THE EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS WHO DO NOT
GRADUATE WITH THEIR COHORT

A DISSERTATION IN
Education

Presented to the Faculty of the University of Missouri-Kansas City in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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THE EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS WHO DO NOT
GRADUATE WITH THEIR COHORT

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this descriptive collective case study was to understand the stories of students who did not graduate with their cohort. The participants represented two comprehensive high schools in a large suburban school district. Data collection included an analysis of school records, observations of the participants in their classrooms, and semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed through enumerative and thematic coding using within-case and cross-case analysis. The participants struggled in the traditional comprehensive high school setting and had experiences in their lives that impacted their academic success. Several participants experienced limited success in the comprehensive high school and needed significant support. The students were successful in flexible learning environments in which they had caring relationships with adults. High school educators must work to create flexible learning supports that are personalized based on the needs of each student.
The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the School of Education, have examined a dissertation titled “The Experiences of Students Who Do Not Graduate with their Cohort,” presented by Mark Maus, candidate for the Doctor of Philosophy degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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PREFACE

Learning about the experiences of struggling students, especially those who do not graduate with their cohorts, was motivated by my work as a teacher of Algebra I students and both an assistant principal and principal. While working as an assistant principal, I led the Student Assistant Team, a group that met to discuss how to support struggling students and ensure as many students as possible graduated. The reality was we were trying to intervene with students who needed more support than we could provide in a year. Students were too far behind for us to properly support their learning. We had failed because we did not intervene early enough. I knew as a system and organization we could do better. We had the right people in the room to support students, but we did not have the right interventions, and we did not intervene early enough.

Addressing the needs of struggling students was a new experience for me and certainly different from my own experiences in school. During my high school career, I was involved in extra-curricular activities and athletics all four years. My parents expected me to earn grades of A’s and B’s in every class; if I was not reaching that level of attainment, I was encouraged to work with teachers to improve my grades. I attended a high school that had fewer than 300 students in a small community with a graduating class of 70 students. There were no alternative programs available; if you wanted a diploma, you needed to be successful during the traditional school day. Education was valued in our household. My father was an educator, and at the time of my high school career, he served as a principal. His father worked his entire career in education as well. We repeatedly had conversations about where I would attend college, because there was an expectation that I would complete a post-secondary degree.
As an educator, I needed to learn more about the experiences of struggling high school students. I was comfortable working with students whose experiences were similar to my own—those who were active in school and were able to navigate the system well. I was raised in a middle class, two-parent household, and nearly all of my classmates were white like me. My parents met in college, and while my mother did not finish college, my father earned his Education Specialist Degree and was an administrator in the town in which I grew up. Education was valued and an important part of my everyday life. I did not know how to properly help students who needed additional support, because it was not something I knew of while growing up. During my years as a teacher, assistant principal, and principal, my goal was to learn about each struggling student’s experiences and what I could do as an educator to better to serve all students. I believed that learning from students who struggled could influence current practices and create a learning environment where all students could be successful.

Thus, my motivation for examining these issues derived from direct experiences with struggling students. During this study, I entered their spaces with the realization that I had a lot to learn through an inquiry that focused specifically on their needs. Cook-Sather (2006) reminded me that, “‘student voice’…asks us to connect the sound of students speaking not only with those students experiencing meaningful, acknowledged presence but also with their having the power to influence analyses of, decisions about, and practices in schools” (p. 363). This means that once educators hear students’ voices, they must give them the power to make changes in structures and practices of schools. A voice without action is useless.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Students exiting school and moving into adulthood without a diploma is a nationwide problem that has far-reaching impacts to society (DePaoli, Balfanz, Atwell, Bridgeland, 2018; Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010). Each year, the number of high school dropouts continues to confound the general public when they read the newest articles in Time magazine or look at their local newspapers. Education opens doors, and one of the greatest benefits is the potential earnings over the course of a person’s lifetime. Graduation from high school creates the opportunity for a better quality of life because of the potential for higher income. The difference in annual earnings between a high school graduate and non-graduate is approximately $10,000 a year (Balfanz, 2009; Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2016). This was the approximate difference between projected annual earnings of a high school graduate and a non-graduate in 2005 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2006). This difference is felt not only in the pocketbooks of non-graduates but also by the entire population of the United States. A study conducted in 2007 estimated the U.S. economy would have benefited from more than $300 billion in earnings during the lifetimes of non-graduates (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009a). Simultaneously, non-graduates create a loss in tax revenue, spending potential, and a higher reliance on social services (Buffum, Mattos, & Malone, 2018; Veronneau, 2007). As schools continue to fail students, educators carry on the practice of sending young adults into the world who are not self-sufficient and are unable to become productive citizens in their communities.

As previously pointed out, when young adults do not finish high school, they are unable to obtain high paying jobs and are more reliant on services provided by tax dollars
(Buffum et al., 2018). They are also less likely to vote or become involved in their communities (Trostel, 2015). Dropping out of school is not a new trend; it is a persistent problem that schools and communities have been trying to resolve for more than 40 years. The cost of students not completing high school has led to both personal and societal economic challenges (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010). With the current national poverty level for a family of four at $24,600 for the 48 continental states, $10,000 makes a significant difference in the lives of families (ASPE, 2017). Moreover, immigrant high school dropouts earn less than their counterparts who graduate. They also earn less than non-immigrant students who are not able to finish high school successfully (Christenson, 2004; Enchautegui, 1997).

Students who do not graduate from high school are also more likely to have a lower life expectancy and are more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system (DePaoli et al., 2018). Students who do not finish high school with their cohort not only impact our economy negatively by reducing taxable income, but dropouts are also more likely to commit crimes and become part of the prison system. Non-graduates also make up over 40% of the prison population and are 3.5 times more likely to be incarcerated when compared to the population (Moretti, 2005; Woolredge & Smith, 2017). The difference in cost between education and detainment is also staggering. A report from the state of Texas estimated it costs $79 per day or nearly $29,000 per year to incarcerate a person (Orrick & Vieraitis, 2014). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2006), the cost to educate a student is approximately $9,644 per year. Based on the difference in cost, a state could educate 1.2 students per year with the estimated $12,000 they are not spending on a prison inmate.
The cost of not completing high school is greater for males compared to females based on their graduation rate of 65% and 73%, respectively (Harlow, 2003). While Black and Latinx students have experienced an increase in graduation rates, on average African American and Latinx students graduate at a rate of 10% less when compared to their white counterparts (DePaoli et al., 2018). Another challenge is African American and Latinx students are more likely to be suspended and referred to law enforcement by school personnel. Perhaps the most startling realization is they also are more likely to attend a school which employs a law enforcement officer than one that employs a school counselor (DePaoli et al., 2018). Students who fail high school are more likely to struggle with life’s challenges and become repeat offenders within the correctional system (Moretti, 2005). These are startling statistics and should force educators to reflect on their everyday practices. Educators must consider the best way to support all student learners. They must be flexible and work with students to support them throughout their educational careers.

This study was designed to further understanding of the reasons students do not successfully complete high school with their cohorts. Data were obtained by analyzing school documents and interviewing and observing students who have experienced extending their high school careers or not earning their high school diplomas. It is hoped that findings will help current and future teachers and administrators understand the factors that contribute to students dropping out of school. My findings suggest that academics is often a part of the puzzle and many other relational factors that educators fail to address affect students’ decisions to drop out of school. Hence, struggling students find themselves on a winding road toward dropping out of school with few interventions along the way. Educators must
prioritize learning for all students in order to understand what prevents students from completing high school.

The Problem

When examining the problem of students dropping out of school, a persistent challenge exists related to identifying the number of students dropping out across the country. The graduation rate calculation for each state determines the way the percentage is calculated and is different for each state; the national rates also differ. The graduation rate for high school nationwide has been between 75% and 80% for over a decade (Balfanz, 2009). While the Midwestern state where this study was implemented reported a graduation rate of 88% (State Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2018), the U.S. Department of Education (2018) estimated the national graduation rate at 84%, and Education Week questioned the number being reported. Gewertz (2019) found states had raised graduation rates by two and three percentage points while having decreased achievement levels in national normed assessments such as Advanced Placement and the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Each entity used different ways to calculate the rate, which causes a disparity in state and national graduation rate percentages; thus, it is difficult to report an exact rate.

Students who come from socially disadvantaged backgrounds have traditionally experienced lower graduation rates nationwide and in 2010 had a rate of 72% (Stetser & Stilwell, 2014). For students in urban schools, dropout statistics are much worse. According to a June 20, 2006, USA Today article, students in large urban school districts have about a 50% chance of graduating with their cohort (Toppo, 2006). These statistics are similar to those for African American and Latinx students, whose dropout rates are over 50%
(Camangian, 2013; Yosso, 2005). Dropping out of school is strongly associated with academic achievement (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Murnane, 2013; Stetser & Stilwell, 2014). National Assessment for Education Progress (NAEP) data, accounting for factors that impact student achievement such as poverty and specific student and teacher characteristics, indicated that Back and Latinx students continue to perform below White students (Nation’s Report Card, 2018).

While these statistics are important for us to gauge the severity of the problem and progress among students, policymakers and educators at all levels must understand why students drop out of school and work to eradicate the problem. Freeman and Simonsen (2015) began to address this issue by reviewing literature dedicated to the subject of dropout prevention. They used a multiphase process of identifying articles for inclusion which comprised those focused on empirical studies, policy or practice studies, K-12 populations, and/or dependent variables of dropout rates or school completion rates. During their research, they found several studies that discussed the risk factors associated with dropping out and the characteristics of schools that have a higher percentage of dropouts. There was an over-representation of students who dropped out who were from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds, qualified for English Language proficiency support, and who were Latinx or African American. The literature researched provided limited information about effective dropout prevention and/or high school completion practices or policies and how these would be implemented. Academic success is predictable in those students in post-secondary schooling who experience success in high school (Maynard et al., 2015; Walton & Cohen, 2007).
States have tried to increase their graduation rate by extending the high school career to a fifth year (Murnane, 2013). However, the graduation rate decreases the longer students are required to stay in school (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006; Murnane, 2013). Extending a high school student’s career beyond four years provides an opportunity for the student to finish high school, but the longer a graduation date is extended, the less likely the student will earn their diploma. Apparently, solving this issue requires intervening timely, effectively, and efficiently during a student’s four-year high school career. Schools must work to improve graduation rates because it impacts the quality of life projections of youth for many years.

The long-term impact for young adults was the focus of the work of Princeton University Professor Cecilia Rouse. She estimated each high school dropout will cost the nation approximately $260,000 over the course of their lifetime (Maynard et al., 2015; Rouse, 2005). Over a quarter of a million dollars could be saved per student who graduates from high school. The state where this study was conducted is estimated to lose approximately $4.8 billion dollars in revenue due to students who do not earn their high school diploma (Balfanz, 2009). If the current trend of 1.2 million students dropping out each year continues, the economy will lose over $3 trillion (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009b). The high cost of non-graduates should create a sense of urgency and anxiety. Economic consequences are just one factor in the phenomenon of students who do not finish high school.

The causes of dropping out are often socially related and eventually affect the academic experiences of students. Students who are not successful in high school often experience social rejection and are more likely to drop out than their thriving peers.
(Veronneau, 2007). Often social rejection by peers generally follows bullying or harassment (Wei & Williams, 2004). For some groups of students, social rejection may be compounded by their race and ethnicity and may cause them to leave school (Mikami, Gregory, Allen, Pianta, & Lun, 2011; Wentzel & Ramani, 2016). The graduation rates of African American and Latinx students are lower than those of their white peers and may be the result of social rejection based on race and ethnicity (DePaoli et al., 2018).

Students gain key academic skills throughout their high school careers. They transition from more structured middle school experiences to more freedom and responsibility in high schools. While academic changes occur during transitioning, there are also social and physical changes (Craig & Baucum, 2002; Sawyer, Azzopardi, Wickremaratne, & Patton, 2018). Students are able to grow and learn from peers and adults as they progress through high school. During the second or third year of high school, the majority of students begin driving and have more flexibility in their schedule. This is an important milestone for students, and with increased freedom they are able to experience activities outside of high school. The skills learned within and outside of school help them to transition to adulthood (Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006; Hamedani & Darling-Hammond, 2015; Wagner, 2010).

There are also skills students learn within the high school setting that are key to their post-secondary success. Students who graduate with a comprehensive understanding of communication and problem-solving will be more productive members of society and the economy (DePaoli et al., 2018; Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006). According to a report published in cooperation with The Conference Board, Partnership of 21st Century Skills, Corporate Voices for Working Families, and the Society for Human Resource Management,
high school graduates are entering a workforce that requires skill sets including information
technology application, teamwork and collaboration, and diversity (Casner-Lotto &
Barrington, 2006; Hamedani & Darling-Hammond, 2015). The report noted that continuing
education leads to greater skill development, and if continuing education is not possible, it is
imperative to acquire a strong base of these skills in high school. When students engage in a
four-year high school career and successfully complete it, they leave school with a greater
understanding of what is needed to be successful in the community and the world of work
(Wagner, 2010).

This transition is essential as students are asked to move on from high school to either
additional education opportunities or the workforce. Students in high school are also
expected to advocate for themselves and acquire interpersonal skills as they become more
independent (Hamedani & Darling-Hammond, 2015). Students who drop out miss the
opportunity to learn social skills and see proper skills of interpersonal communication
modeled by adults. Students mature and begin to transition from young persons who are
dependent on their parents and other adults to young people who are able to navigate the
broader society (Upadyaya & Salmela-Aro, 2013). Students often do not understand the
consequences of not finishing high school, and they are asked to make decisions about their
future lives during one of the most stressful times of their lives. These youth are asked to take
on additional responsibilities while going through a significant amount of physical and
emotional changes due to hormonal and social challenges (Hamedani & Darling-Hammond,
2015: Upadyaya & Salmela-Aro, 2013). Further, opportunities to successfully navigate
environments where they are suddenly faced with increased responsibilities and decision-
making skills are less challenging for students who attend more affluent schools than for
students who attend urban schools (Carter & Welner, 2013; DePaoli et al., 2018). More affluent communities offer students varied opportunities to see and model successful adults interacting in a variety of roles, especially roles that yield more economic and social capital than service-level roles in poorer communities (Travers, Bohnert, & Randall, 2013). Social capital involves networks of people and community resources, peer and other social contacts that can provide both instrumental and emotional support to help youth navigate through society’s institutions (Yosso, 2005).

The What Works Clearinghouse identified 19 programs that focused on keeping students progressing in school with the ultimate goal of graduating with their cohorts. Freeman and Simonsen (2015) identified 18 recovery programs focused on students who had already fallen behind their classmates. Of these programs, only four schools showed evidence of helping students stay in school, and these programs lacked strong evidence of assisting students in finishing school (Freeman & Simonsen). Freeman and Simonsen’s (2015) study, identified several implications for education leaders, researchers, and policymakers. They suggested using caution moving forward because limited research studies had been completed to support different programs and interventions. However, their research pointed to several indicators found in only four successful programs. Freeman and Simonsen recommended implementing multi-component interventions, intervening early, and developing strategies that address the school’s organizational structure.

Another factor in students’ failure to graduate is teachers working in isolation; they are more effective when they collaborate about the needs of students and ways for them to be successful as they matriculate through schools (Schmoker, 2013). This isolation allows students to fail because teachers are required to introduce a certain amount of curriculum
rather than base classroom decisions on what students have learned and communicate their progress to other teachers. Most are willing to collaborate and would work together, but some principals do not make this a priority (DuFour & Fullan, 2013; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many, & Mattos, 2016; Muhammad & Cruz, 2019). Allowing teachers to work together and collaborate would create an environment that would benefit students (DuFour et al., 2016; Muhammad & Cruz, 2019; Schmoker, 2013). Teachers learn best from each other, and the collaboration would increase the effectiveness of the learning environment for students (Fullan, 2016).

Students are also more successful when they are connected to the school environment. The relationships students build in school, especially with adults, benefit them. Students are more likely to graduate if they have a significant adult that they can count on to help them navigate schooling (Gasper, DeLuca, & Estacion, 2012; Quin, 2017; Wiseman, 2012). The relationships can be built with peers, teachers, coaches, activities sponsor, or adults at school (Guest & Schneider, 2003; Nichols & White, 2001). As students move through their educational career, they more than likely see increased number of teachers and have more peers in their buildings. This experience may decrease their chances to build deep relationships with teachers and peers.

The ability to connect to the school environment is related to an often overlooked factor of social bonding—students feeling they belong in the school and have a stake in its activities, including being involved and represented in the school’s curriculum (Aldridge & Ala’l, 2013; Gay, 2010; Johnson, Crosnoe, & Elder, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Lipscomb, 2007; Walton & Cohen, 2007). Social bonding, inherent in parent involvement and culturally responsive teaching, created a sense of belonging and were considered proximal variables in
correlational research conducted by Chun and Dickson (2011). They found these proximal variables affected academic self-efficacy and academic performance of 478 Latinx seventh graders. Findings indicated that parental involvement, culturally responsive teaching, and sense of school belonging increased academic performance by improving academic self-efficacy.

An additionally significant factor in student success is the importance parents place on education (Jeynes, 2003). Research studies indicate that parent involvement is crucial to student learning; however, it is well known that parent involvement also decreases as students move into middle and high school (Ross, 2016). Reynolds, Crea, Medina, Degnan and McRoy (2014) found parent involvement can be increased in middle and high school levels when parents are invited to the school and engage with teachers. High expectations for students need to be combined with parents partnering with educators to support students during their high school experiences (Ross, 2016).

Students who experience bullying and harassment at elementary or middle level age are more likely to have weaker school attachments. The students may feel loneliness and disconnection from the larger school environment and isolate themselves from peers who may not want them as part of their social group (Mikami et al., 2011; Wei & Williams, 2004). How students perceive their friends and the types of connections they have with them may negatively impact their grades, which impacts their ability to persist through high school and graduate with their cohort (Burk & Laursen, 2005; Wiseman, 2012). Students’ inability to connect in high school also affects their ability to make productive social connections once their high school careers are over.
Burk and Laursen (2005) examined the importance of early- and mid-adolescents’ perceptions of friendships using 282 responses to questionnaires. The study focused on the effects friendships have on the ability of students to work through conflict, their relationship with their mothers, and the impact the friendships have on school. Researchers found “the best school grades and the fewest externalizing problems were found among friends who agreed that their relationships was low in negativity” (p. 162). When students had higher levels of negativity in their relationships, their grades were impacted.

The importance of teaching the academic curriculum is only part of our jobs as educators. We must also consider the social-emotional growth of students and their maturation through high school. Effective curriculum and instruction involve both cognitive and affective natures of learning; however, educators at all levels tend to consider only cognitive instruction or reform (Costigan, 2013; Hamedani & Darling-Hammond, 2015). There is a tendency to ignore social and emotional support students need because of the failure to listen to what they have to say about their struggles in schools. This study was designed to listen to the voices of struggling high school students.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to learn from the experiences of high school students who have not graduated with their cohort through the use of case study research (Merriam & Tisdale, 2015), which allows the researcher to examine phenomena in a natural setting using multiple data sources (Yin, 2014). This study was designed as a collective case study with one issue examined multiple times through a variety of cases (Creswell, 2013). Each case represented an individual student who did not graduate with their cohort. The options for the
participants were to graduate through an alternative method or extend their high school career to a fifth year.

The setting for the study was two comprehensive high schools in a large suburban school district. The study was bounded by time and space because it involved students in a comprehensive high school during their high school careers (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I found the descriptive collective case study to be appropriate for this research because multiple data were collected through interviews, document analysis, and observations to describe the phenomenon with each student viewed as a case, which met the criteria of a collective case study (Yin, 2014).

Specifically, the units of analyses were the experiences of struggling students who failed to graduate with their cohorts. The goal was to learn more about their experiences in order to create effective environments for students to have success in high school and graduate with their cohorts. Identifying common themes from their experiences will inform schools and allow them to increase graduation rates that, in turn, will reduce dropout rates. One central research question and four sub-questions were significant to this inquiry.

**Research Questions**

The research questions were designed to guide the collective case study within two suburban high schools. The questions helped me to gain a greater understanding of the students’ high school experiences and provide rich, thick descriptions of the phenomena. As an anthropological term, Denzin (1989) explained thick description as “It goes beyond mere fact and surface appearances. It presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another…. In thick description, the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals are heard” (p. 83).
Central Question: How do students who have not graduated with their cohort at two high schools describe their experiences during their high school career?

Sub-questions:

1. How do students describe their relationships with peers, teachers, and other school personnel?
2. What interventions did students experience during their high school career?
3. What choices did students have about the interventions that were implemented to support their efforts toward graduation?
4. What messages did students provide to educators to encourage others to stay in school and progress toward graduation?

**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework of a study guides the goals and purpose of the research. Conceptual framework refers to the ideas the person completing the research holds about the issue being studied (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2005). This study was designed to influence future practices of secondary schools and to create a deeper understanding of why students are not successful in high school.

I brought several assumptions from my experiences about the nature of this research. I believe the consequences for students who do not successfully complete high school are too vast for most teenagers to comprehend. Most young adults do not realize attaining a higher education will provide the opportunity to earn higher paying jobs. These positions require a minimum of a high school education, and students do not understand that the opportunity to advance is not there without a diploma. Some jobs require a high school diploma over a GED because the perception is that a GED does not require a person to learn to work with other
people (Thornburgh, 2006), and teamwork and collaboration are necessary skills for employment (Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006). I also assume that students who do not successfully complete high school have relatives or immediate family members who have also not completed high school. Successful models of high school completion and higher education attainment are often not a part of their social capital. Finally, we do not ask students what they need to be successful in school. The inclusion of their voices, cultures, and interests should be an integral part of decision making related to interventions.

The conceptual framework highlights the topics that are discussed in Chapter Two. Each of the four topics was designed to give greater insight about different types of experiences high school students are likely to have. This section provides a brief overview of the development of the comprehensive high school, the organizational structure and experiences of students, the importance of relationships, and the development of interventions for struggling students, many of whom are students of color.

The early development of schools in America was shaped by the values and views of schooling designed to teach white wealthy males within private settings. The expansion of public education continued to be a vehicle for sorting students through tracking and ability grouping, and not much has changed in its structure and organization (Cawelti, 2003; Mirel, 2006; Wraga, 2000). Important to this study is how the organization of the school and its structures can support or inhibit the learning of certain students. Finding ways to develop organizational structures to support all students should be the goal of schools. As I reflected on the experiences of struggling students, I found it important to provide relevant literature for understanding this phenomenon. The third focus area of relationships is significant to this study because for many students, relationships with significant adults and peers provide a
sense of belonging, which also impacts achievement (Johnson et al., 2001; Lipscomb, 2007). Finally, the interventions struggling students need should be timely and involve the input of students. Rarely are students asked what they need to be successful in schools. Inequities exist in schools because most educators expect students to acclimate to schools instead of changing their procedures and practices for students (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2010; Maier et al., 2016).

**The Historical Development of the Comprehensive High School**

After the American Revolution, the early states saw education as a necessary tool for civil peace and prosperity and the development of the American character. “Here was a chance for a real departure from corrupt Europe. This was the ideal of the American Revolution, and education had a critical role in it” (Kaestle, 1983, p. 6). The newly formed nation debated the nature of education and ways to achieve a balance of freedom and order. Some believed that politics and education were separate entities and schools should teach reading and writing. The other position argued that schools need to teach the basic principles of a republican form of government and help ordinary people acquire the beliefs and behaviors of good character. Jefferson supported the former position, believing that the best way to protect a country from tyranny was to educate its people and allow them to form their own political beliefs (Spring, 1986).

In Jefferson’s early plan, a proposed Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge, education was to be offered for three years to all free children, with the most talented selected and educated and the public taking on the expense in Grammar Schools (Spring, 1982). On the other hand, Horace Mann, known as the creator of the common school movement, supported a plan that “a common political creed had to be instilled in all citizens”
He dedicated his life to public schooling, believing that education was needed to reform society. Despite Jefferson’s and Mann’s different philosophies, the development of public schools was led by men and women with common interests in helping to build a school system by mobilizing local communities in its support (Tyack & Hansot, 1982).

These interests eventually led from schooling in the form of academies for the wealthy to schools set up all over America, modeled after Germany for the rich and poor (Katz, 1995). Historians have described the proliferation of secondary schools as a “unilinear institutional development: from Latin grammar school to academy to public high school” (Katz, p. 201). The concept of a comprehensive high school was not considered until the late 1800s, when laws were passed that dedicated funds for high school aged students (Tevis, 2014). From about 1870 to 1920, the public high school became the major institution for a secondary education, and as society grew more complex, so did its schools. A comprehensive high school was defined as a school that admits all children of appropriate age in a given area and provides a range of courses to suit their whole range of interests and abilities (Campbell & Sherington, 2006). Merriam-Webster (2019) defines comprehensive as “covering completely or broadly” (p. 16) and high school as “a school especially in the U.S. usually including grades 9–12 or 10–12” (p. 16).

The education of Blacks and Native Americans was not considered in the establishment of public schools. In the South, it was against the law to educate slaves; meanwhile Northern states were building systems that were to embrace all. Katz (1995) pointed out that though valid, this perspective “neglects the antiblack racism that was dominant in the North” (p. 252). The solution for the Native American population was
assimilation, considered the gift of civilization through the establishment of reservation schools—the reservation day school, the reservation boarding school, and the off-reservation boarding school (Adams, 1995)

Comprehensive high schools, private, and religious-based schools existed as choices for parents in the early twentieth century, with the wealthy having more choices about how to educate their children. Gamoran (1996) used data from the National Educational Longitudinal Survey (NELS) which began with a data base in 1988 for surveying 24,000 eighth graders with follow-up in 1990 when they were sophomore in high school. Analysis of test data and questionnaires was restricted to 4,000 students with data also collected from parents and school administrators. Gamoran (1996) sought to compare the achievement of students who attended public magnet schools, Catholic schools, and nonreligious private schools with similar students in public comprehensive schools. With an awareness of the purpose of comprehensive high schools, questions posed were: Are magnet and private schools more supportive than comprehensive public schools? Do they offer better academic climates and promote more social bonding and academic course taking among students?

Gamoran’s (1996) findings were magnet schools are more effective than comprehensive high schools at raising the proficiency of students in science, reading, and social studies; Catholic schools indicated a positive impact on math skills, while non-religious private schools were less impactful in this area. Further, magnet school administrators reported more positive academic climates than those in comprehensive schools. Social attachments were similar in magnet and comprehensive schools. A significant policy implication was results were not favorable for advocates of private school choice in cities; no meaningful advantages for nonreligious private schools were found; the single
advantage for Catholic schools was in math. Gamoran suggested that this advantage is likely to disappear if public comprehensive high schools would support a “more focused academic climate and promote more course taking in math, this difference, too, would disappear” (p. 14).

The school system in America has developed slowly over the course of over 400 years with a multitude of changes (Mirel, 2006). Gamoran’s (1996) study revealed the continuing debate over how students should be educated in the comprehensive high school that began with its development and continued into the late twentieth century. As comprehensive high schools encounter the new global challenges of the twenty-first century, this debate is likely to continue. The structure and organization of the comprehensive high school over time and its influence on today’s schools is further discussed in the literature review.

Organizational Structure/Experiences in High Schools

Organizational structure and experiences in high schools became a critical topic as I researched the topic of secondary schools. Leithwood and Riehl (2003) described organization structure as: “the skeletal framework which people carry out their work. Structure can enhance or hinder individual performance and the accomplishment of school goals. Effective educational leaders direct structural changes that will establish positive conditions for teaching and learning” (p. 5). These structures should be considered along with the many factors impacting students each day as they navigate a comprehensive high school and interact with a number of people. Educators must explore how their schools are perceived by all stakeholders and place an emphasis on the social bonding of students—how they feel when they are in the building (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015). This special bonding
was significant in Gamoran’s (1996) examination of the comparison of four types of schools, with findings indicating social bonding was similar in both magnet and comprehensive high schools. Vega, Moore, and Miranda (2015) interviewed 18 African American and Latinx high school students about their views on barriers to positive education experiences. They identified barriers connected to people, places, and policies. These were: (a) teachers who were not caring and engaged with students; (b) little assistance from counselors for improved opportunities and access to programs and courses; (c) peers who do not come to school to learn; (d) school policies that were unfair; and (e) perceptions regarding feeling safe at school as well as poor and unsafe conditions of neighborhoods. In short, these organizational structures and factors were connected to the social-emotional aspects of learning.

Gage, Larson, Sugai, and Chafouleas (2016) found that climate influences academic, socio-emotional, and behavioral outcomes of students. The researchers surveyed students in elementary, middle, and high schools. The student responses showed students who were able to share details about the procedures and expectations of the school had fewer incidents of suspension and office referrals. The more they understood the school’s expectations, exhibited ownership in their schools, and perceived the culture as supportive, the greater academic success they experienced in the school. The social bonding that adolescents need to experience in schools include acts of caring and structuring the organization of the school to meet the social and emotional needs of students.

