that online courses provide a better opportunity for students to get back on track than traditional f2f courses despite the optimism that has been expressed about them (Heppen et al. 2017, p. 7).

At the same time, Heppen et al. (2017) did not find evidence that taking an online course, rather than a f2f course, is harmful to students in the long run. Students were no more or less likely to accumulate math course credits over time or graduate if they took an online Algebra I credit recovery course instead of a f2f version. This suggests that the initial negative effects of online credit recovery in Algebra I may dissipate. For schools that find it impractical to offer f2f classes due to the logistical demands they entail, online courses may be a viable option for expanding access to credit recovery (Heppen et al. 2017, p. 8).

Even if the implementation of online credit recovery increases its relative benefits and costs, it may be unrealistic to expect a single credit recovery course, whether online or f2f, to put failing students back on the path to on-time graduation. As the baseline characteristics of students in this study demonstrate they were extremely at-risk. Compared to other ninth

graders in Chicago, students who failed Algebra I were more likely to enter high school with low mathematics and reading scores, have higher absenteeism, and fail multiple courses during their ninth-grade year (Rickles et al., 2016). For these students, navigating course and graduation requirements it was an uphill battle. It required targeting multiple aspects of school engagement beyond specific math credits or subject knowledge. Credit recovery courses may provide an opportunity to acquire specific content knowledge and course credit the student struggled to obtain the first time around, but if that struggle occurred alongside performance issues in other courses and broader school disengagement (e.g., suspensions and chronic absenteeism), retaking a single course in any format may be too little too late. Given these challenges, efforts to improve the utility of online credit recovery should focus on ways to better target online credit recovery to the students most likely to benefit from such a course and ways to incorporate online credit recovery into a comprehensive intervention strategy for school engagement and dropout prevention (Rickles et al., 2016p. 9).

Transformative Leadership

In a 2016 article titled "Enacting Critical Care and Transformative Leadership in Schools Highly Impacted by Poverty: An African American Principal's Counter Narrative," author Camile Wilson writes about the benefits of transformative educational leadership that enacts critical care. Critical care involves embracing and exhibiting values, dispositions, and behaviors related to empathy, compassion, advocacy, systemic critique, perseverance, and calculated risk-taking for the sake of justly serving students and improving schools. Wilson interviewed an African American principal who implemented such practices. The principal consequently helped combat inequity and boosted the academic performance of a low-performing school with a majority African American student population highly impacted by

poverty. The principal's accounts of her practice comprise a counter narrative reflective of critical race methodology. The principal's accounts of her philosophies and practices suggest she was successful in large part because she enacted critical care. The principal offered keen insight into the strengths, needs, and challenges of students experiencing poverty as well as a sharp critique of the ways that U.S. educational policies and practices perpetuate students' oppression. In line with critical race methodology, the principal's data yielded a counter narrative that pertains to the intersecting contexts of structural analysis (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Stovall, 2006). The findings from Wilson's 2016 study speak to the importance of educators understanding the reality of poverty, given racialized conditions and other oppressive contexts of any ethnicity or nationality, so they can better prepare marginalized youth to achieve and succeed. The study also points to the need for increased district support for transformative leaders (Wilson, 2016, pp. 557-558).

Summary

This review of the literature provides a thorough interpretation of the issues common among students at-risk for dropping out of school. The literature reviewed in this chapter also focused on how deficit-based and inequitable schooling contributes to low self-belief, dropping out, and a higher probability of incarceration among young men of color. The tenets of cultural capital provided a conceptual framework from which to interpret the data, as viewed from the theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory (CRT). The conceptual and theoretical frameworks were used to explain how the shift away from a deficit view to an appreciation of cultural capital contributes to decisions made by young men of color to choose to return to school and earn a high school diploma. The historical perspective establishes the baseline for the first definitions of the educationally disadvantaged and at-risk

and analyzes the attributes contributing to low student achievement based on a variety of related factors. The contemporary research provides an analysis of the influence of poverty and educational inequity. Today's drop out issues and the national impact of drop out factories on graduation rates are also raised. Understanding the negative outcomes of the achievement gap and the injustice of low expectations of students most in need of assistance and recommendations for closing the achievement gap and other related topics are also discussed.

There are many warning signs that teachers and families should be alerted to early in a student's school career, starting in pre-school and kindergarten, that can potentially put students at-risk for dropping out of school. These conditions can signal problem behaviors, learning disabilities, or habits that, if ignored or go undiagnosed, have the potential to eventually contribute to the beginning of the slow process of disengagement that eventually leads to the decision to drop out of school.

The literature in this review also reveals it's not just one single factor that causes a student to drop out of high school; rather, it is a combination of factors that usually begin early in a student's school career. The dropout process is an event that happens over time. Early intervention and strong support by teachers and families who see students struggling with their academic skills, behavior, or any other condition that may prevent students from graduating from high school are all important to students' future success and for keeping kids in school. How resources are allocated in schools, the need for a rigorous curriculum based on content standards and benchmarks, high expectations, a mastery-based curriculum that meets students where they are and giving them the time, support and guidance to succeed, and ensuring that teachers are trained and highly qualified for the content areas they teach,

along with the presence of transformative leadership that values and respects all students,

have the collective power to provide schools with the tools they need to meet the diverse

needs of students.

Chapter Three:

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore the factors contributing to young men of color dropping out of high school and what factors led them to incarceration. This study also explored what changed in their lives that influenced their decision to return to school and graduate. Chapter 3 includes the research questions posed, research methodology, phenomenological research and methodology, a description of the study site, a brief discussion of the sample and population, and the research design and procedures. In addition, Chapter 3 summarizes the data organization and analysis plan, quality standards, ethical and political considerations, and University of New Mexico Institutional Research Board approval.

Research Questions

This study addressed the following research questions:

1. What academic, environmental, and social factors lead young men of color to their decision to drop out of high school?
2. What factors lead them to incarceration?
3. What changes occur in the lives and experiences of young men of color to influence their decision to return to school and graduate?

Phenomenological Research & Methodology

The most appropriate and applicable approach used to support this inquiry was phenomenology. "Phenomenology is qualitative research that describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon" (Creswell, 2007, p. 57). A phenomenologist's focus is on describing what all the participants have in common

as they experience a phenomenon. (Creswell, 2007, p. 58). Creswell also defines a phenomenon as the central concept being examined that has been experienced by subjects in a study, which may include psychological concepts such as grief, anger, or love (Creswell, 2007, p. 236).

"The basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of a universal essence; a grasp of the very nature of the thing" (van Manen, 1990, p. 177). Phenomenology is also concerned with wholeness and examining entities from many angles and perspectives until the essences of a phenomenon are achieved through the descriptions and experiences of the individuals being studied (Moustakas, 1994, p. 58). The descriptions keep a phenomenon alive and illuminate its presence. Descriptions also seek to present in vivid, accurate, and complete terms the images and impressions that lead to the ideas, concepts, judgments, and understandings of the phenomenon. The research question must be constructed carefully to guide the study (Moustakas, 1994, p. 59). According to Moustakas (1994), examples of the concept of a "phenomenon" include human experiences such as insomnia, being left out, anger, grief, or undergoing surgery (p. 47).

Description of the Study Site

The site selected to perform this study was a charter high school located in the largest city of a southwestern state. This high school first opened its doors to students for the 2008-2009 school year. It has a curriculum and an environment designed specifically to accommodate adult students who have not completed the requirements to earn a diploma and graduate from high school. This high school serves a student population that includes incarcerated inmates and recently released inmates from the local jail facilities, other campuses, and community custody programs.

This study site was also selected because its mission, "Changing Lives from the Inside Out," focuses on working with incarcerated or probation adults, regardless of their age, who are interested in earning their high school diploma. A majority of the population at this high school are men of color. The demographics for this high school were obtained directly from the registrar of the school for the 40-day count submitted on STARS (Student Teacher Accountability Reporting System) on October 11, 2018. The 40-day count showed the total enrollment for the school was 426 students, which included males and females. There was a total of 284 male students enrolled. This number included currently incarcerated male students and male students at this high school who were not currently incarcerated in grades 9 through 12. This study was approved by the University of New Mexico Institutional Review Board to only include male students not currently incarcerated to participate. This study was performed at the main school campus site and not the jail site where the "school pod" for incarcerated inmates is located.

Sample and Population

This study focused only on male students. In the STARS' demographics report, 284 or 66.6% were male students out of 426 total students enrolled. Of the male student population, 152 male students, or 53.5%, were Hispanic; 46 male students, or 16.1%, were Caucasian; 24 male students, or 8.4%, were Black/African American; and 60 male students, or 21.1%, were American Indian/Alaskan Native. There was only one male Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander student, or 0.3%, and one male Asian student, or 0.3%, enrolled during this period. According to the Executive Director, 100% of the students who attended this high school were dropouts from other high schools. It is important to note that

being an inmate or a high school dropout is not a requirement to attend the school. Any adult

who wants to earn a high school diploma is eligible to enroll.

Research Design

The research design developed for this study included data collected in four separate

parts: an interview with the Executive Director, a focus group interview with staff, student

interviews and a student survey.

1. **Executive Director Interview** – A single interview was audio-recorded and

focused on the work and leadership the Executive Director performs to support students to

graduate. One interview session took place in a 90-minute meeting. A short follow-up time

for clarification or information to be added or deleted from the interview session was

available but not needed. There were five semi-structured questions in this interview. The

name of the Executive Director was changed to protect her identity.

2. **Focus Group Interview** – A single focus group interview was audio-recorded

and took place with staff who volunteered to participate. The participants worked directly

with students and had supported, in different ways, their efforts to graduate. The interview

session was conducted at the school in a 90-minute meeting. A short follow-up time for

clarification or information to be added or deleted from the interview session was available

but not needed. The focus group was asked eight semi-structured questions regarding the

challenges and rewards in their work and how they support students to graduate. Names of

the participants were changed to protect their identities.

3. **Student Interviews** – Interviews were audio-recorded with young men of color

who were English speakers, not currently incarcerated, and who were voluntary participants

18 years of age or older. Written parental permission was not required due to the legal age of

the participants. There were 23 individual interview questions. One interview session took place in a 60-minute meeting. A short follow-up time for clarification or information to be added or deleted from the interviews was available but not needed. Names of the participants were changed to protect their identities.

    4.   **Student Surveys** – Surveys were distributed to young men enrolled at this high school who were English speakers and who were willing to volunteer to complete the survey. No currently incarcerated young men participated in taking the survey. The survey took about 15 minutes to complete. No personal identifying information was contained in the survey. There were five parts in the survey:

    Part I - Five (5) general demographic questions;

    Part II - Seven (7) questions on school factors;

    Part III - Fifteen (15) questions on personal factors;

    Part IV - Six (6) questions on academic factors;

    Part V - Seven (7) questions on other related factors.

Procedures

    Upon receiving University of New Mexico Institutional Research Board approval, the researcher met with the Executive Director to discuss potential dates to perform each separate part of the study during the 2018-2019 school year. Volunteers were recruited per University of New Mexico Institutional Research Board requirements for each part of the study as outlined below.

        Executive Director interview. Initial contact was made by making an appointment to meet with the Executive Director. The Executive Director agreed to volunteer and participate in the interview. Prior to the interview, a prepared script with an explanation

of the consent process, the purpose of the interview, and the intent of the study were read.

The Executive Director was asked to sign a consent form. The interview with the Executive

Director took place in her office at the school and took 90 minutes to complete. The name of

the Executive Director was changed to protect her identity.

Focus group interview. Initial contact for recruiting volunteers for the focus group

interview was made in a staff meeting. A prepared script with an explanation for the purpose

of the interview and the intent of the study were read. Volunteers were also informed that

their names would be changed to protect their identities. A specific day and time for the

focus group interview was set with the Executive Director. On the day of the focus group

interview a prepared script with an explanation of the consent process, the purpose of the

interview, and the intent of the study were read. Participants were asked to sign a consent

form. The Focus Group Interview took about an hour and fifteen minutes to complete.

Student interviews. Initial contact for recruiting students was made in a classroom

setting. Only English-speaking males were asked to volunteer to participate in the interviews

based on their meeting the criteria for the study. Prior to asking for volunteers, the researcher

read a prepared script to each class of students explaining the consent process and the

purpose of the audio-recorded interviews. The researcher then asked for volunteers and told

students that she would be available in a quiet office space if they were interested in

volunteering and/or finding out more about the study. A quiet office space in the school was

provided to conduct the eight audio-recorded interviews. Prior to each scheduled individual

interview, the researcher read a prepared script and again explained the consent process, the

purpose of the interview, and the intent of the study to each volunteer before the interview

began. Participants did not need to sign a consent form because a waiver of documentation of

consent was granted by the University of New Mexico Institutional Research Board. Each interview took about 60 minutes to complete. The participants were also informed that they were under no obligation to complete the interview if they chose not to do so. Names were changed to protect the identities of the volunteers.

Student surveys. Initial contact for recruiting students was made in a classroom setting. Prior to asking for volunteers to participate in the survey, a prepared recruitment script was read to each class of students explaining consent, the purpose of the survey, and the intent of the study. After reading the prepared script, surveys were distributed in a plain manila folder with a consent form (no signature required per the approved University of New Mexico Institutional Research Board waiver of documentation of consent) to male students. Only English-speaking male students were asked to volunteer. Students were also informed that the survey was anonymous. Directions for taking the survey were read and the survey took about 15 minutes to complete. Students were asked to leave manila folders with the survey documents in a designated place in the classroom at the end of the class period. Incomplete surveys were not included in the data analysis. The only reference made to incomplete surveys in the data analysis was only to report how many incomplete surveys were collected.

Data Organization and Analysis Plan

The data collected in this study were organized and analyzed to provide the most accurate results from the information provided by the participants. The survey responses were recorded and entered on an Excel spreadsheet for data processing. All data and audio-recordings were stored on a USB flash drive and locked in a file cabinet. The researcher looked for themes and patterns in the data using field notes, and qualitative data analysis to

condense and report the data accurately and to draw and verify conclusions. The processes outlined by Creswell (2007), Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), and Saldana (2016) were the main sources of guidance in the data analysis. In addition, guidance from Kreuger and Casey (2015) in the area of focus groups was also utilized.

The following information provides the details of the information regarding the criteria for completing of each part of the research collected in the study and guidance for data analysis.

Executive Director interview. The Executive Director Interview was completed in one session at this charter high school located in a southwestern state. The processes outlined by Creswell (2007), Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), and Saldana (2016) were utilized to analyze the data. A sample of the interview questions for the Executive Director are included in Appendix A.

Focus group interview. The focus group interview was completed in one session and consisted of seven volunteer participants from the staff at this school. In addition to the processes outlined by Creswell (2007), Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), and Saldana (2016) to analyze the data, guidance from Kreuger and Casey (2015) in the area of focus groups was also utilized. A sample of the interview questions for the focus group interview are included in Appendix B.

Student interviews. The eight student interviews were voluntary. Only English-speaking males 18 years and older were asked to volunteer to participate in the audio-recorded interviews which took place in one session. The age range of the participants interviewed was 28 to 30 years old. The responses to the 23 interview questions for each participant were analyzed using the processes outlined by Creswell (2007), Miles, Huberman,

and Saldana (2014), and Saldana (2016). A sample of the interview questions for the student interviews are included in Appendix C.

   Student surveys. The survey was completed by 62 volunteers who were not currently incarcerated per the requirements of the University of New Mexico Institutional Research Board. There were three incomplete surveys collected. Only English-speaking males were asked to volunteer to take the survey. The survey data were entered and analyzed using Excel to create pie graphs for the demographic information and figures and tables for the remaining survey responses. A sample of the survey instrument is included in Appendix D.

Quality Standards

   Koul (2008) discusses the nature of educational research, the influence of research paradigms on educational research, and quality standards as cited in Gay and Airasian (2000). Educational research is conducted to provide trustworthy information regarding educational problems and their solutions. There are many approaches to educational research shaped by different research paradigms. Various research paradigms have different criteria for ontology and epistemology to maintain quality standards. The ontology and epistemology of a research paradigm influences the researcher applying the quality standards, methodology, and methods (Koul, 2008, p. 1). Guba and Lincoln (1989) write that quality standards, such as research and policy analyses are essential for judging the quality of disciplined inquiry. Research standards also help researchers monitor the process of research construction. Furthermore, the criteria for quality standards for each paradigm are different as they are influenced by the nature of each research paradigm. Koul (2008) presented four main research paradigms used in educational research: post-positivism, interpretivism,

criticalism/critical theory, and post-modernism. Each of these research paradigms has its own epistemological and ontological characteristics to maintain quality standards.

The paradigm that best fits the research for this study was the *interpretivist paradigm.* The interpretivist paradigm studies individuals with their many characteristics, different human behaviors, opinions, and attitudes (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). This interpretivist paradigm helps the researcher acquire knowledge by investigating the phenomena of the world and humans in many ways. It gives opportunities to understand and make sense of others' perspectives, which are shaped by the philosophy of social constructions (Taylor, 2008). Subjectivity is an integral aspect of this paradigm. Through this paradigm we can gain a fuller understanding of meanings, reasons, and insights to human action (Bryman, 2001). The interpretivist paradigm also emphasizes that, in social phenomena, the world has different meanings. A single factor influences the change in social context. The interpretivist paradigm is related to post-positivism. It is often utilized in qualitative research and stresses the importance of understanding each individual's perception of reality (Koul, 2008, p. 2). Phenomenological research must include how individuals experience the world and consider that their experiences are valid realities for the individual persons. Critical humanism is a subtype of this paradigm that involves the inclusion of the individuals studied in the research process.

The quality standards in the interpretivist paradigm are trustworthiness and authenticity. Trustworthiness is the foundational criteria because it is a deliberated parallel to the positivist criteria that includes internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The trustworthiness criteria consist of four quality standards: credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability (Koul, 2008, p. 3).

Authenticity criterion is about relationships between others and the researcher. Educative authenticity helps researchers understand their roles as educators and as people who influence professional practices (Koul, 2008, p. 4).

As a researcher, I ensured reliability and validity throughout this study in the following ways: 1) Before research began, I reflected on my own biases which could impact validity. I began by analyzing my limitations as an insider who understood the challenges faced by males of color. I also needed to constantly remind myself to stay open to new perspectives. 2) I established trust through my positionality and authenticity by being true to the process. 3) I used rich descriptions to avoid the rush to judgement when writing field notes, analyzing data, and constructing concluding comments. 4) In order to protect the identities and potential risks to the population of students and volunteers participating in the study, the steps approved by the University of New Mexico Institutional Research Board were taken during the data collection phase as follows:

Executive director interview. The interview with the Executive Director posed minimal risk linking her real identity to the research. A breach of confidentiality was the principle risk. A signed consent form for the Executive Director was taken prior to the audio-recorded interview. The Executive Director's name was changed to protect her identity. The signed consent form has been stored in a file folder in a locked file cabinet in accordance with the University of New Mexico Institutional Research Board requirements of three years after closure of the project.

Focus group interview. The focus group interview posed minimal risk linking the volunteers' real identities to the research. A breach of confidentiality was the principle risk. Names were changed to protect the identities of the participants in the focus group interview.

The signed consent forms have been stored in a file folder in a locked file cabinet in accordance with the University of New Mexico-Institutional Research Board requirements of three years after closure of the project.

Student interviews. The student interviews posed minimal risk in linking the students' real identities to the research. A breach of confidentiality was the principle risk. Names were changed to protect the identities of the participants in the student interviews. Participants did not need to sign a consent form because a waiver of consent was granted by the University of New Mexico Institutional Research Board. A sample of the consent form has been stored in a file folder in a locked file cabinet. The audio recordings have also been stored on a USB drive and are locked in a file cabinet in accordance with the University of New Mexico Institutional Research Board requirements of three years after closure of the project.

Student surveys. The student survey was anonymous and posed minimal risk to linking the students' real identities to the research. The waiver of consent documentation (with no signature) was the only record linking the participants to the study. Volunteering to take the survey did not adversely affect the rights and welfare of the participants. A sample of the consent form has been stored in a file folder in a locked file cabinet in accordance with the University of New Mexico Institutional Research Board requirements of three years after closure of the project.