Noddings (2012) insisted in her work on care that growing debates are related to “the priority of care or justice—or the reconciliation of the two concepts—and the extension of care ethics beyond the family and small community into global affairs” (p. 771). Noddings (2012) also wrote about the mutuality of care in adult relations; however, all relations are not
equal, as in the teacher-pupil relation where both parties must contribute to the act of caring. The challenge for teachers is that even when there is a reason they cannot respond positively to an expressed need, the response must be aimed toward maintaining a caring relationship through open communication which teaches students to engage in the moral aspects of caring.

While much attention is often given to the culture of the school, educators sometimes exclude the importance of valuing the personal cultures of students and the background experiences and interests they bring to school. Gay (2010) contended that curriculum and instruction in schools must adopt pedagogical perspectives “to improve the performance of underachieving students from various ethnic groups—one that teaches to and through personal and cultural strengths, their intellectual capabilities, and their prior accomplishments” (Gay, 2010, p. 26).

An important aspect of the school culture is identifying the opportunities students have to be successful learners in schools. To consider the background experiences of students is to know their stories. As educators, we often forget some students come to school hungry. The feeling of safety for students involves their basic needs, including food, that must be met in order to be productive. Fiese, Gundersen, Koester, and Washington (2011) reported food insecurity has serious effects on teenagers; they were “three times as likely to have been suspended, twice as likely to have seen a psychologist, twice as likely to have difficulty getting along with others, and four times as likely to have no friends” (p. 7).

Additionally, an effective school climate requires purposeful planning with multiple staff members and stakeholders. When I reflect on my own work during my undergraduate studies, I remember only one course in which I was asked to purposely collaborate with my
classmates. There were many times we collaborated about assignments, but only once were we asked to plan related to common concerns and to discuss outcomes and expectations for students. Student outcomes are raised when teachers are collaborating and focused on students’ learning outcomes. (DuFour et al., 2016; Fullan, 2016).

I have thought a lot about how these organizational structures impacted my personal classroom and what the students experienced in my class. As I reflect on how students learned in my classroom, it was my culture that allowed some students to fail. I have asked myself what I did or did not do to create an inclusive and welcoming environment for the students.

**Relationships**

Relationships are vital to the success of all students’ paths toward completion of high school. Teacher and student relationships of care and respect have been found to improve student learning and prevent students from dropping out of school, which is especially “significant for low-income students of color, mainly due to the sociopolitical nature of the urban context” (Rodríguez, 2008, p. 38), where inequalities from the larger society are replicated in schools. Students must have an adult advocate in their building to support their work and advancement. Relationships at the secondary level with teachers can be complex and difficult to maintain because students have up to eight teachers based on the organizational structure of the schedule. Students are likely to develop relationships with teachers whom they perceive as caring and show interest in their lives by making connections to their outside worlds. Noddings (2012) explained that having an ethic of caring allows teachers to create classroom cultures of positive expectations through “establishing and maintaining relations of care and trust which include listening, dialogue, critical thinking,
reflective response, and making thoughtful connections among the disciplines and to life itself” (p. 771).

A study conducted by Briggs (2018) explored the perspectives of African American males and what factors support and impede their academic success. The study identified four junior and four senior level students in a predominantly white high school. The students were asked 20 questions focused on their perspectives of the factors that supported their academic success. The students identified four factors that created barriers for them to be successful academically. The students identified lack of expectations, lack of caring relationship with staff, lack of belief in students and the desire to have staff look like them (Briggs, 2018). The study reinforces the need for all staff members to support students and be cognizant of their stories. The desire to have staff that look like them raises the goal of hiring and retaining teachers of color in schools. However, all educators must have an awareness of the cultural background of students. Both Ladson-Billings (1994) and Gay (2000) make clear that culturally relevant and responsive pedagogies for African American students are not the sole domain of African American teachers (Low & Golden, 2014). African American teachers who feel alienated from younger generations can also be cultural outsiders, needing to become more informed and knowledgeable (Low & Golden). Educators who are aware and support a student’s personal and cultural experience will create a better environment for students (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Classrooms that reflect students’ social and cultural experiences create environments where students are engaged. Students more engaged in the classroom are more likely to achieve at higher levels (Shernoff et al., 2016). Peer pressure can work negatively for students who are high achieving but associate with a low achieving peer group. Students tend
to conform to their peers by matching the values, attitudes, and behaviors of their group. This also results in students who raise their achievement levels based on the need to conform to peers (Goldsmith, 2004). A student’s personal culture of race and ethnicity is integral to the types of relationships a student may need and search for inside and outside of school.

Studies have reported a positive correlation between a mother’s education and the success of students (Crede, Wirthwein, McElvany, & Steinmayr, 2015). Crede et al. (2015), using self-reported grade point averages, found a relationship of academic achievement and students’ life satisfaction among middle and high income families of 411 German students with mothers who had achieved a high school diploma or higher. Limitations were cited as self-reported data and the homogeneity of the population making it difficult to generalize the findings to other populations of students. Among low income families, as suggested by social inequalities and educational attainment theories, parents “are less powerful in participating in questions of education affecting their children’s academic success. . . especially the relationship between educational attainment if children follow an academic track unfamiliar to them” (p. 6).

Developing relationships begins with building community within schools and classrooms. Teachers must work to build a community of learners in classroom where students work collaboratively and learn from each other. “Teachers should effectively scaffold student learning by assessing and drawing on previous knowledge” (Low & Golden, 2014, p. 182). Intervening for struggling learners to retain them in schools and support their completion will require culturally responsive interventions.
Culturally Responsive Interventions

Concern about high school graduation and education has been a part of educational conversations for years; however, there have been few studies focusing on this issue. The U.S. General Accounting Office (2002) supports more research efforts in this area (Christenson, 2004; Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2016). The majority of secondary schools want to implement interventions for their students to ensure their success. The reality is the majority of interventions are based on the school’s ability to offer the intervention rather than on the needs of the student (Maier et al., 2016). Schools develop and implement a myriad of interventions, but most are developed based on the current structure of the school. These interventions are designed to meet the school’s need to help students rather than on how to successfully meet each student’s needs.

Educators must intervene as soon as a student begins to struggle in order to support their personal and academic growth, which requires understanding the cultural background of students and making sure these are considered in school interventions. Ladson-Billings (2016) explained the importance of culture:

This incorporation of students’ culture—both historical and contemporary—requires an active and engaged learning environment. Urban public students want to do science and art and music, not merely read about these things. And being able to do these things is what will make them successful in a post-secondary educational setting. (pp. xv- xvi)

Current interventions at the secondary level often do not consider the cultural background of students; instead, many are similar to a doctor prescribing medication before identifying what a patient needs. Peters (2006) stated it best:

[It makes very little sense to continue with a goal of covering page after page, chapter after chapter, of material while the children are failing to understand the
material covered. I empathize with teachers who are in an impossible bind: doing and
trying everything possible but still coming up short. (p. 1)

This type of practice is a constant in a majority of secondary schools. Teachers plow through
textbooks and worksheets teaching new objectives every day with little concern for students’
interests or cultural backgrounds. Interventions are often explored and examined separately
from conversations about what students want from schools, excluding opportunities for their
authentic voices to be heard. Levin (2000) noted:

Virtually all school reform is planned and implemented by adults. By talking with and
listening to students, we can learn more about how classroom and school processes
can be made more powerful, and how improvement can be fostered, whether or not
students are committed to a particular reform. (p. 158)

Students are not the only ones who feel isolated; teachers have the same feeling as they work
in their classroom with students. They are able to close their door and live in their own
worlds.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Response to Intervention (RTI) are both federal
legislation that have been introduced in the last 10 years (Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012), along
with, more recently, the Every Student Succeeds Success Act (ESSA). In NCLB, various
demands were placed on schools, including a focus on high school completion in four years.
The NCLB rates a five-year high school diploma lower than a four-year diploma
(Christenson, 2004), which affects how states are evaluated. RTI was designed to assist
schools in meeting the demands of NCLB and to create schools that were proactive to student
needs. The work produced by RTI is designed for teachers to collaborate and work together
in order to ensure every student is successful (Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, 2009). Every
Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was reauthorized from No Child Left Behind (2001) with
attention to increasing student achievement and higher school accountability (U.S.
Department of Education, 2015). The legislation reauthorized the 50-year-old Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) put in place to ensure equal opportunities for all students, including economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, and English language learners. ESSA reduced the roles of federal and state government in education policy and gave flexibility to state and local governments to provide interventions that are best for children but maintained previously mentioned protections for specific groups of students.

Whatever interventions teachers use with struggling students, they must consider the personal cultures of students, their background interests, as well as their voices in order to be successful. Educators often assume that culture consists of merely the race and ethnicity of students. Gay (2010) defined culture as “referring to a dynamic system of social values, cognitive codes, behavioral standards, worldviews, and beliefs used to give order and meaning to our own lives as well as the lives of others” (p. 9). However, most teachers believe that teaching is devoid of culture and good teaching is simply good teaching. The diversity of students in schools calls for culturally-mediated instruction. Bowens and Warren (2016) conducted a study focused on secondary students in an urban school engaged in a summer learning program. The students engaged in a math program designed to support students of color and low-income students in urban communities in California. The key characteristics of the study were the students were engaged in real life problem solving, using hands on manipulatives, collaborative learning experiences, classroom community building and discussions consisting of mathematics language. The results of the study found low-income and students of color were able to test at the expected state level of attainment because of the characteristics of the program (Bowens & Warren, 2016).
**Design and Methods**

The descriptive collective case study took place in two different secondary schools in the Midwest and was focused on students who had not or did not successfully complete high school with their cohorts. The participants were identified with the assistance of the school personnel who work with students who did not graduate with their cohort. The study identified students who did not graduate with their cohort and demographically reflected the school’s population of students who do not graduate with their cohorts. Focusing on the population of students who do not graduate with their cohorts allowed me to gain an understanding of their experiences. By conducting case study research, the sample size was small, but working with two different sites helped to create a group of participants with varied socio-cultural backgrounds. The descriptive collective case study was designed to examine multiple cases with the ability to validate the research (Yin, 2014). Representing the socio-economic status and diversity of the sites was a critical part of the study (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2013).

In order to identify the participants, I relied on the schools’ administration and teaching staff (see Appendices A and B). I defined boundaries to ensure the collection of data from the correct participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Miles et al., 2013). The process I followed to identify the students was purposeful criterion selection. Yin (2014) recommended replacing the word sampling with selection; although some authors differ on this recommendation this study used selection rather than sampling. Maxwell (2005) stated there are four reasons to use purposeful selection: guarantee the “representativeness or typicality of the setting”; develop a sample size that exhibits heterogeneity; “deliberately examine cases that are critical for the theories that you began to study”; and “establish
particular comparisons to illuminate what is going on in a way that representative cases cannot” (pp. 89–90). Yin (2011) defined the selection of participants in the following manner: “The selection of participants or sources of data to be used in a study, based on their anticipated richness and relevance of information in relation to the study’s research questions” (p. 311).

Purposeful case selections provided in-depth opportunities that quantitative study does not. By using purposeful selection, I was able to identify information that was rich and would lead to changes in practices in secondary schools (Yin, 2011). The study was focused on improving educational practices and creating change.

Participants were adults (18 years old) who were in high school but were not going to earn their high school diploma in May with their cohorts. The students returned for a fifth year of high school or at this point in their high school careers knew they were not going to graduate with their cohort. Participants were also identified if they were going to complete high school through one of two alternative methods. The first was the State Options Diploma by completing the HiSET exam through the state. This diploma option allows students who are not able to earn enough credits to graduate with their cohort to earn a diploma (State Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, n.d., Options Program). This alternative diploma option does limit graduates in their ability to continue their education and enlist in the military. My personal interactions with the United States Army and the United States Marine Corps indicate they do not accept the State Options Diploma as an adequate achievement to enter their branch of the military.

Another option was to enroll in the school district’s High School Alternative Program or HSAP. The program was part of the school district, and students remained part of the
district but went to school for three hours instead of the usual seven hours per day. Students also interacted with three to four educators and were in classes of approximately 20 students. This program allows students to earn credits through an online learning platform. The challenge with this program was students earned a “P” (Pass) for each of the classes for which they showed mastery of the key concepts. This is a good way for students to earn credits quickly, but the “P” grade transcribes as a D or 1.0 out of 4.0 toward their grade point average. Students who engage and graduate from this program have grade point averages below 2.0, and their last semester or more on their transcripts show classes with grades of P instead of a traditional letter grade. Additionally, while the program is staffed by the school district and students remain with their high school, they earn a diploma from another school. Neither State Options or the High School Alternative Program allow students to enroll in four-year universities or in the military. While they are options for students to earn their diploma, students who graduate through either of these programs have limited options once they have completed high school. This is a significant deficit for those who earn this diploma rather than progressing through the traditional high school program.

Criterion selection was applicable because I identified students who would not graduate through earning enough credits with their cohort and who represented the school’s non-graduates’ demographics. By identifying participants who represented the school, I gained knowledge from a variety of backgrounds and experiences. This was vital because I wanted to represent the sites as effectively as possible (Creswell, 2013). During the study, I took the reader into the time and place of the participant (Patton, 2015). I have never experienced what the participants have undergone, but my goal was to allow readers to understand the struggles students have in gaining the number of units to graduate from high
school. Participants provided information that allowed for deep learning, and I was able to understand why students are not successful.

During my research, I implemented an approach that incorporated documents, interviews, and observations to ensure crystallization. Crystallization is ideal and required extensive work for the researcher to have the most effective data. A variety of methodological research enriches the knowledge that is gained by the researcher (Ellingson, 2009). Crystallization may not provide different results, but it validates the research being conducted (Patton, 2015). As the researcher, I must gain a true understanding of what the participants are experiencing because if I do not understand, then I will not be able to properly represent their opinions.

Documents were a primary resource for data collection and analysis. Personal documents are valuable and reliable sources of data and provide information about the participants’ experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The documents provided by and developed by schools are primary pieces of information the school uses to determine if a student will graduate. The documents I analyzed were transcripts and progress reports from students’ high school career. Information I obtained from these documents provided insight about what the participants received as feedback during their high school career. The documents also allowed me the opportunity to see what types of comments were put on the progress reports by teachers.

Another primary data source was the semi-structured interviews with the participants. The interviews allowed me the best opportunity to gain from the participants’ personal experience (Patton, 2015). The interview opened up the opportunity to hear from the participants and gain an understanding of their emotions, feelings, beliefs, and thoughts. The
interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis once trust had been established between the researcher and participant. The interviews were semi-structured in nature because several topics needed to be addressed during each interview. A semi-structured interview provides a protocol while creating the opportunity to build on the responses of the participants. This created the opportunity to go deeper into responses provided by the participants. By having a semi-structured interview, I was able to respond to participants’ responses (Merriam, 2009).

The third data source was observing the students in their classes in the school. Observations are a key component because they provide the researcher the opportunity to draw inferences about the participants (Maxwell, 2005). Observations were possible because the students remained engaged in an alternative program or had returned to school for a fifth year of school. Information was obtained during observations that may not have been gathered while conducting interviews. During these observations, I was non-participatory because I wanted to observe the interactions the participants had with their surroundings. Although several researchers suggested participatory research, I did not believe it was best for my study because of my role at a secondary school. The goal of my observation was to understand how the participant interacted with their natural school surroundings. The best way to accomplish this was to take the role of an onlooker (Patton, 2015).

The observations took place in the participant’s school during an hour of their school day. An observation was preceded by the document analysis and after the interview had been completed. The information obtained from the documents and interviews provided insight about the participants, and I was able to add to the insight after the observation was complete. In order to obtain quality information, I followed Patton’s (2015) guidelines: “pay attention and see what there is to see; write descriptively and often; record discipline notes accurately;
separate detail from trivial information; use rigorous methods to ensure validity; report strengths and limitations” (pp. 260–261).

In collective case study research, all of the information for each case is gathered to support the findings for each case. All of the information gathered comprised the case record for that participant (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). After the case record is accumulated and the written report is produced, policy makers and other decision makers can review the collective data to make good decisions in the future (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015).

Once the case record was collected for each of the participants, the data were then analyzed. To begin, I made sure I was familiar with the information (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003). Then I began coding the data based on what the observations, interviews, and documents showed. As a researcher I was open-minded while coding and did not try to pre-determine the codes identified. Codes and themes emerged from the data rather than identified before the data was analyzed (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003). After the initial coding was completed, the information was organized into interpretive codes and then into themes. Interpretive codes are important pieces of information and were developed based on the descriptive codes. As interpretive codes emerged from the analysis of the documents, interview scripts, and observation notes, themes were identified; this process is known as within-case analysis (Stake, 2006).

Themes were identified for the documents, interviews, and observations. After each was completed individually, they were compared through cross case analysis to identify common themes that occurred in all of them (Khan & VanWynsberghe, 2008). Once the themes are compared and analyzed, the findings were interpreted. Participants must know their voices were heard and the information presented from their cases was accurately
represented in the findings (Patton, 2015). The readers of the study needed to understand the experiences of students who do not graduate from high school with their cohort.

**Significance of the Study**

Secondary school educators and community stakeholders will be interested in the study because it was designed to identify weaknesses in current practices in secondary schools. The study was designed to impact society as a whole and make a difference for every student who struggles during their high school experience. In this study, students were given a voice and were able to provide specific feedback to practitioners for reforming comprehensive high schools. The benefits of graduating are significant to the entire community. A graduate has a greater earning and spending potential and is more likely to make a positive difference in the community (Harlow, 2003). Because of this focus, secondary school leaders and educators will benefit the most. Learning from firsthand accounts allows educators to reflect on their personal interactions with students, as well as look systematically at their current practices.

Designing and implementing plans based on specific student needs was ideal to ensure students graduate with their cohort. Schools have schedules and interventions which are based on what the school can provide rather than on the needs of the student (Buffum et al., 2009). Changing to a practice based on the students’ needs is designed to engage teachers in a collaborative process of working together to ensure all students graduate with their cohort after four years of high school. Collaboration is designed for teachers to work together to have focused conversations about the curriculum they are teaching, the student learning taking place, and how to meet the needs of every student (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Collaboration by teachers also creates ownership in their work, and teachers learn best from
each other (Fullan, 2016). Schools must provide time for teachers to work collaboratively in order to meet the needs of students (Muhammed & Cruz, 2019).

The literature reviewed for this study focused on the historical development of comprehensive high schools, organizational structures and experiences of students, relationships, and culturally relevant interventions. For the most part, successful interventions and systematic approaches at the secondary level are not consistently tracked. I believe every school must develop their own plan, but it is imperative for plans to consider the cultural backgrounds of students and for schools to work to involve the voices of students (Cook-Sather, 2006; Mitra & Gross, 2009). The study provides examples of successful interventions and demonstrates the importance of relationships. The impact of supporting students to complete high school will be felt throughout society as more productive and satisfied citizens are developed in our schools (Balfanz, 2009).
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

The graduation rate for the United States continues to be a concern. While it has increased over the last decade with a reported rate of 71% in 2001 and 79% in 2011, these figures still equate to one in five students not graduating from high school (DePaoli et al., 2018). I find these statistics alarming when we know students who do not graduate from high school have a lower earning potential and an increased chance of being involved in the criminal justice system (DePaoli et al., 2018). The current economy suffers due to poor graduation rates, and it is estimated the economy will lose over $3 trillion over the course of the lives of these non-graduates (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007). Not only will these young adults earn less money, they will be more apt to rely on social services (Thornburgh, 2006). It is vital for students to have quality high school experiences so they can be more productive members of the community.

The purpose of this descriptive collective case study was to understand the experiences of high school students who have not persisted toward graduation at two suburban high schools. I wanted to describe the meaning of the experiences of students who had not been successful in a comprehensive high school (Creswell, 2013). Secondly, the intent was to influence future practices of secondary schools and create a deeper understanding of why students are not successful in high school.

During my review of the literature, I used several search terms that led to the selection of topics, including the following: comprehensive high schools, historical development of high schools, dropping out, struggling students, high school interventions, culture, climate of high schools, social bonding, and teacher-student relationships. The
Education and Full PDF databases provided quality articles that informed the study. Ebscohost and Google Scholar offered a multitude of resources such as case studies, journal articles, and books. I searched the web for dissertations of similar studies. I found many studies that examined differences based on gender, race, and socio-economic status of high school completion rate, but very few studies have been conducted related to the experiences of struggling students. I identified 12 studies in my search that had student experiences as the primary focus with several dating back to the 1980s and 1990s.

The four topics that came to the forefront of the search were the historical development of comprehensive high schools, organizational structure/experiences in high schools, relationships, and culturally responsive interventions. The topics of interventions, relationships, organizational structure/experiences in high schools, and interventions had significant amounts of easily accessible information, and it was relatively easy to find multiple resources. The development of comprehensive high schools was much more challenging. While in-depth research on the development of comprehensive high schools existed, the challenge was identifying recent studies that have revisited their development. Also challenging was adding cultural responsiveness to interventions. I found a few studies related to Response to Intervention (RTI) for elementary and middle schools. Cultural interventions for African Americans and Latinx males and English Language Learners (ELL) are more prevalent in elementary schools, but limited studies related to culturally responsive interventions, in general, exist at the high school level. Each of these topics promoted a greater understanding of struggling high school students; however, a gap in the literature existed regarding specific culturally diverse interventions for struggling high school students.
Learning about the students’ experiences in high schools was an important part of the study for me. As I delve deeper into different aspects of the literature, I begin with the historical development of comprehensive high schools, followed by the organizational structure and experiences of students, the importance of relationships, and the development of culturally relevant interventions for struggling students, many of whom are students of color.

**Historical Development of the Comprehensive High School**

Separate from the discussion of the development of comprehensive schools in America was the development of schools for Native Americans and ex-slaves. While the focus of this section focuses in general on the development of the comprehensive high school in America, I acknowledge the disparities in the development of schooling for many of today’s citizens and the failure to desegregate our schools (Frankenberg, Chungmei, & Orfield, 2003). Schools for Native Americans began with removing children from their families and placing them in boarding schools (Adams, 1995; Takaki, 2012) as a way to assimilate them to Anglo-Saxon or white culture (Spring, 2016). While educating enslaved black people was against the law, early black schools were established in the South before the Emancipation Proclamation and Civil War in 1963 and before the Freedmen’s Bureau in 1865 (Williams, 2005: Woodson, 1933). The ex-slaves established after the Civil War “free” or “public” schools took the form of Sabbath schools—church-sponsored schools that were operated in evenings and on weekends to provide basic literacy instruction.

Racially segregated schools existed for Blacks and other people of color during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries until the “separate but equal” doctrine was contested through the courts, resulting in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision.
(Kluger, 2004; Kousser, 1980). In his visits across the country, Kozol (2005) noticed the diminished progress of desegregation:

Schools that were already deeply segregated twenty-five or thirty years ago are no less segregated now, while thousands of other schools around the country that had been integrated either voluntarily or by force of law have since been rapidly resegregating. (p. 1)

The separate system of the American education system developed with Horace Mann’s grassroots movement of common schools. These schools were free and designed to train poor and immigrant students and teach them American values (Downs, 1974; Messerli, 1972). Enslaved Black people were not afforded this form of public education until 1863 (Evans, 2012), which occurred mostly in the North with the help of religious groups such as the Quakers or with the self-help of freed blacks.

Along with enslaved Black people not receiving an education and in many states, it being against the law to educate an enslaved Black person, Native Americans were being stripped of their heritage through boarding schools (Spring, 2016). These schools were designed to assimilate Native American students into the now dominant Euro-centric culture (Brown-Rice, 2013). The schools would take Native American children away from their families at the age of 4 or 5 and strip them of all cultural identities. They were not allowed to speak their native language, possess any sacred items, or practice any traditional rituals (Brown-Rice, 2013). This was a practice that stripped children of their identity and forced them to assimilate to the new Euro-centric culture.

Within the common schools movement, the comprehensive high school was developed. This was a slow process with many aspects influencing its structure and curriculum. The education system developed over years with changes in how schools were
funded and legislation about how schools were expected to perform. The recommendations of college preparatory or career preparation continue to influence high schools today.

After the end of the Civil War, secondary schools expanded but remained small and selective (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). This education system still did not meet the needs of all school-age children. The majority of school-aged children were not educated because they could not afford the cost to attend school. For the next three decades, from the 1830s to the 1850s, the number of secondary schools continued to increase, along with the number of students enrolled, but it was a small percentage when compared to the number of students enrolled at the elementary level. As education transformed from the 1880s to the 1900s and secondary education was available to more students, not all school-aged students were taking advantage of schools. While there was an opportunity, there was not a requirement for students to continue past their elementary education. After students had completed their elementary years and had the opportunity to work, it was common for them to join the work force. During the last decade of the 1800s, more than 3 million students were eligible to attend secondary schools and finish their education, but fewer than 360,000 enrolled (Copa & Pease, 1992). At this time, most Americans still lived in rural areas.

In the early 1900s, fewer than 10% of all students pursued and finished their high school career. For years, students and families had little reason to complete high school because of their rural lifestyle. Secondary aged students were expected to work in the family farm to support the family and the small local community. During this time, there was also little financial reward to pursue secondary education because the skills needed to work in rural areas were learned on the job, and the humanities approach of schools did not have a significant benefit to rural workers (Thattai, 2006).
Shortly before 1900, the Committee on Secondary School Studies was formed and began examining the scope and influence of their task. One of the concerns was the lack of funding for public education (Raubinger, Rowe, Piper, & West, 1969). The committee, made up of college and high school educators, focused on streamlining the course offerings to match what colleges expected of incoming students. As the committee examined their role, they decided to make subcommittees to study different aspects of Latin, Greek, English, and mathematics. This committee focused mainly on preparing students to be productive citizens and discussed little vocational education. The committee streamlined their work to focus on the curricula (Copa & Pease, 1992; U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

The committee reviewed several items with support provided by Benjamin Franklin, who supported vocational education and the need for skilled workers (Thattai, 2006). The resulting recommendation was to create effective citizens for the United States, which closely matched requirements for college admittance. In 1917, the Smith-Hughes Act was passed, which in essence created the comprehensive high school and negated the proposed dual system (Wraga, 2000). The act developed vocational training in the high school. Both of these programs viewed high school as a pathway towards college education rather than focusing on the work force (Mirel, 2006).

Shortly after the passing of the Smith-Hughes Act in 1917, The Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education were developed by the Commission on Secondary Reorganization. The report focused on the teaching of seven principles that would be taught throughout several subjects: health, command of fundamental processes, worthy home membership, vocation, civic education, worthy use of leisure time, and ethical character. The overarching theme of the seven principles was democracy, and the commission believed each of the seven were
inter-related (Raubinger et al., 1969). While specialized in nature, the themes needed to be interconnected to serve the greater purpose of supporting the society. The commission believed that comprehensive high schools should serve the needs of an increased number of heterogeneous students while teaching them how to live in a democratic society (Wraga, 2000). The commission also supported teaching all subjects to students at the same depth regardless of what the student may pursue after secondary school, as long as students pursued learning (Raubinger et al., 1969). This is a concept educators have discussed for years but has not been implemented with fidelity.

Comprehensive high schools continued to change and adapt. College preparatory and vocation education were apparent much as they are today, but societal needs were the greater driving force. In the early 1920s, the Committee of Secondary School Studies did not believe a college preparatory path was best for all students and encouraged all students following the path of college preparatory education after transitioning out of high school (Copa & Pease, 1992; Reese, 2005). While the committee made a commitment to this path, it did not take long for this plan to be discarded. Specialization became a common practice, and the idea of uniting students from a variety of backgrounds in order to work in a diverse democratic society was no longer embraced (Wraga, 2000).

**Tracking and Ability Grouping of Secondary Students**

John Dewey was an influential educator at this time; he disagreed with the two-track practice and reinforced the need for a common experience for all students. Dewey set the expectation that schools should act through democratic procedures for the entire organization. The strong belief that education should be used to create and support productive citizenry was a cornerstone of the modern education movement. This practice
continued to be part of the new comprehensive high school approach (Dewey, 1922). The other big change that occurred during the 1920s was the proliferation of tracking, in which more specialized courses were offered to students (Reese, 2005).

The movement away from a common experience for all students and having students learn to work together was not a recommendation the country was committed to following, but it was the practice schools were putting into place. This was the beginning of the idea of required and elective courses. All students were required to take some courses that would enable them to specialize based on their vocational path (Copa & Pease, 1992; U.S. Department of Education, 2009). While being under the same roof, students were able to have varied experiences based on the specific courses they pursued during their secondary career. The 1920s saw an increase in the number of students pursuing at least part of their secondary education.

The Committee of Secondary School Studies examined many aspects of past and current education practices to identify the best path for education to follow in the future. The committee decided that students would be served through a college preparatory track and a vocational track and recommended that this practice continue. During this time, there was a push to increase the individualization of a student’s experience based on their strengths and interests. These would be supported through required elective courses for students to pursue (Reese, 2005). An interesting recommendation that came from the Commission of Secondary Reorganization, developed by the National Education Association to exam school reform, was the requirement for students to take four years of English and Mathematics (Mirel, 2006).
This was a challenging time in America because of the Great Depression. The Commission of Secondary Reorganization examined schools as a vehicle for societal reconstruction. At the same time, they recommended that the education of each student be driven by their individual goals. The committee did not feel it was reasonable or necessary to put the burden of societal change on the shoulders of America’s youth. The committee used a middle of the road approach and reinforced the idea that change may come through youth, but education should prepare youth for societal change (Copa & Pease, 1992).

In 1933, the Eight-Year Study identified the strengths and weaknesses of the current secondary education system. Twenty-nine secondary schools throughout the country took part in the study to examine current curricula practices and experiment with different practices. During this study, the 300 colleges and universities provided relaxed admittance requirements for the graduates of the schools so they would not be punished for experiments that ended up producing gaps (Copa & Pease, 1992). The thought behind the study was to free up the secondary schools from certain requirements and spur innovative curricular practices. The schools were able to move away from the Carnegie unit that was required by colleges and universities. The study encouraged the process of “learning by doing” and “experimentation” rather than the traditional focus on rote memorization and regurgitation of facts (Welch, 2010/2011).

The result of the Eight-Year Study found no difference in the 29 participating schools and the rest of the comprehensive secondary high schools across the nation. The study identified numerous shortcomings in secondary schools. Some of the weaknesses identified were relevance to the students, the tendency to prepare and push the most intelligent students, an inability to produce prepared citizens, provision of diplomas to students who had not
achieved a required amount of credits, failure to ignite students’ creativity or innovation capabilities, and poorly prepared graduates in English/Communication Arts. The conclusion of the Eight-Year Study was eerily similar to the findings of A Nation at Risk and concerns brought up in the No Child Left Behind Act (Angus & Mirel, 1999; Copa & Pease, 1992; Heise, 2017).

The study also came to several conclusions meant to give students more freedom and to focus on a collective commitment to improvement by all local stakeholders. Schools were encouraged to use stakeholders to answer the institutions’ most difficult questions (Copa & Pease, 1992). Recommendations also encouraged an approach that broke down traditional subject-based barriers to consider a more interdisciplinary approach (Welch, 2010/2011). The study followed the recommendations of previous groups by focusing on democracy as a unifying part of all schools. Personalization and individualization were key elements of the study’s findings with an emphasis on each student pursuing their interests. By encouraging a focus on individualization, each person would be able to identify their self-worth (Heise, 2017).

During the 1930s, America struggled through the Great Depression and the beginning of another World War. Education was seen as opportunity, but significant events were taking place throughout the world. A challenge during this time was the continued tracking of students, reinforced through psychological and aptitude tests. The results of these tests were designed and used to sort and select students (Reese, 2005). As students were sorted and selected, they were also divided into different tracks of their education path, which were designed to be based on the strengths and interests of the student; however, the majority of
the time, tracking resulted in different educational experiences for students based on their testing results and perceived aptitudes.

In 1935, the American Youth Commission was formed by the American Council on Education with the purpose of surveying the needs of students from a student perspective in the areas of home, school, leisure, work, and religion (Raubinger et al., 1969). The survey was administered to 13,000 Maryland students. The study uncovered students were not receiving the same education opportunities, were not adequately prepared for the work environment, and did not have a desire for civic responsibility (Reese, 2005). Findings indicated certain groups of students were pushed to the side and continued to be minimalized (Raubinger et al., 1969). Closely aligned to expectations for all students, this problem identified in the 1930s continues in contemporary schools.

The John Dewey Society released its Eighth Yearbook in 1946 titled *The American High School: Its Role and Opportunity* in which it addressed the role of the comprehensive high school. The book addressed several issues the group had identified as problems, including racial stereotyping and prejudices against Native Americans and students of color, particularly African American students (Wraga, 2000). The book identified school as the best place to break down stereotyping and prejudices because it was the only place where all people are brought together regardless of religion, socioeconomic status, or race. The book also insisted that segregation and specialization should be delayed as much as possible and opposed separate vocational schools. Vocation preparation was a need in all schools, but there should be some experiences all students have during their secondary school years (Reese, 2005).
The Impact of World War II and the Cold War

In the 1940s and 1950s the United States was finishing a World War and experiencing the beginning of the Cold War. Critics felt secondary education was aimless and there was a need to go back to the basics (Hutchins, 1953). There was also general concern that preparation of students was not adequate in the vocational or college preparatory path. Some educators at the time felt it would be best to educate these students through a life adjustment curriculum focused on family, having children, and leisure activities (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). While the idea of this curriculum was supported by some, with the continued escalation of the Cold War, it soon was not acceptable. In the early 1950s there were many critics of the way secondary schools were operated, and a familiar argument to change the system surfaced again.

As the push against life adjustment curriculum arose, the argument for separate vocational schools reemerged. Professor Arthur Bestor pushed for separate academic institutions and felt an all-inclusive model did not meet the needs of the country or each individual (Bestor, 1953). Another person who believed secondary schools were failing the country was Admiral Rickover, who thought America was not prepared for the scientific rigor needed to secure the defense of the country. He agreed with Professor Bestor that separate secondary schools should be developed to meet the needs of student and country (Angus & Mirel, 1999). The idea of separate schools for secondary students again came to the forefront. The same argument was made that occurred in the early 1900s, which affected how secondary schools would implement curriculum.

Another significant event occurred in the 1950s. In 1954, the Supreme Court ruled that “separate but equal” schools were unconstitutional. The court unanimously decided it
was unconstitutional for schools to be separated based on the color of student’s skin. In 1896, *Plessy v. Ferguson* had allowed states to create schools for students of color, specifically African American students, to be separate from white students. The 1954 decision, written by Chief Justice Warren, stated:

> Today education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments….It is the very foundation of good citizenship….In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available on equal terms….To separate them from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely to ever be undone. (Tanner, 1972, p. 78)

However, there was little to no oversight on this decision by the court and states to improve resources, materials, funding, and facilities for students of color. The landmark *Brown* decision in 1954 signified an end to *de jure* segregation and sent schools and communities into a sense of panic. Schools, particularly in the South, had long established separate but equal schools and did not want to change what their policies and practices had been for decades. Many schools in the South did not change and were supported by the state government. The North was segregated because of geographic location where whites and blacks had separated based on neighborhoods. There was little action taken in many states to change their current practice of separate but equal doctrine in response to the Supreme Court decision. Schools that may have been undertaking reform movements dropped them to focus on the realities created by the Supreme Court’s decision. This was a significant event in 1954, but there was another that would occur in just a few short years.

In 1957, Sputnik was launched, and the world of education changed. This launch only reinforced the idea that schools were failing, and standards had to be raised immediately in
order to keep up in the Cold War, particularly with the Soviet Union (Zhao, 2009). The launching of Sputnik created national concern about the state of our education system and worry about whether or not our students would be able to successfully compete with students from the Soviet Union in math and science. The launch also reinforced Admiral Rickover’s concern about our students not being prepared for scientific rigor (Heise, 2017).

The overarching purpose of the comprehensive high school was to produce productive citizens who could effectively function in a democratic society (Wraga, 2000). During the late 1950s, James B. Conant suggested a model that was accepted by education reformers. He championed the comprehensive high school and thought it was the best way to support secondary students; but in the comprehensive model there would be separate tracks for students. These separate tracks would allow the most intelligent to be pushed and rise to the top, while others would receive the vocational training they needed.

Conant’s model involved identifying and training the most highly intelligent through providing separate tracks for students. All students would receive some pieces of a similar education while each student would be able to specialize. With the continuation of the Cold War and the launch of Sputnik, there was a continued push away from local control of education. The fear implanted by propaganda during the Cold War and repeated attacks on secondary schools enhanced the stance that the federal government needed to take a bigger role in education. The National Defense Act was a significant step in the process with the federal government providing money for science, math, and foreign language education (Copa & Pease, 1992). At a time when education was funded fully at the state level, this step opened the door for the federal government to have a larger role in education.
With federal funding becoming part of the education process, schools continued to provide more course offerings (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). More course offerings resulted in more curriculum development and implementation at the national level, which reinforced the idea of specialization and content specific courses. The interdisciplinary model and overarching goals of education became secondary to the content or subject. Teachers would be required to become more specialized in the content they taught. They became content experts rather than student education experts. This change created a shift in teacher training and preparation programs (Wraga, 2000).

With the rise of the national development of curriculum and highly trained content specific teachers, it is no surprise that over the next decade concerns grew over the depersonalized and uncaring nature of schools. Secondary schools continued to debate whether to focus on education for most students versus providing specific content for individual students (Reese, 2005). The overall goal of producing students who would be active participants in a democratic society was challenged with the increased option of sorting and selecting students based on their course selection and career interests (Wraga, 2000). James Conant, the former President of Harvard University for two decades (Hershberg, 1995), was asked to study the current comprehensive high school status.

In 1959, Conant wrote a book titled, The American High School: A First Report to Interested Citizens. Conant (1959) explored the purpose of the comprehensive high school, describing it as a place that prepared all students for a democratic society and trained the students who wanted to marry or get a job right out of school or become an atomic scientist (Conant, 1959). The challenge of meeting both groups would require some schools to close their doors because they would not have the resources to meet the needs of every student.
Conant maintained the purpose of schools was producing productive citizens in a democratic society while supporting students who wished to start their careers immediately after high school and those who would need additional education at a college or university (Conant, 1959).

Once again reformers called for the dismantling of the comprehensive high school. In the 1960s reformers called for alternative schools to be developed. These reformers would create one system in which the most academically inclined would continue to flourish on a college preparatory path while other students would be placed into less demanding paths (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). The pattern of comprehensive versus separate path schools is a theme repeated for over 50 years at this point, with neither side being able to identify the best way to meet the needs of a growing society.

A significant move during the 1950s and 1960s was the growth and development of suburban communities. The suburban communities were more affluent than their urban counterparts and larger than their rural counterparts. As the suburban communities were growing, they were also smaller than the urban schools. This allowed them to change and adapt more quickly than the larger urban schools and the rural schools, which did not have the resources to adapt as quickly (Mirel, 2006). Education was valued in the suburban school district, and the secondary schools were early adopters of the new curriculum and practices. Many of these practices were the ones Conant suggested in the late 1950s (Wraga, 2000). The schools transformed largely with the support and backing of a group of people who valued education as a requirement for future success.

As comprehensive high schools continued to grow and develop, schools supported an increased number of elective courses. In the 1960s high schools experienced an increase in
industrial arts, world language, math, and science courses. This is without a doubt in accordance with continued concern over our ability to compete in the technological age of the Cold War. Another significant occurrence in the 1960s was the Civil Rights Movement, which caused great unease throughout the country and particularly in the South (Heise, 2007). There had been little movement in integrating schools despite the desire of President Kennedy and President Johnson (Loder-Jackson, 2015). Both presidents also pushed for change in societal action and away from poverty and racial segregation (Copa & Pease, 1992). Despite the efforts by both presidents, little progress was made, and much of the nation continued to have schools separated by white students and students of color. The content-centered reform movements triggered in previous decades were pushed against with reforms which focused on more electives and relevance to students. More elective courses were added to high schools, which continued the concern of schools becoming less personalized (Wraga, 2000).

James Conant followed up his 1959 book with one in 1967 titled The Comprehensive High School: A Second Report to Interested Citizens. This book followed his findings and thoughts on comprehensive high school in his previous book. Creating productive citizens who would effectively work together in a democratic society continued to be the purpose of the high school. Conant addressed specifically the idea of including vocational schools in the comprehensive high school and not making them separate institutions. He wanted this to be the practice because of social reasons; the concept was that all students would be together in their learning (Copa & Pease, 1992).

As Conant was pushing for a more inclusive social environment, the comprehensive high school was moving farther away from the practice. Schools continued to see growth in
elective course offerings and students engaging in more individualized classes. Students were becoming increasingly segregated, and Conant was worried about the social separation of students who were more talented. Students were creating their own social paths in the comprehensive high school (Wraga, 2000). Conant hoped in the future technology would help close the gap between students so comprehensive high schools would enable all students to meet a rigorous and high level of learning (Copa & Pease, 1992). The idea of having all students obtain a high level of education was once again brought to the forefront of practice. The challenge was the implementation of the practice.

The 1970s saw a political and financial climate that encouraged the deconstruction of the comprehensive school system (Wraga, 2000). Researchers felt it would be best for schools to change from a comprehensive model to one that offered more alternative opportunities for students. The alternative options were not more elective courses but instead separate paths of study in which some students would take one of several vocational-based paths, while others would be involved in a college preparatory path (Copa & Pease, 1992). In the findings from The Coleman Report in the late 1960s, schools were shown to have challenges of having the same opportunity and results for all of their students because schools continued to be largely segregated, and success for students was largely determined by the student’s socio-economic status and where they went to school (Coleman, 1966).

Education was under scrutiny during the 1970s, and while there was a push for more reform, the financial support to implement the changes was not available. The comprehensive high schools were restricted by a lack of finances to implement new programs while maintaining their current offerings (Wraga, 2000). Several funding recommendations came from work on school finance in the 1970s.
In 1974, the Panel on Youth of the President’s Science Advisory Committee made several recommendations about the future of high school education. The panel recommended more specialized schools that provided students not only with varied experiences but also the ability to have experiences outside of the school in museums, workplaces, internships, and even the ability to explore a series of questions that were independent from the traditional model schools had provided students (Copa & Pease, 1992).

**A Nation at Risk**

As the country moved into the 1980s, a published report caused great concern about public education, a repeated theme throughout history. The report published in 1983 was titled “A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Education Reform,” written after 18 months of study and work by members of the National Commission on Excellence in Education who were brought together by Secretary of Education T.H. Bell. The report, written as a letter to the American public, pointed out concerns and shortcomings of current public education institutions (Wraga, 2000). President Reagan took the time to meet with other politicians and educators to discuss education and found there was nothing to celebrate (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

The report, while looking at all levels of education, focused mainly on secondary education. Several shortcomings were identified and focused on what the commission felt was a diluted curriculum and educators who were not trained at the right level to effectively deliver proper lessons to students. The commission found shortcomings in areas of science and math, where teachers either did not have the background knowledge or did not have the skills for teaching to the level of rigor expected to ensure America’s dominance in the world.
At the time, Japan and South Korea were specifically noted for making significant gains in automobile and steel production (Gardner & Wagner, 1983).

The report also studied the testing results of American students compared to those of other industrialized nations and their own results from previous years. The report found that student scores on the SAT had declined for years. The report also found American students did not score as well compared to other industrialized countries and that our students were scoring at the bottom. Another major finding of the report was the expansion of remedial courses in college over what had been required in previous years (Gardner & Wagner, 1983).

Tanner (1982) also reported that schools had many challenges in the article he wrote in Education Leadership. He acknowledged challenges schools face while cautioning against splitting up schools and providing different tracks. He warned, as Dewey had done previously, about the classism that could come from separate tracks and places of study for students. By continuing the comprehensive approach, students would be interacting and socializing under one roof instead of separate schools that would be divided according to socio-economic status (Copa & Pease, 1992). The strength of the comprehensive high school was the diversity of the students who walked its halls each day (Tanner, 1982).

As the country watched, schools were asked to increase the rigor and requirements students would need to graduate and become productive citizens. This push continued throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s. High schools were asked to meet the needs of all students and ensure they were prepared for the next steps in their education. During the 1990s, Career and Technical Education (CTE) was on the rise and working with schools to support students throughout their academic studies. CTE facilities and programs were being expanded, and students began to see the value of these programs. Students were increasing
their exposure to career courses but were also able to select elective courses (Stone, Kowske, & Alfeld, 2004). The programs offered were available in comprehensive high schools and in separate facilities that were dedicated to CTE programs (Copa & Pease, 1992).

As the comprehensive high school continued to evolve, new legislation emerged that would affect how comprehensive high schools would function and meet the needs of every student. In 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) had been passed by both houses of Congress and signed into law by the President. This piece of legislation greatly impacted states and schools. The law was designed to hold schools accountable for the achievement of their students, and states were required to develop standardized exams to measure schools’ and students’ achievement (Mathis, 2003). The act was supported by both parties and was expected to be the best way to improve schools. NCLB set a high standard and expected every student to meet the standard. Each school’s results would be published and compared to those of other schools.

The original NCLB Act required all students to be proficient by 2014 in English and Math, but that has since changed as a different administration has taken over the White House and Department of Education. This change has allowed states to move toward a growth model instead of benchmarks that all students are required to meet regardless of their current level of achievement. The thought behind this was to raise the bar for all students and hold school districts accountable when the new higher standards were not met (Wiener & Hall, 2004). Increasing the rigor would also translate into graduating students being more prepared for college level courses. High schools were forced to examine their current practices to determine whether they were providing the correct support in English and Math (Mulcahy, Maccini, Wright, & Miller, 2014).
Also, during the early 2000s, schools were implementing, with support from the government and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the idea of small schools. There was a growing concern about large comprehensive high schools and whether or not they were able to support all of their students in their learning. This work also coincided with school districts breaking up their larger comprehensive high schools into learning academies focused on student career interests (Kuo, 2010).

Both of these reform movements focused on breaking the comprehensive high school into smaller learning communities with the goal of connecting students to a personalized environment. With a more personalized environment, students would increase their attendance rates and be more involved in their school. The purpose was also that students would be able to have a greater connection with their teachers. Smaller school environments are also present in college-prep style programs, whose purpose is to support students as they move into a college environment by introducing them to those environments before they go.

President Obama followed the path of the three previous presidents and continued to push for a standard curriculum in order to compete in the global market. Previous presidents had begun this process and pushed for states to use testing and accountability to ensure students were being held to the same standards. As President Obama pushed for College and Career Readiness, the majority of states finally came to consensus around the Common Core State Standards in 2010 (Mathis, 2010). The standards were developed in accordance with the National Governors Association and the Council of State School Officers. This was a significant shift for states as they adopted the new Literacy and Math standards, which were designed to require students to move beyond rote memorization and instead focus on critical thinking and problem solving.
Under President Obama, the recommendation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was adopted by Congress and replaced NCLB (Weiss & McGuinn, 2016). The new federal mandate greatly reduced the federal government’s influences on K-12 education while providing more power at the state level. Through ESSA states are required to submit accountability plans to the U.S. Department of Education for approval, and those plans must include graduation rates of high schools (“Graduation in the United States,” 2013).

High schools have continued to work to restructure and exam best practices. Cawelti (2003) surveyed 10,365 public and private schools which were regionally accredited. With a 33% response rate, he was able to identify seven indicators of restructuring that were occurring across the United States. The seven foci of restructuring were: outcome-based education, alternative assessment practices, site- or school-based management practices (SBM), block scheduling, interdisciplinary teaching, partnering with businesses and industry, and use of modems (online and distance learning). Of the approximately 3,420 respondents, the study found few schools implementing interventions focusing on their students’ and school community’s needs. The most common response, with nearly 50% of the respondents, was site-based management and shared-governance. The take-away of the study was high schools and their structure have remained largely intact with innovation occurring in small parts within the school but largely remaining the same.

Summary

There have been a number of significant changes in high schools over the last 150 years. Each change was driven by a plan for improvement and ideas to change the shortcomings of whatever system was in place. Early on there was a significant amount of discussion and concern about whether or not a comprehensive high school was the correct
model to follow, but the idea of separate systems worried educators. Separate schools would create separate paths for students; it was unknown whether a system with multiple paths would support all students.

Changes were also implemented in the comprehensive high school because there was concern about whether students were being properly prepared to be productive citizens and academic scholars. Educators in universities and colleges were worried the comprehensive high school was watering down the curriculum and not properly holding students to a high enough level to be prepared for their pursuit of higher-level studies. Conant (1959) in particular was worried about the separation of students and how it might expand the current practices of classism throughout the country. The back and forth between the nature of comprehensive high school separation will continue. If there is one thing that is certain in education, it is that change is constant.

As high schools developed, many changes took place. Significant research was developed about how students should collaborate and work together. Schools examined the best way to intervene with students who were struggling and how best to structure the school day for students. More recently there has been significant research about how best to structure school start times for young adults in high school.

**Organizational Structure/Experiences in High Schools**

When developing different topics for this study, I explored school structures to determine how they worked to either help or inhibit students (Stewart, 2007). The organizational structures of a school include: (a) “how tasks are assigned and performed; (b) the use of time and space; (c) the acquisition and allocation of equipment, supplies, and other resources; and (d) all of the routine operating procedures of the school” (Leithwood &
Riehl, 2003, p. 5). How school leaders monitor and implement these structures affects the climate and culture of the school, which, in turn affect students’ experiences (Freiberg & Stein, 1999, Gage et al., 2016). Schools must focus on their culture and structure in order to help and support students. Students must feel safe to learn, and structures must be in place to support all students.

One of the most important aspects of school culture and climate is its feeling of safety. Students must feel safe in order to engage fully in their learning (Pain, 2006). As students come into the school, they must feel a sense of belonging and safety before they can begin to engage in learning. If students do not feel safe, they are not able to interact with their teacher and other students.

The school’s culture is what the members of the school community believe and agree to do, as well as how individuals treat each other. One of the primary elements of culture is having a clear set of behavioral expectations, which must be clearly communicated and enforced (DePorter & Reardon, 2013). With clear expectations set for all members of the school community, the school can have a safe and effective environment for learning. Students, parents, and staff members understand what is expected behaviorally and know there are consequences when these expectations are not met.

**Collaborative Learning Structures for Teachers**

Another necessary step when creating an effective school culture is developing an environment that provides teachers time to collaborate professionally with a focus on student learning and meeting the social and emotional needs of students. School culture can be a challenge for any comprehensive high school. There are cultures designed to buffer teachers from the local board of education and other central office administrators; there are also
cultures in which instruction is not monitored. Effective school cultures work to monitor and inform instructional practices (Schmoker, 2013). Some school cultures have teachers working in isolation and not working with each other. The culture of collaboration between teachers creates an environment and culture focused on student results and achievement (DuFour et al., 2010). Teachers must prioritize examining how students are learning and the results they are obtaining.

This task is a change in practice for schools. While several schools provide time for teachers to collaborate, schools do not always require a focus on student achievement and growth (DuFour et al., 2010). Too many times teachers work in isolation. This is not necessarily the fault of teachers, because this was encouraged while teachers were in college (Fullan, 2016). Rosenholtz (1989) found that teachers who were committed to collaborating and lesson planning found a positive correlation between their commitment and student achievement. Creating a culture and environment where teachers work interdependently supports student learning at multiple levels because they collaborate and focus on achievement and social support of students (DuFour et al., 2010).

Muhammad and Cruz (2019) described the transformation of culture based on four skills leaders need: strong communication, the ability to build trust, the ability to increase the skills of those they lead, and results orientation. This work initially began with the earlier work of DuFour and Eaker (1998) in Professional Learning Communities at Work, and they continued to expand their practices for years. Elements of the work was focused on what students are learning and how the system can ensure all students learn at high levels. A second element was educators must not work in isolation but work collaboratively to address aspects of student learning. There must be time set aside for educators to meet and discuss
best practices. Another part of their work is the focus on results. Educators must implement a guaranteed viable curriculum and equally as important, look at the mastery level of the concepts as evidence. Once the data are gathered and analyzed, the educators can create a system to intervene to ensure all students have mastered major concepts (DuFour, 2004).

For years, the belief was teachers were trusted to learn, study, and implement new practices on their own, but the reality is teachers were not encouraged by administrators to implement new practices (Schmoker, 2013). Administrators stifled innovation and fell into a comfort level of status quo. The lack of encouragement by administrators encouraged teachers to become stagnant and not grow or try new practices. By working in isolation and not taking advantage of experiences and practices of colleagues, teachers were left to do the best they could. Schools performing well on state and local assessments were less likely to look for practices to change.

The practice of allowing teachers to be isolated becomes a part of the school culture, and new teachers will learn isolation (Owens & Valesky, 2011). Without support, constructive feedback, and critique, a teacher is assured to become mediocre in their practice (Schmoker, 2013). This is not a fault of the teacher but a fault of the administrators in the building; administrators must engage with the teachers in identifying best practices to ensure a high level of instruction. Administrators and teachers must work collaboratively to create sustainable change (Schmoker, 2013). Unless teachers are focusing on best practices and are connected with their students, students are not fully supported in their learning.

In order to create an effective culture, the teachers and administrators must implement an environment where teachers collaborate and focus on student outcomes. The purpose of the collaboration is for teachers to identify the primary learning outcomes of the year, then
assess whether or not students have mastered these outcomes, and additionally identify opportunities to enrich the learning outcomes or intervene when students have not mastered the concepts (DuFour et al., 2010; DuFour & Eaker, 1998). During collaboration teachers should look at student data from formative and summative assessments to look at how students are mastering concepts and also assess how they are performing as teachers. The collaborative process allows teachers to learn from each other and share best practices. Teachers are expected and coached on how to collaborate with their colleagues and reflect on the progress of their students (Muhammed & Cruz, 2019).

To dig deeper into the professional learning community process, all professionals in the building must focus on learning for all students. DuFour et al. (2010) has educators use the following four questions as the guide:

1. What knowledge and skills should every student acquire as a result of this unit of instruction?
2. How will we know when each student has acquired the essential knowledge and skills?
3. How will we respond when some students do not learn?
4. How will we extend and enrich the learning for students who are already proficient? (p. 28)

Using these questions as a guide keeps the focus on implementing the agreed upon curriculum, student learning, and what steps to take to support students who are struggling. The questions focus on what the student is learning rather than what the student is doing.

Teachers must also know they have relevant data in order to inform their practices and instruction. Schools are data rich but information poor because teachers do not know
how to use the data or are overwhelmed with the amount of data to sift through. As teachers work as a collaborative team, they must develop common formative assessments based on a viable curriculum (DuFour et al., 2010). The common assessments can then be used to know where students are having difficulties, and teachers can develop a plan to ensure mastery of crucial concepts. Leaders and teachers must work together to focus on the results from the common formative assessments developed by the teachers (Muhammed & Cruz, 2019).

Common assessments also lead to conversations between teaching teams about best practices. While working together, teachers can review the results and find gaps in where one class may have performed when compared to another, which leads to conversations about instructional practices (Muhammed & Cruz, 2019). Common assessments must be based on the agreed upon learning objectives, with each member of the team having a clear understanding of how the objectives will be assessed at the end of the unit. When colleagues share best practices, they will collectively develop the best plans for all students to be successful and take ownership in all students mastering concepts.

**Monitoring Learning**

As the curriculum is developed, the school must put in place procedures to monitor its implementation. While districts spend a significant amount of time and energy developing the curriculum to match state assessments, they rarely put in place structures to monitor implementation (DuFour, 2004). Educators must actively work together to not only discuss results but also to ensure the curriculum is implemented at a high level. Teachers must commit to instructing at a high level while the leaders oversee and give effective feedback to the teachers. After curriculum is developed, teachers must have time to discuss changes and
plan with the end in mind. An integral part of the process is having the teachers who will be implementing the curriculum also participating in the development (Marzano, 2003).

In order to create a culture focused on student achievement, teachers must have the ability to collaborate while being focused on student achievement. Teachers must have collaborative time dedicated each week uninterrupted by faculty meetings or other managerial tasks. Building leaders must be committed to providing teachers the dedicated time every week. This time will create a culture focused on student achievement and mastery of learning objectives (DuFour et al., 2010).

Building leaders should provide the time and also the structure the teachers’ need for institutionalizing these practices. Having teachers record turn in notes each week establishes best practices. Teachers need to define student learning goals at the beginning of each year. When they collaborate, teachers must be focused on the accomplishment of the goals. At the end of each year the teacher group should reflect on their gains and report on what they accomplished. During the meetings, the teachers must develop a common set of practices, so the meeting is focused. Teachers must develop these norms to keep the meetings working toward student achievement and keeping the conversation open and honest.

**Structuring Times and Schedules for Optimal Learning**

As teachers have open conversations about how students learn, schools must also study research about how adolescents’ function and what has been learned from brain research. Secondary schools have traditionally started earlier in the day, with elementary schools on a later schedule. Recently there have been studies that contradict this practice. Secondary schools throughout the country open their doors about 8:00 a.m. and finish school around 3:00 p.m. Between these times, students could be asked to engage in a variety of
schedules. The most common schedule is a seven-period day in which students have class for approximately 50 minutes. Schools have implemented everything from an 8-block A/B day to a block schedule with one 50-minute lunch shift for nearly 2,000 students (Goodman, 2007). Other schools have followed college models and have switched to trimesters with a built-in 30-minute window for student tutoring and teacher collaboration (Brower, 2000).