Ethical and Political Considerations

Participants were fully informed about the study's goals and their rights throughout the project. The researcher followed all processes and steps written in the protocol as required by the University of New Mexico Institutional Board. The processes and steps

followed ensured transparency and the high ethics necessary to develop a sense of trust and authenticity between the researcher and the participants based on my positionality.

Vogt, Gardener, and Haeffele (2012) define the term *ethics* as good conduct toward others. It also refers to the branch of philosophy that studies good and bad conduct and the moral obligations or responsibilities we have toward others. Ethics is a matter of commitment to and behavior guided by certain values, making decisions and choices about which principles should apply and what kind of conduct is ethical in particular situations (Vogt, Gardener, & Haeffele, 2012, pp. 227-228). Ethical considerations are relevant in all stages of a research project from the initial formulation of a research question through design, sampling, and analysis (Vogt, Gardener, & Haeffele, 2012, p. 228).

As researchers, we all have responsibilities toward the people being studied and other researchers. A community of scholars is built on openness and trust. Largely because of the atrocities committed in the name of medical research in World War II, in the 1940s, and the Tuskegee experiments that lasted from 1930-1972, much has been done to ensure the rights of human subjects. Institutional Research Boards (IRBs) were established in 1981 to give any university or institution receiving federal funding the final word in approving all research involving human subjects (Vogt, Gardener, & Haeffele, 2012, p. 230).

Clarke (1994) writes, "Political considerations are factors that arise in relation to the interplay among individuals or organized groups which results in the exercise of will, and legal considerations are treated as the means of the expression of political will" (p. 1). Utilizing Clarke's description of political considerations and thinking about the potential outcomes of this study, there is always the chance for political resistance to change.

University of New Mexico Institutional Research Board Approval

All University of New Mexico Institutional Research Board requirements were fulfilled. The research proposal was approved by the dissertation committee in May 2016 and followed-up by completion of the required Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative in 2016 and four Institutional Research Board workshops on Regulations, Elements, Protocol & Consent, and the IRBNET in 2016-2017. Approval of the new study application was made by the University of New Mexico Institutional Research Board in November 2018.

Chapter Four:

Findings

The purpose of this study was to research the factors and experiences of young men of color who dropped out of high school and failed to graduate, experienced incarceration, and then made the decision to return to school to earn a high school diploma. This chapter includes a description of the data analyses of all four components of the research: (1) executive director interview, (2) focus group interview, (3) student interviews, (4) student surveys.

As a part of the phenomenological research, I also wanted to know how these phenomena were impacting the participants' lives and how their life circumstances were changing as they got closer to completing the requirements to graduate with a high school diploma. It was exciting to see how these young men were actively working to change their lives in a positive way. They felt hopeful and perceived themselves as being more capable and able to accomplish goals they never believed they could before. The opportunity to better themselves through post-secondary education or career training and the chance to experience more favorable employment opportunities were on the horizon as they moved forward in their lives. While they continued to earn credits toward the important benchmark of graduating with a high school diploma, they were also feeling more motivated to have a better life for themselves and their families in the future. The work and commitment of the staff and the Executive Director at this high school have provided a safe place that's respectful to everyone and does not judge people for their shortcomings, mistakes, or their life experiences. Instead, students are accepted for who they are.

Study Site Description

The site selected to perform this study was a charter high school located in a southwestern state. This high school first opened its doors to students for the 2008-2009 school year. It has a curriculum and an environment designed specifically to accommodate adult students who have not completed the requirements to earn a high school diploma. This high school serves students that include incarcerated inmates and recently released inmates from the local jail facilities, other satellite campuses, and community custody programs. This study site was also selected because its mission, "Changing Lives from the Inside Out," focuses on working with incarcerated or probation adults, regardless of their age, who are interested in earning their high school diploma.

Participants

Participants in all four parts of this study were adults and members of this school community either as students or staff. All participants volunteered to share their experiences, and the names of all participants were changed to protect their identities. There were 78 participants in the study. The study included a student survey with 62 male participants not currently incarcerated, eight student interviews with young men of color ranging in age from 28 to 30 years old, an audio-recorded interview with the Executive Director, and a focus group consisting of 7 staff members.

Findings: Executive Director

There was one 90-minute interview held with the Executive Director. The name of the Executive Director was changed to protect her identity. The major themes from the Executive Director's interview that emerged during the data analysis phase were:

1. Background and life experiences;

2. Teaching and leadership;

3. Student support;

4. Staff support and engagement;

5. Trauma-informed care and practice.

The major themes that emerged from the Executive Director's interview are important to the findings in this study because they directly relate to her position and leadership that supports her staff in their work with students. Her own life experiences also strongly influence the school culture that accepts students for who they are and encourages and supports positive outcomes for young men of color to have a second chance at graduating from high school, thereby fulfilling the mission of the school to change lives from the inside out.

Background and life experiences of the Executive Director. The Executive Director's low socioeconomic background and personal life experiences growing up in this southwestern state presented challenges early in her life. Although she was an avid reader and a good student, she felt that she was left to her own devices to succeed through high school and college. Her school experiences were void of connection, high expectations, and the proper guidance and advisory opportunities she needed. Her school experiences growing up have given her a deep understanding of what students need to succeed in school. Her leadership has evolved through these experiences. She has worked diligently over the years to transform the educational experience at this high school to serve the needs of students who have dropped out, have experienced incarceration, and have felt hopeless about their futures because of the mistakes they've made and how they are perceived and judged in the world. This school is a safe place with high expectations, strong connections, and caring people who

support student success one day at a time. Interwoven with the major themes of this interview is a blueprint that customizes the school's educational program through a mastery-based curriculum that is self-paced. It also articulates the dynamics of the school culture, the advocacy by all in this school community to support student success, and the cultural relevancy of the work done by the Executive Director and her staff with incredible dedication and commitment.

Regarding her background in education, the Executive Director stated,

I have to start with the idea that I was in school. To me that's where my background in education starts as an educator, and as a leader, I see it through the lens of my own experiences in school which I think many teachers do.

The low socioeconomics of her family while she was growing up helps her today as a school leader to interact with students in an authentic way that embodies empathy, compassion, and understanding for the difficult life circumstances that the students who attend this school have experienced. She uses her background and personal life experiences to connect with students in an effort to provide guidance and support concerning their success in school and in life. As a student, she felt firsthand the isolation and loneliness that many students experience, especially in high school. The lack of connection and the absence of high expectations at school were persistent experiences for her. She shared,

As a student, I was very curious, and I was a voracious reader because I had a lot of time to read, and I read at an early age. But I feel through my school experiences and through high school, I was very much left to my own devices.

Although she was a good student who was an excellent reader and she had "the fire in the belly" to succeed, she didn't have teachers who took the time to guide her through the

process. As a student, she didn't make waves and she had to find her own way. She
succeeded despite a lack of opportunities at home and at school that she felt she needed, in
order to make the most of her high school and college experiences. She earned a bachelor's
degree from the state's flagship university where she majored in English and minored in
History. She also married very early and had a child, so she knew she had to do something to
improve her life. Although she didn't go to college directly after high school, she slowly
started taking college classes. She is an exceptional role model in her school community of
the "inner resilience" that students who come from poverty often manifest despite their
adverse life circumstances. She exemplifies that students can learn and succeed in school and
in life with hard work, effort, the will to succeed, perseverance, and a growth mindset.

In addition to an isolated and lonely high school experience and a similar college
experience that also lacked connection, advisement, and the direction she needed, the
Executive Director also experienced trauma in her family. The trauma in her family stemmed
from the experiences her younger brother and sister faced inside and outside of the
correctional system. Both siblings were arrested several times. Her personal life experiences
have been of great importance in her growth as a teacher and a school leader. The family
trauma she experienced through her sibling's incarceration has also given her a unique
understanding of and a deep commitment to her work with adults who have been
incarcerated. She realizes the problems and barriers students who have been incarcerated face
as they work to get their lives back in order. She said, of what she had learned through her
life experiences, "I've always been a champion for people who need extra support."

Teaching and leadership. Her journey in education began with a long-term
substitute position in a fourth-grade classroom. She felt that her students were just

developing their sense of self and they also had a sense of humor. She said, "I could just see all the potential and promise with these students." She truly enjoyed this experience and it catapulted her into deciding that she would get a second college degree in education.

After teaching for 11 years, 10 of which were at the high school level teaching language arts, history, and humanities electives with students of all ability levels, age ranges, and backgrounds, she was ready to take her work to a charter school that served a different population of students. She was hired at this charter high school to design a mastery-based curriculum. Her teaching experience was valuable, leading her to understand the needs and challenges that teachers face in the classroom. Designing the mastery-based curriculum was a game changer.

She stated,

I've always known in my heart, and I tried to do this in my classroom, is that what a mastery-based curriculum does is individualizes for the student. That means that you can go as quickly as you need to or as slowly as you need or want to. Mastery-based for me individualizes education and meets the students where they are.

The mastery-based curriculum that she designed is still used at this high school, and it's a major component of the work the teachers do with students to meet the state requirements for graduation. It helps students who are at all stages of literacy development improve their literacy skills, which then improves their opportunities in life. She stated,

Interestingly, as I'm sharing this with you, I didn't have any education in this. I didn't take a class in mastery-based education. It's part of who I was. It was what was needed in education. I took our State Standards and I developed a set of core standards and made a packet model for the school, and we've been using that here

ever since. When students leave the program, they bank the credits they've earned

and the work they've done, so when they return it's reactivated, and they can start

where they left off. She feels this is essential to helping students succeed.

Her leadership at this high school is transformative in many ways and reflects her life

experiences and her school experiences growing up. Her empathy, compassion, and

connection to the students and staff at the school embody a school culture of success for all.

She cited in this excerpt:

So, as director, I am not kidding, I know the inside and the outs of this school. The

history of what we've been through, the studies that we've done, the teachers… all of

those kinds of things. That knowledge and experience in the classroom, outside of the

classroom and now I'm at the level of working with the PED (Public Education

Department) and the political part of it, working with the state legislature. It's given

me such a wide range of knowledge as a leader; I think that's a very important piece.

So, through the years at this charter high school the depth of my knowledge about

trauma-informed practice, a mastery-based curriculum, individualization, and how the

system here runs in general is very deep. When I took over as Executive Director, I

restructured the mission and what I put in our mission is, I call it "enlightened

membership." That's my term. Enlightened membership means we all have a piece in

this.

During the interview, she discussed the autonomy that charter schools have in terms

of creativity, use of time, and scheduling structure. She utilizes these opportunities to be

creative in leading staff through challenges and successes. She also provides a high level of

support and engages at a noteworthy level with her staff. She says, "We can be creative, and I

invite staff feedback. We all take a piece in structuring what's best for our students." She is

willing to hear feedback, implement change, and support change, as it needs to happen. She

also supports and nurtures shared leadership, where everyone has a voice in decision-making

and the opportunity to take on leadership roles. Through her years of work, she has gained

the trust of staff, which she acknowledges is a very difficult thing to do. She has high

expectations of her staff and is very diligent in directing resources to the appropriate places

to meet the professional needs of staff and the needs of students in the classroom. As a result,

the school does not have a turnover in staff, which is unusual at any school. In recent years,

she has implemented a personal "reflection piece" which she has worked tirelessly at. She

and the staff have been reflecting, in written narratives, about what's happening at this

charter high school. It helps her, as the school leader, take responsibility, and the process

builds on the "enlightened membership piece" of her work. They are a bottom-up

organization, and they live their mission and vision every day.

   She stated,

   Staff here model good behavior. I do not allow gossip or toxicity. If someone has a

   complaint they can come and talk to me. I'm very open to feedback and

   communication. If there's a problem, come to me and we'll deal with it. The staff

   here feels very comfortable coming to me to say, "Hey, there's a problem; this isn't

   working!" I say, "No problem, let's fix it." But if someone wants to stand behind the

   scenes and pull people together and gossip and complain they do not work at this

   school! We have a lot of things we need to solve. We have disagreements, we get

   upset with each other, and I feel very comfortable with conflict. I grew up with it. I'm

   okay with conflict as long as I know we can resolve it together. We model

professionalism. We model alacrity, optimism, joyfulness, and sorrow for our students, but they know when they come on this campus it's professional. It's a big deal.

She is always mindful of the contributions the person whom the school was named after made to families and to this community. She wants the students to have respect and an appreciation of this person's selfless contributions to incarcerated inmates and their families. When adult students in the school are not being accountable or are not being responsible for what they need to do, she marches them over to his picture in the main entrance of the school, with humor, and points to it saying, "This man lived this. He wanted change." She does this so they understand that this person and his family cared enough to inspire changes that benefit the outcomes for people who've experienced incarceration in a positive way. He worked tirelessly to set the wheels in motion to improve the lives of people in the community who've experienced obstacles and difficulties in their lives due to incarceration.

The Executive Director's leadership is inspiring, and it's also driven by reality. The reality is the dark side, the challenges and the incredibly sad things she hears and talks about every day in her work. There is also that component of thinking, "This is so big; we're not going to be able to fix things." But, she said, "I do know if you're a thoughtful kind of person and you see the world at that level, that this work is not for the faint of heart. The burnout could be high."

She also thinks compassionately about the first responders, law enforcement, and the correction officers and their work and what they must face every day. She said that it can be frustrating, at times, working with students and families who don't take responsibility. She believes there are multiple entities that need to take responsibility with this issue.

In this excerpt, she shared:

You can do everything with fidelity, love, and compassion and high standards, and then you have to detach from the outcomes because it could kill somebody or deaden you on the inside if you remain attached to all of that ugliness. It is the most challenging work, and there are multiple pieces including the individual because what it comes down to and the bottom line is, whether or not the individual wants to make a change.

She doesn't believe in blaming whole groups of people and at some point, she'd like to bring all those components together, including the community, so they can all feel like they're all being heard and coming together for a common purpose. She said,

We've got to stop shaming, blaming, and judging people. At this school, there is no judgement. People just need to take a deep breath and realize that life is a little hard and we don't all get the same start. Sometimes I think our students can't get out of their circumstances because of the shame. We can say all day that we don't care what people think, but it does matter. I am hopeful though; I feel there are more and more conversations taking place about these things now.

Student support. In her work to support students, the Executive Director said that people confuse nurturing and trust with the idea that you don't have boundaries. At this high school, teachers and staff have very strong boundaries in their work with students. She said, "Our students here don't do well without excellent boundaries. We have exceptional boundaries and provide exceptional support." In terms of how student discipline is handled, she commented, "We don't yell here. Even if I have to sit down with a student and discipline them, I don't even consider it disciplining. I have the language so in-tune with the purpose."

It is clear she believes in holding students responsible for their actions. She has conversations with them using a calm and professional approach. She also has deep compassion for the problems they are experiencing that keep them from focusing on their goal to graduate. She sits down with students who've been arrested and incarcerated and has the tough conversations with them, respectfully, and they thank her for holding them responsible. When she's with students in these situations, she also reflects on her own school experiences and thinks about that lack of connection she experienced. "If somebody would have just noticed me in school and said, 'You know what, you could go to medical school' or 'Hey, you're failing math…what's up? We know you have the brains to do this!' So, she takes the time to make meaningful connections with students to help them grow as individuals and to succeed in their efforts to graduate. They don't give up on students in this school. She doesn't allow misbehavior or disruption, and their door is always open for students to return if their present circumstances are keeping them from being accountable and doing the work they are responsible for in order to graduate.

The school culture at this high school is one of individualization in terms of academics, caring, compassion, and support for students. Students get what they need. It is another facet of the Executive Director's leadership that promotes success for all students. Student's know that they are all working at their own pace and it is accepted and embraced. Many of the students at this school experienced being left behind in the curriculum at other schools for various reasons. This is one of the ways that makes this school different from other high schools. The mastery-based curriculum meets students where they are and gives students what they need in terms of individualization and support. The staff has high expectations for students, and teachers work patiently to help students learn what they need

to in order to meet the requirements for graduation. They are not a school of apathy. Teachers also take the time to make strong connections with students and they let them know they care and want them to succeed. This is something that many students rarely, if ever, felt at their other schools before making the decision to drop out. There is a student support team (SAT) on campus that meets weekly, and the Executive Director attends two-thirds of all the student-teacher meetings to know students and stay connected to what's going on with them.

The school culture is also influenced by two of the Executive Director's educational heroes. In the interview, she described the work of Bill Strickland 2009, who wrote the book *Make the Impossible Possible* and Jeffery Canada who founded the "Harlem's Children's Zone" in 1970, for combatting the effects of poverty and improving child and parent education. Both are African American men who have designed schools and these beautiful programs in the inner city. She said, "They are two of my educational heroes." Their ideas are simple and based on the idea of elevating beauty and having high expectations for the beauty of school campuses. This shows students the importance of who they are. At this high school, they redid the campus, and students painted and did beautiful things. She keeps the campus in order, clean and beautiful for students. Students say to her, "This feels rich Miss!" Her response is, "It's not rich, it's you; it's what you deserve!" She recounted,

> It's the beauty we all deserve… beauty and fresh flowers. They don't even know they're worth a beautiful lobby. They think only rich people deserve a beautiful lobby and that's just not true. My mom, who's always been very, very poor and struggled her whole life, has always made her environment beautiful. Environment works!

As a result of this philosophy, they don't have problems with trash or graffiti because students appreciate, value, and respect their school.

Following Strickland's 2009 model and the mission at his Bidwell Centers, where they have vocational and music programs and eat fresh meals together for lunch, the staff and students at this school prepare healthy fresh meals together and sit down twice a week to enjoy lunch together. This is something that many students have not experienced in their lives. Their life experiences have been very limited, and this tradition strengthens their bond as a school community and expands the life experiences for students.

At this school, another facet of support the students receive is not invested in a particular "niche," they receive the guidance they need to fit their future plans in terms of educational opportunities or career training that leads to important life skills and/or employment opportunities. For some students, it may mean pursuing a vocational program at the local community college like electricity, auto mechanics, or nursing or it could simply be improving their literacy skills so they can earn a high school diploma. Some students may go on to college or they simply need to take care of their family or get a job. Other students may need help staying out of jail, so the school can help students with that too. The school is there to support students' needs and it streamlines their transitions with the assistance and the necessary resources to support their success.

Cultural relevancy is important to student success. The Executive Director stated,

I have a good insight into my own experiences here. I have decided that cultural relevancy is exactly what any single student needs to belong and connect. So, my responsibility with cultural relevancy is knowing the student and providing anything that is going to help them to connect. And that was a big "ah-hah" moment because it removed any preconceived notions in making assumptions about students.

The Executive Director told the story of a female student who's been incarcerated and expecting her first child. She's getting ready to graduate and she is a strong and amazing young woman. This student fell in love with Shakespeare. She loves all the kings and queens of England. You would never guess. The Executive Director said, "I would not have thought to hand her a book about Shakespeare and say, 'Hey, you need to study Shakespeare.' It was through her social studies class and her teacher that she fell in love with that part of history." So, the Executive Director said, "My job is to say, 'What do you need so that we can meet the benchmarks and standards to help your literacy and what books do you need? Then how will we make sure to tie in your love of Shakespeare with all the other rich resources to help you graduate?'" That's what the Executive Director said she's learned about cultural relevancy: individualization and not making vast assumptions about what people need to read and what they want to read. She just makes it all available. She believes that literacy is the single most important skill students need to acquire, and it's a really important part of the foundation for student success at this school.

Staff support and engagement. In discussing support for her staff, she said, "I have very high expectations of the staff to rise to the level of leaders at our school, and I support staff in this mission." She reiterates the importance of "enlightened membership" and "shared leadership" whereby "everyone on staff has a piece in this." She engages with staff in a positive and supportive manner, and she invites and encourages teachers and leaders to be creative in ways that inspires them to develop unique models that support student's needs. As far as instructional materials are concerned, they don't have textbooks in this school. She looks to each individual staff member to keep her informed about what they need in the classroom in terms of teaching materials. She also works to provide as many learning

opportunities and training opportunities as staff want and desire. This includes paying for

staff to get licensed in special education and multiple certifications. The school also pays for

the preps and testing that they need to have. The school also has an excellent leave policy and

pays teachers well. Time is organized creatively so staff can take care of their families. The

school's in-services are provided to staff on a need-based basis. As stated earlier in this

chapter, the feedback comes from the bottom up, which is what makes this school a bottom-

up organization.