Schools have adjusted schedules various ways to try to meet student needs. An essential element of any schedule change is including the two groups who will be impacted the most, teachers and students. In the Brower study (2000), the schools sent invitations and sought to gain input from stakeholders to so that they were involved in the decision-making process. Engaging the community created buy-in for stakeholders. The school also created open lines of communication, which encouraged two-way communication and built trust with the community. This continues to reinforce a strong relationship between the school and local community. As districts work with local communities, they need to hold open discussions to consider possible impacts to schedules.

Several school districts are studying secondary school start times based on adolescent sleep time research. Several researchers are finding the benefits of later start times that accommodate teenagers’ natural clock. Current research shows that teenagers need a minimum of eight hours of sleep at night and would benefit more from nine hours of sleep a night. Lamberg (2009) used Carskadon et al.’s (1980) research when writing about the release of chemicals in the young adult brain:

Melatonin secretion, which starts about 9:30 p.m. in prepubescents, begins at roughly 10:30 p.m. in adolescents, Carskadon found. Melatonin serves as a marker of circadian time. While it does not induce sleep, it signals readiness to sleep. Its onset typically precedes bedtime by about an hour, so many teenagers are not physiologically ready to sleep until 11:30 p.m. or later. (p. 2201)
This research contradicts the current practices at the majority of high schools with start times at 8:00 a.m. or before. In the past ten years, more than 80 high schools have changed their start times to fit with the research (Watson et al., 2017). The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends high schools have a start time no earlier than 8:30. At the end of the 2012 school year, only two states (Alaska and North Dakota) reported at least 75% of the high schools began after 8:30, with the average start time only slightly later than 8:30 (Wheaton, Ferro, & Croft, 2015). High school-aged students sleep less than eight hours on average, and this impacts their ability to stay awake and engaged during the school day. The lack of sleep also impacts teachers. Teachers have difficulty keeping students engaged, regardless of their ability, because students are at school without adequate sleep (Graham, 2000).

Another factor for high school students is their ability to be cognitively engaged and attentive during the school day. Only two out of three high school students currently get the recommended 8.5 to 9.5 hours of sleep per night (Kennedy, 2015). A startling statistic is 28% of students reported falling to sleep at least once a week while attending school. One in five students reported falling asleep while studying and doing homework (Owens, 2014). This impacts students twice, because students are less cognitively engaged in school, and they also find themselves struggling to stay awake while doing their homework. Delaying the start time for students would allow for optimal alertness and provide students the ability to gain sufficient sleep (Watson et al., 2017).

A common concern which comes from moving start times later is the idea students will simply go to sleep at a later time because they can wake up later. This should certainly
be a concern as schools consider when to begin the school day, but research should be used in the decision making. A study conducted by the National Sleep Foundation found that six in ten students received less than eight hours of sleep per school night (Lamberg, 2009). Another study showed the benefit of a later start in Colorado, Wyoming, and Minnesota; the percentage of students meeting the eight hours of sleep suggested increased from 33% of the students to 66% (Owens, 2014). The significant gain in what researchers consider a minimum amount of eight hours of sleep per night should be a driving force when districts make decisions about high school start times.

While the shift fits the sleep cycle of teens, it also impacts other activities which occur before and after school. Extra-curricular activities are affected because their practice and activity times move to later in the day. While this is a consideration for schools, it should not be a determining factor because it is essential to try to make decisions for the majority of students. While school districts engage in the conversation with their local communities, extracurricular activities may come to the forefront; however, it should not become a determining factor when districts decide to move to later start times. Districts that have chosen to move their high school start times have not chosen to revert back to the earlier start time. This shows the extra-curricular activities have been able to adjust to the later start time (Lamberg, 2009).

**Maturation Changes among Adolescents**

High schools must consider the transition between middle school and high school and how students are able to adapt to the new learning structures and environment. McBrady and Williamson (2010) found as few as 68% of ninth grade students nationwide finished high school. Because a high school diploma increases earning potential, a successful ninth grade
transition is needed. Success in ninth grade not only assists in obtaining a high school diploma but also opens doors for post-secondary opportunity (Allensworth & Easton, 2007).

The changes occurring during ninth grade are more than moving into a larger school with more students and opportunities; there are significant physical, social, and emotional changes. Many students are able to transition successfully, but others struggle (Craig & Baucum, 2002). High school students have also experienced an increase in stress as they continue through their careers. Students, particularly ninth grade students, need additional support and structures to help them transition through the changes. Supporting ninth graders during their transition is essential to their success (McBrady & Williamson, 2010).

Part of supporting students during their transition to high school is understanding and acknowledging the importance of relationships. Students need these connections at all grade levels, and when students are moving through adolescence, they need supportive and caring relationships in high school with adults as well as with their peers.

**Relationships**

This section discusses relationships as indicators of how a student performs in high school. The relationships built at the secondary level can take on many forms. A study by Guest and Schneider (2003) found students perform better in school when they are involved in an extra-curricular activity. The relationship built between the sponsors and student participants of these clubs, activities, and athletic teams creates an environment where students build relationships with students and adults outside of the classroom.

Guest and Schneider (2003) found students who participate in extracurricular activities have higher educational expectations and achievement. There was a difference depending on the socio-economic status of high school communities. The school
The study surveyed high school students about their academic achievement and expectations of academic achievement. Students in both communities were asked to identify the type of extracurricular activity they were involved in—whether in athletics or in a non-athletic activity. The survey results showed students who were at low socio-economic high schools had higher achievement and educational expectations if they participated in athletics over non-athletic activities. These results were the opposite for students who attend high school in a wealthy community. At higher socio-economic high schools, there was a greater association of high expectational outcomes and achievement for non-sport extra-curricular participants. Both non-sport extra-curricular activities and sports did raise educational expectations and achievement in higher socio-economic schools. The activities also created a relationship with the school and a feeling of belonging to the school, which also increases student achievement (Johnson et al., 2001). Each of these relationships can result in students being successful at the secondary level.

**Relationships with Peers**

Another part of school success is the relationship students have with peers (Nichols & White, 2001). There are times when individual students reflect the peer group with which they are associated. The closer they are with that particular group, the more reflective they are (Goldsmith, 2004). Students who associate with peers who have high motivation or good study habits will be more successful in school. Students who work with students who take their academic progress seriously will have a higher completion rate at the high school level. Being connected positively correlates to students finishing high school with their peers and
walking across the stage at the end of their senior year (Mikami, Gregory, Allen, Pianta, & Lun, 2011).

Students feel the need to be socially accepted at the high school level and use clues to identify social norms and what is accepted. As students define their peer groups, the norms for the group becomes clear. Students strive to be accepted, and they are concerned with being part of their peer group. As student define their peer groups, they tend to define goals that reflect those of their peers. This differs from adults, who tend to define goals based on mastery. Adult goals also do not require acceptance from their peers because they are more internally driven, while adolescents tend to work for external acceptance (Wiseman, 2012). Students raise their achievement level to conform with high achieving peers (Goldsmith, 2004).

A student who associates with a peer group that is less likely to engage fully in the educational process will be less successful in school. Peer pressure can work negatively for students who are high achieving but associate with a low achieving peer group (Nichols & White, 2001; Shernoff et al., 2016). Students tend to conform to their peers by matching the values, attitudes, and behaviors of their group. As students work with the larger culture in smaller peer groups, they will reflect the smaller group (Goldsmith, 2004).

**Parental Relationships**

There is a correlation between student success and parent involvement and the environment in which the student is raised. There is a growing body of research that states that parent involvement is essential for the success of students (Stewart, 2007). Froiland (2011) found conflicting results when he examined parent involvement and student achievement. At an early age, students who had environments where numerous books were
available and parents interacted and monitored their progress achieved at high levels. Students who did not have as much support were not as successful. As students reached adolescence, parents who monitored their student’s grades and checked their homework had a neutral result or negatively impacted their student’s achievements. This is not the logical result from parents being more involved; most would predict that more involvement would create higher levels of achievement, but it can reduce intrinsic motivation. Students who have involved parents may push against the constant oversight of their parents (Froiland & Oros, 2013).

Parental involvement in different types of school activities such as open houses and parent-teacher conferences is shown to increase student achievement (Stewart, 2007). Parents who hold their students to high standards and expect more from their students will have students who perform better in the classroom (Froiland & Davison, 2013). Parents must monitor performance in the classroom and have consistent contact with teachers, so they know how their child is progressing (Jeynes, 2003). This type of connection reinforces to the secondary student the continued importance of their education performance, and therefore students perform better (Stewart, 2007).

Traditionally, parent involvement and interaction with the school reduces as students grow older and move from elementary to middle school to high school (Froiland & Davison, 2013). Parent expectations and the parent-school relationship is important for all stakeholders to understand because it has an influence on student success. A caring relationship will influence the student positively (Jeynes, 2010). Parent expectations can also support students to overcome other barriers that are challenges to education. Students who have parents with high expectations and are supportive can help reduce the impact that poverty and single-
family household can cause. In 2015, Nunez, Suarez, Rosario, Vallejo, Valle, and Epstein conducted a study on the relationship of parent involvement in homework, student homework behaviors, and student achievement. The study found there is a strong correlation between parent involvement in homework practices and student achievement. The most interesting part of the findings is the correlation was greater for high school and junior high students than it was for elementary students (Nunez et al., 2015). Parent expectation and involvement shows students that the school and family are working together to support them (Froiland & Davison, 2013). While parent involvement with middle and high school aged students can be counterproductive, Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, and Pastorelli (2001) found that parent expectations at this age can positively impact student achievement.

Parents who are welcomed into the school environment and have good relationships with teachers create an environment of support for students (Jeynes, 2010). The relationship and responsiveness of teachers to parents helps offset reading gaps and behavior of students, leading to students having higher achievement in the classroom. Having a trusting relationship between parents and staff members is also an aspect of the school-parent relationship. This is built through open communication and students knowing the school and parents are in a codependent relationship with student achievement as a goal. Parents entering into a welcoming environment and being supported by teachers positively impacts student achievement (Froiland & Davison, 2013).

Expectations of parents and other adults can help offset poor peer relationships and have a positive impact on students completing high school. Switching schools can be a challenge for students because students will come into a new school where social groups are already defined from the students’ previous experiences with each other. When students are
mobile at the high school level, they are entering an environment where the focus is on teachers providing academic content, and the development of caring peer or teacher relationships is second to the student learning (Mikami et al., 2011). Good relationships with parents and other adults in the community can help offset poor relationships within the school. Students need support in order to be successful academically (Gasper, DeLuca, & Estacion, 2012).

As parent involvement decreases as students get older, students’ motivation for learning also decreases. This is a challenge faced by secondary teachers, and little support is provided in teaching programs. Teachers who work in secondary classrooms must show students they care about them and create a caring relationship. A strong relationship supports students learning and shows positive results on academic tests. This is done through methodologies and activities that interest the students and engage them in the learning process (Wiseman, 2012). This is not an easy task and can be a challenge for high school teachers, especially when much of their bachelor’s work was focused on content.

**Educator and Student Relationships**

The perception of what motivates students differs between students and teachers as well. Wiseman (2012) found teachers felt students liking them and having a caring relationship was the highest factor in student achievement, but students felt much differently. The relationship with the adult is important, but it is also important for the student to know what they were doing was going to make a difference in their lives in the future. Students also wanted to see themselves improve and know the work they were doing was improving (Wiseman, 2012). The data obtained in this study supported the need for students to have support from the teacher during their academic work (Gasper et al., 2012).
As teachers look to motivate students, they use intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Students have natural curiosities about some topics and items being discussed. If students have a natural curiosity about a subject, the teacher can grab their attention quickly and involve them from the beginning in the learning topic (Wiseman, 2012). We must also recognize that students come to class with prior knowledge that helps students engage in the knowledge initially, but we must have students use new knowledge conceptually if they are going to apply it outside of school (Noguera, Darling-Hammond, & Friedlaender, 2015). Using new knowledge conceptually helps engage students through the content and creates a greater opportunity for students to raise their academic achievement (Shernoff et al., 2016).

The challenge comes when students may not have curiosity about a learning concept being taught. Teachers can engage students in this type of learning by connecting to more relevant topics and technology that students experience each day. Technology places a tremendous amount of information at students’ fingertips and gives them a tool to express their creativity. Using social networks, YouTube, and other more relevant technology allows students to engage with concepts with the tools they use every day.

Extrinsic motivation also supports students as they learn because students need encouragement and support. Wiseman (2012) found students want to know they are improving as they continue to work on different topics and concepts. The study also suggested using external motivation carefully. A meta-analysis used in the report found extrinsic motivation does not always mean students learn at a higher level when engaging in concepts in which they are not interested. Teachers need to know their students and class dynamics when using extrinsic motivation. Over- or under-using motivation based on class dynamics can hamper the learning environment (Wiseman, 2012).
There is a significant amount of research about motivation as a factor in learning, but ensuring every student is connected with a caring relationship can positively impact motivation. Researchers have attributed success to different types of motivation, but there is a strong correlation to relationships and success in high school (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002; Quin, 2017). As students get older, their motivation tends to decrease. This type of negative correlation does not necessarily mean students’ grades decrease. Students who have caring relationships with teachers will be more successful in high school (Anderman & Gilman, 2006). A relationship with an adult in the secondary school environment assists students in attaining at higher levels during their educational career. Teachers also engage and create relationships by employing instructional practices that engage every student. This engagement moves beyond traditional practices and shows all students they are valued, and their learning is important (Mikami et al., 2011). Students must have caring relationships with adults at school, and the school must support all students by engaging them in the learning process (Quin, 2017).

Teachers who engage students in the learning process also create ways for students to positively interact with their peers. This has been a leading focus at the primary level, but there is a similar need for this at the secondary level. Supportive peer interaction leads to a better relationship with their classmates and creates a better environment for all students in the classroom to learn. The secondary classroom is traditionally an academically driven classroom where obtaining information is necessary for success (Mikami et al., 2011).

The word relationship can be defined broadly. Some teachers define their relationship with a student on the basis of how they behave and follow the expectations of the classroom and school. Relationships with these students are easier for teachers because the students
conform and navigate the school environment effectively. They do well in school because they are able to socially conform. This type of relationship is an aesthetic relationship where depth and the knowledge of the individual is not known. Some educators praise students for their ability to follow school rules and perform well academically. Students who do not follow procedures and rules as have struggled because schools traditionally prefer compliance (Shiller, 2009).

The relationship built between students and teachers can be challenging and has caused teachers to burn out. There is little structural support for teachers on how to build effective relationships with students even though the relationships are essential to student achievement levels (Wilkins, 2014). High teacher turnover negatively impacts student achievement. An environment where students and teachers build relationships, along with structures that allow these relationships to be built, encourages success for high school students (Shiller, 2009).

Dr. James Comer is a leading research in supporting black students, and particularly poor black students, to successful education outcomes. Comer (2004) discussed the need for relationships to be the key part of a student’s academic growth. He described the need for relationships to extend beyond the parents and into the community with support throughout the student’s life. This continued support creates the opportunity for the student to experience their highest level of academic development (Darling-Hammond, Cook-Harvey, Flook, Gardner, & Melnick, 2018).

**Significance of Relationships for Students**

Another type of relationship and the one referenced in this study is an authentic relationship. This type of relationship involves the teacher and students engaged in a deeper
relationship that moves beyond academic performance and adherence to school rules. This is a form of caring where the teacher wants to know about the student’s activities outside of the school and about their family and community. This relationship reaches far beyond the collegial or cordial relationships provided in an aesthetic relationship. The teacher seeks out opportunities to learn more about the student and identifies opportunities to have a reciprocal relationship (Shiller, 2009). This type of relationship also leads to teachers who are more culturally responsive in their teaching practices and therefore are able to connect the academic practices to the students (Mikami et al., 2011).

As mentioned by Mikami et al. (2011), student engagement requires teachers to encourage interacting with peers in effective ways to create a supportive classroom environment. This creates ways for students to interact with each other, the teacher, and the instructional objectives during the class period. Taking it a step further necessitates being cognizant of students’ cultural differences, realizing each student’s cultural background is unique to them. The practice and goals of teaching in a culturally responsive way are summarized by Banks (2005):

Multicultural education is at least three things: an idea or concept, an educational reform movement, and a process. Multicultural education incorporates the idea that all students – regardless of their gender and social class and their ethnic, racial, or cultural characteristics – should have an equal opportunity to learn in school. Another important idea in multicultural education is that some students, because of these characteristics, have a better chance to learn in schools as they are currently structured than do students who belong to other groups or who have different cultural characteristics. (p. 3)

In order to accomplish the goals that Banks (2005) discusses, the teacher must also understand how culture impacts learning the histories of the students. This understanding creates the ability to have a deeper relationship with students (Shiller, 2009). Understanding
students’ backgrounds allows the teacher to tie current learning to aspects of their cultures, thereby making the learning relevant for all students. At the secondary level this becomes a challenge, with some teachers having well over 100 students on their caseload (Kea & Trent, 2013).

Teachers who take the step to connect and learn about students’ histories make deeper connections with students and plan classroom lessons that connect their learning with their histories. This sometimes requires that teachers who may be alienated from the younger generation gather knowledge about their interests and backgrounds. Low and Golden (2014) call these teachers cultural outsiders, who may have limits of their own schooling. Such teaching can help students overcome the socio-economic disadvantages they experience today.

When compared with previous years, our schools have become more racially and ethnically diverse while the overall educator population has remain stable with predominantly white teachers, who are mostly female (Sleeter, 2017; Warren, 2014). Further, there are still challenges when schools look for science, mathematics and special education teachers (Ford, 2012). Schools must be purposeful in trying to hire a staff which reflects their student body. This further requires schools and teachers to work cooperatively to gain a better understanding of how to connect and relate to students who are from different backgrounds and ethnicities. Making the connection creates a better bond between the student and the teacher and allows them to bridge gaps that may have been present before the connection was made. This must be part of all schools but especially in culturally diverse schools that traditionally have a greater percentage of diverse students and a lower
relationships between different racial and ethnic groups’ cultures. Studies have found a foundation of familism within certain cultures can have a positive influence on academic achievement. In some families, a strong sense of familism will create a sense where student achievement is an expectation (Lopez, 2003). A study performed by Esparza and Sanchez (2008) found a positive correlation in achievement between a sense of familism and a mother’s education. This study reinforced the concept of the importance of a caring relationship between the student and the parents—specifically the mother. Another study found that immigrant students’ obligation to their family can have a negative correlation with achievement because of their responsibility to help with the family obligations (Tseng, 2004). These secondary students feel obligated to their family before school. For the first time students have the opportunity to assist with family bills and other financial obligations. In the district where the current study took place, there was a set of twin students who gave over half of their paychecks to their family in order to help support them. This was an expectation and required these two students to prioritize work every week. If the students missed work, the family would have had problems paying the bills. The balance between school and work was a tremendous challenge with both students planning on attending college.

**Student Voice**

Student voice is another factor that supports students having a positive relationship within their schools. Building this type of opportunity where students have the ability to share their thoughts and insights is challenging because structures, polices, and practices are not designed for students to truly be able to share about their own insights (Friend &
Caruthers, 2015). School practices are traditionally built on practices that have been held for several years, including having traditional student leadership opportunities and split honors and regular level classes. Much of the student voice is based on students who are highly involved in school activities, perform well in the classroom, and have high grade point averages. Schools are traditionally built on white European traditional views and cultures (Mikami et al., 2011). To actually make student voice a part of school growth will require a re-culturing of current practices within the organization.

A culture of student voice identifies gaps in current practices and what is best for all students. Schools traditionally focus on standardized testing and increasing students’ performance on these traditional exams. Identifying students to bring to the table is key to this type of re-culturing. Honor roll and student leadership students are traditionally invited to serve on a re-culturing student committee, but including diverse thoughts and views of struggling students will allow schools to obtain the best information in order to reevaluate current practices. The views from a diverse group of students, including ethnicity, race, class and gender, will give the staff the ability to analyze their own current practices (Friend & Caruthers, 2012).

As schools continuously refine and re-examine ways to connect with students and make meaningful relationships, they also must examine how to support students who are struggling. Schools have felt increasing pressure through different legislation, and state level standards continue to be increased. Schools have developed and implemented a variety of interventions with different levels of success. As schools continue to refine their practice, all students should receive individual personalized support that should include who they are as learners.
Culturally Responsive Interventions

As schools developed from one-room schoolhouses to comprehensive school districts, there has always been the challenge of meeting students’ needs (Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, 2012). In order to meet the needs of students, schools have employed a variety of resources and have identified areas to support students. The support provided for students at the high school level has included coaching some students out of the system, encouraging them to move into the work force. The intent of coaching a student to drop out of high school was not meant to be malicious but was a standard practice in schools. A former administrator and professor in my specialist program discussed the practice his school implemented with juniors who were not on track to graduate. The school administration would meet with students and recommend that they choose a different path than high school. The ultimate goal of any intervention should be to support the student in their learning and find ways to help them complete high school.

There have been multiple policies, regulations, and laws that require schools to support the success of all students while raising the expectations. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 was reauthorized multiple times with increasing federal requirements. This was a challenge for state education departments to meet. Amendments were also made to the Individual with Disabilities Act in 2004, which required schools to address the needs of all students. The most recent passing of Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides states direction to help them meet their accreditation requirements. Another consideration for state education agencies is being able to meet the expectations of the collaboration between the Council of Chief State School Officers and National Governors Association. This council meets to discuss and develop common practices among states without the input of the U.S.
Department of Education. Out of this work came the Common Core State Standards (Mulcahy et al., 2014).

The standards, which were adopted in some form by over 40 states, were put in place as guidelines for Literacy, English and Math curricula. The purpose of the standards was to raise the standards which our students were expected to meet while providing common practices among states. Funding by the Department of Education was partly based on whether states had adopted and were implementing the Common Core State Standards (Mathis, 2010). There were gaps in current practices and new curriculum standards which required schools to implement effective intervention strategies in order to implement the new standards while filling in learning deficits of students.

Schools want to implement interventions for their students to ensure their success. The goal is to ensure that every student learns and succeeds at the secondary level. The reality is that interventions are based on the school’s ability to offer the intervention rather than on the needs of the student. Schools develop and implement a myriad of interventions, but most are developed based on the current structure of the school (Maier et al. 2016). Many secondary schools are not able or are unwilling to base interventions on student needs, and this creates inequity because students are expected to acclimate to the school rather than the school acclimating to the student. Schools develop a variety of interventions, but they fail to analyze whether the interventions are being effective (Buffum et al., 2012).

Interventions at the high school level can be compared to people taking a reading intervention and giving it to students who cannot make word sounds. We have not done enough to identify what the student needs before applying interventions. Current
interventions taking place at the secondary level are similar to a doctor prescribing medication before identifying the needs of a patient. Peters (2006) stated:

It makes very little sense to continue with a goal of covering page after page, chapter after chapter, of material while the children are failing to understand the material covered. I empathize with teachers who are in an impossible bind: doing and trying everything possible but still coming up short. (p. 1)

Traditionally teachers have started with chapter one and then pushed through the textbooks and worksheets, working through the objectives the authors have identified. Teachers have focused on teaching the next objective each day and not focused on students’ mastery of essential concepts. At the secondary level this can be a challenge, with students having seven or eight teachers with different expectations in classrooms. Students are rarely asked what they need help on; rather, they are told what they need to do when the optional tutoring sessions occur (DuFour et al., 2010). Teachers must work to identify the specific support the student needs rather than telling a student who has a question to attend a tutoring session or to find their question on a website. Teachers need to learn how to best help students and support their learning.

For years pre-service teachers have not been asked to engage with each other in collaborative processes (Fullan, 2016). Our universities need to put in place systems and processes that require pre-service teachers to collaborate and identify common learning goals for students (DuFour et al., 2010). Higher education instructors must explicitly teach pre-service teachers how to engage in collaboration processes they are expected to use when they enter teaching roles (Muhammed & Cruz, 2019). Pre-service teachers should also be involved in culturally relevant teaching practices that can bring energy to traditional settings.
Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

As interventions are planned and implemented, it is also important for these efforts to be connected to the personal culture of students. Students need to see themselves reflected in the school’s curriculum, instruction, and assessment through culturally responsive teaching. Gay (2010) maintained that “culturally responsive teaching can be defined as using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (p. 31). Gay’s framework includes four pillars: “teacher attitudes and expectations, cultural communication in the classroom, culturally diverse content in the curriculum, and culturally congruent instructional strategies” (p. 46). One of the most significant aspects of teacher attitudes and expectations is caring about students through promoting effort and achievement, demanding rigor, and expecting all students to achieve to their highest potential. The second pillar of cultural communication requires teachers to understand the meaning of culture, language, and thought. Students of color may have different ways of communicating that come from their social practices in homes and communities. Academic language complements their communication styles. Culturally responsive teachers value the backgrounds, knowledge, and culture of all learners and integrate these elements into their instruction so that all students feel valued and learn about others. Students become engaged in learning that is active and meaningful. Gay (2010) views instruction as the most powerful because it enables the teacher to emphasize the other pillars through a variety of active instructional strategies.

Schools have worked to increase the knowledge of all students about cultural diversity in multiple ways. One example of this is Ethnic Studies courses. There was a
disagreement when these courses were implemented, with some discussing the practices occurring in African American independent and tribal schools that taught classes through the historical lens of the students (Sleeter, 2014). Others believed Ethnic Studies courses began to be implemented after the Civil Rights Movement which were interdisciplinary programs of study that taught content through the lens of racial and ethnic groups of students and emphasized their historical struggles (Sleeter, 2014). Ethnic studies courses are many times taught as stand-alone courses within a student’s schedule. Schools have also focused on implementing culturally responsive pedagogy throughout all school curriculum by revising curriculum to align with the cultural experiences of their students outside of the school and affirming their personal identities (Gay, 2010).

Ladson-Billings (1994, 1995) studied culturally relevant pedagogy for many years and found a disconnect between classroom practices and what students of color experience outside of the school setting. The disconnect between classroom practices and the culture students of color experience outside of school causes the student to navigate two different sets of expectations. Teachers who adopt culturally relevant and similar methods for students of color will create a space where students can see themselves in the classroom (Dee & Penner, 2016). Teachers who use valid cultural references are able to create a classroom space where students of color can see themselves as valued by the school and classroom (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995).

Sleeter (2012) reported that a challenge for Ethnic Studies courses and culturally responsive pedagogy was the lack of research conducted that showed these practices equating into higher student achievement levels. Gay (2000) stated most of the research related to “socioculturally centered teaching” (p. 27) increases student learning, especially when
schools do not view learning as restricted solely to cognitive learning and standardized test scores. Another challenge specific to Ethnic Studies courses is many times the courses become politically charged and the focus moves away from the curriculum. Instead of recognizing the value of the course, the conversation is divisive and not focused on supporting students (Dee & Penner, 2016). An example is a Mexican-American studies course developed in the Tucson, Arizona, school district which was ultimately found to be in violation of a state mandate. The threat of losing state funding required the district to cancel the course. The story became large enough it was covered nationally by a multitude of news outlets (Cabrera, Meza, Romero, & Rodríguez, 2013).

The research that has been completed around the impact of Ethnic Studies courses and culturally responsive pedagogy has been limited, and studies have had varied results. Two studies were conducted in Tucson with students who engaged in Ethnic Studies courses. One found no correlation between increased student achievement and taking an Ethnic Studies course, but this was a study conducted over one school year (Dee & Penner, 2016). Cabrera, Meza, Romero, and Rodriguez (2014) found opposite results in their comparison of four graduating classes, studying whether the Ethnic Studies course impacted student outcomes for Latinx students. The study involved approximately 8,400 students across four Tucson high schools and compared students who took the Mexican American Studies course to students who did not take the course. Students who engaged in the Mexican American Studies course were 6% more likely to pass all three exit exams required by the state and were more than 9.5% more likely to graduate with their cohort.

A similar study was conducted in the San Francisco Unified School District, but the course was not optional for students; it was required for students who had a poor GPA when
leaving eighth grade. Dee and Penner (2016) compared students who were placed in the course to those who were not placed in the course and had just above the 2.0 GPA that would have required them to take the course. Students who had engaged in culturally relevant Ethnic Studies courses had a higher GPA by 1.4 points at the end of their ninth grade and had a higher attendance rate when compared to students who were not required to take the Ethnic Studies course (Dee & Penner).

The results from both of these studies must be used to inform practices in our schools. Students who are engaged in Ethnic Studies courses in two different school districts performed better academically when compared to students who did not engage in the course (Cabrera et al., 2014: Dee & Penner, 2016). Students who see their community and the culture in the classroom and school culture will be more successful academically. The school’s culture must reflect the local community and the interest and the culture of students of color.

Response to Intervention (RTI)

For the last 15 years, schools have been expected to implement collaborative practices with the expectation of all students being successful. The practices have been partly mandated through federal legislation. An example is No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which was adopted in 2002. Response to Intervention, which is part of federal legislation as well, is designed to help educators respond when students do not master the learning objectives for the course and/or grade level. RTI is focused on educators identifying students’ needs early, intervening with the appropriate level of support, and further monitoring how the student progresses based on the support. The RTI process was recommended in response to the level of support required under NCLB (Buffum et al., 2012). With the adoption of the Every
Student Succeeds Act we will be able to see in coming years how schools and states will use the RTI model to meet the new standards.

The RTI process has evolved over the years as schools have continued to refine the process. The main purpose of RTI is to increase support for students until they are able to master the specific concepts for their classes. Buffum and colleagues (2012) shared the reason for RTI:

Only when schools create a tiered, systematic intervention program can the promise of certain access be realized. A systematic response begins with the school’s ability to identify students who need help. After students are identified, the school must determine the right intervention to meet the child’s learning needs, and then monitor each student’s progress to know if the intervention is working. (p. 12)

The RTI process brings in the student’s cultural and social background to develop the intervention. Ladson-Billings (2016) discussed the need for educators to integrate the cultural background of students in every aspects of schooling. This process allows students to see themselves in the classroom and creates ownership for the students (Dee & Penner, 2016).

A decrease in the pupil to teacher ratio as result of RTI interventions allows students to receive more directive and structured support (Maier et al., 2016). Many schools have a menu of interventions to select from without regard to the specific support the student needs. In these instances, schools attempt to fit the intervention to the student instead of the student being given the support they need (DuFour et al., 2010). Doctors do not prescribe medication without examining the patient, so why would a school determine an intervention without knowing what the student needs? As the RTI process continues to be revised, the approach must focus on student needs, which are not the same for every student (Muhammed & Cruz, 2019).
There are two different ways to look at Response to Intervention: as a system and as support for students. The original focus was a tiered practice and supported students using a systematic approach. Buffum et al. (2009) eventually revised the RTI process to ensure focus on students. The first system was based on tiers and students who would be impacted by each of the different tiers. Schools using RTI develop a systematic approach to intervention with the majority of students, approximately 80%, needing little to no intervention for support. The traditional school system meets the needs of these students. The second tier of students, approximately 15%, need additional support. These students might need additional tutoring, more personalized instruction, and other supports built into the school day. The third tier of students needs a significant amount of resources and support throughout the school day. This small group of students may be on a different schedule or even in a different setting based on their needs. The students need support outside of the school day as well (Maier et al., 2016) which may involve education but usually will tie more closely to general health. Students may need support with turning on utilities, finding a job to help support the family, or, if they are classified as homeless, making sure they have a consistent education experience.

The two pyramids and systems the authors used are shown in Figure 1 (Buffum et al., 2012). Both are guides that were used in the current study. School administrators were asked to place specific interventions into the system based on what the school can offer and what the student needs. Figure 1 shows the pyramid with the original on the left and the revised, updated version on the right (Buffum et al., 2012).
Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

Another intervention schools have implemented school-wide is Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS). More and more, schools understand the importance of the social and behavioral development of students because high school is the last stop for students entering post-secondary institutions or the work force (Flannery, Fenning, Kato, & McIntosh, 2014). In Figure 1 the PBIS model would be reflected similarly to RTI interventions. The majority of students would exist in Tier 1 with little to no intervention needed; a small number of students, approximately 15-20% would require support at Tier II; and a small percentage of five percent or less would need Tier III support (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). High schools have the highest number of suspension and expulsion rates, and the majority of discipline measures are punitive in nature (Fenning et al., 2012). The punitive discipline is delivered at a higher rate for students of color and especially African American males (Skiba & Losen, 2016). PBIS has been an intervention implemented in a
significant number of schools, but there has not been a change in our discipline data nation-wide (Skiba & Losen, 2016).

Discipline issues are often related to instructional issues and students resisting the boredom with low-level instruction and routinized teaching that does not allow them to engage in learning. Exceptional teachers are more likely to raise their levels of expectations for rigorous, critical, and engaged teaching, resulting in increased student motivation and engagement with learning (Rubie-Davis, 2010). Expectations may be based on socio-economics class levels Rubie-Davis (2010). The effect of socio-economic status has not been developed; studies have focused more on individual student characteristics. She explained;

Studies that investigate teacher expectation of individual students ask the question, what is it about students that their teachers may have high or low expectations for them? In contrast, studies that examine expectations at a class level, ask the question what is it about teachers that mean they may have high or low expectations for their students? (p. 123)

Many times, students who struggle the most with non-compliant behavior are placed in remedial classes without examining what is going on relative to instruction in classroom. This further results learning gaps, placing them at risk for social or emotional behaviors (Menzies & Lane, 2011).

Students, particularly at high school, are at a disadvantage when they struggle socially, emotionally, or behaviorally. The interventions put in place in schools remove students from instruction, which places them at a greater disadvantage when they return to class, where they have not been successful (Menzies & Lane, 2011). The students who struggle to meet the behavioral expectations of a classroom will also struggle to connect and build positive relationships with peers and instructors (Walker, Ramsey, & Gresham, 2004). Without a positive connection to school, it becomes more difficult for students to experience
success. Students who do not experience success in high school have experienced this pattern before. They will likely have more success at higher levels when they have learned to negotiate the school environment and use the system to their advantage (Menzies & Lane, 2011).

When students enter their high school careers, the behavioral and social expectations are supposed to have been learned through their previous experience in schools (Flannery et al., 2014). Because their behaviors can cause students to be removed from class and suspended at a higher rate, this expectation can inhibit a student’s ability to be successful. Without early intervention, students are more likely to drop out, be unemployed, incarcerated, or dependent on government assistance (Menzies & Lane, 2011). Early intervention is necessary for students to be successful behaviorally and academically. A school that has employed RTI and/or PBIS, especially if these approaches attend to the cultural backgrounds of students, can intervene early and support students while keeping them engaged in school (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Menzies & Lane, 2011).

**Promoting Self-Efficacy**

A strategy schools are using as part of the RTI process is increasing students’ use of self-efficacy. As students transition into high school, the system at their comprehensive high schools is designed to benefit students with a higher level of self-efficacy and resiliency. By increasing a student’s ability to be an advocate for themselves, they will experience greater success during their high school experience (Lessard, Fortin, Butler-Kisber, & Marcotte, 2014). Schools that have successfully put in place programs of self-efficacy and resiliency focus on having students work with teachers who are relationship-based and create classroom
environments where students know they are the ultimate decision-maker in their own success (Shepard, Salina, Girtz, Cox, Davenport, & Hillard, 2012).

In order for students to believe in themselves, they must be around educators who believe in them (Lessard et al., 2014). Students who set and obtain goals see themselves grow personally and academically. Students need to develop long-term and short-term goals. This type of process requires students to look into where they want to be over the course of several months versus a shorter-term goal of several days. When students set a long or short-term goal, it is imperative for students to believe they can obtain the goal.

Elliot and Dweck (1988) found students must pursue goals that are measurable and challenging while being obtainable. Another aspect to the goal-setting process is students must have internal motivation to obtain the goal. Classroom-based goals can negatively impact the outcome and impede motivation. When goals are set around student interests and strengths, there is a greater likelihood of the student accomplishing the goal. Connecting the goals to the student’s future plans and desires will help with motivation and also increase the likelihood of the accomplishment of the goal (Wiseman, 2012).

Students must develop realistic goals that can be accomplished (Menzies & Lane, 2011). This type of positive conversation and reinforcement of student success helps students gain belief in themselves. The students gain resiliency based on seeing the goal-setting process to the end. Students are able to develop resiliency throughout their lives and when given the tools to be successful will continue to develop throughout their educational careers (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2002).

Schools must continually identify ways to increase student engagement in their learning. Schools must look at how they are opening up opportunities for students to be part
of the school outside of the school day. This can also be part of the student’s goal setting process. Students may wish to be part of an extra-curricular program, which can be a driving force in the reason they want to be successful academically (Shepard et al., 2012). Schools usually require students to pass a certain number of classes or maintain a grade point average in order to participate in extra-curricular activities. Finding ways to increase these opportunities for all students can provide motivation for the students to be successful during the school day so they can participate in activities before and after school. Students who are involved in extra-curricular activities might change their social structure based on the relationships developed with the before and after school groups (Mahoney, 2014).

The change of social networks is not guaranteed to be a positive change, but it does create an environment where students have a common purpose, whether the purpose is instrumental music, vocal music, theatrical presentations, speech, and/or being part of an athletic team. Some of these programs also have co-curricular aspects when students participate during the day and before or after school. The increased amount of time spent increases the social interaction within the group (Mahoney, 2014). This also increases the amount of time spent within the school structure and involvement with activities associated with school (Shepard et al., 2012). The amount of time spent in school activities positively impacts the student’s social bonding with school.

A challenge schools continue to work on is students who are homeless, a student population that has been increasing in recent years. Providing proper and timely interventions for homeless students has increasingly been seen as a need for schools. Students who are homeless sometimes attend several schools within the same year, and the constant change creates social and educational challenges. Students are required to move in and out of social
groups and navigate different social dynamics as they move between schools. Students must learn new systems and teachers within each move. Besides the ongoing adjustment to environments of schools from 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., changes at home also impact the student. Being able to meet all of these challenges and involving multiple agencies for support is complex work in order for schools to meet the students’ needs (Miller, 2011).

**Summary**

Schools continue to refine and develop new practices based on how schools have been developed and structured over the years. Educators must take time to learn from each other so they know how to support students when they need an intervention. High school education will continue to change over the years, and it is critical that they continue to identify the needs of each student to ensure they graduate from high school with their cohort. Students who do not finish high school face a greater challenge after high school and are unable to give as much back to the community as those who graduate.

The following chapter will communicate the methodology designed to learn from struggling students and to better ensure that they finish high school. The results of the study are presented in chapter four and offered an examination of the case profiles of six struggling students representing two comprehensive high schools. Chapter five reports on the implication of finds, provides recommendations and future studies that can be conducted in this area.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this descriptive collective case study was to learn from the experiences of students who do not finish high school with their cohort (Merriam & Tisdell 2015; Yin, 2014). The study explored experiences of six high school students in two large suburban, comprehensive schools who would not graduate with their cohort. Students who do not graduate with their cohort face challenges as they move into the community.

This study was a collective case study which examined multiple individuals through documents, interviews, and observations. Each individual participant was considered a case, and together they comprised a collective or multiple case study that occurred within a natural context while being bounded by time and space (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Each participant was identified based on their inability to graduate with their cohort. The study was designed to learn more about specific experiences of former and current high school students who failed to graduate with their cohorts and how their experiences shaped their school career (Creswell, 2013). Rich descriptions were identified through the variety of data used to understand the experience of the participants (Yin, 2014). The students shared what they had experienced during their high school careers through open-ended questions during the study. I was able to observe them in their classroom setting and analyze records related to their high school experience. Through the inquiry qualitative study, I was able to include my personal insights of working with students who had not been successful in high school.

As educators, we know students who successfully complete high school with their cohort have a higher earning potential (DePaoli et al., 2018). As the researcher, I do not support extending a high school student’s career past four years (Bridgeland et al., 2006;
Murnane, 2013). Having the ability to learn through the student’s experiences will help educators understand the experiences of students who do not graduate with their cohort. Systems need to be in place to assist students to graduate because they will have the opportunity to be more productive members of society. Students who graduate from high school have a skill set to help them be more productive members of the community (Wagner, 2010). The study was designed to be applied to help a societal concern (Patton, 2015).

Several interventions and programs may be purchased by schools to support students toward graduation, but the reality was it takes a personalized plan. A canned approach would help some students, but when students are need of support, it must be individualized to the student. Research has been completed around dropout prevention (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015), and this study as designed supported research related to how to prevent students dropping out of school. It is important to ensure that students are able to graduate with their cohort by exploring the experiences of students who have not graduated with their cohort. The design of the study focused on the students’ voices and what they experienced during their high school careers.

**Central Question and Sub-questions**

There was one central question used to guide the study and four sub-questions.

Central Question: How do students who have not graduated with their cohort at two high schools describe their experiences during their high school career?

**Sub-questions**

1. How do students describe their relationships with peers, teachers, and other school personnel?
2. What interventions did students experience during their high school career?
3. What choices did students have about the interventions that were implemented to support their efforts toward graduation?

4. What messages did students provide to educators to encourage others to stay in school and progress toward graduation?

While these research questions guided my inquiry, I remained open to addressing the possibilities of asking and answering more questions as I explored the phenomenon of school dropout and other aspects of their high school experience. Following the flow of the study and its design flexibility is one of many “hallmarks of qualitative methods” (Rossman & Rallis, 2012, p. 135). The rationale for qualitative research, explored in the following section, lays out the characteristics of qualitative inquiry and why I chose this approach rather than quantitative inquiry.

**Rationale for Qualitative Research**

During this study, a qualitative approach was used to gain a deep understanding of what students have experienced during their high school careers. Qualitative research, according to Creswell (2013):

 begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is inductive and establishes patterns or themes. (p. 37)

Qualitative research is also described as interpretive research that allows the researcher to gain a deep understanding of the topic (Creswell, 2013). The understandings are developed from interviews, observations, and examination of documents from the participants (Patton, 2015). Another characteristic of qualitative inquiry is its personal stance with the focus on
meaning, making it imperative that I use my voice through the first-person pronoun “I” to describe learning from the study (Creswell, 2013). Another reason to choose qualitative research was that there was a need to gain a detailed understanding of students who do not graduate with their cohorts. Grbich (2013) helped to explain my choice because qualitative inquiry “can help assess the impact of policies on a population; it can give insight into people’s individual experiences; it can enable the exploration of little known behaviors, attitudes and values” (p. 3).

The description of the students’ experiences and my own experiences during the study added to the thick description of the study. Geertz (1973) is associated with the use of thick description in qualitative inquiry. He purported that qualitative analysis should be so descriptive that it brings the reader into the experience and helps them to understand how researchers derive patterns in the study that result in themes and interpretations that make up the findings.

Qualitative research allows researchers to conduct studies using theoretical traditions. The ability to identify which tradition best fits the research allows ideas to be clarified during the process (Patton, 2015). The use of the traditions provided a framework to design the study and to create research questions which drove the data collection process. The study is driven by the qualitative tradition of case study as detailed through the methodology which constructs the procedures followed for the inquiry (Patton, 2015). The collective case study is also descriptive as outlined in the following section. I followed the processes and procedures of this tradition to answer the research questions that flowed from the unit of analysis—the experiences of the six students who did not graduate with their cohort. Qualitative research
allowed a significant amount of information to be obtained through the six participants, and the data were explored through their lens.

Creswell (2013) further reinforced my choice of qualitative research because I wanted to “understand an issue or problems using the case as a specific illustration” (p. 73). A descriptive case study was used to describe the participants’ experiences as each of them told their stories of what they experienced during their high school career. This included experiences inside of the comprehensive high school and outside of the school setting that impacted their academic progress. As the layers of data were added, flexibility was needed as new understandings emerged (Grbich, 2012). Qualitative research provided the best approach to conduct the study and gain a rich understanding of each participant’s experience. The understanding of the use of case study, both a method and a product, is detailed in the next section beginning with the historical underpinnings.

**Case Study**

Case study started at the Chicago School and began to take on the form as it is today in the 1930s and 1940s (Stake, 1995). However, it was used in the 1920s and 1930s in the fields of anthropology and sociology (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Anthropologists applied the tradition of case study using observations at the University of Chicago School of Sociology to study different social and cultural experiences on their campus (Stewart, 2014). Case study became popular in education research during the 1960s and 1970s in the United Kingdom and the United States, whose researchers were trying to gain an understanding about the experience of participants during curriculum innovation (Simons, 2009). The evaluation of innovations, programs, and curricula was undertaken by two earlier researchers, Stake in the United States and Macdonald in the United Kingdom, who used case study research to
evaluate curriculum and programs in schools (Simons, 2009). The methodology was implemented on both sides of the Atlantic, with neither originally knowing about the other’s study. By using case study as the lens for their studies, they were able to examine the complexity of programs and gain a contextual understanding (Simons, 2009). Case study research in the 1960s and 1970s was implemented because the developers and other audiences of the approach desired to learn more about why some students succeeded under new programs or innovations while others did not. The innovations were new, and the researchers did not believe a simple pre-and post-test approach would allow the innovation to be properly evaluated. This research created a deep understanding of the innovation or program, and institutions were able to make researched, data-driven decisions based on knowledge gleaned from results of the studies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Case study research is now widely accepted in the field of education to support knowledge creation or evaluate complex innovations and phenomena which occur among people in various groups, institutions, and organizations (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2011, 2014). Lichtman (2011) noted that “Case study is an examination of a particular group or event or program” (p. 108). Yin (2009) explained that case study design should be considered by researchers when: (a) the purpose is to answer “how” and “why” questions; (b) the control and/or direction of participants’ behaviors cannot be controlled; (c) they want to explore contextual conditions because they believe such conditions are related to the existing phenomenon within the context of the study; or (d) the boundaries are not clear between the phenomenon and context.

Case study draws from the fields of political science, sociology, psychology, clinical science, and health sciences. Stake (2005) suggested case study research is considered “both
a process of inquiry about the case and the product of that inquiry” (p. 444). This approach allowed me to better understand the experience of high school learners as they worked to graduate from their comprehensive high school. I presented the results of the data as a case study product, as viewed in Chapter Four, the findings of the research. This supports the reason I chose a case study approach for my research. Each participant experienced the phenomenon uniquely, and by treating each of them as an individual, I was able to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences. Person-specific information provided rich data I was able to analyze as the researcher (Ayres, Kavanaugh, & Knafl, 2003).

As Yin (2009, 2014) suggested, case study should be considered when the researcher cannot manipulate the study. During this research the participants were not going to graduate with their cohorts, and I could not manipulate the reality of their experiences. The study was designed to answer the questions “how” and “why” for each of the participants (Yin, 2014); why were the students academically behind their cohort and why did this occur? The contextual conditions of the study were that participants were students in a high population comprehensive high school in a large suburban school district and were not going to graduate with their cohort. The conditions Yin (2014) discussed are the reason case study was appropriate for my research.

Case study requires the researcher to follow specific parameters. The research requires in-depth examination of a single unit or case (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This case was bound by students who were not going to graduate with their cohort. The research was an intensive approach to examine the experiences of six participants who had the same experience of not graduating with their cohort and attending a large comprehensive high school in a large suburban school district (Swanborn, 2010).
The understanding of the case study process leads to the close examination of the data collected and formulates a more precise research question. This, in turn, can open up the research to unexpected aspects of the process, which help determine the approach to the case and methods that are used. Initially, once qualitative case study is identified as the best research method and the case has been bound, the type of case study must be determined.

Stake (1995) discussed case study as intrinsic, instrumental, or collective. Intrinsic case study is when a researcher examines the case for its own purpose. When instrumental case study is used, it is to identify a pattern of behavior of the group (Stake, 1995). In a collective case study, the researcher coordinates data from several different sources, such as schools or individuals, which supports cross-case analysis, comparing data across cases (Crowe et al., 2011). For the purpose of this study the collective cases were multiple participants who had all shared an experience.

Yin (2014) also identified three types of case studies: descriptive, explanatory, and exploratory. An exploratory design usually acts as a forerunner of a larger case. Explanatory cases generally explain the phenomenon in sharp detail and with the boundary of the case taken into consideration (Yin, 2014). Descriptive case study also reports on the findings of the research in explicit detail to explain the phenomenon that occurred (Stake, 1995).

In keeping with Yin’s (2014) explanation, I considered my research as a descriptive collective case study as an intervention in the real-life setting in which it occurred. This study took place in two large comprehensive high schools within a large school district. Case study as a method allowed me and the participants to have a voice (Simons, 2009). This methodology allowed me to make recommendations on different programs implemented by schools. Schools must make decisions on the best way to meet every student’s needs with
shrinking resources and funds. As the leader in a school district, I know it is imperative to implement the appropriate programs and to use resources as thoughtfully and judiciously as I can. This study allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of why students do not successfully complete high school with their cohorts. I was then able to make decisions about why a program was or was not successful.

I chose to implement a collective case study approach because this methodology has several strengths. Collective case study is the process of coordinating data from several sources. This collective case study drew data from six participants who were the sources. Case study requires a deep understanding of the complexity of students who do not graduate with their cohort. The methodology also permitted the participants and the researcher to have a voice in the study (Simons, 2009). The researcher describes the setting, uses direct observations of incidents, and incorporates quotes from the participants, which provides thick description. By writing in accessible language, I wanted to help readers gain an understanding of the participants’ experience as they read my words (Simons, 2009).

The Role of the Researcher

As the researcher, I had had previous experience with students who did not graduate with their cohort. This experience led to my research, but this was not a phenomenon I had experienced myself. While I did not struggle in school, much of my education career has been working with students who were struggling to graduate with their cohorts. The relationships I built with these students created a desire to understand their experiences. I contend that research is always subjective, including quantitative research. I understand that I could never bring an objective lens to this study. I had to be careful to understand my role as researcher and not allow my experiences to overshadow the experiences of my participants.
The researcher plays an essential role in a qualitative study and is considered the instrument (Patton, 2015). By immersing myself in the study, I became the primary instrument for the study while collecting and analyzing the data (Atieno, 2009; Denzin, 1989). Since I was working with young adults, I knew it was important for me to carefully analyze how I structured observations and interviews. Would I be a participant-observer in the research, fully participating with students during observation? How would interviews be structured? Should I plan for standardized questions or semi-structured interviews? These questions that came to mind were eventually resolved in the design of the study and are clarified in the data collection section.

While examining whether to fully immerse myself in the study or take on the role of onlooker, I had to examine several factors (Patton, 2015). When I began examining my topic, my goal was to become a full participant in the study and experience what the participants were experiencing in their lives. One of the challenges of being the primary instrument of research is becoming aware of associated biases which could influence my research. In order to control the biases, I frequently monitored my biases to ensure they were not shaping my interpretation of the data collected (Merriam, 2009). To focus my study, I used Creswell’s (2013) recommendation of maintaining a “strong commitment to study a problem and its demands of time and resources” (p. 49). I also closely self-monitored the participants’ potential perceptions of power through my role in education (Grbich, 2013).

Having an awareness of my personal perspectives and biases was critical to the research process; this process is known as reflexivity. During the study it was critical to be reflective and aware about my stance as a researcher, careful not to have my own biases cloud what participants experienced (Patton, 2015). Reactivity is defined as the influence
researchers might have on the participants; in turn, the participants can also have an influence on the researchers (Maxwell, 2013). Thus, it was important for me to engage in reflexivity, defined by Finlay (2002) as when “researchers engage in explicit self-aware meta-analysis” (p. 209). Being conscious of reactivity and reflexivity was an important part of this study.

The participants’ perception of my influence due to my current and past district roles had to be examined during the data collection process. An important task was building relationships and gaining trust with the participants so that any potential influence would be negated (Patton, 2015). When I introduced myself to the students, I spent time discussing their experiences in life and learning about their education history. This was done to build a relationship and the commonality we had as researcher and participants. I also was completely honest and open with the participants. They needed to know why I was conducting the research and what my role was in the field of education (Patton, 2015). I wanted them to know that in our explorations regarding the struggles of students in high school, their involvement would lead to helping themselves as well as others. This openness allowed the participants to be comfortable with my presence in the study’s setting and to further build relationships.

As relationships were built, it was imperative to build trust with the participant to ensure I was able to gather rich data. Again, this was accomplished by finding common ground and being transparent about the process (Patton, 2015). The participants certainly knew I was observing them because UMKC’s procedures require notification. I explained the tasks involved: collecting pertinent documents, interviewing, and observing in classrooms followed by analyzing the data once all observations were complete. Further, I let them know they would have a chance to review their interview transcripts and the case study records. My
research had to be done away from the site where I was once principal to ensure the information obtained during observations and interviews was valid and reliable (Miles et al., 2013).

**Design of the Study**

**Setting, Participants, and Selection Techniques**

Qualitative research requires multiple aspects to be considered while conducting research. The study took place in the natural setting of the participants where they experienced the phenomenon (Patton, 2015). This also allowed me to see the participants interacting with peers and adults and how they behaved in their environments. Yin (2014) shared six sources of evidence for case studies: documents, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant observation, and physical artifacts. While working in the natural setting, I gathered and examined documents and observed and interviewed the participants. I employed inductive data analysis, which focused on identifying patterns in the data through coding at three different levels: descriptive coding, interpretive coding, and themes (Grbich, 2013; Miles et al., 2013).

The collective qualitative case study took place in two different secondary schools of a large school district in the Midwest with over 19,300 students. The school district is made up of approximately 13% African American, 13.5% Latinx, and 62% white students. Approximately 49% of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch through the federal lunch program. The demographic data are represented in Figure 2 (State Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, n.d., School Profile).
In order to identify the participants, I relied on the school’s leadership and staff who worked with students who were falling behind their cohort. Identifying the characteristics of the participants early in the study was important in order for the leadership to have a clear picture of what was needed (Miles et al., 2013) (see Appendix A, Principal Participant Recruitment). The process I followed was purposeful criterion selection. Maxwell (2013) stated four reasons to use purposeful selection: guarantee the “representativeness or typicality of the setting”; “develop a sample size that exhibits heterogeneity”; “deliberately examine cases that are critical for the theories that you began to study”; and “establish particular comparisons to illuminate what is going on in a way that representative cases cannot” (pp. 89–90). Purposeful criterion selection provided in-depth opportunities for studying the phenomena of interest that quantitative study does not. By using purposeful selection, I was able to identify and recruit participants who would provide information that was rich and would lead to changes in practices in secondary schools (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2014) (see

*Figure 2. District Demographic Data.*
Appendix B: Student Recruitment Letter). The study was focused on improving educational practices and creating change.

All of the participants met the following criteria in order to be part of the study: (a) each student was at least 18 years old; (b) all were scheduled to not graduate with classmates in May 2019; and (c) they attended one of two comprehensive high schools within a large Midwestern suburban school district (see Appendix C: Definition of Terms). These students could have experienced a number of ways to complete high school; however, several of these would serve to limit their opportunities. Participants who were not going to graduate with their cohort could return for a fifth year of high school. Participants might decide to complete their high school equivalency diploma by graduating through an alternative pathway. Further, students may take the high school equivalency exam called the HiSET, which the state calls the State Options Diploma. This diploma option allows students who are not able to earn enough credits to graduate with their cohort to earn a diploma (State Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, n.d., State Options). However, this alternative diploma option limits graduates in their ability to continue their education and enlist in the military. Through my personal interactions with the United States Army and the United States Navy, I know they do not accept the State Options Diploma as an acceptable equivalent to a traditional high school diploma. Students earning an alternative diploma will not be able to enter into most four-year college or universities.

Additionally, participants could enroll in the High School Alternative Program (HSAP). The program provides students the ability to complete their high school diploma by working through an online platform where they take courses they need to complete to earn their diploma. A challenge with this program is when a student passes a course, they earn a
“P,” which has the grade equivalency of a “D” or 1.0 on a 4.0 scale. HSAP is limiting for students because of the grade point average they receive after finishing their high school diplomas.

Criterion selection was applicable because I identified students who were unable to earn enough credits to graduate with their cohort and also represented the school’s non-graduate demographic. By identifying participants who represented the school, I gained knowledge from a variety of backgrounds and experiences. This was necessary because I wanted to represent the sites as effectively as possible to provide the best data (Creswell, 2013).

In the study, I take the reader into time and spaces of participants by using thick description (Geertz, 1973). I had never experienced what the participants have, but my goal was to allow multiple audiences to understand the struggles students have in gaining enough credits to graduate from high school. Participants provided information that stimulated deep reflections regarding their current dilemmas, and I was able to understand why students are not successful. This research also helped me to understand why students of color graduate less frequently than their white and Asian counterparts.

**Data Sources**

To ensure crystallization, I implemented an approach that incorporated interviews, observations, and documents (Ellingson, 2009), the three primary data sources used during the study. Ellingson (2009) explained that crystallization occurs through:

The compilation not only of many details but also of different forms of representing, organizing, and analyzing those details. Strong themes or patterns supported by examples provide a wide-angle view of the setting or phenomenon; stories or poems highlight individual experiences, emotions, and expression; critiques shed light on relevant cultural assumptions and constructions; and so on...crystallization provides
one effective approach to richly describing our findings to marking both overt and subtle manifestations of power in analytic, narrative/artistic, critical genres. (pp. 10–11)

In order to complete effective qualitative research, intense exploration of the participants’ experiences is needed (Polkinghorne, 2005). A variety of methodological approaches enriched my knowledge as I interacted with the students. During the study, it was imperative to gain a true understanding of what the participants experienced to properly represent their opinions, and crystallization helped in this regard. I start the review of data collection with a discussion of how documents were used in this inquiry.