The Executive Director also has a lot of heart for teachers who are in the classroom

and don't know what to do. From her own experience as a teacher she knows that having a

personal connection with students is something you can't build in a person. She said, "I've

always had that and its inherent in me but it's not true for everyone." It's the personal

connection that's important to building trust with students and it's vital to establishing an

environment conducive to learning and creating a safe place where students become willing

to open up their hearts and minds to learning. Students learn to feel safe taking risks in a

learning environment like this.

During the interview, she emphasized her gratitude for the incredible dedication of

the staff and their ability to wear many different hats "well" and their commitment to

students. She shared one last story that's very dear to her because it exemplifies the

importance of literacy for students and the commitment, dedication, and hard work embodied

by her staff with students.

In this excerpt, she conveyed quite vividly:

When you sit across from an adult student with children who realizes he was never

taught to read it's heartbreaking for me. And I have one student in mind who was an

adult and he was a very difficult student. He had so much rage and pain and he came to us and he couldn't read, and our very Catholic older teacher worked with him non-stop. He passed all his graduation tests. He raged and raged against us, saying this is bull… and a couple of times he came to school intoxicated. He just struggled and struggled and struggled but he kept coming back. He did it all… he graduated, and he brought his children here. One day in the classroom he had a breakdown with another staff member and me. He completely had a breakdown. And he said he'd been invisible all of this time and that he had never been taught to read, basically, in a nutshell. He asked if his reading teacher would help his children learn how to read using the same reading program he used. Shortly after graduation he was hit by a car and killed. In our hearts, we will never know if he was intoxicated and stepped in front of a car, if it was an accident or if he was just filled with so much pain and struggle that he couldn't find a way through it. I'll just never know what it was that didn't allow for him to go to the next step, but that will forever be in my heart for the story of literacy. I'm very careful about explaining students' stories because I don't like to be dramatic about things, but literacy is huge. I want to be very accurate in these stories. I guess the point is, especially in this last story, is that two very different people crossed paths. The teacher is a devout, religious, older man that has a love and compassion for people beyond anything I've ever seen. He is so dedicated to teaching, and this student was from the reservation, he was a native. These two came together and the teacher never gave up, and it was amazing to witness. The teacher is tenaciously stubborn, and he changed that student's life. In addition to his work, all the other teachers here also supported him to graduate, so I know it can be done.

That's a story that I share because that literacy piece is so important, and it

demonstrates the willingness of the staff to go the extra miles necessary to help and

support a student that fell through the cracks and never learned to read.

The Executive Director's transformative leadership guides and inspires her school

community to come together to help all students learn by providing them with the care and

support, the academic skills, and the structure they need to experience success in school and

in life. She began teaching at this charter school 11 years ago. She was originally hired by the

founding director to write the curriculum for the mastery-based curriculum packets still used

today at the school. She was also the second person hired at this school as a teacher when it

first opened for the 2008-2009 school year. About one year later, when the founding director

retired from the school, she took over and transformed the school with her vision, leadership,

and personal life experiences in several ways. During her tenure as Executive Director, she

has expanded on the educational services provided to students and they continue to offer the

mastery-based curriculum she authored. Teachers take the curriculum and individualize

instruction to meet the needs of students. The Executive Director is also at a level in her

leadership where she testifies and speaks before the state legislative committees of this

southwestern state to advocate for students and for the funding necessary to provide services

to students. She has also continued to build upon the original program that provided

educational services to incarcerated and probation inmates and community custody program

participants. Originally, this school was housed for 10 years in the adjacent courtyard of the

city jail in the downtown area of this large city. Through her transformational leadership and

vision for the possibilities of what this school could be, she transformed the third-floor space

of a government building, where the school was located, into a beautiful, safe, and

welcoming space for this population of students, who so desperately need the care and support of this Executive Director and her staff. The warm and welcoming atmosphere of this space helps students to heal from their past experiences and contributes in a positive way to helping staff change the lives of students, as their mission states, from the inside out!

As of April 2019, the school relocated to a brand-new building in the northwest quadrant of the city. Upon entering the building, you can feel the calm and comfort of this beautiful learning environment built for students who have, in so many cases, come from environments of chaos and dysfunction. The positive vibes in the air and the welcoming atmosphere richly invites students to participate in the educational process to earn their high school diplomas. Students, over the years, have been awestruck at the beauty of this school learning environment.

Trauma-informed care and practice. The Executive Director also supports staff in making sure that they all process what they're going through in their work. They have a trauma-informed care staff who are fully trained because, as she says, "Until you address trauma, you cannot address learning. We all speak that speak and walk that walk." She states, "It doesn't mean you stay and live in trauma; we're not advocating for that, otherwise people are not going to make it." She emphasizes that she does not see students as victims. That's another piece that she's really thought a lot about. She asks herself, do people always want to be considered the victims? As a staff, they address the trauma and they address what's happened. Then, she believes, through their work and high expectations "Our students are going to be amazing citizens who contribute to this campus, and I expect nothing less because they are amazing!" The trauma-informed skills and practice training for staff also addresses the deep emotional needs of this population and gives them hope for the future.

For several years now, The Executive Director and members of this school staff have attended trainings on trauma-informed care and compassion fatigue skills training. This is an integral part of the services this school provides to help students learn coping skills and healthy alternatives to addressing trauma and stress. Trauma-informed care is a movement that was started circa 2009 by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) https://www.samhas.gov and the National Institute of Health (NIH), https://www.nih.gov both branches of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The principles for trauma-informed care are based on the work of Fallot and Harris, 2009. According to the website for the National Center for Trauma Informed Care (NCTIC) https://tash.org/nctic funded by the Center for Mental Health Services (CMHS), https://ww.cmhsma.org, trauma-informed care helps publicly funded agencies and programs to make the cultural shift to a more trauma-informed environment that is intended to be more supportive, comprehensively integrated, and empowering for trauma survivors. Trauma-informed policies and services work both for the person seeking services and for the provider. Providers emerge as partners to guide and support those who seek services, while also taking time out to engage in self-care practices that help to manage the stresses linked to their own past traumas and possible compassion fatigue.

According to Fallot and Harris (2009) there are five primary principles for trauma-informed care:

1. Safety – This includes creating spaces where people feel culturally, emotionally, and physically safe as well as having an awareness of an individual's discomfort or unease;

2. Transparency and trustworthiness – This includes providing full and accurate information about what's happening and what's likely to happen next;

3. Choice – This includes the recognition of the need for an approach that honors the individual's dignity;

4. Collaboration and mutuality – This includes the recognition that healing happens in relationships and partnerships with shared decision-making;

5. Empowerment – This includes the recognition of an individual's strengths. These strengths are built on and validated (p. 7-10).

These principles guide the services provided to students at this school by everyone on staff. There is no deviation from anyone practicing these principles because they are vital to providing a safe and caring environment for students and they ensure a positive school environment and school culture for students. The Executive Director implemented this practice schoolwide a few years ago. It also enhances the academic, social, and emotional well-being of students who've, in most cases, lived with trauma and stress most of their lives. The school also provides an elective class where students can earn one-half credit per semester for attending 30 class sessions on trauma sensitive yoga, a practice developed by Dr. Bessel van der Kolk. Dr. van der Kolk is considered one of the world's leading authorities on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This yoga practice helps to regulate emotional and physiological states and allows the body to regain its natural movement and teaches the use of breath for self-regulation.

Two full-time social worker-therapists (LISWs) on staff are trained in trauma informed care and they at the forefront of this important work with students. They teach

students the following life skills to help them succeed at school and cope with stresses they may be experiencing in their lives outside of school. The skills they teach are:

1. Distress tolerance skills – Skills taught that are used when someone is feeling overwhelmed by a problem and think they might do something that will only make things worse in the long run;

2. Self-care skills – Skills that are part of the distress tolerance skill set that promote well-being and reduces emotional vulnerability;

3. Interpersonal effectiveness skills – Skills that teach that balance is the key to maintaining healthy relationships;

4. Self-regulation skills – Skills taught to achieve a calm state of mind to help students focus in class and outside of class. These are things like breathing techniques, chair yoga, and observing and describing anything inside or outside themselves without making judgement.

The Executive Director has expanded the local and state conversations in understanding the needs of this population and the importance of educating inmates as it relates to rebuilding lives, families, and the communities of this state. Every graduate of this school is enriched by becoming part of this special school community. She works from a very deep level of knowing everything it takes to lead a successful school with this population.

Findings: Staff Focus Group Interview

There was one 90-minute interview held with volunteers from the staff. All names were changed to protect the identities of the participants. The focus group consisted of seven participants who are all long-standing members of the school staff. There were two social

worker-therapists (LISWs), one special education teacher, two math teachers, one social studies teacher, and one academic counselor. All are experienced educators and clinicians in their fields. Their daily work with students is compassionate and sincere and they reported they love their students. The staff has a unique perspective regarding the significance of their work with this population of students. The major themes from the focus group interview that emerged during the data analysis phase were:

1.   Positive elements of their work;

2.   Negative elements of their work;

3.   Staff support for students;

4.   Staff engagement with students.

The focus group interview was an open-ended conversation guided by semi-structured questions regarding the rewards and challenges in the work the staff does to support students to graduate with a high school diploma.

Positive elements of their work. The staff has strong support from the Executive Director. They all work together as a team to help students succeed. It is important to note that, to date, this school has a zero-turnover rate for staff. This fact was confirmed by the Executive Director during her interview. The Executive Director's high expectations of staff include that she wants them to "rise" to the level of leaders in the school. Her "enlightened membership" term includes "shared leadership," and it means "that we all have a piece in structuring what's best for our students." The Executive Director is also very diligent in directing resources where they are needed. During the interview, the staff expressed high job satisfaction and their gratitude for working in an environment that encourages creativity and affords them as many professional training and development opportunities as they want or

need, and which are paid for by the school. Some examples of the training they've received include the opportunity to become licensed in special education and the opportunity to participate in trauma-informed care/practice and compassion fatigue training. Traditional textbooks are not used in this school. Instead the school pays for whatever instructional materials are needed and requested by staff to use in the classroom based on student interests, which also meet the graduation requirements.

An additional resource developed by the Executive Director to help her and the staff "process" what's happening in the school is a "reflective process" in the form of written narratives. They've used this reflective process for the past three years. This reflective writing practice is a way for them to process and maintain balance in their work. The Executive Director and her staff are all on the same page with the mission of the school to "Change Lives from the Inside Out." She's always open to new ideas and proposals from staff for training, resolving conflict, and improving or making changes to existing challenges they may be facing. She utilizes the autonomy that charter schools have regarding creativity with scheduling and time, which helps her give the staff what they need to take care of themselves and their families. The school also has a lucrative pay schedule and an excellent leave policy. The staff who participated in the focus group interview affirmed the significance of the Executive Director's commitment and support for them in all facets of their work.

One participant, Donna, summed it up this way:

I would have to say the administration from the get-go, when I started here many years ago, has been the most supportive in terms of staff development. It has been

phenomenal! It trickles down to our students; if the employees are treated well and they're happy, they [the students] do the best work they can.

The unique needs of this population make staff satisfaction and professional support critical components of the program's success. Joanna commented, "Schools need to fight for more resources. We are lucky here to have the resources that we need to have. It's so hard to do what you need to if you don't have the resources."

Jane commented,

I like working with adults. For me that's one of the most positive elements of this program. I've worked a lot with teenagers, and I'm done with that. I really appreciate the perspective that adults bring to the classroom. They recognize the value of education in a way that 15-year-olds often don't. So maybe maturation has taken place. That's a real positive thing, just to be around people who have chosen and truly want to get an education. No one under 18 is given that choice.

Teachers reflected on work they do, as expressed by students themselves, in a series of small moments that happen daily. It heartwarmingly reminds them of the significance of their work. They may not be big interactions with students, instead they can be smaller interactions. For example, "Have a good lunch" or "Welcome back." It is that kind of feeling of caring about a student or appreciating who they are that matters most. It does not have to be big stuff, nor does it need to be dramatic. Teachers say they can feel it in their bones when it happens like it is a good thing. For the teachers and staff in this school it is a privilege to be a part of that. The loyalty of the staff directly contributes to the consistency and stability that's so important for many students who've experienced some of life's most difficult circumstances.

Watching students blossom and become strong individuals (individuals who can contribute to their community as opposed to turning to drugs and alcohol) is deeply felt among this school staff. With the right support, students learn that they can achieve; they can see for themselves that they can do whatever they've been told in their lives that they could not do. As Donna shared, "It's rewarding and it's a very positive element of our work because sometimes we don't see our successes for years down the road in these careers."

Roy noted, in his years of experience, there is another kind of moment he has witnessed with many students that delights him. He explained, initially, inmates come to the school pod in the jail because they can get out of the cell or their pod for a day. So, they get out and hang out in school and goof off. They just "yo-ho-bro-it" all day long for a while. And, for some students, it might take up to six weeks for them to suddenly realize they want to get serious about school and work toward graduation. He said, "I just let them be." And then, surprisingly, the switch gets thrown and its full steam ahead, and he sees them churning out credits left and right. It's amazing, and for Roy it's a great moment when someone makes that commitment internally to understand in themselves that "I can do this. I want to do this and I'm going to do this. The journey begins!"

Not surprisingly, the most positive element of the staff's work and their greatest reward is watching their students graduate. Debbie commented,

> To watch someone graduate when you've been a witness to all of the trials and tribulations, the ups and downs, the disenrolling, the not showing up, the getting incarcerated again, and then getting out again, and all that our students go through to get to graduation and to watch that process unfold and to see them get a diploma is incredibly amazing and beautiful.

In this excerpt about graduation Roy shared:

> In the prison system, you can only get your GED, and the impact that it has on everybody seems to be the same. I've seen people who've been incarcerated for 30 years burst into tears when they get their GED, and they always invite their mothers to see them graduate. It's the same at this school and at the jail: people want their mom to be there and it's the same, lots of crying, and so that says to me that this is a really important moment, and it shows that dropping out of school however cool they thought it was at the time or for whatever reason it has left a huge hole in their lives, and this filling of it is great for us to see.

In consensus, the staff expressed they are grateful to be a part of the process whereby their work has contributed to making their students proud of themselves as they go through the process of earning credits and completing the program to graduate. For many students, this is their first experience with success. This is a life-changing accomplishment, and, for many, it's the first steppingstone toward feeling hopeful about their futures and pursuing dreams and goals they never thought were possible before.

Negative elements of their work. As with staff in any organization, there are negative elements in the work they do. The negative elements are more about the daily challenges the staff faces outside of their work with students. They love their students and their work with them. There are simply entities beyond their control professionally that can be a source of frustration at times. In charter schools, everyone wears many hats. Part of the work in this school is that they work with many different organizations and the staff must figure out how to function within those organizations. Whether it's with the jail, other school programs, or the men's and women's recovery programs, they're all different and have

pressures of their own. As Debbie said, "They all have stresses, and so I feel that we end up having to manage with their stresses too." Donna commented:

> The most difficult part for me, because we work with students who've been incarcerated, who've had substance abuse issues and mental health issues, there is so much judgement out there in the world and it's really difficult to deal with. People cannot see past someone's mistakes to give them a second chance. I'm talking from employment to the corrections officers at the jail, to different organizations that we work with. While most of them are good, that for me is the most difficult part: other people not treating them as dignified human beings.

There was also a practical concern raised by Jane and Betty regarding the math requirements for high school graduation and the relevancy of those requirements to a person leading a successful adult life. The kind of math now required to graduate from high school is not appropriate for where these students are in their lives as adults. The classes should be focused on other ways for students to deal with life realistically. This school does offer a financial literacy curriculum that teaches the life skills that students need, like how to pay their bills and develop a personal budget. Neither math teacher believed, at this point, that their students need to know equations and/or algebra.

Roy makes made a strong point, based on his years of teaching experience in corrections education and the challenges of working in a restricted and difficult environment like a corrections facility: teachers work with other service providers, which cuts across the grain of what that corrections facility's purpose is, and that is to "constrict people." Many times, it's hard for teachers to adapt to that setting and it's why most of them don't make it. Roy stated,

Teachers in corrections education need to become accustomed to the fact that they are

going to be constrained throughout their careers regarding what they can and can't do.

They have to go with the process and do what they can within it to help people. He

said teaching in corrections education is not for task-oriented people or people who

can't follow guidelines. It's hugely challenging.

Judy noted that teaching with "continuity" is a dilemma staff works with directly with

students. Trying to build upon the skills students need to have is sometimes difficult because

of their absences, time away, restarts, and the times when they are in and out of jail. These

issues make it hard for teachers to make steady progress with students. The other part of this

problem is that the students don't understand the "continuity of learning," and teachers often

find it frustrating to try and establish that mindset in them. Jane said,

Recognizing and realizing the trauma the vast majority of students in this school have

experienced in their lives and their inability to escape the dysfunction within their

own family systems is very difficult. It impedes their ability to know who they are,

and it hinders their capacity to rebuild their self-esteem and self-concept.

This is a constant presence within their school program. It's frustrating for the staff that very

few people recognize and understand that trauma has such a tremendous impact on

someone's ability to learn and be successful.

Jane expressed a concern that negatively impacts students and their abilities to

succeed:

Typically, education is associated with a lot of shame, internalized shame. Shame

about not being able to perform academically, shame about not fitting in culturally or

socially. Shame about not finishing. Shame is an overwhelming, and powerful, very

widespread thing. I think that's not just the case with our students, but I think a lot of students in school feel that way. Unfortunately, I think education typically produces shame for most children.

Staff support for students. In terms of staff support for students, the Executive Director made it clear in her interview that everyone on staff "speaks the speak and walks the walk." Her staff confirms that to be true. They all share the same mindset of how to have high expectations, how to approach students, how to develop strong boundaries, and how to provide the structure their students need. They work simultaneously to recognize student strengths and, in turn, help students to recognize the strengths they possess within themselves. This is life-changing work with a student population who's been disenfranchised and failed by schools in the past.

In her interview, the Executive Director said, "A bigotry of low expectations does not exist in this school, and yet it has affected so many students who enroll here." One example of the distress and the low academic expectations students have experienced at previous schools are the students who come to this school with "As" on their transcripts who come to find out after placement testing is completed at this school, that they actually have a third-grade reading level. This is heartbreaking and unethical on so many levels. It is shameful when we think about the rights all students have to a fair and appropriate education. The stark reality they're faced with, in pursuing their high school diploma at this stage of their lives, is that they have to start over again with the basics because they don't have the literacy skills (which includes writing) or the math skills they need to move ahead at a more accelerated pace to earn a high school diploma.

The teachers at this school treat students with respect. Respect is meaningful because it changes students' perspectives on the student/teacher relationship in a positive way. Overall, many of these students do not have that frame of reference in their past school experiences. Inmates enrolled in the school pod at the jail and students who attend classes on the outside at the main school campus enjoy a different dynamic, gain an alternative perspective, and have a more positive experience with their teachers. When teachers show respect, they get it back. Betty said,

> I've never had an incident where somebody has challenged me or come up against me or anything like that because I treat them with respect, and so you always get that back. And I think when you do that, they really start to respect themselves and start to see themselves in a different light.

That notion is carried over into the pods with how the inmates treat each other in the jail. It's been reported to the school that in the pods in the jail where their students reside, students are more well-behaved than in the general population pods. Respect has a positive impact on students.

Another way staff supports students was highlighted by Donna, who is a social worker/therapist at the school. She said:

> My work supports students and contributes in a positive way in the sense that helping them and teaching them how to use positive coping skills is so important. For most students, all their lives they've reacted the way they've been taught or by what they've seen in their family systems. Just teaching them that there are healthier ways to react and deal with things is important to how they deal with the stresses in their lives now.

Another contribution she makes as a social worker-therapist is, sometimes in a sense, she serves as a surrogate parent with boundaries—like most of the staff at this school does. Donna noted,

> It's something they've never had before. They've never been shown compassion. They've never had that nurturing, and they've never had someone say to them, "Wow, you're doing really good. I'm so proud of you." I think the more you do that, the more you lift people up and it helps them to believe in themselves.