**Documents.** As a primary resource for data collection, personal documents were valuable and reliable sources of data and provided information about the participants’ experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Documents, according to Bogdan and Biklen (2007) can be developed by the researcher in the form of personal documents, official documents such as mission and vision statements of an organization, and documents that communicate an organization’s culture. The researcher may ask the participants to generate personal documents that describe their experiences in schools. The researcher can also collect personal documents of each participant relevant to this study such as records of report cards, school transcripts, test scores, programs of study, and discipline incidents. Cultural documents include awards, students’ art works, writings, announcements, memos, and other work samples that “entertain, persuade, and enlighten the public” (Bogdan & Biklen, p. 64). One of the advantages of using documents in a study is they provide a consistent source of information. Yanow (2007) noted:

> Documents can provide background information prior to designing the research project, for example prior to conducting interviews. They may corroborate observational and interview data, or they may refute them, in which case the
researcher is “armed” with evidence that can be used to clarify, or perhaps, to challenge what is being told, a role that the observational data may also play. (p. 411)

The documents developed and provided by schools are valuable tools used to determine whether or not a student graduates. The documents I analyzed were the transcripts and progress reports from their high school careers. The two high schools provide two progress reports each semester with a culminating semester grade that is part of students’ transcripts. The transcripts were the most informative document gathered. Information I obtained from these documents provided insight into the feedback participants received during their high school career. The document review also allowed me the opportunity to see what types of comments were put on the progress reports by teachers, but few comments were helpful. Many of the comments were standard and did not reveal significant information related to students’ experiences.

The documents were gathered from the participants, reviewed as early as possible, and led to additional questions for the interviews based on the coding and themes identified during their analysis. Additional questions were also gleaned from the initial six questions of the interview protocol (see Appendix D) and helped to obtain a full picture of the participants’ experiences during high school. These school documents are important because they are formal feedback that the participants received during their high school careers. The interviews gave a fuller perspective of their experiences and helped to interpret the documents.

**Interviews.** Another primary data source were in-depth semi-structured interviews with the participants. Being able to gain insight from the participants’ personal experiences was a learning opportunity for me, and interviews were the best way to gain an understanding
from each participant (Patton, 2015). The interview opened up the opportunity to hear from the participants and allowed me to gain an understanding of their emotions, feelings, beliefs, and thoughts. Semi-structured interviews, described by Galletta (2013) as the way to “create an opening for a narrative to unfold, while also including questions informed by theory” (p. 2), were the best approach for these descriptive conversations with students. The semi-structured interview allows the researcher to learn of the complexity of the participant while creating understanding (Fontana & Frey, 2005). The researcher is able to create questions that are aligned to the research questions and use the semi-structured interview to dig deeper into conversations (Fontana & Frey, 2005). By using a semi-structured interview, I was able to create interview questions as a guide while also leaving open the opportunity to ask further questions that would deepen the meaning of participants’ experiences when necessary. This was the flexibility needed to generate thick description. Rabionet (2011) described interviewing as a “flexible and powerful tool to capture the voices and the ways people make meaning of their experience” (p. 563).

The questions were designed to be open-ended to allow students to expand on the information they shared with me about their struggles in high school. The value of the open-ended question to the researcher is the distinct and unique response of each participant (Maxwell, 2013). I posed the same questions for all students, then asked additional questions based on their unique experiences. Hence, the semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix D) supported the opportunity to build on their responses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I posed such questions as:

- How would you describe the relationships you had with peers, teachers, and other school personnel during your high school career?
• What interventions did you experience during their high school career? (May need to describe interventions when asking)

• What choices did you have about the interventions you experienced to support your work toward graduation?

Having an interview guide ensured that students were asked the same questions and helped to establish a clear focus for addressing the research questions that guided my study. Seidman (2013) contributed to the importance of interviews with these words: “I interview because I am interested in other people’s stories. Most simply put, stories are a way of knowing” (p. 7).

I found it important to first establish trust with students before conducting interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis at a location of each student’s choice which helped to establish trust and enhance their comfort level. Trust was a key aspect of the interview process, because in order to gain validity of the data and rich description, I had to establish trust with the participants. Researchers learn about the participants’ perceptions through the interview process by building trust (Seidman, 2013).

By analyzing the school documents first, I was able to gather insights about students’ individual school experiences before the interview and use this information in my conversations with them. They understood that I knew of their struggles before talking to them, which communicated interest and also helped to establish trust. An interview guide also supported casual conversation, which contributed to trust and provided the freedom to gather a significant amount of in-depth information. I could talk with them about their interests, hobbies, and outside activities, and I used the interview guide for monitoring.
The semi-structured interviews lasted approximately an hour for four of the participants, with two interviews conducted for over an hour. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and finally analyzed for themes. The interviews were coded, and themes were identified based on the interpretive codes from the interview transcriptions. Observations were a third opportunity to provide deep explorations of students’ experiences.

**Observations.** The third data source came from observing the students in their classes in the school. Observations are important because they give the researcher the opportunity to draw inferences about the worlds of the research participants (Maxwell, 2013). Classroom observations, as Merriam and Tisdell (2015) suggested, “represent a firsthand encounter with the phenomenon of interest rather than a secondhand account of words obtained in an interview” (p. 137). The researcher can pick up actions, interactions with others, conversations, facial expressions, and body language that may inform the unit of analysis—in this study, the experiences of struggling students. Angrosino (2005) discussed three types of observations a researcher engages in during a study. The first type, reactive or non-participatory observation, takes place in a controlled setting with the participant being aware of being observed by interacting minimally with the observer. The second type is the unobtrusive observation, conducted without the awareness of those being observed. A third type is participant observation with the researcher interacting with the participant and joining them in their everyday life (Angrosino, 2005). The researcher must be cognizant of their presence during the observation and how it may impact the observation. During this study I took on the role as an onlooker and was non-participatory during the observation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013).
I was able to obtain information through observing that which could not be gathered using only interviews (see Appendix E: Student Observation Guide). I wanted to observe the interactions of the participants with their surroundings, including students and adults in the classroom. What were their levels of engagement? What did the classroom look like, and how did its design affect student engagement? I chose the non-participatory role based on my previous roles in secondary schools. I wanted to only observe the student and did not want to participate in actions that would convey to teachers that I was usurping their space in any way. The goal of my observation was to understand how the participant interacted within their natural school surroundings. The best way to accomplish this was to take the role of a non-participant (Patton, 2015).

Each participant identified a time they were comfortable with me coming into their classroom. I was able to observe each participant for an hour after I had conducted documents and interviews and analyzed their transcriptions. The information obtained from the documents and interviews provided insight about the participants, and I was able to add to the data after the observations were complete. In order to obtain quality information, I followed Patton’s (2015) observation guidelines: “pay attention and see what there is to see; write descriptively and often; record discipline notes accurately; separate detail from trivial information; use rigorous methods to ensure validity; report strengths and limitations” (pp. 260–261).

Data management. A significant amount of data was collected from the documents, interviews, and observations. All data were analyzed manually using code books, reading and re-reading transcripts, and categorizing like concepts using descriptive and interpretive codes, and eventually clustering the codes into themes, as described in the following section.
All of the data came from the participants’ natural setting, where the participants experienced their struggles. I kept data on a password protected computer and backed up in the cloud. All identifying data were redacted, and names were replaced with pseudonyms to protect the identities of participants. Names of participants with pseudonyms were kept in a master list on a password protected computer which could be accessed only by the researcher.

Original documents were backed up electronically, along with my field notes. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim before they were analyzed. The audio recordings of the interviews were destroyed after the data were analyzed, transcripts were reviewed by the participants, and I was satisfied with the reporting of findings. Observation notes were recorded electronically and maintained electronically. Observations do not have identifiable information on the form, so observations cannot be tied to individual participants. There is danger in recording everything electronically because of the chance of losing the data. I backed up my data regularly. To be proactive, I kept the information password protected and backed up in the cloud. During the interviews, identifiable information was not used while recording. In short, information has been kept secured from outside people, and pseudonyms have been used instead of actual names. The pseudonyms were chosen by the participants (see Appendix F: Student Identifier Key).

**Data Analysis**

The purpose of collecting data was to learn from the experiences of students who would not graduate with their cohorts May 2019. A significant amount of data was collected and was considered text or narrative data (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003). Qualitative researchers must immerse themselves in their research in order to provide the readers quality information (Grbich, 2013). Case study research requires the researcher to organize
comprehensive data in specific ways for in-depth analysis. Stake (1995) stated each individual account is referred to as a “case,” and the researcher has interest in each case for its uniqueness and commonality. Each participant was an individual case, and there was no layering in this study (Patton, 2015). If the researcher needs comprehensive data, they must submerge themselves in the case and gather all of the information impactful to the research questions (Grbich, 2013). In this descriptive collective case study, all of the information for each case was gathered to support the findings for each case and is viewed as case record for that participant. After the case record is accumulated and the written report is produced, policy makers and other decision makers can review the collective data to make good decisions in the future (Patton, 2015).

Once the case record was collected for each of the participants, it was time to analyze the data. I wanted to make sure I was familiar with the information (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003) so I read and re-read transcriptions of documents, interviews, and observations to immerse myself in the data, and I studied code books used to categorize the data. After the documents and other data pieces were reviewed a number of times, descriptive and interpretive coding were used to group and label the data (Grbich, 2013) for the purpose of forming themes from the interpretive codes. This deep analysis created meaning for me as the researcher. Once the descriptive coding process was completed, interpretive codes were used to form groups from the descriptive codes; themes were formed by clustering the interpretive codes that emerged as a result of categorizing like concepts from descriptive coding (Miles et al., 2013). This process allowed information to rise to the top based on the frequency of concepts in the data (Grbich, 2013). As stated by Ayres et al. (2003), “Analysis of individual cases enables the researcher to understand those aspects of experience that
occur not as individual ‘units of meaning’ but as part of the pattern formed by the confluence of meanings within individual accounts” (p. 872). Themes were identified for the documents, interviews, and observations.

Being open-minded during coding was important because I did not want to have pre-determined codes or themes. Codes and themes emerge from the data; they are not identified before the data are analyzed (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003). The use of code books throughout the process aided my analyses. My goal was to answer the following questions:

1. How do students describe their relationships with peers, teachers, and other school personnel?
2. What interventions did students experience during their high school career?
3. What choices did students have about the interventions which were implemented to support their work toward graduation?
4. What message did participants provide to educators to encourage students to stay in school and progress toward graduation?

By treating each case individually, I was able to dig into each individual’s experience before moving into cross-case analysis. The previous steps are known as within case analysis. The individual case records were sent to the participants, who verified that my interpretation of the information was accurate. This allowed the participants to know their voices were heard (Patton, 2015). The next step is to conduct cross-case analysis.

After each case was analyzed individually, I compared themes across multiple cases to identify common themes that occurred in all of them. I carefully looked for unique attributes, codes, patterns, and themes to help me clearly understand each case and then identified common themes across the collective cases. I found it significant to “understand
both the commonality and differences across cases in the quintain” (Stake, 2006, p. 40) for providing a deep analysis of the students’ experiences that can be used by educators to make changes for this group of students. Cross-case analysis helped me to understand why one case was different than the other, to reflect on these differences as to why, and to understand the uniqueness of findings for each case (Khan & VanWyseberghe, 2008).

Additionally, cross-case analysis was employed to answer the research questions and provide readers “a more holistic impression of what a certain experience is like in all its facets” (Boeije, 2010, p. 202). A case description considers all of the identified themes and brings them together to tell a story of the case (Boeije). The individual case descriptions were sent to the participants, who verified that my interpretation of the information was accurate. This allowed the participants to know their voices were heard (Patton, 2015). I thought it imperative for readers to understand the experiences of the students who did not graduate from high school with their cohort, the unit of analysis for this inquiry.

During qualitative research, it is important for the researcher to interact with the participants as part of developing themes that emerge. I had personal experiences working with struggling students, but I did not have the depth of information gained by interviewing and observing the participants and learning from their experiences. The documents, interviews, and observations informed my work as a qualitative researcher (Creswell, 2013).

Further, my inquiry is not without its limitations. I sought to reveal the limitations of my study, but heeded Maxwell’s (2013) warning that no study is perfect. For qualitative researchers, the intent is to be aware of the limitations and find ways to address them. Validity and reliability are also areas to consider in qualitative research, but they are viewed differently than they are in quantitative research. Above all, the researcher must adhere to
ethical considerations throughout the conduct of the research. These areas are the focus of the concluding section.

**Limitations, Validity, Reliability, and Ethical Considerations**

One limitation of the study was that only one district was used, although participants were selected from two high schools within the district which provided some variability. Another limitation was my current and previous positions within the district. I have served as the high school principal at both schools that were involved in the study. Currently, I serve as the Executive Director of Human Resources for all schools in the district; I handle hiring procedures and resolve conflicts when managers have concerns about employees. Working in a hierarchical organization, I encountered assumed power in the positions that I have held in the district (Bradshaw & Boonstra, 2008). Building relationships with each participant was essential to ensure their understanding as my role as a researcher and person trying to gain an understanding of their experiences rather than as the former principal or human resources director.

Another limitation was often working as a lone researcher with limited contact with other qualitative researchers. Since the qualitative researcher follows an interpretive process, I find it significant to be able to test ideas with others and discuss meanings gleaned along the way. I used my advisor extensively in this regard. I kept her updated of my progress as well as sought her advice to make sure I was following the correct procedures. I also spoke with the members of my cohort in order to exchange ideas, as well as ask them to review the processes I was using for case study research. Several of the cohort members were developing studies different than mine; however, most were conducting qualitative research.
They provided different perspectives, but the experiences were similar. Other areas for consideration included making sure that my findings were valid and reliable.

**Validity and Reliability**

Reliability and validity are challenging topics that must be addressed by qualitative researchers. I was able to add confidence to my findings by applying techniques of validation and reliability (Miles et al., 2013). To ensure the study was validated, I began by reviewing each procedure and providing an audit of the research. The next step was working extensively in the field with the participants in order to ensure I gained a deep understanding of their experiences (Creswell, 2013). I carefully worked to ensure their experiences were presented accurately (Stake, 1995).

As qualitative research has evolved, one of the important elements of reliability and validity is crystallization. Richardson and St. Pierre (2008) described the change from triangulation to crystallization which purported there are more than “three sides from which to approach the world” (p. 934). Crystallization creates another layer of depth through representing, organizing, and analyzing multiple sources that contribute to details of the phenomenon (Ellingson, 2009). This depth of crystallization is also obtained by using a critical friend to review and examine interpretive codes and themes identified in the documents, interviews, and observations.

Credibility, authenticity, transferability, dependability, conformability, and internal and external validation, reliability, and objectivity all ensure validation. Credibility is an evaluation of whether or not the research findings represent a “credible” conceptual interpretation of the data drawn from the participants’ original data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 296). Transferability is the degree to which the findings of this inquiry can apply or
transfer beyond the bounds of the project. Dependability is an assessment of the quality of the integrated processes of data collection, data analysis, and theory generation. Confirmability is a measure of how well the inquiry’s findings are supported by the data collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Guba and Lincoln (1985) explained credibility as “the degree of confidence in the ‘truth’ that the findings of a particular inquiry have for the subjects with which—and the context within which—the inquiry was carried out” (p. 290). Credibility was a challenging area to address, and I employed a three-tiered approach. To ensure the study was credible, I collected rich data, kept detailed, descriptive notes, and had respondents check for accuracy through member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2005). Ensuring validity by ruling out threats to the study is equally important. First, in designing the research procedures, I included three experiential processes of document, interviews, and observations rather than just one or two because this approach creates validity. Secondly, as previously discussed, I worked with the participants to verify findings and ensure proper representation by allowing each participant to verify their experiences and ensure proper representation of their voice (Guba, 2005). More importantly, Lincoln and Guba (1985) state, “Since there can be no validity without reliability (and thus no credibility without dependability), a demonstration of the former is sufficient to establish the latter” (p. 316).

**Ethical Considerations**

As I began my descriptive qualitative research study, it was necessary to follow principles of the Social Science Institutional Review Board (SSIRB). As the main researcher in this process, it was critical for me to protect the participants. First, in preparation for data collection and to ensure protection of participants, I took the courses of the Collaborative
Institutional Training Initiative (CITI), designed to ensure that researchers conduct responsible research. Secondly, the Belmont Report (1979) outlined some guiding principles that were followed in the conduct of my research: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (Sales & Folkman, 2000). The Belmont report states, “respect for persons demands that subjects enter into the research voluntarily and with adequate information” (p. 4). Participants needed to know their participation was voluntary. Additionally, I assured the participants that the benefits of participating in this research greatly outweigh the risks. Through this research process, participants had an opportunity to inform a larger body of research that supports models of effective professional development for classroom teachers. If a participant became uncomfortable throughout any stage of this study, they could drop out of the study without fear of repercussions. This assurance was included in the consent form. There were six participants who all participated fully in the study and did not have concerns or drop out of the study. Finally, it was important for me to present information to the subjects in a clear and coherent way in order to ensure that the presentation of information did not cause confusion and hinder the research participants’ ability to make an informed decision (Sales & Folkman, 2000).

Part of ensuring ethical considerations was also following my institution’s Institutional Research Boards (IRB) guidelines. The IRB has three guiding principles:

- protecting the autonomy of the subjects (i.e., subjects must be informed about the nature of the study, the details of their participation must be voluntary),
- ensuring beneficence (i.e., the benefits of the research must outweigh the risks), and
- promoting fair procedures in the selection of subjects (i.e., the risks and benefits of research should be evenly distributed among the possible subject populations).
The IRB also works to protect participants to ensure they are treated ethically, and that the positives of the study outweigh the possible negative outcomes. Following the federal and state laws were important aspects as well.

All IRBs consider:
- Risks to the subjects
- Anticipated benefits to the subjects and/or others
- Importance of the knowledge that may be gained
- Informed consent process to be employed

The IRB required me to be open and honest about my study with the participants, to make sure the benefit outweighed the risk, and to select participants fairly (Office of Research Services, 2009–2010). To meet the IRB requirements, I ensured participants knew fully what I hoped to learn from them during the study (see Appendix G: Student Participant Consent Form). The outcomes of my study outweighed the risks because the research can change the practices of secondary schools in the coming years. The goal of the study was to ensure more doors are open for these young people.

**Potential Ethical Problems**

A challenge I had was the position that I hold in public education. Since I am a former high school principal, there were perceptions about my power based on my position. In order to address these perceptions, I was open and honest with the participants about roles I had served in education and my personal high school experiences. The goal was to gain trust from the participants, and to ensure them that the study would assist future students who may find themselves in similar situations. Another perception I needed to fight was that I had a very different high school experience than those of the participants. I grew up in a small
town, and my father worked in the school district I attended. This was another topic about which I was honest with my participants because I needed to be open to them in order for them to reciprocate. To gain access, I was open and honest about my goals for the study, and when the participants had questions, I answered them all honestly (Patton, 2015).
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

During the study, I used my experience as a teacher, assistant principal, and principal to discuss what I learned by working with students who do not complete high school with their cohort. The experience I have gained has created a passion for me to help students complete high school and to see them take advantage of the opportunities that a high school diploma provides. My previous experiences allowed insights into the study. Additionally, the experiences of the students were crucial to this story. The case study involved students who did not graduate with their cohort. An essential part of the study was to learn what interventions the students had experienced throughout high school (Creswell, 2013).

In the study, the questions were open-ended in order to allow the participants to share openly about their experiences in high school and for the researcher to gain as much knowledge as possible. As more information was gathered, themes were identified. The questions allowed participants to speak openly about the interventions implemented during high school. Participant input on the intervention was an important aspect because it would help inform educator practices. In order to identify common themes, two comprehensive high schools in a large suburban school district were used as the setting. Using two high schools allowed me to give feedback to both high schools and provide insight to comprehensive high schools and large suburban school districts.

This study was a collective case study designed to learn from the experiences of students who did not finish high school with their cohort (Creswell, 2013). Students have not been graduating from high school for years in America. The failure to support students to graduation limits their future earnings and options after high school. Without a diploma,
students are limited by what they can pursue after high school and professionally. The purpose of this collective descriptive case study to was learn from the experiences of students who did not graduate from high school with their cohort. The students either earned an alternative diploma that limited their options, or they graduated after their cohort had finished.

For this study, I had one central question and four sub-questions to explore. The central question was: “How do students who have not graduated with their cohort at two high schools describe their experiences during their high school career?” The sub-questions included in the study were:

1. How do students describe their relationships with peers, teachers, and other school personnel?
2. What interventions did students experience during their high school career?
3. What choices did students have about the interventions that were implemented to support their work toward graduation?
4. What messages did students provide to educators to encourage others to stay in school and progress toward graduation?

Prior to the study, it was not clear what students were going to share based on their experiences in high school. The qualitative nature of this study allowed me to learn from the experiences of the participants and discover new information. This information will be valuable for educators to ensure students’ needs are met as they progress through their high school careers. Through this process I was able to share the experiences of the participants during their high school careers as they progressed toward graduation. In this chapter, I reveal the themes and interpretive codes identified through each case analysis of participants’
documents, observations, and interview. After sharing this information, I provide the interaction with each participant. After analyzing each case, I present the themes prevalent across all of the participants’ data.

**Reflections about the Process**

As part of my methodology, three pieces of data were collected and analyzed for all six participants to ensure there was a deep understanding of what the students experienced during their high school careers. Each individual had a unique experience based on their transition into high school and their experiences. Documents were reviewed from each participant that gave insight into what the participants had received as formal feedback from the school. A semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant using an interview guide (see Appendix D). An hour-long observation was completed with each participant in the school setting.

I was able to learn from each of the participants about their personal experience while they were in high school. The events in the participants’ lives had a major influence on their high school experience. The unique experience of each participant created rich information to learn from and share with educators. Each participant had different experiences and influences throughout their school career that impacted their education. Relationships with adults within the school was an obvious influence of the participants and helped shaped their path to graduation.

The selection of participants was purposeful and was intended to reflect the overall demographic of the students who did not graduate with their cohort. I had varied levels of interaction with the participants who engaged in the study. I was able to use my 15 years as a high school teacher as a starting point in this study. Being able to build relationships quickly
and connect with the participants helped me gain valuable information during the interview process. Building a relationship and creating a level of trust allowed for a deeper conversation and the ability to gain quality information from the participants. I met with each participant to discuss the process in their preferred location and via their preferred communication method; some conversations took place in person and others were by phone. After the initial contact and explanation of the study, the potential participant decided whether they wanted to be part of the study or not. If they decided to engage in the study, they determined the location and time of their interview.

**Setting and Participants**

The collective case study took place in two secondary schools of a large school district in the Midwest with over 19,300 students. The school district is made up of approximately 13% African-American, 13.5% Latinx, and 62% white students. Approximately 47% of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch through the federal lunch program (State Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, n.d., Comprehensive Data). Six participants were identified to participate in the study. The study included three students from each of the secondary schools.

Both schools’ administrative teams helped identify participants who met the criteria to participate. Identifying participants who reflected the population of the school’s students who did not graduate with their cohort was a key part of the identification process. The characteristics of the secondary schools were similar but not identical and considered each school’s unique characteristic (Miles et al., 2015). Purposeful criterion selection was used to identify the participants. By using purposeful criterion selection, it allowed me to identify participants who reflected the school’s students who did not graduate with their cohort. As I
honied the process, the eligible participants who would provide the most valuable information became apparent (Patton, 2015).

My passion for this study is based on my years as an assistant principal and working on the student assistance team. After researching the performance of secondary schools and graduation, I was alarmed by the lack of progress the nation had made in graduating students. The research showed there is a need to support our students and ensure they graduate from high school. The missed opportunities when a person does not graduate are challenging to overcome. Some students choose to engage and graduate through the high school equivalency exam called the HiSET, which the state calls the State Options Diploma. This diploma option allows students who are not able to earn enough credits to graduate with their cohort to earn a diploma (State Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, n.d., State Options). This seems like a solid option for students, but the reality is the military and many universities do not recognize this as an adequate replacement for a traditional diploma.

Working with students who have struggled to graduate or have not graduated created a focus for me as a building leader. I wanted to make a difference and knew there were gaps in what schools were doing to meet the needs of every student. Schools are obligated to meet the needs of all students and meet each student based on where they are and not expect every student to fit into the existing system. The reason for this study is the need to support students and ensure they earn a high school diploma, because I know there is more we can do as a school system.

**Telling the Story of the Data**

For this study, I used three different data sources: a review of documents the participants received from the school, a semi-structured interview, and an hour-long
observation which I analyzed based on my research questions. The first piece of data I used was an interview with each participant. The interviews took place at a setting and time of their choosing because their comfort was the best way to ensure reliable data and answers. The second data used was an observation of the student in their classroom environment. The purpose of this was to observe their interaction with their instructors and peers. The final piece of data was a review of their transcripts and other information the school provides students as they progress through high school. The transcript provides a comprehensive look at a student’s progress through each semester of their high school career. Documents provided me as the researcher the ability to see the formal feedback the student was receiving from the school.

The semi-structured interview was audio recorded in addition to being transcribed before being reviewed. The audio recording and transcription were both kept, ensuring validity. An observation guide allowed data to be gathered based on what the student was experiencing while they were in the classroom (see Appendix E).

Data Analysis

As I thought about potential topics for my research, I had a strong passion for students who struggled to complete high school or had to go through an alternative program that limited their future and provided them with a high school diploma. Over my years as an educator, I had the opportunity to speak with several students who had struggled in high school and did not graduate through the traditional route, but I never took advantage of tracking to see the common themes in the students’ experiences. I had ideas about them, but nothing concrete. This drove me to begin collecting data on the experiences of students who did not have a traditional high school experience. Before I began collecting the data, I
focused on the overall topic by diving into a variety of literature, including books and articles. I also took opportunities to learn about the topic through the professional organizations of which I was a member.

A large amount of data were collected. In order to analyze the data it must be gathered and organized in specific ways (Patton, 2015). Once the data gathering for the collective case study was completed, it was important to immerse myself in the data. The data were first analyzed using descriptive codes to identify concepts and recurring themes that emerged during the process (Miles et al., 2015). The recurring descriptive and clustering of interpretive codes allow the themes to become apparent as the data were reviewed. In order to have accurate interpretive codes, it is imperative the descriptive codes are allowed to emerge independently and without predetermined assumptions.

Before beginning the coding process, it was important to review each participant’s data to make sure I had all collected all the information (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003). This allowed me to become familiar with each case before the coding process. The first step was coding using descriptive codes to summarize and identify concepts through the analysis process (Miles et al., 2015) to help identify recurring concepts throughout the process.

The next step in the coding process was to identify interpretive codes. This process was to form the descriptive codes into interpretive codes and begin grouping them together. Once the interpretive codes were developed, themes were identified from the codes that had been identified (Grbich, 2013). Themes were identified for the documents, interviews, and observations based on the interpretive codes. As I reviewed the information, three themes were developed from the documents, interview, and observation. Based on how students described their experiences with peers and adults, the themes were setting and environment,
relationships, and interventions. The themes came from students discussing the interventions they experienced, relationships with people in their lives, and the setting in which the participants learned, both successfully and unsuccessfully.

During the initial coding process, I read over each of the documents, observation, and interview transcripts. After reading each document, I began to make notes on each of the items to gather my initial thinking. Once this was completed, I reviewed the notes I had taken in the margins of each item to make sure I was inclusive and had read correctly. After I reviewed my initial notes, I began tracking what I noted in an Excel spreadsheet. The spreadsheet helped gather my thinking into one place. I compared the cases to identify common themes that occurred in each one. I read and reread the documents and transcripts of the observations and interview until it was time to interpret the findings. Each of the participants had similar themes and interpretive codes. The interpretive codes associated with the relationship theme were caring adult, supportive peer, destructive peer, and bullying/mental health. The interpretive codes associated with the theme intervention were flexible/student-focused, school-based, HSAP/State Options, and IEP. The associated interpretive codes with the theme setting and environment were flexibility, engaged, distracted, and teacher-focused.

The interpretation of the information must be accurate. I obtained confirmation of accuracy by allowing the participants to review their information (Patton, 2015). At the same time, I continued my analysis. I identified themes from the descriptive and interpretive codes which emerged from the information from each participant. I reflected on my central question. Grounding myself in the research allowed me to continue focusing on the question and sub-questions I was trying to answer. With the data collected and analyzed, I worked to
ensure I had a deep understanding of the data and the experience of each participant. During this time, I used my own personal experience as well as the themes identified within each case record.