> Joanna also said, "Really complimenting them on their strengths as opposed to

focusing on what they're doing wrong can really make a difference with students." Debbie noted that, as an academic counselor, she thinks it's helpful to provide students with a different experience. She believes part of the challenge in supporting students is figuring out how to do something different for each one. Do they need more limits, or do they need more kindness and compassion? She asks herself what is it that this student didn't get, that we can provide here to support their success.

> Judy said,

> I'm probably being kind in saying that 80% of our students were probably in special education at one point or another, and so I think we all see a tremendous link between students who don't make it through to graduate and something going on with our special education students whatever that might be. It's hard to pinpoint. So many students have had such bad experiences with special education; it's not like anyone was trying to be mean to them or anything, but the students felt pointed out and they felt stupid and they felt less than. It's rewarding when they start figuring out that they

really are not "less than" here at this school, and they have those successes. It's pretty

special.

The culture of acceptance and nonjudgement in this school has a powerful impact on student

success. In unison, this staff works from a strength-based place to help students succeed.

Teachers encourage and support students to take ownership of their education. They

want students to express what they want to learn, and then teachers can help to shape what

that can look like. The tenable difference between this school and other schools is that

students do not need to be manipulated and shaped to fit the curriculum. In this school,

teachers shape the individualized, mastery-based curriculum to fit the students and their

needs. Roy stated,

> I tell them it's completely individualized, and you won't move together as a class,
>
> you'll go at your own speed, and that takes a lot of pressure off students who've
>
> traditionally struggled to keep up. Also, when students get discouraged or
>
> overwhelmed, the focus is placed on what they can do, and changing their program or
>
> their way of studying to help them earn the credits they need to graduate.
>
> Additionally, if a student is overwhelmed with three classes, they can modify their
>
> program so students can focus on completing one class at a time. Working to meet
>
> students where they are alleviates frustration and stress and encourages them to move
>
> forward one step at a time.

A vital component in their work is also encouraging students to make plans for the

future. The staff believes that students, from the onset, need to be thinking that earning a high

school diploma is just the beginning and not the end of reaching their goals. Judy said,

In the moment, it feels like a huge triumph to them, but it's really just a piece of it. I

think that's a huge motivator because they're going to create a life of stability for

their children. Many of the students at this school are adults and/or parents, so

fostering that mindset is a considerable incentive for students to continue their

journey to a better and more stable life.

Joanna said,

When a student wants to quit, I have them use skills like what are the pros of leaving

and what are the cons of leaving and what are the pros of staying and what are the

cons of staying. I use visualization. Studies show that if you can visualize yourself

doing something that you're more likely to complete it.

She has them visualize graduating and holding that diploma in their hand. Also, the staff

really tries to hear what's going on and really listens both emotionally and cognitively to

understand what a student is experiencing, and then they try to help students work with

whatever that issue might be.

Another aspect of positive support the staff provides is that at every staff meeting

they go through the names of every single student who's at the main school site. The Student

Support Team discusses and reflects upon the needs of every student every week. They've

discovered that there are things that need to be discussed about students who are quiet and

not showing up. Mentioning every student's name at every meeting has been a very

important component of meeting students' needs.

Donna spoke about the importance of reconnecting with students who've had

problems in their past stemming from early attachment issues. "They've never attached to

their caretaker. They were never shown the affection they needed or that their caretaker cared

about them. If you can rebuild that trust, you're almost guaranteed success if you can reestablish that connection."

Both the Executive Director and the focus group participants agree that they accept their students for who they are. They really like their students with all of their problems and troubles, their ups and downs, their strengths, shortcomings, and quirks; they become endeared to them. Judy said, "It is family…we've constructed a strong community here and that is a strength we bring to our students."

In providing words of wisdom to other schools, Judy pointed out that, in most schools,

> There's a lack of awareness of the emotional distress that students carry around inside of them and how that impacts their behavior and their ability to learn. I just think there's a huge lack of awareness for their plight in life. As a society, we tend to look at the negative instead of the positive. What I would love to see is that teacher's stop recognizing the negative and start focusing on the positive and the good things that students bring to the classroom. For example, "Great. You were quiet for five minutes. That's a huge thing that you just did." Or, "I see you're angry and you're not throwing anything. What a great way to behave right now." Just being able to recognize what's going right instead of getting into that place where teachers are just looking at what's going wrong is important to student success. It's self-defeating for students and for staff."

Teachers at this school focus on the fact that it doesn't matter how students get to the graduation line as long as they get there. They feel that the mindset of teachers needs to

change to accept that there can be other ways for students to reach that important benchmark of graduating.

       Other thoughtfully spoken words of advice to other schools included that working more closely with parents and listening to what they have to say is important for both younger students and for high school students. Teachers aren't always right, and parents know their children. Parents are often pushed away to the detriment of the students. And the possibilities of what teachers can experience with students by just getting to know who they are is also compromised. Also, punitive systems of discipline (used for many decades in classrooms across the country and which are still in place even today) don't work with every student. Unfortunately, these systems (created to regulate behavior) start very early, most often in an effort to control boys who may act out. Their active behavior labels them in a negative way and impedes their success in the classroom and at school. Systems of competition for gathering points for good deeds also don't work because they externalize behavior instead of internalizing it in a meaningful way that produces positive results. Both systems of discipline have a negative impact on the success of boys. Their perception of how they see themselves being accepted and treated by their teachers contributes over time to the process of their decision to drop out of school. Boys who are active and easily distracted in the classroom are especially susceptible to unfair scrutiny by teachers who don't understand their behavior. Teachers need to understand what they need to include in their classroom activities to engage boys in learning. For example, teaching coping skills to today's kindergarteners, skills like meditation and breathing, could create a whole new way for kids to learn how to deal with stress that comes both from home and the school.

At this school, teachers and staff base their work on a foundation of caring and showing students they are important. They treat every student with respect. They work together to meet the individual needs of students. Instruction is individualized, and they use a mastery-based curriculum that allows students to go as slow or as fast as they want. In addition, the social worker-therapists work with students to help them strengthen their emotional stability, rebuild their self-confidence and their self-esteem in their ability to succeed.

Staff engagement with students. A starting point for staff engagement at this high school begins with creating a family-like environment with students. For the past three years the staff has connected and engaged with students around cooking food and sharing food in the way a family does. Meals are prepared and eaten together twice weekly. This tradition is continually growing, and it has become a rich emotional touchstone for students. Jane and Judy expressed that these community meals are a huge factor in students coming to school more often.

The staff works together as an incredibly dedicated group of professionals who all share the same vision of success for their students. They are a strong school community that doesn't give up. An important facet of continuity for students related to staff engagement is that the staff is the same every day. Students know what to expect at school. There's real predictability and stability among the staff and that shows the students that the staff cares. Staff members' demeanor, actions, and commitment to their work show students every day, "I like you; you are good," and it makes an important difference in how teachers feel at work and how students feel at school. Teachers and staff in this school also don't react to misbehavior. Instead, as Donna said,

They can set kind limits and do something different than what students have typically experienced in their homes or previously in their education. The message conveyed to students is, "I still like you unconditionally, and no matter what, I'm going to stay engaged with you and you're not going to push me away."

Bringing joy to learning is another way that teachers engage with students in the classroom and it permeates throughout the school. The teachers really know their subjects well, and they enjoy teaching their subjects, and that conveys a message of enthusiasm to students about the work the teachers are doing with them. It also exposes students to learning things in a positive way that they may not have experienced before. Teachers provide continuity, stability, and encouragement every day. Teachers show students they care and reinforce the idea to students that they can accomplish whatever they put their minds to. Some students have confided to their teachers that they want to "change the cycle" for their children. Teachers inspire the students to be different and remind them they don't have to live the same life their parents have lived.

Teachers also engage collaboratively with each other and heavily consult and support each other in their work. It's one of the key strengths of the program. Teachers feel that collaboration is especially important in working effectively with young people because students can push buttons. The teachers work cooperatively to make decisions about students, and this helps prevent an issue from becoming a one-on-one teacher-student situation. By communicating and supporting each other in this way, teachers acquire the feedback they need to diffuse any concern that may arise between any staff person and a student and supports students in the process.

Findings: Student Interviews

There were eight student interviews and each interview lasted about 90 minutes. The ages of the eight participants were 28 to 30 years old. The median age of participants interviewed was 29 years old. Six out of eight of the participants had children between the ages of one and fourteen years old, and five out of the eight participants were single fathers. The participant's experienced incarceration from 3 to 30 times making the range in the number of times incarcerated 27. It's also interesting and heartwarming to note that each of the eight participants asked me to use their real names in my study because they wanted me to know they are accountable for their choices and the mistakes they've made in their lives, and it's been those decisions and life experiences that have contributed to the strength and honesty of the young men they are today. Each of them is committed to working really hard to earn the credits they need to graduate with a high school diploma. I explained to each of the participants the reason why I needed to change their names to protect their identities and to comply with the University of New Mexico Institutional Research Board requirements for this study. The names of all eight students were changed to protect their identities.

Student interview participant: Jesse. Jesse identified as a Hispanic male who is 29 years old. He's originally from California and was raised in poverty in a single-parent household with his mother and four sisters. He also had a brother who was some years older, and who moved away when Jesse was young. Jesse's father was very abusive toward his mother. She took Jesse and his sisters away from him at a young age. They relocated to the southwestern corner of this southwestern state where the family remained until he was 11 years old. Jesse was bullied in elementary and middle school. He was also bullied at home, growing up with four sisters. Jesse's family relocated to the largest city in this southwestern

state because Jesse was already misbehaving and acting out in school, and he didn't put a lot of effort into his schoolwork. At this point, with Jesse's behavior and grades continuing to get worse, his mother sent him to live in California with his older brother. Jesse said, "I never really liked school; I really didn't think I belonged there." But as he got older, Jesse felt that he was well-liked by his peers and his teachers. Jesse stated, "Teachers liked me, but I just wouldn't do any of the work. I was like the class clown." He looked up to his older brother because he never had a father figure in his life. The highest grade in school Jesse completed was the sixth grade. He traveled back and forth from California to visit his mother for the next 11 years. As a teenager, he was incarcerated and the last school he attended was located inside a juvenile detention center. He never attended high school except for the time he was incarcerated at this facility. Jesse felt that he had positive relationships with his teachers in school. He didn't participate in any school sports because his family couldn't afford the related expenses. He commented, "We were really poor growing up, so I really never got to do that kind of stuff. At recess I would play basketball, football, and kickball, but as far as ever being on a team, no." He started thinking about dropping out of school in middle school, and he began hanging out with the wrong crowd. His mother enrolled him in the eighth grade, but he was expelled within two months and he never returned to school.

The first time he was incarcerated in a juvenile detention center was when he was 13. He was booked on graffiti charges, and from that point forward he was in and out of the juvenile detention system until he was 18. He also got involved with heavy drugs and gangs at a young age. The first thing Jesse thought about every time he was arrested was how much it was going to hurt his mother. It took Jesse quite a few years in and out of incarceration as a

juvenile and as an adult to decide that he wanted a different life. At the time of this interview

Jesse said,

> I'm almost 11 months clean off heroin and meth at the end of this December, and I've
>
> been out of jail for eight months. I'm also proud of the fact that I haven't missed one
>
> day of school since being out of jail. I work full-time and go to school full-time now.

> Being incarcerated has changed how Jesse now feels about being in school and

graduating. He gives himself positive pep talks these days, saying that he can graduate. At

the time of the interview Jesse only needed five more credits to earn his high school diploma.

He's great at math and he's worked hard to earn all As and Bs on his math tests.

> While he was incarcerated, Jesse was ordered by the court twice to participate in the

Addiction Treatment Program (ATP). The first time he didn't put any effort into the program.

The second time he was facing a life sentence in prison for armed robbery and drug

trafficking, so he took it seriously. Jesse remarked,

> I have a really bad criminal history, like armed robbery and trafficking drugs and so
>
> much other stuff that I'm not going to lie, I should be in prison for that stuff right
>
> now, but this time the judge gave me a chance.

Fortunately for Jesse, the judge saw something in him despite the district attorney's

recommendation for life imprisonment. Jesse knew this was his last chance to change his life

for the better. The judge gave him one last opportunity to turn his life around and so he's

been working hard at that goal.

> Jesse said,

> I have a really good support system now. My mother also dropped out of school and
>
> used drugs, but eventually she got clean and earned her General Education Diploma

(GED) when she was 31 years old. She's my hero now because she has gone on to earn a master's degree in art and she is employed as a therapist. I use her story every day to keep going and I think to myself that if my mother did it, and I came from her, I can do it too.

Jesse's confident that he will accomplish good things in his life now.

Jesse loves this charter high school, and he's happy he found it because the teachers encourage and support him. They take their time and sit down with him when he doesn't understand something. The mastery-based curriculum has helped him to learn at his own pace, and it has given him the skills and the self-confidence to keep moving ahead with his credits. He feels that the teachers in this school really do care about his future. He also appreciates the respectful environment and that no one judges the students for their past experiences.

In this excerpt, Jesse shared:

It's different here because in this school most of the students grew up like I did. They had a tough life and they made bad decisions too, so they understand how I grew up. We're all here fighting for something that we want and that's to finally graduate.

When Jesse dropped out, he felt like he disappointed his family. Now, his family is proud of his decision to change his life and graduate. They're all planning to be at his graduation. The last thing he shared about his experience of dropping out and experiencing incarceration for so many years is that he wishes he just would have taken the bullying and continued going to school to graduate. He thinks if he had taken this path instead, he wouldn't be in the position he is in today, with felonies and a criminal record. Jesse

commented, "The bullying was hard to take. I think if bullying hadn't been an issue, I would've graduated on time."

Of earning his high school diploma, Jesse said:

I've never been this happy in my life. I actually want something, and I go to sleep at night and wake up in the morning excited about coming to school and going to work. I'm also doing everything I need to do for drug court. I'm just happy now, and I'm really blessed today, and that's all that matters to me.

Jesse is expecting a newborn son in a few months and he doesn't want him to go through what he's experienced, and that's his biggest motivator in getting his life together. He wants to be a good father and raise his son the right way.

Student interview participant: Charles. Charles identified as a Native American male who is 30 years old. Charles was raised in the largest city in this southwestern state. Charles said, "A lot of my family struggles with addiction and that's one of the things I ended up struggling with too. It's one of the reasons I fell out of school, stopped going." He attended a large high school, a charter high school, and an alternative school before finally dropping out for good. When he was in school, he felt that he didn't belong, and there were too many distractions that kept him from being committed to his schoolwork. His main reason for going to school was to hang out with friends and smoke marijuana. Charles was voted "most popular" two years in a row. The only one who supported him to stay in school was his Native American grandma from a nearby pueblo. She was also the only one in his family to be disappointed that he didn't graduate. His mother was never involved in his life, and his father was in prison all of his life. Charles recalled that it was hard to find anybody to help him move forward with his education. As an adolescent, he was never incarcerated in

the juvenile detention system. In school, he admitted that he ditched classes a lot and he didn't put the effort into getting his work done that he should have. He didn't have any problems with bullying or with his teachers, but, on the other hand, he didn't he have any strong connections with them either. The main reason he cited for getting suspended from school was fighting. He said, "I never went out looking for fights or anything but when somebody said something or disrespected me, that's when I had to fight." He didn't participate in high school sports either. However, in middle school he did participate in soccer and football. He recalled that after eighth grade he started going down the wrong path. He failed eighth grade twice and was held back one grade. He was 16 years old and in the ninth grade when he began thinking seriously about dropping out. He kept getting suspended from school and he finally reached a point where he didn't want to deal with it anymore, so he dropped out. After dropping out, Charles tried finding a job to earn money the right way, but that didn't work out for him either. He was 19 when he experienced incarceration as an adult for the first time. He didn't take it seriously. After a short stay in jail, he was released and then went out and did the same things over and over again.

Charles' last experience being incarcerated really made him think about what he needed to do to change the way he wanted to live his life. He was facing five years in prison, but he ended up serving nine months. He participated in the Addiction Treatment Program (ATP) when he was in jail, and he was also moved into the school pod in the jail. Attending classes in the school pod motivated him to make the decision to earn his high school diploma. Charles' interactions in jail with his fellow inmates were good, and he participated in an after-school study group where they helped each other with subjects they didn't understand. When growing up, Charles always felt that he'd never amount to anything, but

now he sees that he can do the work and get good grades. He's also currently attending classes at the local community college. He's learned that it's important to get an education and to work hard in order to have the life he's always wanted for himself and his family.

Charles has an eight-year-old daughter who's doing well in school, and he realizes now that he can't provide for her if he's in jail or only able to have part-time employment. He's motivated to graduate now so he can move forward with his life.

He indicated in this excerpt:

The life I was living before never got me anywhere except in jail and I'm done with that life. I'm thankful this time around that I went to jail because I needed something different in my life. Otherwise, I'd still be out there in the world doing the same things I was doing before that got me into trouble.

He shared that his teachers at this high school encourage him every day to keep doing well, and he is more self-confident now because they believe in him. He noted:

The teachers from the school pod in the jail and out here (at the main school campus) have built up my confidence by telling me that I can do the work. Just having somebody tell me that I can do this instead of listening all my life to people who told me that I'm never going to be able to do anything good in life, is just such a big change from all of that. People actually believing in me and encouraging me to do good, has actually helped me to do good.

Charles felt that the teachers at this high school really care about his future and they're helping him to earn the credits he needs to graduate. He felt that teachers in previous schools he attended didn't teach him or take the time to help him learn. He noted that if he'd

received more support and he had been motivated at all to stay in school by teachers at his previous schools, he would've had a greater chance to graduate.

Having the support, he needed from his family to stay in school would've also encouraged him to graduate. Sadly, he felt that his decision to drop out did not affect his family at all because, "It was nothing new to them, they all dropped out of school too." The last thing he shared about his experiences of dropping out and incarceration was:

Dropping out was one of the worst decisions I've ever made because after that everything went downhill for me and that's when going to jail came into play in my life. I felt during that period in my life that I just gave up on all of the things I wanted to do that were good in life.

Charles said,

Being away from family is the hardest thing about being in jail. Even though me and my family have been through a lot of things and we struggle with a lot of stuff, I'm still really close to them. I want to help them out as much as I can but when I'm locked up, I can't do anything to help.

He's learned from his experiences that to get somewhere in life, a person needs to get an education. Happily, he's heading in the right direction. He feels hopeful for the future, and he knows it's important to not quit and to work hard for the things he wants in life. Charles will never go back to being incarcerated because it's the worst place anyone can be, and no one reaches their goals in jail.

Student interview participant: Tony. Tony identified as a Hispanic male who is 30 years old. Tony was raised in poverty in a single-parent home by his mother who was also a high school dropout. He is a life-long resident of the largest city of this southwestern state.

He has one brother and one sister and grandparents who live nearby. Tony was held back in second grade, so he was always older and bigger than everyone in his class. He wanted to be with his grade level peers. Tony became the man of the house after his parents divorced, and he had to take on a lot of responsibility at an early age because his mother had to work and his father was absent from his life. It was his responsibility to make sure his younger siblings got to school every day. This made it hard for him to get to school and get his work done. Tony fell behind in his schoolwork and accumulated a lot of absences.

In middle school, Tony did not have consistent daily school attendance. He was in and out of school quite frequently with no one really knowing about it. There was a lady in the attendance office who knew Tony's father and so she excused his accumulated absences. His perception at the time was:

Because I was poor and lived in the ghetto, I really felt there were low expectations by my teachers and other adults at the school that I would even show up for school every day and they didn't care whether I showed up or not.

Tony shared that when he did have an opportunity to play soccer and football at a younger age, he loved it, but he never played high school sports. Tony completed ninth grade at a large high school in a poor neighborhood. Eventually, his family relocated out-of-state where he attended only one month of school during his sophomore year before dropping out. Tony said,

I liked being an outcast because I didn't want to be like anybody else. I'm my own person and it didn't matter to me whether people liked it or not. I did what I wanted to do, and no one could tell me otherwise.

Regarding the last school he attended, he noted:

The teachers didn't take the time to teach us, or to check and make sure we

understood the lesson before moving on to the next thing. They didn't care, and I was

left to my own devices to figure things out.

As a result, Tony ditched a lot of his classes. The only class he attended regularly for that

month was Spanish, where he met his future wife (now divorced). He also didn't get along

with most of his peers because they thought they were better than everyone else. The high

school he was attending at that time, was an out-of-state affluent school where he perceived

that everyone there was rich, and he felt like he didn't fit in because he was poor. Tony also

didn't participate in sports at this high school because he didn't fit in with the school athletes.

Tony revealed, "I've dealt with drugs and I've been in and out of jail my whole life."

The first time Tony was incarcerated he remembered that it was stressful and overwhelming

because he didn't know what to expect. He wanted to go home but quickly realized that he

couldn't. Another thing that made it scary for him was that he had to decide to clique up, go

with a gang or go with a city, to survive the experience.

Tony said,

It wasn't that hard being separated from my family because I was already used to not

being with them from a young age, and so it didn't bother me. Since I was a kid, I had

my own house and I was on my own. I felt more torn away from my house than my

family. My family didn't raise me; I had to raise myself.

The last time, he was incarcerated for five months. He was arrested for a parole violation. He

recalled that being in jail was degrading and inmates were not respected, and they had no

rights. The living conditions in jail were horrid and it was stressful… it was all about survival. Tony explained,

> Inmates really have no choice but to get along unless they get rolled out, which means they've been beaten up and moved somewhere else. In jail, it's always better to just say you're not comfortable and you want to be moved to another cell as opposed to getting rolled out.

Tony has been incarcerated about 30 times, 10 of which were in the past year. He said, "When you're incarcerated you have time, nothing but time, to think about what you've done wrong and what you've done right. You also think about how you want to change." Tony was on methadone in jail and he participated in the Community Custody Program (CCP). Also, while in jail, he attended classes in the school pod, which is the "in-jail educational program" for this charter high school. He's looking forward to graduating and training for a career instead of being on the streets, selling drugs, and living the street life. Tony is also working to get his driving privileges back after receiving two aggravated DWIs (driving while intoxicated) and one DUI (driving under the influence) a few years back. He reiterated,

> I want to make something out of myself and become a civilized citizen again. The hardest part of succeeding is fighting the demons of the real world inside myself against what I'm trying to do that's good for my life.

> Tony has two felonies that he feels will impact the rest of his life. In the future, Tony would like to either be an advocate and voice for people who are incarcerated or a drug rehabilitation counselor because he's walked in those shoes and understands what they deal with.

Tony revealed that being in this school is different because it's a safe place to be and he can just be himself. He also finds the teachers very encouraging and willing to work with him. The teachers take the time to explain not only the schoolwork but life lessons and life skills too. He appreciates that the teachers in this school are committed to seeing the students' progress in school and in life.

He commented:

In this school, teachers help students to embrace and accept their circumstances and focus on what they can be in the future. The best thing about being a student at this high school is teachers take the time to care and sit down to teach us and explain what we don't understand in our classes.

Tony observed, "If I would've had teachers who cared about me as a student in previous schools I attended, that would've made a big difference for me to stay in school and graduate." Also, if Tony had been given the opportunity to earn college credits in high school that would have motivated him to stay in school. He shared, "My mother didn't want me to drop out, but we both knew the reality of the situation we faced at home that forced me to drop out."

Tony sold drugs on the streets to earn a living for many years, and he dropped out in order to help support his family. He said, "I really had no choice, it's all I knew how to do. It was survival." The last thing he shared about his experiences of dropping out and incarceration was:

It's never too late for me to try and make a difference in my own life and believe in myself. Also, I know now that through all of the trials and tribulations in life that I've experienced, those experiences can work together to help me become a better person.

Student interview participant: Emilio. Emilio identified as a Native American male who is 30 years old. He was raised in a pueblo north of the largest city in this southwestern state. He also spent part of his life growing up on the Reservation, and he often traveled back and forth with his mother to the pueblo to be with family. Emilio's mother was a single parent and she was also a high school dropout. It was hard for her to take care of Emilio on her own. When Emilio was in elementary school his mother was involved in a very bad car accident which left her in a coma for six months and disabled afterwards. Emilio started getting into trouble at a young age; he was arrested for shoplifting at a grocery store. Later, he was suspended from school for being in possession of marijuana. Due to his mother's poor health and her inability to take care of him, she sent him to live with extended family on the Reservation. Of that experience, Emilio said,

> I felt like I was living with foster parents and that made me not care about anything I did growing up. I was stressed out all the time because of the lack of money and how hard it was for my aunt and uncle to make ends meet and provide for me too. I also felt lost without my mother, and my father was never a part of my life.

Emilio later figured out who his father was when his older brother was murdered a few years ago. He still doesn't have any relationship with his father.

Emilio shared that he came close to finishing school. He completed the eleventh grade before making the decision to drop out. His aunt and uncle, whom he was living with, constantly made him aware that they didn't have enough money, and Emilio always wanted to have nice things. At that time, his instinct was that if his aunt and uncle couldn't buy him what he needed, then he'd go out and get his own money the only way he knew how. That's when he started dealing drugs and selling them at the high school. Emilio and the group of

friends he hung out with all smoked a lot of marijuana at school. That's all they ever did in school. Emilio was in ninth grade when he started thinking about dropping out. He liked wrestling in middle school, and in high school his grades prevented him from wrestling. His lack of consistent daily attendance at school, and his unacceptable behavior and suspensions, eventually lead him to drop out. Also, contributing to his decision to dropout was that his aunt pushed him too hard to stay in school and he rebelled. He didn't like being forced to do anything he didn't want to do growing up. He was reclassified as a freshman twice, and he was suspended at least three times a year through eleventh grade before dropping out.

Emilio's big issue with school was that there was nothing fun there. There wasn't anything that got his attention. Emilio was a special education student. He said, "I felt overwhelmed with the pace of the teaching and learning in the regular classroom, and I couldn't keep up or focus on my schoolwork. I was lost." Emilio thinks students need to have more choices about what they learn in school. Classes should be more career or vocational oriented. He thinks that if students were taking classes they were actually interested in at an earlier age, they would finish school and graduate. He heard from a teacher at his high school that "Students don't need to know everything we teach in school." Emilio's mindset became that to survive in the world a person needs to know how to fix things, build things, and make things. Emilio doesn't think the system is fair.

He commented:

The kids who have privilege and are fed with silver spoons and gold forks, they're the ones who have everything handed to them and they don't have to work for anything. They get the best of everything while kids who are poor, like me, get what's left at the bottom of the barrel in school.

Emilio has one son who is six years old. He was taken away from Emilio because of a domestic violence incident that was later dropped. Emilio had to complete the requirements of his probation and fight for a long time for full custody of his son. He also had to go to counseling for a while in order to get his son back. It was a huge struggle for Emilio because of the tribal entities involved, but he was successful in getting full custody of his son. Emilio is a good father and he works hard to ensure that his son has everything he needs growing up.

Emilio's first experience with incarceration didn't faze him. He didn't learn his lesson because to him it seemed to be about just waiting for a court date or waiting to be released, and that's it. He did get along with his fellow inmates. Emilio didn't participate in any rehabilitation programs in jail. He was charged with domestic violence in his most recent incarceration, but, as previously mentioned, the charges were eventually dropped.

Now that Emilio has full custody of his son, he has no plans to go back to jail for any reason. Emilio loves this high school because he can learn and progress at his own speed and he can get the help he needs from his teachers whenever he needs it. He reflected:

> I like the classes because they are geared to helping me to succeed and not fail. I'm motivated to graduate now because as I learn the material in my classes, I can earn the credits I need to move ahead. I had to start with the basics, but it's okay because I feel supported by my teachers to succeed. The teachers in this high school care about helping all of us to reach our goals and they make sure that we are progressing. I'm confident that I can go to any teacher here for advice or assistance if I need it. I also think all schools should offer a mastery-based curriculum to help students succeed.

He also noted that when he'd come to school frustrated over the situation with his son and he couldn't do his work, his teachers helped him feel better about his situation and supported his efforts to stay in school. He said,

Being in this school gives me lots of hope because there are a lot of people who care here, and there are people in the same shoes as I am so we can all relate. The younger students here see us making positive steps forward, so we are being a positive influence for them, too.

In addition to working on his high school diploma, Emilio is taking classes at the local community college. He's studying to become an electrician. Emilio commented,

If the teachers at the last high school I attended had listened and supported me more in the classroom, I would've stayed in school. Also, if I'd been treated respectfully and made to feel like I belonged, I would've graduated.

Emilio also commented about this school,

The staff here are really on you and they're helpful to all of us. They make sure you're progressing and support us through any problems we have. They ask how they can help. They don't want us to waste our time. Their attitude is that we are all adults here, we know what's expected of us and we know our boundaries. So just being here in this environment, we learn what has to get done so we can graduate.

Emilio shared two last thoughts in this excerpt about his experiences of dropping out and incarceration.

First, this school is the best, in the education they provide to us. It's a great investment in people who need a second chance. The person whom this school is named for was on point with everything, on every aspect of humanity, the way a

person thinks, and how to rehabilitate a person. This is the first step, getting an

education especially if you want to stop the cycle of dropping out in families. I feel

very highly about this school in every aspect. Second, the teachers and staff here

really do care about our success and they're here to help us reach our goals. I'm

happy that through all my life experiences I found this high school that works with us,

as adults who need to have a second chance to complete our education and better

ourselves in life.

Student interview participant: Ricardo. Ricardo identified as a Hispanic male who

is 30 years old. He grew up between El Paso, Texas and a neighboring state. Ricardo is the

youngest of five boys. His parents are together and have been happily married for many

decades. He shared, "They are really, really, elderly!" He also reported that, as he was

growing up, people always thought that his parents were, in fact, his grandparents. He was

only seven years old when his family relocated to the largest city in this southwestern state.

He remarked:

I've probably done far less academically than any of my four older brothers, who are

all successful. My oldest brother is a professor at a university in Mexico, my second

brother is a system engineer, my third brother is a UFC fighter, and my fourth older

brother is a chef at a restaurant in El Paso, Texas. As for me, I am passionate about

cars. My father was an engineer in Mexico, but here in the United States he's been

forced to accept employment as a member of the housekeeping staff at a local casino.

My mother is a housewife.

He feels that he was raised as an only child because of the differences in age between

him and his older brothers. He doesn't feel like he has very much in common with them. His

birth was a surprise to his parents. There's a nine-year age difference between Ricardo and his fourth brother. He revealed that his brothers are all Mexican born and Mexican raised. He is the first and only Chicano in his family.

The last school Ricardo attended was also a charter high school. He wasn't successful there because he was in the depths of his alcoholism. He reflected, "I was physically there in school but not mentally there because I was drunk a lot of the time." The school he attended before that was a large public high school. He did well at this large public high school his first year. In his second year, although his grades were good, he was always in trouble. He was accused by the administration at this school of being a gang leader, when in fact he was brilliant at bringing people together with the things they shared, like music. He's never been associated with gangs. In high school, Ricardo was eligible to join the Mathematics, Engineering, Science Achievement (MESA) group, which is an academic preparatory program for pre-college, community college, and university level students. He attended for a while but refused to go on out-of-town trips to compete because those trips infringed on his personal time outside of school.

When Ricardo was 15 years old and during his first nine-week semester of tenth grade, he started thinking about dropping out. It was his negative school experiences in tenth grade at this large high school that led to his first thoughts of leaving school early. For example, he argued frequently with his history teacher. Ricardo's brother taught him a different version of history and it didn't mesh with what she was teaching, so he questioned her. She didn't like to be questioned in class about what she was teaching, and she called him out on it after class one day. She asked him to stop interrupting her because it put her behind the curve in terms of being able to cover the curriculum at the pace she needed to. Ricardo

remembered, "I felt that she only cared about getting through the book and not really teaching us." Ricardo was tired of always being in trouble for something and he felt discouraged. Ricardo commented, "I didn't have any teachers who supported me. I didn't believe that my teachers cared at all whether I succeeded or not." At this point he was really turned off and disillusioned with school.

Another incident that occurred in Ricardo's English class that was very upsetting to him is reflected in this excerpt:

> The teacher didn't speak Spanish and another student in the class told her that me and one of my friends were saying bad things about her in Spanish. We were not, and she believed the other student. After a parent meeting with my older brother and my mother regarding this incident, I received a five-day suspension. It was this incident of speaking Spanish in my English class that was the deciding factor that led me to the decision to drop out. I thought this was very unfair.

Ricardo had great relationships with his peers, and he participated in sports through his physical education classes. His coaches encouraged him to try out for the baseball and basketball teams, but he didn't want to stay after school hours to attend the practices. His school attendance was good because he lived near the school, but he was late to school a lot. He remembers that at this large public high school he didn't have any teachers who supported him. He said, "The classes were all about "You're here, do the work, and leave."

Ricardo was 22 years old the first time he was incarcerated on DUI charges. He reported that being incarcerated was the worst experience he's ever had. While in jail, he experienced being beaten up by the commissioned officers (C.O.s) at the jail. Since then, he's been incarcerated nine times, and these experiences have all led him to feel hopeless about

his future. Ricardo believes that "Having 'the piece of paper' is more valuable in society than

the person is." Ricardo is very smart, and in recent years, he started a business that was very

successful. The premise for his business was bringing people together who loved cars. It was

called "Just-4-Fun." He sold products with the logo on them, and his intent was to bring

different car people together based on their love for cars. The business took off and it was

successful. Ricardo reported, "My probation officer thought I was making too much money,

so I was forced to shut it down. I wrote the business plan and ran my business successfully."

He's working to complete the requirements of his probation and he's progressing in his

efforts to earn a high school diploma. While incarcerated Ricardo participated in the

Addiction Treatment Program (ATP) and he also assisted his teachers in teaching Spanish

classes to help other inmates. While in jail Ricardo mostly got along with the older inmates.

He reported that jails are "racially divided." He identified most often with the "Paisa's"

which are people from Mexico. English is Ricardo's second language, so it was easy for him

to get along with that group of inmates since he was fluent in Spanish as his first language.

Ricardo shared,

> School can be a zoo just like jail. Both environments are restrictive and punitive with
>
> no respect for who an individual is. There's no shortage of punishment in school or
>
> jail. I think that nobody listens to what we have to say in either place.

Ricardo likes everything this charter high school does to support his efforts to earn a

high school diploma. He firmly believes that in this school the teachers really care about their

students. He said, "The teachers are "actually sincere in their efforts to support us." He's

observed that if students in this school don't want to do the work, the teachers respect their

decision and they wait and encourage them to move forward when they're ready. Ricardo

said, "Teachers in this school are patient and they wait for students to make the decision on their own to engage in learning." Ricardo believes that "The resistance to being in school builds up over the years. Students get rebellious and then they don't want to do what they're told. We all need to come to the decision to graduate on our own."

Ricardo's experience in this school has been different from other schools he's attended because of the level of support and the attention every student receives. He said, "It's different than anything I've ever experienced." At this school, Ricardo feels respected. He's observed that teachers treat students with respect, and he appreciates that they're nonjudgmental. Ricardo also shared that he's never been on drugs. He's an alcoholic. Ricardo reflected that his father wasn't happy about him dropping out of school, and his mother didn't have too much to say about it because she, too, was a high school dropout.

In the end, Ricardo is happy that his brother stood up for him at the last large public high school he attended, and he's confident that he will graduate. He said,

I love that the curriculum in this school is self-paced because I can go as slow or as fast as I need to, to earn my high school diploma. I like that I can earn my high school diploma and not a GED. I like that I can do the work and get the credit. The fact that it's self-paced is important to me. When I graduate, I am planning to move out-of-state to enjoy a fresh start and restart my business once again.

Student interview participant: John. John identified as a Hispanic male who is 28 years old. John's parents divorced when he was six years old. He moved with his mother and his sister to his Grandma's in a small affluent community in the northern part of this southwestern state. From there his family moved three times to other nearby communities and eventually ended up in the largest city of this southwestern state. John's dad's side of the

family originally came from California's San Francisco Bay area. Also, the majority of his mother's family still lives in California. John's mother is a lab technician and his father is the head chef in a restaurant in California. John has not had a strong relationship with his father in his life and he said, "He was never around."

The last school John attended was a homeschool kind of environment run by a teacher. It was established to help students who received prolonged suspensions from their regular schools. The school is located in three portable buildings on the campus of another school. John said, "It was like a delinquent school where you could either get your high school diploma or a GED." John dropped out of school in the eighth grade. He got discouraged in school because he'd written a story for an English class and the teacher kept insisting that he had plagiarized it. It was John's work and he was in disbelief of her accusation, which he emphatically says, "was not true." At that point, John said to himself, "Why even try?" From that time forward, he didn't put his full effort toward his education. John said,

> I'm a good writer. English and writing have always just come naturally to me. I was only 13 years old when that happened. That was the last straw in school for me. I was always told in school that I was dumb. I guess that I was just bored with the work and never really fully got involved again with it.

John admits his behavior at that time was lax and he brushed everything off. John said, "I was more involved with other things outside of school." He admitted that his attendance in school at that time was also "really bad." He only went to school enough not to get kicked out for not showing up.

John didn't really have any friends at the last school he attended. He said, "Everybody I hung out with were either seniors or already graduated. Even in middle school, I got along and hung out with only a small circle of friends. Other than that, I usually just kept to myself." John never had more than one positive relationship with his teachers in school. He said:

> I only had one teacher who took an interest in me. She was my seventh grade English teacher. She was awesome and I made sure to go to her class every day. She was very supportive and encouraging. She always played music. I loved that about her class, and she was the one who taught me to appreciate writing. She also taught me to love writing and transfer emotion on to a page.

From the ages of 12 to 15, John was a sponsored skateboarder. Most of his activities were outside of school. John was in the sixth grade when he started thinking about dropping out. He attended three different schools in the sixth grade. He tried staying in school for a couple more years and then he was done. It was the plagiarizing incident in addition to other things going on in John's life at that time that pushed him to drop out.

John's first experience with incarceration came about when he was arrested for drug trafficking right after turning 18 years old. He said, "It was scary because I didn't know what was going on and I didn't know what to expect. Jail is a restrictive and an oppressive environment. I used to joke that school was like being in jail." John's been arrested at least 20 times and says now, "I'm done with that part of my life."

John's really gotten strong with his faith, especially with his last couple of times in jail. John said of his faith, "It's really helped me out, and it's opened my eyes to not want that

lifestyle anymore. I actually want to become somebody now. I'm tired of struggling all of the time and living day by day."

John's most recent experience with incarceration stemmed from a domestic violence charge related to his sister. At that time, John was completing the terms of his probation and he'd also finished serving 364 days straight in jail. John recalled,

I was actually doing good. I was coming to school and staying out of trouble. I wasn't doing drugs or anything so the last time I was in jail it really made me think about how much I didn't want to do that anymore. I haven't been back to jail since then.

John said that being incarcerated has helped him to appreciate the small things in life. John has four young nephews and he commented,

I want them to enjoy school and get through it, loving it and appreciating it. The last thing I want is for them to go through what I went through in school and experience being treated the way I was.

John feels more hopeful about his future these days. He said this school has made a huge difference in his life. When he was in jail, he stumbled upon this school. At first, he thought it would be better to be in school than on lock down 23 hours a day. While in jail, through this high school, he also completed a program on empathy and improving how he communicates with people. He's grateful to be a student in this school, and he's happy now to be working at a steady pace on his credits outside of jail at this school's main campus. He was reluctant about taking dual credit classes at the local community college at first, but one of his teachers really encouraged him to try it. He did and now he loves it. He said, "It's so much fun and I found something I can be passionate about, becoming an electrician."

John said that the teachers in this high school believe in him, and they've encouraged him and given him the confidence to graduate. Teachers are positive and supportive in helping students individually to make sure they understand the curriculum. John said,

Teachers here really care, and they respect us. They don't judge anybody here, and they take the time to get to know us, as opposed to making assumptions about who we are based on how we look or whether we've been in jail or not.