After identifying the themes, I stepped away and began to review the process I used to identify the themes. This crystallization process of reflecting on the data allowed me to ensure the themes were properly identified. I wanted to make sure each theme was identified in each case in order to ensure my coding was correct and that I did not start determining themes before the analysis of data had taken place. This process allowed me to synthesize the data.

Because my study was a collective case study, it was important for me to look at each case individually before completing a cross-case analysis (Ellingson, 2009). I also used crystallization to make sure the research was valid. As part of the crystallization process, interviews provided data to validate the research (Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2015). Using a variety of methodological research enriched what I learned from the participants of the study (Yin, 2015). Using crystallization did not provide different results, but it did help further ensure I understood what the participants shared during the study (Ellingson, 2009). This was an integral part of ensuring the results I found were representative of the students’ experience and personal story.

**Within-case Analysis**

The data from the collective case study were analyzed by examining each case separately. This took place from August 2018 to February 2019. The first step was to review the documents from each of the participants, followed by interviewing the participants before finally observing each of them. Each participant was interviewed for approximately one hour
and was observed in their classroom setting. Participants also provided documents from their high school experience. During the study, each participant was able to choose the pseudonym they wanted to make sure they were not able to be identified. The following questions were used during the interview process for each of the participants (see Appendix D):

- How would you describe the relationships you had with peers, teachers, and other school personnel during your high school career?
- What interventions did you experience during your high school career? (May need to describe interventions when asking)
- What choices did you have about the interventions you experienced to support your work toward graduation?
- How did the intervention support your progress and advancement toward graduation?
- Were there interventions which did not support your progress toward graduation?
- What advice would you give educators to encourage students to stay in school and progress toward graduation?

The semi-structured interview allowed for follow-up questions to explore the participants’ experience more deeply. Following up allowed for a deeper understanding of the participants’ experience. Participants were also observed in the classroom setting to understand what they experienced while learning. While participants were being observed, four areas were noted: (a) participants’ interaction with peers; (b) participants’ interaction with adults; (c) level of engagement by the participant; and (d) the classroom setting. The engagement of the participants was observed based on how much the students were focused
on class work and did not become distracted by others in the classroom or by searching websites on their computer such as YouTube.

Finally, progress reports and transcripts from the student’s high school experience were examined to see what feedback the student was receiving throughout their high school career. While reviewing the documents, it was necessary to look at how each of the participants performed academically each semester. The school provides students updated progress toward graduation; each six weeks a student receives a progress report, and at the end of each semester, students receive final grades and credits earned. Students must earn approximately 3.25 credits each semester in order to earn enough to graduate from high school with their cohort. A credit is earned by attaining a D- or better for the semester. Students are considered to have a successful semester if they meet these requirements.

The next section discusses the six cases of the participants, which were analyzed individually before being compared through a cross-case analysis. The cases were analyzed by reviewing the documents, followed by the interviews. Finally, the observations were added as the third data set for crystallization (Ellingson, 2009). The within-case analysis provided a descriptive case of each participant’s experience, bringing all of their data together. The themes unique to each case are presented based on each participant’s experience. However, some of the themes are common across the cases.

Case 1 – Pickle

When I met with Pickle for the first time, I was able to speak with him and the intervention teacher with whom he was working for his program. We had not met before the interview, and it was important for him to feel comfortable during this process. As we began to speak, I shared the purpose of my work and why I was working on studying this more in
depth. We then discussed what the experience of the study would be like for him as a participant. Explaining my passion and the study allowed us to begin to build a relationship.

After the initial meeting to discuss the process, I left and followed up by checking in with his intervention teacher two days later to see if he wanted to participate in the study. He agreed to participate. After I reviewed the documents, we set up a time to conduct the interview. I used the interview protocol during the semi-structured interview and asked him about himself and what he liked doing. His regular work, the time he spends with his girlfriend, and school create consistency in his schedule. I could tell he was proud that he worked, and he enjoyed being with his girlfriend. He did not share much information about his other friends or family.

As we discussed what the experience of being part of the study might be like for him, we also discussed his ability to pick a pseudonym to ensure anonymity. Pickle identified a name based on where he works. To preserve his anonymity, I am unable to provide more detail.

Pickle is a senior at one of the comprehensive high schools. Looking through the documents from his high school career, it was apparent he had a very different experience from his ninth grade year compared to others. During his ninth grade year, he passed every class and earned credit in every course in which he was enrolled. Pickle struggled tremendously after his ninth grade year and was not able to build on the success he had experienced during his first year of high school. While he earned seven out of seven credits during his ninth grade year, he earned only 2.5 out of 4 credits possible during the first semester of his tenth grade year. This changed even more dramatically when he did not earn any credits during the second semester of his tenth grade year. The other difference was his
grade point average. During his ninth grade year, he earned about a 2.75 out of a 4.0 grade point average. This would be considered a B- to C+ letter grade equivalent. During his tenth grade year, his grade point average dropped to approximately .6, which would be equivalent to a D- to F letter grade. The teachers made the comment, “not turning in assignments” and “poor attendance” as reasons for the poor grades. His 11th grade year was similar to his second semester of his tenth grade year. He earned only three credits the entire year, which is an insufficient rate to graduate with his cohort.

At the end of his 11th grade year, he began looking at intervention programs designed to support him to graduate. Pickle transitioned into the State Options Program, where he would take the HiSET test through the state of State, which replaced the GED. If he had stayed in traditional classes, it would have taken him at least two more years to graduate by taking classes each semester and earning credits. He would have been nearly 20 years old by the time he would have been able to graduate.

**Caring and supportive relationships.** The theme of relationships is important because it addresses the sub-question, “How do students describe their relationship with peers, teachers and other school personnel?” Quin (2017) found positive relationships in schools helped students in a variety of ways including psychological engagement, academic grades, school attendance, disruptive behaviors, suspension, and dropping out of school. In this section, Pickle’s relationships are described and their impact on his high school academic progress is discussed. *Relationships* with teachers and peers were important to Pickle. He spoke about three specific relationships with adults and peers throughout the interview, and this phenomenon was picked in his observation. He described the interpretive codes of *caring*
adult relationships and supportive peer relationships, and it was apparent these supported him in high school.

This emerged as a theme because Pickle spoke about relationships with three adults and a peer during throughout the interview. The interpretive codes that emerged were caring adult relationship and supportive peer relationship.

The relationships with adults were made with his State Options teacher, a math teacher from his ninth grade year, which continued throughout high school, and an administrative assistant. During the observation, the caring relationship he had with one of the adults about whom he spoke highly was apparent. Pickle described being quiet and reserved during his high school career with little interaction with his peers. The only relationship he discussed frequently was the young lady he was currently dating which was expressed through the interpretive code supportive peer relationship. The observation showed a student who interacted little with anyone in the classroom; he was not overly focused on work and spent at least half the time distracting himself by looking at videos on YouTube and other websites. He rarely spoke with anyone in the classroom, and his only contact was with the educator; but even that interaction was limited to when the educator initiated the contact and conversation.

Adult connections are important for students to be successful which allows them to move beyond just academics by having a reciprocal relationship with an adult (Shiller, 2009). The first person Pickle discussed was his State Options teacher, who regularly checked in on him during class and asked about what was going on outside of the classroom. Pickle had him as a teacher and spent half of every school day with him. During the other half of the day, Pickle was expected to work and turn in his paystubs to verify his working hours. His
connection with this teacher made him want to continue with the State Options Program; the teacher helped him to believe he could finish the program to earn his diploma. He also went above and beyond what teachers have to do:

I’ve always had problems with school, but I felt that the teachers have been really supportive and would always try and help.

Pickle worked closely with his math teacher, of whom he spoke highly throughout his school career. He provided several interactions with her during high school. One of the examples he shared about their caring relationship was:

In Advisory we would work together on the classes I was failing. She was helpful and always let me talk and tell what I felt. She would listen to me and it made a difference.

He felt he had a voice when meeting with her, which drew him close to her. With her, there was interaction and conversation about what was occurring during his educational career. Quin (2017) found a caring relationship with an adult is important and has the greatest impact for students as they transition to high school. This reinforces the need for students to have a strong, caring relationship with adults in high school. The conversation was two-way and allowed him to have a say, and he felt he was being treated as an adult. This connection provided him an ally and gave him a resource if something was challenging during school or outside of school (Mikami et al., 2011).

The other adult interaction Pickle spoke about was a math teacher. He spoke frequently about the effort she made to create a caring connection with him and the effort the teacher made to ask about him as a person and try to get to the source of why he was struggling in school. He talked about what she meant to him:

Since she was my advisory teacher and would see my progress, she would ask me what is going on and if there is a way she can help, but I think I more had an issue of
not feeling confident enough to be able to do it without help. I felt bad for trying to get help and wanted to try and do it by myself, but I just struggled too much.

The teacher was reaching out and wanting to support him, but he was not at a place to accept it. He said it was different than the way other educators spoke with him. Pickle talked about walking in the hall and keeping to himself, while this teacher would always try not only to say good morning and but also ask about what was going on with him outside of school. The teacher would also ask about why he was struggling in school and try to brainstorm ideas to help. During his tenth and 11th grade years, the math class was one of the few classes in which he was successful and passed.

Pickle frequently interacted with the teacher in the classroom by asking questions about his coursework and talk with the teacher about topics not related to coursework. The caring relationship was apparent between the two.

Pickle described the relationship with his girlfriend as a consistent piece of his life. He talked about her always being there to be supportive. He shared he appreciated the support he received from her to keep him on track toward his academic progress.

**Support interventions for graduation.** In this section, I discuss how interventions supported Pickle’s progress towards earning his high school diploma. This was a key theme because it addressed the sub-questions, “What interventions did students experience during their high school career?” and “What choices did students have about the interventions that were implemented to support their work toward graduation?” Both of these questions were designed to learn what participants experienced during their high school career.

Pickle started his ninth grade strong by earning all the credits for the classes he was enrolled in and being on track to graduate after earning seven credits. This changed dramatically during his tenth grade year, when he earned only two and a half credits. No
interventions took place during his tenth grade year, even in the second semester, when he did not earn any credits. This caused him to be considerably behind his cohort of classmates, and there were not enough classes in the school day for him to earn enough credits to graduate.

I just felt like embarrassed since I felt like I was a lot more dumb than everyone else, since everyone else was good at it. I had a hard time.

During his 11th grade year, the school pushed what I coded as school-based interventions. They were described as interventions the school assigned to the students rather than with the student’s input (Lessard et al., 2014). The interventions during Pickle’s 11th grade year fit into the structure already available. The interventions tried during this year were retaking classes he had failed and taking online courses. When I asked what choice he had in selecting the interventions, he told me both were prescribed to him.

They were just like; you are going to take it. You are going to take Plato next year because of this, or you are going to take it in class. They did not really give me much of a choice. I just had to deal with it.

The interventions during his 11th grade year were mixed. He did pass one semester of a course he was retaking, but was not as successful in the other intervention. The online courses did not result in credits obtained. The school-based interventions were not representative of what we know is effective (Maier et al., 2016). DuFour (2010) stated,

Research has made it abundantly clear that putting the least capable and least motivated students together in a class with a curriculum that is less challenging and moves at a slower pace increases the achievement gap and is detrimental to students. (p. 23)

We know educators must focus on how to respond when students do not learn (DuFour et al., 2010). The interventions Pickle experienced were not focused on his personal needs. The response for him was not effective. He did not pass a class during the second
semester of his tenth grade year, and he stayed in all eight classes without any additional support or intervention. After the end of his 11th grade year, it was obvious Pickle was going to need more intense support from the school. This is when student-based interventions emerged from the interview, observation, and document review with the interpretive code flexible/student-focused. Freeman and Simonsen’s (2015) study reinforces the need for flexible and student-focused interventions when the results showed the schools that reported having a high school intervention program only prevented students from dropping out and there was not an impact on supporting students toward graduation.

Pickle described his experience during his 12th grade year as being part of the decision-making process and identifying what intervention would work best for him. These were coded as flexible/student-focused. When asked about why the State Options Program was supportive of his learning, he shared:

After completing the pretest and being told I have an actual chance of being able to complete high school without having to jump through a ton of loopholes, I felt like, for once in my high school career, confident in being able to finish and just the fact that I can actually get a high school diploma.

The intervention options discussed with him are considered Tier 3 interventions (Buffum et al., 2012). This type of intervention is advised when students need to have a different schedule than the traditional school day and require more intense support. These types of interventions many times will reduce the number of students per teacher and the number of teachers the student engages with each day.

This is also when the State Options Program was discussed, and he felt it would fit his learning style and needs. He enjoys working and wanted to work and knew he would be able to pass the HiSET exam successfully. Allowing him to have input in the decision and
determine his intervention made a difference for him. He appreciated being part of solving the problem he had been part of creating. The hole that had been dug was deep, and he wanted to be part of getting himself out of it. His mannerisms changed as he discussed the program and what it meant for him personally and his school. Pickle described his experience:

   I would take three or four different subjects. They were challenging, which was nice that when I came back I could do well, but it just made me feel like I was not bad at what I was doing in school.

Watching him scoot forward in his chair and sit up taller while discussing his education was exciting for me, as an educator, to see. During the observation in Pickle’s State Options class he would spend 30-40 minutes working on a class and then ask the teacher for a short break. After the break he returned straight to work. During the class he was confident.

   Another intervention he spoke about, but which did not occur during his high school career was his Individual Education Plan (IEP) during his elementary and middle school years. Having an IEP would be considered a Tier 3 intervention, which consisted of a student having a written plan for his learning goals and a yearly meeting to discuss progress on those goals (Maier et al., 2016). He described the experience of transitioning from his IEP and having supports available to moving into high school classes without that support as, “I felt like it was just very jarring from one situation to other.” He said it was very challenging and difficult although he performed well during his ninth grade year. He felt the move from being a student with a case manager and an IEP to a student without any type of support made a difference in his education and hurt his ability to be successful.

   Pickle discussed feeling “dumb” when he transitioned to high school when he did not have his IEP and case manager as support. Though he did not remember his case manager’s
name, he did discuss the support they provided, and that it helped to have additional support in classes. He mentioned math in particular was a struggle as he made the transition from middle school to high school. While I have never experienced feeling “dumb,” it is alarming to think a student would feel this way during their first year at a comprehensive high school. This is the first time I had had a conversation with a student who had lost his IEP as he transitioned into high school about how it hurt or helped him.

**Setting and environment.** Setting and environment was a theme that emerged from Pickle’s discussion about what he was experiencing in the classroom and school. This section discusses his experience with setting and environment of the school. This theme assisted in answering the sub-question, “What interventions did students experience during their high school career?” This theme was an important part of understanding interventions because it covers how the students learned the best in the school setting. Comprehensive high schools’ structures and schedules are traditionally developed based on what is comfortable for the majority of students and do not create personalized learning spaces. The discussion of this theme explores the question, what message does the participant have for educators? This section examines Pickle’s discussion of how he learned best during his high school career.

The emerging codes and themes developed from the description of participants having *flexibility* and whether or not they were engaged in the setting. He described his experience with flexibility:

I think having more individual experiences with the teacher in classes would help a lot more instead of just having a ton of kids who are all doing the same thing all the time. It would be better in smaller groups.

Pickle described his experience during his first two years in high school as *teacher-focused*. The *teacher-focused* description encompasses Pickle’s discussion of what the school had in
place and things that were not student-focused or flexible. He explained his teacher-focused experience during his interview:

You are going to take Plato next year because of this, or you are going to take it in class, or you are going to retake it during class. They did not really give me a choice. I just had to deal with it.

Teachers must focus on student mastery and discussion with students instead of working on what works best for teachers or their calendar (DuFour et al., 2010). Teachers must look at essential curriculum that needs to be mastered.

He went to classes each day, just like every other student, and when the bell rang, he would move between classes. The school day looked the same for him as it did for everyone else, and even when he began struggling, the setting and environment remained the same. He did not discuss his environment very much during the interview but did mention feeling distracted in large classrooms with 25 students, and the length of classes was a challenge. For his learning style he suggested:

I think having more individual experiences with the teacher in classes would help and having smaller groups so the teacher can have more time to focus on students.

One of the interesting pieces when analyzing Pickle’s information was the lack of connection with peers, either supportive or destructive. Pickle was not a young person who made connections with his peers, and he discussed being more connected with adults. The lack of connection with a peer over the course of a school day made it a challenge to stay engaged. Students who are engaged in the classroom will have higher achievement in their classes (Shernoff et al., 2016).

He struggled to focus for 70 minutes at a time on one subject. This was apparent during the observation when he struggled to stay focused during his State Options class,
which is about three hours. During the observation I was behind Pickle, so I would not disrupt the classroom:

For 15 minutes he got onto Youtube and began watching music videos and was distracted for the entire time. He basically took a break during the class even though he was not supposed to be disengaged. The teacher had already built in breaks during the class period.

The observation also showed he needed a connection to continue to stay engaged. The connection to the teacher was what assisted him in staying focused on his course work because the teacher encouraged him and helped him. Pickle discussed his interaction with the State Options Teacher:

The class was challenging but he was helpful. He made me feel like I was not bad at what I was doing at school. He gave me support and it helps a lot since he will try and help me.

Again, there was not a connection with a peer in the classroom to help or support his learning. While he made little to no connection with his peers, there was not any conflict with peers, either. This was an interesting dynamic for Pickle and made me think he was someone who could almost disappear in a classroom full of students.

While struggling to stay focused for three hours during his State Options class, he spoke highly of the structure and environment. When he did focus on his work, he was able to track how he progressed through his course work and preparation for the HiSET exam. He would show the teacher his progress on his course work and took a practice exam to see how his score was progressing in preparation for his test. He appreciated that the environment was student-focused with each student working independently and at their own pace. He was able to move about the room, use the restroom, and take a break as needed. The setting made a difference in his high school experience and his belief in his ability to be successful.
Case 2 – Ryan

When Ryan and I began to discuss the process for the study, I asked him what he wanted for his pseudonym, but he was unconcerned with identifying one, so we decided on the name of neighbor I played with growing up. This is unique because it does not make much sense for him to pick someone I knew growing up, but we discussed my neighbor when we were building a relationship and discussing the study. A pseudonym was obviously not high on his list to worry about. We talked about the start of his high school career, and immediately I began to hear about the unique experience he had over the last four and a half years and specifically how it started in his ninth grade year. This section provides a summary of key parts of his experience followed by how the three themes—relationships, setting and environment—and interventions emerged from his documents, interview transcript, and observation transcript. Each of the themes will also be related to the sub-questions of the study.

Ryan had a traumatic experience and spent part of his ninth grade year in a facility outside of the comprehensive high school. He described this experience:

My ex-girlfriend and I broke up and I did not do well after. I was very upset and did not know what to do. I would not leave her alone and did not know how to be away from her because I wanted to be with her still.

This experience created a unique challenge and experience for him, because few students go through this type of experience. He spent a little over a semester in an inpatient facility to support him during his time of crisis.

While in the impatient facility, he took classes and was pushed academically. His most successful semester was at the facility while earning credits through their academic program. He passed all of his classes by earning at least a D in each class, and although he
had a poor GPA, he did pass all of his courses. While he was in the facility, the education setting would be described as a Tier 3 intervention with personalized support in a small classroom (Buffum et al., 2012). The facility was designed with socio-emotional support as its primary purpose and also provided educational support. To protect Ryan’s anonymity, I do not share the name of the facility because it is well known in the area where the study took place.

The other factor that made Ryan’s case unique was his age, 19 years old. He was the oldest participant in the study, so he shared views different from those of the students who had not experienced extending their high school career so much. DePaoli et al. (2018) stated the importance of students graduating in four years because there is no data which suggests extending a high school career to five years improves graduation rates. Ryan was at a point in his career where he just wanted to finish high school and move on with his life. I appreciated that he wanted to attain his high school degree, but I could also sense his angst in wanting to move on.

**Caring and supportive relationships.** As Ryan discussed his relationships with peers and adults, he spoke first of the relationship that caused him to be in an impatient treatment facility, which was a breakup with his girlfriend. Relationships were an important part of Ryan’s school career; he mentioned destructive experiences with peers six times during his interview. He mentioned supportive peer relationships 11 times and caring adult relationships seven times. The interpretive codes that emerged to describe his relationships were supportive peer interaction, destructive peer interaction, caring adult relationships within and outside of academics, and mental health. The concept of emerging relationships was important because it helped answer the sub-question, “How do participants describe their
relationships with peers, teachers, and other school personnel?” The most impactful relationship he spoke of was with peers, the substantial mental anguish it caused him, and how he was unable to cope to move forward from this event.

He was dating a young lady, and when it ended, it went poorly for him with a personal drama and the need for socio-emotional support outside what a comprehensive high school could provide. This had an impact on his education during his ninth grade year. He shared:

Whenever me and my ex broke up, I went through this huge depression. I had to go to (a mental health institute) and a whole bunch of stuff, and then they got a restraining order because of something I did.

While he described this experience, I could see it impacted him considerably, but I sensed he had moved on from the experience and healed. When describing the experience, his shoulders hunched down and he looked down to the ground, but when he discussed moving on, he looked up with his shoulders back. A court action took place which required him to be away from his ex-girlfriend during this time. Besides going to an impatient facility, he also had transferred to a different comprehensive high school so he could ensure he would not be near his ex-girlfriend.

Peer relationships is an important aspect of school and positive or negative correlation with peers is reflected in graduation rates (Mikami et al., 2011). Students with positive peer relationships have higher graduation rates than those who do not have positive relationships with peers. He described the influence of his girlfriend by explaining how she has changed his sleeping habits:

She is weird. She is like “I do not want you awake while I am asleep.” I am like okay whatever, so I go to bed at 10 every night which is not something I have ever done before. We keep the same schedule as each other.
Ryan did not discuss many other relationships with his peers. While not having concerns with peers, he also was not close to many peers. The only other meaningful peer relationship he discussed that was not with a girlfriend was with two friends he hung out with, but he said he always had a small circle of friends during his high school career. He spent a lot of time with those two friends, but he did not describe whether it impacted his school experience positively or negatively. He simply stated they were friends.

The peer relationship he spoke about that made a positive difference was his current girlfriend, with whom he has become close. His girlfriend is studious and is finishing high school herself and making him follow her schedule. He said he had always struggled with going to bed early and getting up to go to school on time. She told him to go to bed at 10:00 p.m. each night and get up at 6:00 a.m. to ensure they were ready to attend school each day. She regularly checks on his progress and make sure he continues to move forward toward his goal of graduation. I believe the current relationship allowed him to openly talk about the breakup from ninth grade. He described her as being a “steady and consistent” part of his life.

Ryan discussed several adult relationships, one of which had a negative impact on his high school experience; however, it led to a caring adult relationship that helped him discover his personal learning style. While a tenth grader, he had a teacher whom he described as looking upset when he raised his hand to ask questions, who would encourage him to leave the room and go to the Intervention Room, and whom he described as uncaring. She would describe the teacher telling him:

Yeah, she was like, you should go down to the Intervention Room since you are behind, and I was like okay, and then I would basically stay down there. Well because I work better down there, a bit more by myself than in the class because I am kind of the class clown, or I used to be.
The Intervention Room was a place a student could go to receive additional support if they were struggling in a class. To watch a student describe a teacher as uncaring was concerning. Not every student will have a deep relationship with every teacher, but for a student to perceive a teacher as uncaring is unnerving. The positive outcome of this situation was the caring relationship he built with an educator in the Intervention Room. He described his relationship with the intervention teacher:

The (teacher in intervention) was probably the only person I got close with, yeah. She is really laid back. She just did not really like, was not strict, I guess. I have a problem with authority and I never had a problem with her.

This relationship was transformational to the little success he had during his tenth and 11th grade years. He used her as a resource and support when he was feeling stressed or needed additional support. While he was in the Intervention Room, there were times when they discussed math or English but many other times when she simply checked in on him to see how he was progressing personally.

When I went to Intervention Room she would always check on me and make sure I was okay. It was not always about classes or what grades I had. She wanted to make sure I was okay.

This type of connection allowed him to bring his voice to the educational space, which is an important part of the education process for students (Friend & Caruthers, 2015). Ryan also liked the Intervention Room because it was a smaller, more personalized space where he would work at his own pace, and he appreciated the additional support.

**Setting and environment.** The next theme to emerge out of Ryan’s experience was his discussion of the setting and environment. The sub-questions, “How do students describe their relationships with peers, teachers, and other school personnel?” and “What choices did
students have about the interventions which were implemented to support their work toward graduation?” were answered based on his responses. The interpretive codes that emerged from Ryan’s experience were *engaged, flexibility,* and *teacher-focused.* He spoke about how uncomfortable he was in a traditional classroom setting with 25 to 35 students. He repeatedly talked about how distracted he was in a large class setting and his inability to focus on his class work. He described one class in the following way:

And our flex classes have been really crowded, like it with 30 students………and our Psychology class had like 40 students. I could not get focused and keep up with the work. I always felt like I was behind and could not get caught up.

While not discussing having any peer conflict, he also spoke about a small circle of close peers, so I am not sure how he interacted with others in the classroom.

When describing his high school experience, Ryan talked about the setting of the Intervention Room being a perfect fit for him. He said:

I preferred going down to the Intervention Room where it is not the quiet room (In School Suspension Room) but where it is small, like 10 or 15 people in there, max. It helped me catch up with my credits, because I was behind, and I only had 8 credits.

The room supported Ryan because there were two educators in the room, both of whom cared about him outside of just his academic progress. Educators who engage students will support students during their academic achievement (Shernoff et al., 2016). He made a connection with the physical setting and would go there to decompress and focus on his academics. He talked about how student-centered it was and that he had the ability to work at his own pace. The Intervention Room was a resource he was able to access during all of his classes.

After several years of trying to work through his high school career, he began to look at different programs that would support him toward graduation and shorten the time it would
take him to graduate. Knowing the type of learning setting and environment he preferred, he was able to discuss programs and identify the one that best fit. As he learned about different options, he focused on an environment that was student-focused, provided flexibility, had caring adults, and did not require a lot of interaction with peers. Peer relationships were not a priority during his high school career. When he transitioned to HSAP, he knew he needed help:

But the this is, I had all Core class credits to do, so I would have had to take two math, two English, two science, and two algebra classes if I did not go. I had other credits had to take too. I wanted a smaller environment.

Looking through all of these options, he felt the High School Alternative Program (HSAP) would best fit his needs. This program allowed him to work at his own pace on online courses through Plato.

The Plato program is set up as a three-hour-per-day program where students work on the modules in a small learning environment with other students. Students are able to move through courses based on mastery and credits they need to earn to graduate. Two teachers support the 20–22 students in the classroom; the personalization they provide is an important part of the setting. The educators in the program are not only content experts; they are student-centered teachers who understand it is important to provide socio-emotional support to the students. The relationship between students and adults is integral in the learning process, and students also want to have strong relationships with adults (Wiseman, 2012).

Ryan has thrived in the smaller learning environment where he has limited interaction with his classmates and teachers. He has enjoyed the flexible environment where he works at his own pace and can see himself earning a diploma. Most importantly, he discussed having hope and knowing he would soon graduate with a diploma. While he feels it is challenging
being a 19-year-old in high school, this program is a good fit for him. He does not believe he would have been able to return to a comprehensive high school and finish traditionally.

Support interventions for graduation. As I worked through the information from Ryan, the next codes that emerged were from his discussion of interventions. The codes were school-based, flexible/student-focused, socio-emotional support, and HSAP. The codes helped answer the sub-questions, “What interventions did students experience in high school?” and “What choices did students have about the interventions that were implemented to support their work toward graduation?” During his high school career, Ryan experienced what could only be described as one of the highest ranges of support by going to an impatient facility because he needed that type of intervention. His statement during the interview reinforced the difference it made to him:

Whenever me and my ex broke up, I went through this huge depression. I have to go to a (treatment facility) and whole bunch of stuff, and then they got a restraining order because of something I did.

School districts do not have the ability to provide students this type of intervention. The facility he went to did provide an education while he was receiving the support he needed. He described the education in the facility as superficial compared to the level he experienced in the comprehensive high school; however, it did keep him from getting too far behind.

The intervention Ryan experienced in high school and one he felt was helpful to him personally was working in the Intervention Room. While this was school-based because it was built within the structure of the school, it was student-centered and flexible. He shared during his interview:

I like Plato a lot because I can do stuff at my own pace, and I do not have to worry about like, I do not know, deadlines, I guess. I also could work at home when I wanted and did not have to work only at school.
He was able to work at his own pace and work on whatever course he needed to when he was in the room. The connection he made with the educator also was an important intervention, because she encouraged him and pushed him to continue working on his course work. When he spoke about this intervention, I could see it was a resource to him academically and emotionally. After the powerful socio-emotional event he went through early in his high school career, he needed a place he could go for support.