John commented that his mother was never involved when he was in school. She didn't go to school for parent conferences or anything else because she couldn't get the time off from work. She was always more focused on work and paying the bills. She also wasn't strict about John and his sister going to school. His mother said of his decision to drop out, "It's your decision." John remembers that her boyfriend, of six years at that time, was upset and didn't want him to drop out of school. In the end, John thinks that if his mom had been more involved in his schooling, and if she'd been stricter about making sure he got to school, he would've stayed in school and graduated.

Student interview participant: David. David identified as a Hispanic male who is 29 years old. David grew up in a nearby state until he was 15 years old. After his parents divorced, he was raised by his mother, who was a single parent to David, his brother, and two sisters. David said, "Growing up was pretty tough without my father being around. He'd come into our lives whenever he was allowed to." David never had a strong relationship with his father because he rarely saw him. He believes his dad has been in jail a few times too.

David admitted that he had a lot of problems growing up, starting in about sixth grade where he was in and out of school often. David recalled that he was a freshman when he dropped out the first time. He said,

The principal at my middle school didn't like me, and when I went to ninth grade at the high school he was there too, as the principal. Him and a few of my teachers there didn't like me, so I felt that all the trouble I had in middle school just followed me.

When David was in middle school he participated in wrestling and competed all the way to the state championships. He couldn't participate in sports in high school because of his discipline problems and grades. David was expelled from school three times during his freshman year. His mother went to the local school board and appealed the school's actions, and he was readmitted back into school for a short time. David felt that he was labeled and eventually pushed out of school there. He was out of school for about a year. His family then relocated to this southwestern state where he enrolled in a large high school and he hoped to have a fresh start. David missed his friends and was upset at leaving them behind. He was fearful about making new friends, and it took him a long time to get to know new people at his new school. He was only there for about three weeks before getting suspended for drinking on campus. After that, he was out of school again for another year. He enrolled again at an independent charter school and met a small group of people who've become lifelong friends to him to this day. They're the ones who've supported him and been there for him. David was also introduced to other people in this large city where he got involved in drugs and other negative experiences.

David felt that he was pushed out of school again at the large high school he attended. He felt, once again, the administrators and teachers didn't want him there. He thinks that when they saw his past school records, they labeled him as a troublemaker and a bad kid. It was obvious by their attitudes toward him. He felt judged by them. That made it hard for David to ask for help in his classes, and it was hard for him to sit through classes just waiting

to be called out for something and sent to the office. He grew frustrated with being in trouble all the time, lost interest in school, and he became disengaged in learning. His third time dropping out was for good. David said, "It was my choice. It wasn't because of schooling or anything like that. It was more that I wanted to be out, and I wanted to be with my friends and having fun." David experienced both drug and alcohol abuse as a teen and as a young adult. At one point in his life, he also considered suicide. In the end, David's mother was upset with him for dropping out, but he thinks if she had been stricter about him going to school and didn't give him the choice of school or getting a job, he would've tried harder to stay in school and graduate. About school David reflected,

> Whenever I went to school, I wanted to be there. I was excited to learn new stuff and I enjoyed it. Anything that I could bring in and anything anyone was willing to teach me; I was willing to learn.

> David was 19 the first time he was incarcerated. He was arrested on a domestic violence charge stemming from an incident with one of his siblings. He remembered being nervous and he cried because he didn't know what to expect. He recalled that it was an awful experience. He'd heard from other people what it was like being in jail and he remarked,

> It's like being locked in a cage with nothing to do. They gave me water and a blanket and no pillow. It sucked and I didn't know if I was going to stay in there or get out, so it was a fearful situation.

While David was in jail, he got to know a few people but didn't trust anyone, so he tried to keep to himself.

> David's most recent stay in jail was for almost a year and it's what he's on probation for now. While there, he experienced a small riot where people got stabbed. In the pod where

he was, lots of prison inmates came in and out for court hearings and then they'd return to

prison. They had shakedowns almost every other week in his pod where drugs, shanks, and

other weapons were found. He also experienced being on lockdown 23 hours a day with only

an hour to warm food, go outside for fresh air, or call his family. He spent many hours in

handcuffs on the floor of the jail. That was a really rough time in his life. Jesse said he's been

incarcerated a total of three times. The first and second times were for domestic violence

charges, and the third time was for armed robbery and receiving and transferring stolen

goods. David has two felonies on his criminal record, and he'll be on probation for the next

four years.

He explained:

The last charge is the one that's really stuck with me. I was with the wrong person at

the wrong time and I got caught up in a mix that I shouldn't have been in. I was the

only one who got down pulled for it. The other person didn't get charged with

anything.

When David was incarcerated the last time, he found out about the work pod where inmates

can do work and get paid with items from the commissary. A few weeks later, he applied for

the school pod in the jail and he got accepted. He was there taking classes, and he really liked

it, and then he got into a fight with another inmate and was removed from the pod for two

months before being allowed to go back. He continued working in his classes successfully

and that's how he decided (with the situation he was in and with having two felonies) that he

wanted to get his high school diploma. He said,

I'm not going to be able to find a job or be able to do any of the things I want to do,

so I think if I get my education, it'll give me more opportunity to support my family.

David is married and a father to five children: four sons and a daughter. David wants to be a better person for his family because he has a lot of regrets for the things he's done in the past. Being incarcerated has changed how David looks at being in school now. He's hopeful about his future. He said:

> When I was in jail, I thought a lot about the path I've chosen and how it's already set in stone. I can't change what I've done so I just have to move forward with what I have now. I have the opportunity to better my life for my family and friends by getting an education.

The things David loves the most about being in this high school is all the help and support he gets from the teachers. Being in school and liking it, is a different feeling for him. David never felt like he belonged or was welcomed in his previous schools. At this school he feels welcomed, valued, and respected. He feels that his teachers truly care about his success and his future. He's not afraid to ask questions and he feels safe at school. He likes working at his own pace, and his teachers encourage him every day to keep moving ahead by telling him, "You can do it!" His experiences at this school have been so positive that he's convinced his wife, who also dropped out of school, to enroll. She's currently taking classes and earning credits toward her high school diploma so, together, they can provide a better life for their five children. David is enrolled in dual credit classes at the local community college where he is studying automotive technology. He feels now, that he has another chance in life to do the things he wants, and he credits this school for encouraging him to move forward with his education. He's confident that he'll graduate and do good things with the rest of his life. David's family is planning to attend his graduation ceremony, and they're excited about the good things that've come into his life.

Student interview participant: Nick. Nick identified as a Hispanic male who is 28 years old. He has six siblings and he was raised in poverty in a single parent household with his mother. He said it was hard for his mother to raise them on her own. Nick's father went to federal prison three months before he was born to serve a 27-year sentence. He got out last year and went back again recently to serve another nine years. Nick has never met his father and has no relationship with him. Nick said, "There's a lot of drugs in the family so I grew up around a lot of drugs and making drugs." At home, he was in survival mode all the time and he was doing drugs, drinking, and getting involved in gang activity.

Nick attended a large public high school for a short while before getting expelled for gang activity. Nick remembered that when the principal of that high school found out about his charges and the time, he spent in the juvenile detention center, he was approached by the school security officer who said, "You can't be here; you're done. You need to empty out your locker and I've got to walk you out the front gate, off campus." Nick said, "They didn't call my mother to come and pick me up or anything. I went out and got drunk and got into more trouble. I almost ended up back in jail." After this incident, his mother moved the family to a smaller community where he enrolled at the only high school in this small town. The rest of his freshman year was uneventful. He started off doing his schoolwork and didn't have any behavior problems for a while, and then he started ditching his classes and smoking marijuana. He also worked out with the football team and ran track for a short time. He was reclassified as a freshman twice. Nick recalled that the principal and the security guards at the school didn't like him. They made remarks to him like, "Why are you even coming to school?" "You don't have enough credits and you're not going to graduate, so why are you here?" "Why don't you just stay home?" They made everything rough on him and he got

discouraged. Nick liked most of his teachers, but his art teacher was his favorite. He loved her class.

On the last day of school, Nick was on his way to class take a make-up test and the principal came up to him and said he couldn't take the test and he needed to go home. He said, "I don't want you on my campus anymore." Nick was upset, and so he and one of his friends went back to the school later that night to vandalize the school. Nick wrote on one of the buildings with spray paint, but his friend committed some worse crimes. Nick ended up getting charged with graffiti over a certain dollar amount and the destruction of private property. He ended up on probation. Nick admitted that he'd been in the juvenile detention system from the time he was 12 to 18. Now, he's on probation until he's 30. Nick reflected that he acted out in school because he was dealing with "life problems" that probably affected his academics.

Nick got along well with his peers in school. They had a strong bond. It was like a brotherhood, but he said, "They weren't a gang." However. they had each other's backs for everything they did.

Nick said:

We all came from the poverty side of life and so we stuck together. We didn't get along with the jocks as much because they labeled us as gangbangers and troublemakers. The jocks were the kids who were wealthier, and I'm assuming they didn't have as many problems at home as we did.

Nick was expelled from several middle schools in the largest school district in this southwestern state. He also went to three different large public high schools and was expelled. He also got expelled from all the schools in a smaller school district south of the

city. Nick was 16 in ninth grade when he started thinking about dropping out. The bad experiences he had with the principals and the security guards at the last two high schools he attended were the circumstances that led him to making the decision to drop out. He said, "After all those bad experiences, I felt that school wasn't for me."

The first time Nick was incarcerated at a juvenile detention center he had just turned 14. He commented that it was scary because he didn't know what to expect. He thought he was going to have to fight a bunch of people and the gangs would be more intense in there. As it turned out, Nick knew people in there and a lot of his friends were there too, so it worked out alright. Also, they got to call home if they were homesick. Nick remembered an incident with his stepfather that was really hard for him to deal with. His mother sent his stepfather to court to pick him up because he was being released. His stepfather told the judge his mother didn't want Nick anymore, so he needed be placed in state custody. This wasn't true, and after court Nick called his mother and questioned her. Nick said that his stepfather was trying to get back at him for a previous incident of stealing his wallet and his van while he was asleep. Nick said he did it because his stepfather was abusing him. He was 18 when he was arrested as an adult. He didn't think that experience was too bad either.

During his last experience being incarcerated, Nick had a spiritual awakening, and he started studying Buddhism. He applied to get accepted into the school pod in the jail. Nick said, "If it hadn't been for the school pod, I never would have come back to school. It was just meant to be." Nick got along with his fellow inmates, and he had fun and he developed strong bonds with people. He also met good people in jail too. He said, "When I'm in jail, I'm stress free and I don't worry about things."

Being incarcerated has impacted how Nick thinks about the future, in a good way. It's made him realize that that's not what he wants. He believes there's more to life than just wasting away in jail and sitting around doing nothing. Attending classes in the school pod in jail made him feel like he was bettering himself. When he got out of jail, he felt like he'd been influenced to do better in life. He was incarcerated three times in the past year. When he got out the first two times, he started using drugs right away. The last time he got out, he didn't do drugs and he'd been sober for the past 100 days. That's the longest period that he'd been sober since he was 15. Nick is a single father to young daughter who's doing well in school.

He said this of his young daughter:

She inspires me to do better. I can't tell her to go to school if I can't do it. So, doing better for her and working to set a good example for her about staying in school and graduating is really important to me. I can't be a hypocrite and tell her to do it if I don't do it.

Nick reflected that if he'd gotten the same kind of support and encouragement in his previous schools, he would have graduated for sure. He didn't know until he saw his transcripts from his other schools that his grades were so good. He said, in his past school experiences, being in school was like being in jail.

What Nick appreciates about this school is the respectful environment and how the teachers at this high school really do care and are they are very supportive of his efforts to graduate. He also likes that the curriculum is self-paced. This is very effective for Nick. Because of the care and the individual support, he is receiving at this school, he is rebuilding his self-esteem and self-confidence to graduate. He now has a positive attitude about being in

school and about his life in general. He said, "Happiness is a choice. Everyone's been through some kind of trauma in their lives, but I refuse to let it have a grasp on how I act, on my character, or how I live."

Nick didn't participate in any rehabilitation or educational programs in jail. He does mindful meditation now, and, although he's a Christian, he's currently studying to become a Buddhist. Nick's goal is to graduate with a 3.0 or better grade point average and get an academic scholarship so he can go to college. He aspires to be a good college student in the future, who graduates with a 3.0 or above grade point average. Nick is interested in literature and writing. He likes writing music. When it comes to his family, Nick said that his mom was upset and she wanted a different outcome than him dropping out of school, but she agreed that it was the best decision for him to make, because he wasn't getting anywhere because of the bad experiences he'd had in school. In a perfect world, there were a lot of things that could've helped Nick succeed. Nick said:

> I wouldn't change anything I've experienced or been through no matter how traumatic or bad the experiences were. Good or bad, they've all helped me to become who I am today. I'm grateful for the experiences I've had even though they haven't been the best. Experience is what creates a wise person. It wasn't always like this though; I didn't always understand life and it took me a while. I have a more positive attitude now, and, after getting in touch with my spiritual side, I've learned a lot about meditating and breathing. Before this, I used to have a very short fuse. I'd get angered very quickly. I used to blame myself and everyone else, but now I know it's just life. The way I feel now is that we all go through problems, but now I feel like, it's how

you react to those problems, and how you handle it that defines your character and strength. That's what defines a person; it's how they handle different situations. Nick has two years left on his probation and on the day of this interview they cut off his ankle bracelet and so he felt positive and happy to be moving forward with his life.

Summary of Findings from Student Interviews

The data analysis from the eight student interviews led to findings that are well supported by current research in Chapter 2 of this study. There are 13 major themes or patterns of behavior that were common threads shared in the stories of all eight participants. All of these themes or patterns of behavior were major contributing factors that caused these young men to make the decision to drop out of school and also influenced the choices they made in their lives that ultimately led to them to incarceration. These themes or patterns of behavior are:

1. All eight students dropped out of high school;

2. All experienced incarceration multiple times;

3. All lacked strong or involved parenting in their lives;

4. All either rebelled against or resisted being in school;

5. All experienced frequent school discipline problems;

6. All felt strongly that they didn't fit in, didn't belong, or weren't accepted at school;

7. All enjoyed positive peer relationships at school;

8. All felt they had too much freedom and/or not enough rules at home;

9. All experienced multiple suspensions and/or an expulsion from school;

10. All experienced personal substance and/or alcohol abuse;

11. All experienced low expectations at school from teachers and/or administrators;

12. All have one or more felonies on their criminal record;

13. All were labeled troublemakers or bad kids at school.

There are also seven secondary themes or patterns of behavior that were detrimental in seven out of eight of these young men's lives and contributed to their inability to stay in school and graduate. Seven out of eight students interviewed were raised and lived in poverty. Seven out of eight students interviewed were also raised in a single-parent household with their mothers, many who were high school dropouts themselves. Seven out of eight students interviewed had fathers who were either absent or distant from their lives due to incarceration or divorce during their childhood and adolescent years. And, seven out of eight of the young men interviewed said they either had a limited or no relationship at all with their natural fathers. Some lived with their mothers, who did have boyfriends or stepfathers at times in their lives, and most students interviewed said that when this was the case, that they either had strained or limited relationships with the boyfriends and/or stepfathers.

The last three contributing factors that affected seven out of the eight students were a lack of consistent daily school attendance, the fact that they moved schools often (several times a year) due to their behavior, and suspensions and/or an expulsion from schools they were attending before dropping out. Seven out of the eight students also freely spoke about their lack of interest, attention, and commitment to getting their work done in school. In addition, they genuinely felt they could not get the assistance they needed from teachers to keep up with the curriculum. Because of the way these young men were treated when they were in school, they did not like school and felt it just wasn't for them.

A third subset of themes and patterns of behavior had significant consequences and impacted the lives of four out of eight young men interviewed: being raised by extended family and not by their birth parents, exposure to domestic violence growing up, and being arrested for domestic violence either as juveniles or as adults. Four out of the eight young men also admitted to having anger management issues and participated in the Addiction Treatment Program (ATP) during their incarceration. Three participants had a considerable number of experiences with the juvenile detention system during their adolescence. Four out of eight participants did not participate in sports in school due to poverty, getting into trouble at school, or did not have the passing grades needed to play on a sports team. There were two participants who were bullied, involved with gangs, or experienced negative peer relationships in school. Two participants reported being held back one grade in school. One of these participants said that this experience was one of the contributing factors to his decision to drop out because he felt out of place and he was bigger than his classmates. There was also one student who reported being a special education student.

The findings from the eight student interviews are consistent with current research in the field and they provided rich data for this study. The "lived experiences" of these young men of color and their individual journeys of hardship and struggle, dropping out, experiencing incarceration, and then making the decision to return to school and graduate demonstrates the inner strength, courage and resilience of the human spirit.

Findings: Student Survey Results

The intent of the student survey was to uncover the factors that most often contribute to young men of color making the decision to drop out of school. I also wanted to ensure that the demographics of the participants in this study supported the research questions posed.

The student survey was completed by 62 participants who were not currently incarcerated per the requirements of the UNM Institutional Review Board. There were three incomplete surveys. The surveys were anonymous and posed no threat to the identities of the participants. The only other criteria for volunteering to take the survey was that the young men be English speakers. The survey took participants about 15 minutes to complete. No personal identifying information was included. The survey had five parts:

> Part I - Five (5) general demographic questions;
>
> Part II - Seven (7) questions on school factors;
>
> Part III - Fifteen (15) questions on personal factors;
>
> Part IV - Six (6) questions on academic factors;
>
> Part V - Seven (7) questions on other related factors.

Student survey demographics. All of the participants who completed the survey were English-speaking males. Sixty-two percent of the participants who completed the survey identified as over 21. Eleven percent identified as 18 to 19 years old. Twenty-seven percent identified as 20 to 21 years old.

As presented in Figure 1, 64% of the male participants completing the survey identified their ethnicity/race as Hispanic, 19% identified as Caucasian, and 14% identified as Native American. Only 3% identified as Other.

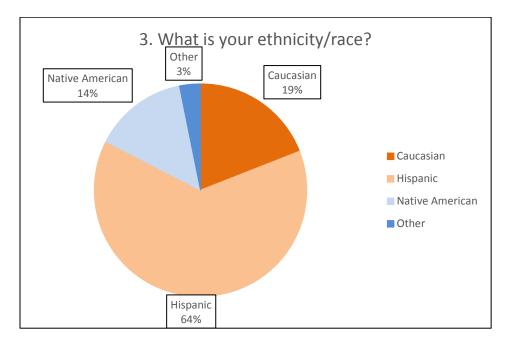*Figure 1.* Ethnicity/race.

As presented in Figure 2, 5% of the male participants reported completing 12th grade, and 38% of participants reported completing 11th grade. Twenty-nine percent completed the 10th grade and 19% of participants completed the ninth grade before dropping out. Nine percent of participants reported completing sixth to eighth grade before dropping out of school altogether.
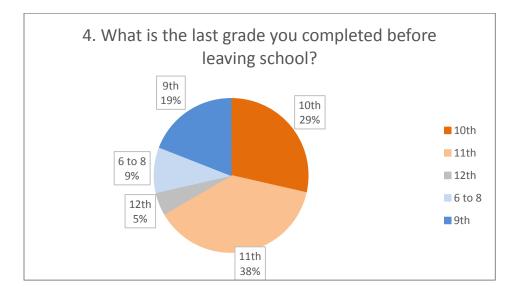
Figure 2. Last grade participants completed before leaving school.

Thirty-nine percent or over one-third of the participants who completed the survey reported that the school they last attended before dropping out was a large public high school. These large public high schools are located in the largest school district, in the most populated city of this southwestern state. There were also a combination of charter schools and smaller high schools that participants reported attending that are located in smaller public-school districts in this state. Two neighboring out-of-state district public high schools and one out-of-state Native American tribal high school were also reported as the last school attended by students before they dropped out of school.

Student survey findings on school factors. The remaining sections of the survey findings focus on the factors that contributed to the students' decision to drop out of their previous schools. Part II of the survey included seven questions that focused on school factors regarding the culture and climate of the last school attended by participants. From the data collected, there were two top school factors that contributed to the participants' decision to drop out.

Sixty-five percent of the participants Agreed/Strongly Agreed that falling behind or failing coursework in school most often contributed to their decision to leave school early. This is the number one school factor contributing to students making the decision to drop out. The second school factor contributing to students making the decision to drop out is represented by 52% of participants who Agreed/Strongly Agreed that the lack of assistance by teachers in classes in which they were struggling caused them to leave school early. Alternatively, 70% of participants Disagreed/Strongly Disagreed that feeling unsafe or being bullied at school was a factor which caused them to drop out. Table 1 displays the top two factors.

Table 1

School Factors that Contributed to the Decision to Drop Out

Factors	Category	%
1	Falling behind or failing course work	65%
2	Lack of assistance by teachers in classes where participants struggled	52%

Findings on personal factors (environmental). Part III of the survey included 15 questions that focused on personal/environmental factors regarding the personality and personal characteristics of students. Some of the questions asked about their views on academic goals and the successes and failures that caused them to leave school before graduating. In this part of the survey there were two main factors that contributed to students' decision to drop out. Family problems was the number one (54%) personal factor contributing to students making the decision to drop out. Using drugs was the second most reported (51%) personal factor contributing to students making the decision to drop out.

Alternatively, 89% of participants Disagreed/Strongly Disagreed that their parents' decision to divorce caused them to leave school before graduating. Eighty-seven percent of participants Disagreed/Strongly Disagreed that a boyfriend/girlfriend caused them to leave school before graduating. Table 2 displays the top two factors.

Table 2

Personal/environmental Factors that Contributed to the Decision to Drop Out

Factors	Category	%
1	Family problems	54%
2	Using drugs	51%

Discussion of findings on academic factors. Part IV of the survey included six questions. One question focused on plans to earn a high school diploma or GED (General Education Diploma). The remaining five questions focused on the academic factors that contributed to students leaving school before graduating.

The factor documenting the plans students were making to earn a high school diploma or GED is represented by 95% of the participants who Agreed/Strongly Agreed with this question. The number one school factor contributing to students making the decision to drop out is represented by 67% of participants who Agreed/Strongly Agreed that not attending school daily caused them to leave school early. Interestingly, 41% of students Agreed/Strongly Agreed that in their last full year of school, they succeeded in social studies. Alternatively, 48% of participants Disagreed/Strongly Disagreed that in their last full year of school their lack of success in reading/language arts, math, or science was a contributing factor to leaving school early.

Discussion of findings on other related factors (social). Part V of the survey included seven questions. Five questions focused on other related social factors that may have contributed to participants dropping out, and the two remaining questions focused on plans to go to college and/or plans to pursue a career path/job. Notably, 59% of participants Agreed/Strongly Agreed they plan to go to college after graduating. A surprising 87% of participants Agreed/Strongly Agreed they plan to pursue a career path/job after graduating. Alternatively, 67% of participants Disagreed/Strongly Disagreed that crime in their community caused them to leave school early; 63% of participants Disagreed/Strongly Disagreed that participating in music and/or dance programs such as band, choir, cheerleaders, dance team, etc. would have kept them in school. Lastly, only 38% of participants Agreed/Strongly Agreed that participating in sports would have kept them from leaving school early.

Analysis of survey data. The analysis of the survey data revealed five main factors that influenced the participants' decision to drop out of school. The factors are displayed in Table 3, ranked in order from highest to lowest factors reported.

Table 3

Factors that Influenced the Decision to Drop Out of School

Factors	Category	%
1	Not attending school daily	67%
2	Falling behind or failing course work	65%
3	Experiencing family problems	54%
4	Lack of assistance by teachers in classes where participants struggled	52%
5	Drug use	51%

Alternatively, in the analysis of the survey data there were five factors participants

identified which had the least amount of influence on their decision to drop out of school.

They are displayed in Table 4, ranked in order from highest to lowest factors reported.

Table 4

Factors that had the Least Amount of Influence on the Decision to Drop Out of School

Factors	Category	%
1	Parent's decision to divorce	89%
2	Boyfriend/girlfriend caused leaving school	87%
3	Being bullied or feeling unsafe at school	70%
4	Crime problems in their community	67%
5	Participating in a music or dance program	63%

It is important to restate and acknowledge three encouraging findings that

demonstrate the determination these young men taking the survey, possess to graduate from

high school and pursue a career path/job or college education in the hopes of providing a

better life for themselves and their families. These findings are displayed in Table 5, ranked

in order from highest to lowest on the responses from all participants who dropped out of

school and experienced incarceration.

Table 5

Factors that Demonstrate Determination to Graduate High School and Pursue

College/Career

Factors	Category	%
1	Plan to either earn a high school diploma or a GED	95%
2	Plan to pursue a career path or a job	87%
3	Plan to go to college	59%

In conclusion, the findings in the survey data are consistent with the research in this

field. The findings demonstrate that there is not one single factor in any category that causes

a student to leave school early, instead, it is a multiplicity of factors existing in students' lives

that interact over time in a process that influences their final decision to drop out.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to research the factors and experiences of young men

of color who dropped out of high school and failed to graduate, experienced incarceration,

and then made the decision to return to school to earn a high school diploma.

The major themes that emerged from the Executive Director's interview are

important to the findings in this study because they directly relate to her position and

leadership that supports her staff in their work with students. Her own life experiences also

strongly influence the school culture that accepts students for who they are and encourages and supports positive outcomes for young men of color to have a second chance at graduating from high school, thereby fulfilling the mission of the school to change lives from the inside out. This school is a safe place with high expectations, strong connections, and caring people who support student success one day at a time.

The focus group interview focused on the rewards and challenges in the work the staff does to support students to graduate with a high school diploma. The culture of acceptance and nonjudgement in this school has a powerful impact on student success. In unison, this staff works from a strength-based place to help students succeed.

There were 13 major themes or patterns of behavior that were common threads shared in the stories of all eight participants interviewed. The top two themes/patterns shared by all eight students were that they dropped out of school and experienced incarceration. The top two secondary themes/patterns were that seven out of eight students interviewed were raised and lived in poverty in a single-parent household with their mothers, many who were high school dropouts themselves.

Responses in the student survey, as it relates to what happens in schools that discourages many students from staying in school and graduating is; that students reported that they fell behind in their schoolwork and many students felt they did not receive the help they needed from teachers in classes they were struggling in. In this realm, the current inadequate responses by educators as it relates to student needs, must change. It is within our power in all schools to make the changes necessary through professional development and cultural relevancy training for teachers and administrators to learn how to help students feel valued and supported in their efforts to graduate.

Chapter Five:

Summary and Discussion of the Findings

This chapter includes a summary discussion of findings and provides responses to the research questions. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the factors contributing to the decision young men of color make to drop out of school, leading them to incarceration, and through those life experiences they made the decision to return to school and earn a high school diploma.

The participants in all four parts of this study at this charter high school were adults and members of this school community either as students or staff. There were 78 participants in the study. The study included a student survey with English-speaking male participants not currently incarcerated. The major findings from the student surveys are consistent with current research from the literature review in chapter two. The literature review supports the existence of a dropout crisis, and the students most affected by this dilemma are young men of color. Sixty-four percent of the male participants completing the survey identified their ethnicity/race as Hispanic. A combined total of 67% of the male participants taking the survey also reported that 10th and 11th grades were the last grades they completed in school. Eight audio-recorded student interviews with English-speaking young men of color ranging in age from 28 to 30 years were also completed. One audio-recorded interview with the Executive Director and one audio-recorded interview with a focus group consisting of staff also took place.

Summary and Discussion of the Findings

Three research questions were examined in this study:

1. What academic, environmental, and social factors lead young men of color to their decision to drop out of high school?

2. What factors lead them to incarceration?

3. What changes occur in the lives and experiences of young men of color to influence their decision to return to school and graduate?

The results of the data analysis for each individual research question are presented below.

Findings for research question 1: What academic, environmental, and social factors lead young men of color to their decision to drop out of high school? Thirty-nine percent of students surveyed reported the last schools they attended before dropping out were large-district, public high schools. The remaining students attended smaller-district, public high schools (44%); charter schools (8%); and two out-of-state, district public high schools (4%).

The two leading school factors participants cited as contributing most often to their decision to drop out were: falling behind or failing course work (65%) and a lack of assistance by teachers in classes where they struggled (52%). The two-leading personal (environmental) factors reported as contributing most often to the decision to drop out were: family problems (54%) and using drugs (51%). In the "academic factors" section of the survey, there was one question regarding plans to earn a high school diploma or GED (General Education Diploma). Ninety-five percent of participants Agreed/Strongly Agreed they plan to earn a high school diploma or GED. The number one academic factor contributing to students making the decision to drop out is represented by 67% of participants who Agreed/Strongly Agreed that not attending school daily caused them to drop-out. In other related (social) factors, 59% of participants Agreed/Strongly Agreed they plan to go to

college after graduating. And a surprising 87% of participants Agreed/Strongly Agreed they plan to pursue a career path/job after graduating.

The findings from the eight student interviews are also substantiated by the current research cited in Chapter 2. Thirteen major themes and/or patterns of behavior shared by all eight participants emerged through their stories and were major contributing factors that caused these young men to make the decision to drop out of school and influenced their life choices, which ultimately led to them to incarceration. All eight students: (1) dropped out of school; (2) experienced incarceration multiple times; (3) lacked strong or involved parenting in their lives; (4) rebelled or resisted being in school; (5) experienced frequent school discipline problems; (6) felt they didn't fit in or didn't belonged or weren't accepted at school; (7) enjoyed positive peer relationships; (8) had too much freedom and/or didn't have enough rules at home; (9) experienced multiple suspensions and/or an expulsion from school; (10) experienced substance and/or alcohol abuse; (11) experienced low expectations at school from teachers and/or administrators; (12) had one or more felonies on their criminal record; and (13) were labeled troublemakers or bad kids at school.

In a technical report titled *Dropout Risk Factors and Exemplary Programs,* Hammond, Linton, Smink and Drew (2007) state that dropping out of school is related to a variety of factors that can be classified in four areas or domains: (1) individuals (e.g., truancy, poor school attitude); (2) families (e.g., low-income, lack of parental involvement); (3) schools (e.g., negative school climate, low expectations); and (4) communities (e.g., high crime, lack of community support for schools) (p. 6). According to their study, there is no single risk factor that can be used to accurately predict who is at risk of dropping out (Hammond, Linton, Smink, & Drew, 2007, p. 1).

According to Hammond et al. (2007), the accuracy of drop out predictions increases when combinations of multiple risk factors are considered. Dropouts are not a homogenous group; many subgroups of students can be identified based on when risk factors emerge, the combination of risk factors experienced, and how the factors influence them. Students who drop out often cite factors across multiple domains and there are complex interactions among risk factors. Dropping out of school is often the result of a long process of disengagement that may begin before a child enters school. Dropping out is also often described as a process, not an event, with factors building and compounding over time. The authors also found in their research that "Dropout rates correlate with high poverty rates, poor school attendance, poor academic performance, grade retention (e.g., being held back), and disengagement from school" (Hammond et al., 2007, p. 2). The findings from this study demonstrate the need for early intervention for students exhibiting at-risk factors early in their school years. The participants in this study began experiencing significant school attendance issues, discipline problems and a lack of interest in school predominantly in their middle school years.

Findings for research question 2: What factors lead them to incarceration? Data that emerged from the student interviews revealed that a major factor impacting the lives of these young men during their high school years was being pushed out of school. This occurred primarily because of various discipline problems leading to suspension and/or expulsion, which then led these young men to the streets. Being raised in poverty in a single parent household, largely by mothers who were also dropouts, also compelled these young men to find a way to earn a living to support themselves and/or their families without employable job skills. Unfortunately, these circumstances led these young men into trouble with law enforcement during their teenage years and to drug and/or alcohol addiction. Some

examples of the crimes they committed were drug trafficking, armed robbery, and receiving and transferring stolen goods. As a result, all eight students had multiple felonies on their criminal records.

While dropping out of school doesn't always lead to a life of crime or incarceration, 100% of the seventy student participants in this study dropped out of school, experienced incarceration and they had criminal records. Christeson, (2008) reports that of the more than 4.2 million Americans who turn 20 each year, 805,000 do not have a high school diploma or General Equivalency Development (GED) certificate. Nationally, nearly 50% of African American youth and nearly 40% of Latino youth attend high schools from which graduation is not the norm. Christeson states, "High school dropouts are three and a half times more likely than high school graduates to be arrested and eight more times as likely to be in jail or prison" (2008, p. 1). He maintains that the dropout crisis poses a significant threat to public safety. Throughout the country, 68% of state prison inmates have not received a high school diploma (as cited in Christeson, 2008, p. 2).

In 2011, author Russell Rumberger published a book titled *Dropping Out: Why Students Drop Out of High School and What Can Be Done About It.* He recounts that public high schools in the United States reported 607,789 students, or 4% of all students enrolled in grades 9-12, dropped out in 2008-09, and a higher number than that failed to graduate. It's estimated that from the class of 2010, each school day, 7000 students dropped out from public high schools across America. Numerous studies and programs focusing on this issue have been performed at the national, state, and local levels. Since 1988, the federal government alone has spent more than $300 million on dropout prevention programs.

Rumberger (2011) writes that there are a number of reasons why there is so much concern about this issue, including:

1. Dropping out of school is costly both for dropouts themselves and for society as a whole. Dropouts have difficulty finding jobs;

2. If they find a job, dropouts earn substantially less than high school graduates. Dropouts' poor economic outcomes are due in part to their low levels of education. Dropouts sometimes can and sometimes do return to school;

3. Dropouts experience other negative outcomes such as poorer health and higher rates of mortality than high school graduates. They are more likely than graduates to engage in criminal behavior and be incarcerated over their lifetimes;

4. The negative outcomes from dropouts generate huge social costs to citizens and taxpayers. Federal, state, and local governments collect fewer taxes from dropouts and the government subsidizes poorer health, higher criminal activity, and increased public assistance of dropouts;

5. The demographics of the dropout problem is a growing concern due to the proportion of students who are racial, ethnic, and linguistic minorities; who come from poor families; and who live in single-parent households. These are all factors associated with school failure and dropping out;

6. There is a growing push for accountability in the nation's public schools that has produced policies to end social promotion and to institute high school exit exams that could increase the number of students who fail to complete high school;

7. There is widespread concern over dropping out and that it is related to a host of other social problems facing adolescents today (p. 6).

Rumberger (2011) states that dropouts report a wide variety of reasons for leaving school related to school, family, and work: "If many factors contribute to this phenomenon over a long period of time, it is virtually impossible to demonstrate a causal connection between any single factor and the decision to quit school" (p. 6). The findings from this study confirm and support the seriousness of the drop out problem nationwide as discussed in Rumberger's 2011 book. This study also validates the economic struggles dropouts face in their lived experiences due to their lack of skills, training and education. As Rumberger reports, there is a cost to everyone in our society, in terms of lost wages and revenue to support the national economy.

Findings for research question 3: What changes occur in the lives and experiences of young men of color to influence their decision to return to school and graduate? The eight participants interviewed in this study experienced the services of this charter high school for the first time while in jail. This new school experience and the reality of the jail and/or prison sentences they were facing in the correctional system, helped them to reflect on the consequences of their choices in life to this point, and impressed upon them, in a positive way, to think about changing the direction of their lives and taking the next step of earning their high school diploma and moving forward with their education. When they were released from jail, this charter high school gave them the opportunity to continue earning credits toward their high school diploma by attending classes at the main campus, outside of the jail.

Taking responsibility for their children and families was also important in their decision to return to school. Six of the eight participants have children between the ages of one and fourteen years old, and five out of the eight participants are single fathers. These

young men don't want their children to go through what they've experienced in life. They all want their children to have better opportunities to stay in school and graduate. They also want to be good fathers and provide for their children and their families by pursuing a career path through vocational training, going to college, or getting a job and becoming contributing members of the community. They all agreed that they do not want to go back to jail and they are done with that lifestyle because it didn't get them anywhere except in trouble and it left them with criminal records that will follow them forever.

Another factor that influenced the study's participants to return to school was the encouragement, support and the work this school staff does every day to re-engage students in learning and they work hard to help them succeed in their goals to graduate. The staff invites students to learn when they are ready to open their hearts and minds to discovering a different model of schooling. They move students from a resistance to school based on their past experiences to being valued as important members of the school community. What's clear from the data analysis of the Executive Director interview and the focus group interview is that their incredible dedication and commitment supports student success for this unique population in many ways. Their work is to provide a safe, respectful, and beautiful environment for students to feel good about themselves and their academic achievements. The social and emotional needs of students are met by the staff providing trauma informed care and teaching the life skills students need to help them heal from trauma and succeed in school and in life. This staff also has high expectations of students. They provide structure and a positive school culture that rebuilds self-esteem and self-confidence in students' and their ability to meet the requirements of graduating. In addition, individualizing learning for students and using a mastery-based curriculum that meets students where they are and allows

them to progress at their own pace helps students to progress steadily in their classes. The teachers also make strong connections with students and take the time to explain things that students don't understand. The students are also treated like human beings with kindness, compassion, and respect. For many students, these experiences of connection and support are new things they've never experienced at home or in their previous schools.

This school exemplifies the vital changes needed in school culture and the support mechanisms students need to succeed academically, socially, and emotionally so they can graduate. This school's approach to educating students challenges the norms of what happens in most schools today. This school demonstrates the important work of Richard Valencia's deficit thinking model and the need to dismantle the intellectual discourse that blames students, their cultures, and their families for school failure. In his book *Dismantling Contemporary Deficit Thinking: Educational Thought and Practice,* Valencia (2010) focuses on how scholars, educators, and policymakers have advanced the deficit thinking model to explain school failure, particularly among low socioeconomic status (SES) students of color. Minority students suffer substantial overrepresentation among those who experience academic problems and school failure. These students continue to be targets of the deficit thinking model. Intellectual discourse blames the students, their cultures, and their families for diminished academic success (Valencia, 2010, p. xvi).

Valencia (2010) also examines the historical and contemporary discourse of the *at-risk* notion. The at-risk notion was popularized in the 1980s, and policymakers (and later researchers) utilized the term in a predictive scheme to identify students (generally low SES pupils of color) who were prone to experience school failure, particularly dropping out of school. Valencia also asserts that the deficit thinking model overlooks any strengths and

promise that students bring to the classroom. A student who is labeled *at-risk* draws attention to the presumed personal and familial shortcomings of the individual. As such, being at risk has become a person-centered explanation of school failure. The at-risk notion fits under the rubric of deficit thinking; the construct pays little, if any, attention to how schools are institutionally implicated in ways that exclude students from optimal learning (Valencia, 2010, p. xvii).

In his article "The Question of Class," Paul Gorski (2007) discusses the impact of poverty on children and his belief that the U.S. education system denies students in poverty the access and the opportunity it affords other students. Gorski supports plans of action that reshape school and classroom practices to counter class inequities and injustices and that put the onus of responsibility for change on us, and the system, and not on the students and parents so historically underserved by U.S. schools.

According to Gorski (2007), regardless of whether a child living in poverty wants to learn, he/she must first overcome enormous barriers to life's basic needs—the kinds of needs that middle-class people take for granted: access to healthcare, sufficient food and lodging; and reasonably safe living conditions. He says none of these conditions speak to the values or desires of students in poverty, although they may speak to the values of a nation that can afford to eliminate these inequities but chooses not to (Gorski, 2007, p. 32). Gorski proposes that injustices exist within education, which is considered the great equalizer. He asserts: "We must recognize that people living in poverty are fully aware of these discrepancies" (Gorski, 2007, p. 32).

Gorski (2007) also believes we should recognize "the resilience of a community that overcomes such insurmountable odds and continues to push, to strive, to learn and achieve"

(p. 32). He suggests we must acknowledge that students and parents from poverty don't have the same access to material resources that their economically advantaged peers have. On an institutional level, this means fighting for systemic reform and insisting on a more equitable distribution of resources and opportunities in and out of school (Gorski, 2007, pp. 32-33).

Connections to the Conceptual Framework for This Study

The conceptual framework used to understand and explain the phenomena for this study drew upon Yosso's (2005) theory of cultural capital. In the article "Whose Culture has Capital? A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community and Cultural Wealth," Yosso challenges the ways race and racism implicitly and explicitly impact social structures, practices, and discourses. Critical race theory (CRT) shifts the research lens away from a deficit view of communities of color as places full of cultural poverty disadvantages. Instead, CRT focuses on cultural wealth: the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged. The forms of capital nurtured through cultural wealth include:

1. *Aspirational capital* – the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real or perceived barriers;

2. *Linguistic capital* – the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style;

3. *Familial capital* – the cultural knowledge nurtured among *familia* (kin) that carries a sense of community history, memory, and cultural intuition;

4. *Social capital* – networks of people and community resources;

5. *Navigational capital* – the skills of maneuvering through social institutions;

6. *Resistant capital* – the knowledge and skills fostered through oppositional

behavior that challenges inequality (Yosso, 2005, pp.77-81).

These forms of capital draw on the knowledge students of color bring with them from their

homes and communities into the classroom. The CRT approach to education involves a

commitment to develop schools that acknowledge the multiple strengths of communities of

color (Yosso, 2005, p. 30).

The lived experiences and stories of the participants presented in this study are

testimonials that corroborate the tenets of cultural capital. The participants' stories

demonstrate the strengths, confidence, and inner resilience students develop over time to

succeed in an inclusive environment like this charter high school as opposed to the exclusive

environments these students experienced in the previous schools they attended. This study

illuminates the intolerant nature of education whereby schools use their power and authority

to judge, marginalize, and discourage students who don't fit the norm. The outward

appearance of most schools is their perceived willingness to educate all students fairly,

regardless of their socioeconomics, ethnicity, race, language, culture and traditions. The

findings in this study provide evidence to the contrary.

The charter high school, in this study, is a model of education that would benefit all

schools, given the diverse population of students served nationwide. When cultural capital is

recognized and students are valued and accepted for who they are, academic success is

eminent. The staff at this school focuses on the strengths students bring to the classroom and

not on their shortcomings. This is the vantage point from which the staff begins its work to

teach students what they need to know to earn the credits required to graduate. The staff

meets students where they are academically to individualize learning, using a mastery-based

curriculum where students can work at their own pace to earn credits. The tenets of cultural capital embedded in the philosophy at this school are validated by the successes of the students who graduate. Despite the hardships of their life experiences, the students at this school have renewed hope for a brighter future for themselves and their families. The kindness, caring, compassion, respect, connections, and insight of the staff guides students in the direction they need to go toward continuing their education, pursuing career training, or identifying a job path that helps them become independent contributing members of the community. In the end, healing happens at this charter high school. This healing fulfills the mission of the school to change lives from the inside out. The students' stories in this study embody the resilience and the strength of the human spirt to overcome debilitating obstacles. This school is a model for the possibilities available to all schools, at no cost, and they can be implemented with a systemic paradigm shift that changes how students are viewed and accepted. This paradigm shift should include a focus on the strength's students bring to the classroom and that is, what should determine, how their needs are met to achieve the goal of graduating with a high school diploma.

Meaning of Findings in a Larger Educational Context

In a larger educational context, improving the educational outcomes through completion of graduation for all students should be the goal of all schools. Reaping the rewards of their hard work in this school is seen on the school's website where students are pictured wearing their caps and gowns and beaming with pride at their accomplishment of an important benchmark in their lives, which they felt had eluded them and left them behind their peers forever. Now these graduates can envision a brighter future for themselves and their families as they move forward on their journey.

Improving schools to meet the needs of today's students involves change. Change, however, is not an isolated process. It is an immense enterprise that involves the willingness of a school community to embrace the hard work of changing the mindset of teachers and the traditional way students have been educated for the past 100 years. This charter high school has reversed the conventional notion of schooling and how most schools operate in traditional and outdated ways. Antiquated discipline practices and unfair labeling of students pushes students to drop out. The difference in in this charter high school is that all students are welcomed, valued, and respected in an environment that's inclusive and conducive to learning with no judgment. Students are invited to learn at their own pace through a mastery-based curriculum taught with kindness and compassion, which leads to academic success. The effects of reformation in this school can be observed in every facet of this organization. This school has become a safe haven for students who have been disenfranchised by their life circumstances and negative school experiences. It's given these students a second chance in life to succeed.

Comparison and Contributions of Findings to Current Research

The findings in this study support contemporary research (Rumberger, 2011), in that dropping out of school is a process that happens over time in a student's educational career, and it's not a single event that causes students to drop out. It is the multiplicity of and interactions between risk factors that set a student on the path to dropping out.

This study corroborates the literature on the serious life challenges that many young men of color face, from early childhood and well beyond adolescence, that solidifies their decision to drop out of school. This study provides a narrative of alternative practices used at this charter high school that can positively impact the life chances of youth. Despite dropping

out and experiencing incarceration, the young men in this study were invited back to school. They were supported by the staff and they were encouraged through the positive school culture to successfully complete their plans to graduate from high school, thereby increasing their ability to provide a better life for themselves and their families.

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

The implications and recommendations for practice are clearly stated in this study. The guidance and support of the Executive Director at this charter high school directly contributes to the realization of their students' hopes and dreams to overcome the obstacles they've faced in their lives. For many students, graduating from high school will be their first experience with true academic success. Her vision for what this school could become evolved through her own life experiences and teaching students at various grade levels and abilities through her career. Her unique instincts and understandings led her to know what students need in the classroom to be successful. Her creativity and eye for beauty has also contributed to the safe and beautiful environment of the school today in their new building. Her strong transformative leadership embodies the strength and fortitude it takes to make a difference in the lives of students who have been disenfranchised in their educational experiences, and who are now being given the opportunity to succeed.

The approach the staff at this charter high school takes, illustrates that their work indelibly changes lives from the inside out, which is the mission of the school. Their unwavering commitment and dedication to helping their students attain a second chance in life to become contributing members of the community is affirmed at every level with the services provided in this school. This disenfranchised population of students who were mostly raised in poverty, and in environments of chaos and dysfunction, where they have

lived their lives in survival mode since childhood, learn the skills they need in this school that will lead them to an improved quality of life and better employment opportunities. This school has given students hope by helping them to pursue their goals of going to college, and/or seeking a career path that they're interested in. All eight of the young men interviewed are now motivated to move forward in their lives despite the mistakes they've made in their past. It is unfortunate now with the current correctional institution laws in place, that their criminal records will continue to affect their opportunities in life. They all aspire to being good parents who want their children to stay in school and they do not want their children to make the same mistakes they have made. Each young man is also eager to work hard and put in the effort necessary to provide for their families.

This exceptionally committed staff are the backbone of the school and they work tirelessly and in unison to provide educational services to their students with care, kindness, compassion, and respect in a beautiful, heartwarming, and non-judgmental environment. These attributes build strong connections with students, and this support helps them to complete the work and earn the credits they need to graduate. As for the students, their positive experiences in this school are something they have rarely experienced before in their educational careers. This school experience shows students how important they are as opposed to what they have been told all their lives, that is, they would never amount to anything. The success of this school is strongly tied to how the staff approaches students with a school culture of structure, high expectations, and accountability for all students' experiences. This has also restored and rebuilt the confidence and self-esteem in students and reinforced the belief that they can learn, achieve, and succeed in anything they put their

minds to. Their work is also restoring families and helping the community to be a better place for all.

What this school offers to their students does not cost a lot of money. All schools can make the cultural shift to implement Yosso's (2005) tenets of cultural capital to help students succeed. The success of this school lies in the unity of the organization to provide interactions, connections, individualization, mastery-based curriculum, advisement, human dignity, respect, and high expectations with support, calm demeanor, love, and compassion. All of these are the factors that make this school stand out as a model for success with students who have been raised in poverty and have been disenfranchised in their lives and in their past school experiences.

Recommendations for Further Research

Further research at multiple study sites and in different contexts are needed to test the impact of the methods used at this charter school. Researchers are advised to be intentional about setting aside bias, avoiding the rush to judgment, and demonstrating precision in analysis of the data from surveys, interviews, and focus groups. The results of further study may yield new understandings about factors contributing to the decision of young men of color to return to school and graduate.

A recommendation for further research also lies in the training and education of pre-service teachers and ongoing professional development for teachers and school administrators in the field to understand what boys need from an early age in their school careers in terms of activities, engagement, and acceptance in the classroom and at school that will support their endeavors to stay in school and graduate.

Changes in law and policy are also needed to give men of color a second chance. Research involving case studies on the success rates of previously incarcerated inmates who went on to complete college and/or career training and became contributing members of society could demonstrate the effectiveness of education to change lives.

Conclusion

The interviews with staff and the executive director helped to explain what happens when school is a place of enlightened support, respect and safety. When a whole school culture of care and inclusivity is established in a school, students' cultural wealth can be more readily acknowledged and used to the advantage of young men of color. In such a culture, students are invited, not forced to engage in learning, thereby "flipping the switch" that helps them to make an important change in their lives. In this environment, students learn to believe in their ability to attain the academic skills they need to earn a high school diploma. This momentous accomplishment leads them to planning for a brighter future through improved training and employment opportunities. This qualitative phenomenological study has captured the essence of the lived experiences of the participants and answered the research questions posed:

1. What academic, environmental, and social factors lead young men of color to their decision to drop out of high school?

2. What factors lead them to incarceration?

3. What changes occur in the lives and experiences of young men of color to influence their decision to return to school and graduate?

Unfortunately, males of color are still not graduating at a rate comparable to the rates in the state where this study was conducted. Strategies to reduce dropout rates need to happen

as early as middle school where nearly 10% of the students in this study reported dropping out of school after completing 6th to 8th grades. Nearly 20% reported dropping out after completing 9th grade and nearly 30% reported completing 10th grade before dropping out. Forty-three percent of students reported dropping out of school after completing 11th or 12th grades.

Most importantly, this study confirmed the importance of interpreting the data through the lens of the six tenets of cultural capital. Despite their prior experiences, these young men of color were able to overcome the dysfunctions of their past and experience their own feelings of self-belief in their ethnic identities. They were able to navigate a new path that resulted in their choice to return to school and graduate. The aspirations of these young men of color were heightened through strong connections with the one-to-one supports and the systems at this school that helped them persist to graduation. Finally, they were committed to becoming a positive role model for their own children; they desired to achieve a level of literacy necessary to obtain employment; they participated in a variety of training opportunities that were tailored to their interests, and they developed a resistance to a life of crime and recidivism.

This study argued passionately for giving young men of color a voice in their future. A shift in outdated and punitive schooling is needed to turnaround deficit thinking and embrace critical care, connections, and trust. Utilizing a curriculum that meets students where they are and that provides flexible time to demonstrate mastery as students are ready, has proven successful in building the academic skills needed to graduate at this school. A transformation of administrative practices that supports hiring, retraining, and retaining culturally responsive staff to work with students in a respectful and inclusive environment is

also suggested to keep students engaged in the learning process. Schools must also consider the importance of providing access to instructional materials that recognize the interests of young men of color to meet the credit requirements to graduate. These changes to the current educational system are recommended to increase the momentum of moving the educational needle forward to improve the outcomes for all students and boost high school graduation rates. The work is all about changing schools to support the academic growth and well-being of all students. This is being done at a charter school and can be adapted to other school contexts.

Educational reform remains a conversation on the national front, and educators and policymakers across the country continue to seek solutions to the dropout issue. The economic future of our country depends on all students graduating from high school and going on to college or career training to gain the skills needed to enter the work force. The difference in in this charter high school is that all students are welcomed, valued, and respected in an environment that's inclusive and conducive to learning with no judgment. The effects of reformation in this school can be observed in every facet of this organization. This school has become a safe haven for students who have been disenfranchised by their life circumstances and negative school experiences. The outcomes for young men of color who need the additional support of their families, teachers, and school personnel can also be improved to increase graduation rates. The school has given these students a second chance in life to succeed. Preparing these students for the global workforce and giving them the skills, they need to support themselves and their families with dignity and pride should be a priority in every school community across America.

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Appendices

Appendix A:

Interview Questions for the Executive Director

This audio-recorded interview with the Executive Director will focus on her leadership. This will not be a structured interview; it will be a conversation. It will consist of the following queries:

- What is the Executive Director's background in education?

- What is the Executive Director's story about the work she does to lead her staff through challenges and successes?

- What is different in the school culture at this high school from other high schools that promote student success?

- How does the Executive Director support her staff in their work with students?

- What does the Executive Director do in her interactions with students that motivates and leads them toward earning their high school diploma and fulfilling the mission and vision of this high school?

Appendix B:

Focus Group Questions

This audio-recorded interview with the staff will focus on their work to support students to graduate from high school with a high school diploma. This will not be a structured interview; it will be a conversation. It will consist of the following queries:

1.   What are the positive aspects of your work at this high school?

2.   What are the negative aspects of your work at this high school?

3.   How do you feel that your work contributes in a positive way to the students at this high school?

4.   How do you motivate and support students to persevere and stay in school to graduate?

5.   How does the educational program at this high school change "the experience of school" in a positive way for students?

6.   What is the greatest reward in the work you do with students who attend this high school?

7.   What advice would you give to other high schools that would help them to better meet the needs of their students?

8.   Is there anything else you would like to add or change in your comments during this focus group discussion?

Appendix C:

Interview Questions for the Eight Participants Being Audio-Recorded Individually

1.   Tell me about yourself, your family, and where you grew up.

2.   What is the name and location of the last school you attended?

3.   Describe your "school experiences" at the last school you attended.

4.   Tell me about your behavior and school attendance in high school.

5.   Tell me about your relationships with peers at the last school you attended.

6.   What kind of relationship did you have with your teachers in high school?

7.   Did you participate in school activities, sports, clubs, etc.?

8.   How old were you and what grade were you in when you started thinking about dropping out of school?

9.   Describe the deciding factor or set of circumstances that caused you to drop out of school.

10.   Describe your first experience being incarcerated.

11.   Describe your most recent experience being incarcerated.

12.   Describe your interactions with your fellow inmates.

13.   How has being incarcerated impacted your thinking about the future?

14.   How has being incarcerated changed how you look at being in school and graduating?

15.   Do you feel more hopeful about your future since making the decision to graduate?

16.   As an inmate did you participate in any rehabilitation or educational programs?

17.   In what ways have you been encouraged and supported to graduate? Be specific.

18.   How is this high school different from other schools you've attended?

19.   How would you compare your past school experiences to your experiences in a correctional facility?

20. What kind of supports at your last school would have prevented you from dropping out?

21. How did your family feel about your decision to drop out of school?

22. Is there anything your family could have done to help you stay in school?

23. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience of dropping out, incarceration, or working now to earn your high school diploma?

Appendix D:

Survey Instrument

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO YOUNG MEN OF COLOR DROPPING OUT OF HIGH SCHOOL AND EXPERIENCING INCARCERATION: WHAT INFLUENCED THEIR DECISIONS TO RETURN TO SCHOOL AND GRADUATE?

Please Note: This survey was developed for the purpose of collecting data that will allow the researcher to address important issues facing young men of color who drop out of school, experience incarceration, and return to school to graduate.

Directions: Please respond accurately to each item on the survey. There is no personal identifying information on this survey. It is anonymous. Please do not put your name on the survey. The results of this survey will remain completely confidential. Your participation is voluntary, and you may refuse to answer any question that makes you feel uncomfortable. When you complete this survey, please place it in the manila envelope provided by the survey administrator.

Please place a check mark √ in the appropriate space below. Please provide accurate responses to all other questions on the survey.

Part I. Demographic Information

1. What is your age?

    ___ 16-17
    ___ 18-19
    ___ 20-21
    ___ Over 21

2. What is your gender?

    ___ Male
    ___ Female

3. What is your ethnicity/race?

    ___ Hispanic
    ___ Native American
    ___ African American
    ___ Caucasian
    ___ Asian
    ___ Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
    ___ Other

4. What is the last grade you completed before leaving school?

          ___ 6-8
          ___ 9th
          ___ 10th
          ___ 11th
          ___ 12th

5. What is the name of the last school you attended?

_____

Part II. School Factors
This part of the survey will focus on the culture/climate of the last school you attended.

To what extent do you agree with each of the following statements? Please circle your response: (5 = Strongly Agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Undecided (neither agrees nor disagrees); 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly Disagree. *Please use this rating system to complete the remaining sections of the survey.*

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2.1 Punishment and discipline were not fair, which was the reason I left school.	5	4	3	2	1
2.2 Punishment and discipline was the reason I left school early.	5	4	3	2	1
2.3 A feeling of being unsafe at school caused me to leave school early.	5	4	3	2	1
2.4 Lack of assistance by teachers in classes that I was struggling in caused me to leave school early.	5	4	3	2	1
2.5 Lack of success in the state mandated testing in subject-area tests caused me to leave school early.	5	4	3	2	1
2.6 Being bullied caused me to leave school early.	5	4	3	2	1
2.7 Falling behind or failing course work caused me to leave school early.	5	4	3	2	1

Part III. Personal Factors (Environmental)
This section of the survey consists of questions that will help the researcher identify personal characteristics such as personality characteristics and your views on academic goals, successes, and failures that may have caused you to leave school before graduating.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
3.1 Having a baby or childcare was a reason I left school before graduating.	5	4	3	2	1
3.2 The need to stay at home to care for a baby or a family member caused me to leave school before graduating.	5	4	3	2	1
3.3 Being incarcerated/in jail caused me to leave school before graduating.	5	4	3	2	1
3.4 Family problems caused me to leave school before graduating.	5	4	3	2	1
3.5 Addiction to drugs caused me to leave school before graduating.	5	4	3	2	1
3.6 Use of drugs caused me to leave school before graduating.	5	4	3	2	1
3.7 Addiction to alcohol caused me to leave school before graduating.	5	4	3	2	1
3.8 Use of alcohol caused me to leave school before graduating.	5	4	3	2	1
3.9 My boyfriend/girlfriend caused me to leave school before graduating.	5	4	3	2	1
3.10 Being held back in the same grade caused me to leave school before graduating.	5	4	3	2	1
3.11 My Mom/Dad did not care if I graduated, and that caused me to leave school before graduating.	5	4	3	2	1
3.12 My parents' decision to divorce caused me to leave school before graduating.	5	4	3	2	1
3.13 Living with one parent (single-housing home) caused me to leave school before graduating.	5	4	3	2	1
3.14 The need to get a job to aid in household income caused me to leave school before graduating.	5	4	3	2	1
3.15 Working long hours caused me to leave school before graduating.	5	4	3	2	1

Part IV. Academic Factors
This section of the survey consists of questions about academic factors that may have caused you to leave school before graduating.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
4.1 I do plan to get a high school diploma or GED.	5	4	3	2	1
4.2 I did not attend school on a daily basis before I left school.	5	4	3	2	1
4.3 In my last full year of school, I succeeded in Math.	5	4	3	2	1
4.4 In my last full year of school, I succeeded in Reading/Language Arts.	5	4	3	2	1
4.5 In my last full year of school, I succeeded in Science.	5	4	3	2	1
4.6 In my last full year of school, I succeeded in Social Studies.	5	4	3	2	1

Part V. Other Related Factors (Social)
Responses to statements in Part V will help the researcher identify other factors that may contribute to high school dropouts, such as community and co-curricular activities.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5.1 My crime problems caused me to leave school early.	5	4	3	2	1
5.2 Crime problems in my community caused me to leave school early.	5	4	3	2	1
5.3 My community had quality sports and faith-based programs for youth.	5	4	3	2	1
5.4 Participating in sports while in school would have kept me from leaving school early.	5	4	3	2	1
5.5 Participating in the music program and dance programs (band, choir, cheerleaders, dance team, etc.) would have kept me in school.	5	4	3	2	1
5.6 I plan to go to college.	5	4	3	2	1
5.7 I plan to go on to career path/job.	5	4	3	2	1

Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this study and for taking the time to complete this survey instrument. *Written permission was granted to use this survey instrument by Dr. Calvin Lockett, Ph.D., Deputy Superintendent of the Jackson Public School District in Jackson, Mississippi on November 3, 2017.*