One of the gaps we discussed and that I saw in his documents was the lack of intervention when he transferred schools. One of the biggest challenges he discussed was trying to get to school:

And for (school A) I had to have my own ride to school, because the bus did not come to my house, since I lived in (school B) district (school zone), the bus would not pick me up. So, if I could not find somebody to pick me up in the I could not get to school.

This was his third educational setting in his high school career. During the time in his new setting, he was unable to connect with any adults or students. This lack of connection hurt him academically and socio-emotionally. He stopped going to school because there was no connection to pull him there or someone to check on him regularly. The new comprehensive high school was similar to the previous school in the same district. The school had 1,700 people to speak with and work with. This was a challenge, and he essentially stopped attending school. When he talked about the transition, he said he did not fault the new school for anything that occurred. He felt it was a hard situation for him personally, and the transition was not successful for him. He was complimentary of the school and how teachers worked with him to place him with HSAP.
As he transitioned to HSAP, he was able to find an intervention that supported him and helped him see the light at the end of the tunnel—earning his diploma. During the observation it was apparent he was in an environment he felt comfortable in:

During the observation he would be focused and working on his courses. He did not interact a lot with the teachers in the classroom but when he did need help, he would ask. He was able to move around the room and interact on a regular basis.

Tier 3 intervention was based on his needs and learning style, which is what he needed (Buffum et al., 2012). He received support to make the transition from the traditional school-based schedule to HSAP, where he was in a more student-centered and flexible environment. He especially liked the individual pace at which a person could move if they mastered the content:

You do a pre-test and you kind of know what you are going to be going, and you end up knowing all the stuff on the pre-test. You do not have to worry about learning it again like you would at school.

When discussing his experience at HSAP, he talked about having socio-emotional support even though he did not make deep relationships with his peers or the educators who worked with the program. He appreciated the flexibility the program allowed, because he was able to work on the online course based on what he wanted to get done while the educators checked in on him regularly and made sure he was focused on his diploma and finishing his work.

**Case 3 – Blimpie**

Blimpie had a different experience than any of the other participants in this case study. This section reveals her experiences in school and her struggles in a comprehensive high school. This case also discusses her transition to experience success and being able to move toward earning her high school diploma. She had struggled since her first semester during her ninth grade year. The documents showed she had never earned a passing grade in
more than three classes during a semester. This means she was failing more than half of her classes every semester. After attending high school for five months, she was already behind, and after her first year of high school, she was so far behind there was little hope she could recover and graduate with her cohort. During the second semester of her first year of high school, the only course she passed was Weight Training & Conditioning. She did not pass a math, English, history, or science course. As she transitioned into her tenth grade year, she started to receive support from interventions but did not experience any more success. The school-based intervention did not provide the support she needed to experience success.

When Blimpie thought about what she wanted as a pseudonym, she chose something that could be used to identify her. For the sake of anonymity, further information will not be given.

Blimpie experienced a considerable amount of drama with her peers during her high school career. She discussed having a lot of destructive peer interaction through social media, in hallways, and outside of school with peers with the same group of young ladies. When asked, “How would you describe your relationship with peers?” she responded, “Horrible.” In this context, drama is considered making personal attacks against a peer. During her discussion she never considered it bullying or that she was being singled out. Her small group of friends and the other young ladies had a mutual dislike between each other. The people in the two groups switched between them, while continuing to create drama with each other. This drama continued the entire time she was in the comprehensive high school but not while she was attending HSAP. She spent a large amount of time communicating back and forth with the other group of young ladies, and the social media exchanges occurred at all times during the day. In my experience, social media and texting allows young people to
communicate with greater intensity than when young people are face-to-face talking to each other.

When Blimpie and I began discussing her experience, the first thing she mentioned was wanting to be a nurse. She was excited talking about the possibility of earning her nursing degree and the steps she was going to take to earn the degree. Her eyebrows raised, she inched forward in her seat, and I could see her excitement about the idea of being a nurse. When asked about her future, she shared:

CRN is a certified registered nurse. The CNT is a certified nurse technician and actually my friend gave me her big binder of all her stuff because she already took her test, so I am studying that big book of future plans. And then she is not done nursing, she is not doing her nursing degree yet, but she is already working in King City hospital, which I mean is cool because once I take these test I can work at hospital even though I do not have my nursing degree yet, but I think that is cool.

She gave credit to the HSAP program that provided her a chance to graduate. Without an intervention, she would probably have had to attend seven years of high school. There is not any data which supports a student’s extended high school career and an increased likelihood to earn a diploma. Students who are 20 or 21 years old should not be expected to attend school with 14-year-olds. The intervention truly made the difference in this young person’s life.

**Caring and supportive relationships.** This section discusses how relationships impacted Blimpie’s high school progress. Specifically, this looks at the question of how relationships with peers, teachers, and other school personnel impacted her progress in high school. The first theme I discovered in Blimpie’s interview and observation was relationships. The interpretive codes associated with this theme were destructive peer relationships, supportive peer relationship, caring adult relationship, and bullying. I asked
her how she would describe her experience with peers while in high school. Her response was:

   Horrible, just their attitude towards everything like the big picture. They did not care about graduating high school or getting in trouble and people that I hung out with all the time would get into trouble and they would bring me down as well.

This was alarming but also telling as she described her experience. She was associating with a peer group who did not care about school or graduating and were always trying to find a way to create conflict with peers. In addition to discussing being part of a group not focusing on education and creating conflict within school, Blimpie discussed social media and how it negatively impacted her peer interaction at school; they bullied her constantly through the medium. She talked about how social media allowed students to interact 24/7 and without a filter. She spent hours each day engaged in this destructive interaction, and she said it frequently distracted her from her work. She was constantly checking her social media and being bullied through it. Research has shown positive peer interaction can have a positive impact on student academic success (Mikami et al., 2011). Blimpie acknowledged she was creating a situation in which it was more difficult for her to be successful in high school because of the interactions she was having with her peers.

   As I continued to analyze the observation and interview information from Blimpie, it became apparent how important adults were to her successfully completing high school and earning her diploma. She described multiple positive adult relationships, including one she described as being her “school mom” and another in which she had built a relationship with an adult over seven years because they had transitioned between middle and high school at the same time. When talking about her “school mom,” she shared:
She would get onto me every time I missed class, or I was late to school which I was pretty much late every day because I am not a morning person and have not been since I was in elementary school.

While in high school, she interacted with multiple adults who kept her moving forward and engaged in the school rather than dropping out. Positive educator relationships are a key to the success of students, creating an environment for students to be successful (Shiller, 2009).

She explained her connection with one of her administrators:

The administrator, even though he is not a teacher he was one of my middle school principals as well and he encouraged me to keep going and not stop. I mean he, what is the word I know, he is a big helper.

I believe her adult relationships were the only reason she stayed engaged in school, because the feedback she was getting academically would not have kept her engaged. She was not making any significant progress toward graduation.

As Blimpie was talking about her “school mom,” I could see the difference this person—who was not a teacher but an administrative assistant—had made with her. Blimpie said if she missed a day of school or showed up late for school, her “school mom” was always checking in:

Even though my mom had already lectured me, my “school mom” lectured me as well, which was okay with me because I needed it.

Even though she was not successful academically, she had connections in the building that encouraged her to continue to show up each day. Blimpie did not want to disappoint her “school mom” because she knew how much she cared about her personally, and the relationship was about more than school.

An educator worked with her through all of her middle and high school careers, and both of them transitioned from middle to high school at the same time. She talked
passionately about how he would check in her on but also hold her accountable. He would push her and not accept her excuses when she tried to explain her way out of situations. He engaged her in the classroom and support her learning (Shernoff et al., 2016). Having a voice in these conversations was something she valued about their relationships because it was not something she had experienced in all interactions with educators. Research affirms how important this is for young adults (Friend & Caruthers, 2015). This relationship extended beyond academics to support her socio-emotionally as well. The educator genuinely cared about Blimpie as a person and wanted her to be successful.

She eventually transitioned into the High School Alternative Program through her comprehensive high school as an intervention. When she was placed in this three-hour program, she was able to earn the credits she needed to graduate. As she transitioned into the program, her peer relationships completely flipped from her experience in high school. While she interacted with approximately 20 students, she described all of them as supportive, and she even felt she was a person who encouraged her peers and they encouraged her as well. During her observation it was apparent she enjoyed the relationship:

When students would get off task, she would redirect them and encourage them to keep going. It was a different conversation than what the students received from the teachers because it was a peer. It also was not negative and focused on supporting and encouraging.

She enjoyed having such supportive peer relationships, which she had not experienced in the traditional high school setting. While in the program she had an adult champion as well. This person checked in on her socio-emotionally and also encouraged her and expected her to move forward academically. She said her peers and the adult connection made the difference in her being able to successfully complete HSAP.
Support interventions for graduation. Blimpie’s data answered the sub-questions, “What interventions did students experience during their high school career?” and “What choice did the students have in their high school career?” This section discusses how Blimpie experienced interventions during her high school career. One piece that emerged from Blimpie’s documents, interview, and observation was that interventions were provided early and throughout her high school career. This was apparent in the codes school-based, flexible/student-focused, and HSAP. She began struggling in school during her first semester in high school and never made much progress until she started receiving support from interventions. While she was in the comprehensive high school, she received a variety of interventions, but they were largely school-based versus student-focused (DuFour et al., 2010). The school-based intervention in which she found success was taking courses in which she had not been successful through Plato, an online resource. During the observation, Blimpie:

Worked independently with support when she requested it. She would move between classes on the computer and work throughout the session. The teachers came and checked on her but the majority of she was perfectly happy working alone. She also helped out students sitting around her.

While the interventions were school-based, they did support Blimpie with her academics, but they were not helping at the rate she would need to graduate from high school with her cohort. She was not earning a sufficient number of credits, and she was going to need Tier 3 support (Maier et al., 2016). During the second semester of her tenth grade year, she passed three courses using the school’s intervention. The problem was she failed all of her traditional courses in the comprehensive high school. At the end of her tenth year of school, she had earned four credits toward the graduation requirement of 24 total credits. Of
the four credits she had earned, 1.5 credits were earned working through an intervention. She had earned only 2.5 credits through traditional classes over the course of two years at her comprehensive high school. At this rate of earning credits, she would age out of high school at 21 per state law.

While she did experience some academic success working through Plato, she also spoke about an intervention in which she received socio-emotional support. She found support in the Intervention Room, which had a flexible, unstructured environment. She said:

I would go to the Intervention Room mainly because I could not deal with people and teachers. The loudness and rowdiness I could not handle it. I had a hard enough time concentrating anyways.

This intervention was also effective because of the socio-emotional support she received from the educators in the classroom. She said both educators would give her space and allow her to gather herself when she was stressed at school. There were times when she needed a space to be away from the peer conflict she was experiencing and sometimes creating in the school. While the Intervention Room helped her stay positively connected to the school and to the adults in the school, it did not assist her academically.

During her 11th grade year, her relationship with the educator who had been working with her for seven years truly began to influence her academic progress. He knew Blimpie’s prospects for graduating were dim and she was in need an intervention in order to move forward academically and graduate. She shared about their conversation:

He pretty much told me I need to get my (stuff) together or I was not going to graduate. So, I was determined to get my (stuff) together and graduate.

Blimpie and he decided to sit down and dig deep into what would be the best fit for her to be successful academically and lay out a plan to successfully complete high school. This
student-focused approach was different from the interventions in which she had been engaged previously. They began to discuss what she wanted—something that was flexible for her as a learner while being more unstructured compared to what she had experienced in the comprehensive high school. As Blimpie and the administrator began to look at different programs, she chose to work at the school’s High School Alternative Program. Blimpie attended HSAP as a first semester 11th grader, which is unique. Most students are second semester 11th graders or 12th graders. Moving into the program earlier demonstrated the level of support she needed to be successful.

With HSAP as her chosen intervention, she was excited to transition into the program. The program within the school was a smaller setting of about 20 to 22 students with two educators. There was also flexibility when she attended because there were several sessions:

There was times I was late to the middle session or whatever and the teacher told me just to come to any session to make sure I was getting stuff done. Which I thought was cool because that was not really like my session or whatever.

The students worked on a mastery-based online program to earn enough credits in order to graduate. As she began the program, she took on an interesting role and one she had not experienced in the comprehensive high school setting. In this intervention she was a leader with her peers who made sure to check up on them and keep the class moving forward. This is the only time she had been considered an academic leader, and it was something she was proud to discuss.

Besides being a leader in the program she immediately found success academically. Through the mastery-based program she was earning credits at a much greater pace than she ever had. During her 11th grade year her documents showed she earned four credits, which
equaled the number of credits she had earned during the previous two years. The documents continued to show her earning credits and experience academic success more quickly than she ever had before during her high school career. While this was a great start in HSAP, she still had work to do in order to graduate. Even while doubling the number of credits she completed, she knew she needed to focus during the upcoming semesters so she could graduate. During her 12th grade year, she continued as a leader in the classroom and wanted all of the students to be successful in the program. While she needed to extend her high school career past her cohort, she was able to graduate and complete her high school degree. Her individual needs led her to a Tier 3 intervention that was student-focused and flexible.

She gave credit to the socio-emotional and academic support she received during her high school career in order to graduate. There were times she wanted to drop out and move on with her life, even though she knew a high school diploma would help her future. The ability to move into a program which fit her need for an unstructured, flexible learning space that was student-focused made the difference in her ability to complete high school. She described the flexibility of the program during her time at HSAP:

> If I had a doctor’s appointment or whatever I mean I would go in the earlier time, or if I did not wake up on time I would go in a later session. If I ever arrived late they would let me stay longer than my session so I could get my work done which was cool.

I do not believe she would have completed high school without HSAP as an intervention.

**Setting and environment.** Blimpie struggled from the start of her comprehensive high school experience. The circumstances where she experienced success demonstrate why setting and environment was a theme. Setting and environment emerged in all three sources of data: interview, documents and observation. The theme supported answering the sub-
questions, “What message did participants provide to educators to encourage students to stay in school and progress toward graduation?” and “What choices did students have about the interventions that were implemented to support their work toward graduation?” The codes that emerged were flexibility, teacher-focused, distracted, and engaged. From the beginning of her career in high school, Blimpie was not successful in a comprehensive high school, which she described as structured and distracting because of all of the students and drama she experienced with peers. The documents showed when she attended a traditional high school classroom, she earned only one passing grade—in Health class. The other classes she passed in traditional high school coursework were physical education courses and one art course. The setting and environment of a traditional comprehensive high school would not fit her learning style.

When I asked Blimpie about her experience in the traditional high school, she said she was distracted by peers, and the conflict with them was a major component. She did not like the traditional classroom setting with eight different teachers over two days and 30 students in the classroom. She shared one story about why she now “hates” reading and has not read a book cover-to-cover since third grade.

I used to love reading like kindergarten up to third grade I used to love it. I hate reading now, I hate it. My teacher that I had for that class told me that I could not read ahead in the group book that we were reading and I would just not even think about it and I would continue reading and I got in trouble multiple times for that. During third grade she would many times read ahead and be in front of the required reading for the book the class was reading, but her teacher did not like this and told her she was not allowed to do this anymore. This situation caused her to not only be turned off from reading but also from school.
She described a caring experience in a comprehensive high school when she had a teacher who would come and work with her one-on-one. She said she needed to have her teacher sit with her as she worked on the assignment, and she needed that individual support to be successful. She stayed engaged when she had a teacher available to work with her closely. She described a teacher at HSAP and the support she received as:

Yeah and something she would just sit next to me and go through the questions with me and help me as I answered them. I mean it was good to have her with me.

The challenge with this kind of support was there were at least 25 students in the classroom who were not receiving support. This made it easier for her to be distracted. When the teacher went to work with other students in the classroom, she would shut down and stop working. The teacher-focused environment did not help her academically.

She was most successful in the intervention environment, which was flexible and individual-based. She was able to have choice in what she was working on as well. She was able to work on the academic assignments she needed to in the intervention setting, which helped her focus. The flexibility allowed her to work on the classes she needed to focus on rather than the class she was assigned to during the time period. She described it during the interview:

Like the schools says class is here, school starts at this time and finishes at a certain time, classes start and end and I have different classes every other day. It did not fit the way I learn and concentrate. I would just get really excited to go home and have the day done so I would not really concentrate.

The relationships she had with the adults and peers in the setting made a difference in how she performed in school. When describing HSAP, she discussed being a leader and motivator in the classroom setting versus being distracted by peers in the traditional high school setting.
Case 4 – DB

As I built a relationship with DB by discussing the research study and the purpose of the study, he grew more relaxed and discussed details about his specific experiences in high school. This section presents the information he provided during the interview and observation process and the information obtained from his documents. He selected his pseudonym by identifying the initials of people he relies on and can trust. When he spoke about the initials of the people he used, I could see in his mannerisms how much they meant to him. He was expressive when speaking about them and shared specific reasons they impacted his life. DB’s experience for the first 2½ years of his high school career would by most observers be considered normal. He documents showed he was ahead of many peers and was on pace to graduate with this cohort. He was progressing academically with no real concerns. He was passing all of his classes and even working ahead during some semesters by earning extra credits through online courses. There is little doubt he was going to graduate with his cohort and even had a chance to graduate a semester early if he had continued to take extra credits and pass all of the classes in which he was enrolled.

During the second semester of his 11th grade year, something significantly changed for him that will impact the rest of his life. During this semester he found out he was going to be a father. This changed DB’s thought process and entire world. During the previous years he was involved in extra-curricular activities and enjoyed competing outside school hours for the football team. With this change in his life, his priorities changed. The priority of working on his academics quickly changed to his new family and their immediate and future needs. An obligation to family can have a negative impact on a student and their academic achievement (Tseng, 2004). This is something I have seen specifically when I was a teacher.
DB focused on being present for his child and providing emotionally and financially for the needs of the child. With his new priorities, he began to work more to support his child, but this came at the expense of his high school career. He began missing classes frequently, and he went from having success in every class to passing only three classes out of eight and having a grade point average under 1.0.

**Caring and supportive relationships.** The first theme that emerged for DB was relationships. The themes that emerged from the interpretive codes were *supportive peer and caring adult*. His responses to the interview and information recorded during his observation helped answer the sub-questions, “How do students describe their relationships with peers, teachers, and other school personnel?” and “What interventions did students experience during their high school career?” When reviewing the observation and interview with DB, it was interesting to note he had little interaction with his peers. When asked about his friends, he shared:

> Like when I walked through the halls and I see certain people, I like of course I will speak to them. Other than that, it was just class. Most I consider acquaintances, but I have a few people I consider as brother and sister, just a few. Some were in my grade level. Some went to a different school.

He preferred to keep to himself during school and would have limited interaction in the hallway and classroom. When he walked down the halls with his peers, he would say hi and interact, but he considered only two of his peers at school to be close friends. His small group of close friends was made up of those both inside and outside of school. He never searched to expand his friend group or number of friends in school because he liked his current friends and did not feel the need to add to it. He discussed not liking to walk down the hallway with 1,500 peers, but it did not cause him angst or cause him to miss school.
When DB described the most important relationship, I could see him light up in an entirely different way. He talked about his child with pride. He changed his focus from school and his academic progress to ensuring his child was taken care of. DB described it as follows:

When [my child] was born, I don’t know how to put this but when [my child] was born I would have to make it a priority to get up every morning, get myself ready, say good-bye to [my child] and go to school. I would just sit in class thinking about [my child], the whole time thinking I just want to go home. That really took my mindset off of school and it changed my whole mindset of because since I am a father, I felt like I have to provide for my daughter and mother, which made me get a job.

This relationship is the prism through which he looks at the world. He will always take into consideration what is best for his child and child’s mom when making decisions. Taking care of his child’s mom is one of the main reasons he disengaged in school. This was the most important peer relationship in his high school career.

He spoke most fondly of his caring relationships with adults during his high school career. He felt the relationship he built with his counselor was meaningful. He worked with her through a variety of situations during his time at high school. She supported him when he was struggling in a class and looking for a change in schedule and when he found he was going to become a father (Tseng, 2004). He described their interactions almost as a partnership in which they discussed options and identified the best one for him.

She is just always trying to help me figure out what classes I need, how I should go about getting to my classes. She is part of the reason why, like I had good attendance. I at least tried to keep my grades above a C. So, she just motivated me and now she gave me the opportunity to come (to HSAP).

He appreciated being able to share the personal things going on in his life and work together to ensure he would graduate. Bringing his voice to the conversation was important to him, and he valued this opportunity with his counselor (Caruthers & Friend, 2015).
The caring relationship with his math teacher from his ninth grade year was one he valued. She was a teacher who took an interest in him and built a relationship with him beyond the academic side of school. The interactions they had in the hallway, during which she checked on him personally, were important to him. Research reveals that relationships with adults can positively impact student achievement levels (Wilkins, 2014). DB physically changed when he spoke about his relationship with his math teacher. His eyes widened and he leaned forward. The relationship was important to him, and he shared:

She helped me out a lot like for stuff I did not understand or if I had questions about Algebra I, I would go to her and be like, “Hey, how do you solve this,” or “How do you do this” and she will help me. [In the halls] even if I did not acknowledge myself and say hi to her, whatever, she would always say hi.

The powerful relationship started at the beginning of his ninth grade year and continued throughout his high school career. A simple cordial greeting in the hallway followed by a question about how everything was going meant so much for this young person.

I believe as educators we do not always realize the difference we make in young people’s lives. Treating them as young adults who have personal stories is important. We must do our part in understanding each student’s personal story and history (Banks, 2005). From the way DB described both of these relationships, it was obvious he valued both connections and relied on them to be successful in school. When he learned he would be a father, through the support system that he had built during his previous years in school, he was able to earn his high school diploma.

**Setting and environment.** When DB described the learning setting he preferred, the codes that emerged were flexibility and engaged. Setting and environment helped answer the questions, “What message did participants provide to educators to encourage students to stay
in school and progress toward graduation?” While he was in the comprehensive high school, he did not prefer to interact with 1,500 other students and 150 adults each day. He explained firmly that he preferred a smaller setting where he could interact with fewer people. During the interview he stated:

I was actually pretty shy, believe it or not. I just do not do well around large groups. I mean, playing [a sport] is nothing because I am in my own zone, but as far as being in a tiny hallway where there is probably thousands of people walking around and bumping into each other, getting close, I do not know. I just do not do well with that type of stuff.

This would be similar to the structure of his friends’ group, which was a small, tight set of friends with whom he was close throughout his high school career.

When he was in school, DB described the environment he preferred as flexibility. He thrived in settings in which he had the ability to have flexibility and freedom. DB did not describe the setting as a free-for-all but an environment in which the student had choice in what they were working on and the way they were learning. During the observation it was obvious DB enjoyed the setting:

He came in and worked on his assignments right away. He came in and worked on his assignments and was able to change between classes if he wanted. He worked on a class for 45 minutes, took a break and then came right back working on the same class. He was determined to finish his class work.

This environment kept him engaged in his work. While this was the environment he preferred, DB was successful in every environment. Until he discovered he was going to be a father, he was ahead of where he needed to be to graduate with his cohort and even would have had the option to graduate early. The documents showed during his first two and a half years of school, he was successful, earning all of his credits and maintaining a grade point average of over 2.5. During the second semester of his tenth grade year, he earned 4.5 credits.
when most students would have earned a maximum of four credits; he chose to take an online course on top of the classes he took during the school day. He showed he was able to be successful in the traditional comprehensive high school and taking online courses. DB’s case was unique because he was able to thrive in a variety of settings and environment. Being able to create flexible learning opportunities based on learning styles of students will create greater academic achievement (Buffum et al., 2012). DB wants comprehensive high schools to have different settings and environments for students so each one can find a setting that meets their needs. During the interview his advice for educators was:

I do not want to say do not give homework, but that is one of the issues because we have four classes a day and each teacher gives out homework, that is pretty much a big packet of homework to do in one night. It would be different if it was more like self-taught. I do not know how other students or teacher do, how well they do like this self-teaching but it was a great advantage for me.

**Support interventions for graduation.** DB’s response assisted in answering the question, “What choices did students have about the interventions which were implemented to support their work toward graduation?” Intervention emerged because having a child created a new reality and new priorities. DB was having what many would describe as a typical high school experience working through his classes, earning credits, and progressing toward graduation at a faster rate than most students. He was engaged in school and working well in the comprehensive high school. He did not need any interventions academically during his first two and half years of high school. He did receive socio-emotional support from two adults at the school and he did have an IEP, but he did not have a need for additional support. The interpretive codes which emerged for DB were *IEP, socio-emotional support, flexibility, and HSAP.*
DB’s experience was divided into before and after becoming a father; he needed two entirely different support structures. Before becoming a father, DB would have been considered a Tier 1 student who received a viable curriculum and teachers who were focused on student learning by following the four big questions: What do we want students to learn, how will we know if they learned it, what will we do when they do not learn it, and what will we do when they do learn it (Buffum et al., 2012; DuFour et al., 2010). Once he became a father, his educational needs changed, largely based on his family needs. DB went from a Tier 1 student, in which nearly 80% of the students in the school are placed, to a Tier 3 student, where about 5% of the students are categorized (Buffum et al., 2012).

When he became a father, he stopped going to school on a regular basis and focused on working and on being present for his child and his child’s mother. He was missing school one or more days every week, and it was apparent he was not going to be successful attending school 80% of the time. His performance declined from passing all of his classes and maintaining a 2.5 grade point average to failing five classes and barely passing two classes. He was distracted and focused on taking care of his new family. During the observation he showed he was able to balance school and family:

While observing DB took a phone call from his child’s mother to make sure they had everything taken care of at home. I listened to him discuss the plan, confirm actions taking place and then was able to return back to work. He also knew he had another hour before he would be returning home.

DB needed support and a specialized intervention based on his needs in order to be successful (DuFour et al., 2010). His needs were not caused by a learning disability and did not develop over time through peer or adult relationships. A major change in his personal life created the need for a higher level of support.
As his needs changed, his counselor supported him and identified what he needed. As he, his counselor and another educator discussed options, they determined that he needed a flexible learning environment where he could earn credits quickly in order to graduate. He needed someone to work with him and provide socio-emotional support because he was not achieving like had before he became a father. They decided the High School Alternative Program would be the best fit, because he would have the flexibility to be able to work full-time and go to school for three hours a day while earning credits. During the interview process he stated when he decided on HSAP:

It was half and half. It was me and my counselor we decided on it because I could not keep up.

The program was flexible and allowed him to focus and prioritize his child’s and the mother’s needs. As he transitioned to HSAP, he was able to get a second job to earn more money for his family and attend school for about three hours a day. He went to school in the morning and then worked the rest of the day. During the interview he described his experience:

Coming in for a few hours a day knowing that I have a couple of hours to get as much work done as I possibly can, but at the same time knowing I can go home and do some of this stuff, that it would probably take me all day to do [in a comprehensive high school]. I do not know, just knowing that I can come at a different time than regular high school start and get done with a class instead of taking the whole semester, I do not know, it definitely comforts me.

He was able to move through this program quickly, and even though he received a high school diploma, he received a “passing” grade instead of receiving the traditional letter grade.

I was not aware of another intervention he had received until I reviewed his documents; he did have an Individual Education Plan because he had a learning disability.
noticed this because he had earned a credit during a semester in a course which is only accessible to students with an IEP. DB had not mentioned this course or having a case manager to support his learning, but it was apparent in his documents that he had received this additional support. This was interesting, because most students would have discussed having this support system or individual support. Perhaps he did not need to rely on the IEP and was able to transition without needing the support. He did not request or access any additional support while in HSAP through his high school.

DB’s case was unique because he would have been considered a typical student who was moving along high school at an advanced rate. He was ahead in credits and would have been able to graduate before his cohort by taking extra classes during his tenth grade year. His life changed for when he found out he was going to be a father, which caused him to reprioritize his life. He focused on his child and child’s mother and took steps to ensure they would be taken care of in the future. This greatly impacted his academics, because he was choosing to work and focus on them instead of going to classes on a regular basis. Because he had a strong connection with his counselor, they were able to work together to find a way for him to progress and earn his high school diploma.

**Case 5 – Victoria**

Victoria’s documents, interview, and observation revealed a contrast in several pieces of her experience. She described having a close relationship with a teacher who provided her socio-emotional support. She saw this teacher in class and in a co-curricular activity. They would spend at least an hour per day together during the school year for practices and classes. During the summer there were camps for the co-curricular activity. She described her experience during the interview:
We all kind of stuck together. It was kind of funny because we all had classes together, but I was kind of nervous going into some classes and trying to make new friends, and talking to other people, but I just kind of first understand the person, and then approach them that way. Just kind of ease my way into a friendship with other peers.

Victoria and the teacher would spend weeks each summer in the activity group. The time they spent together helped grow their relationship. Victoria depended on their relationship for the socio-emotional support she needed. The teacher was an adult she trusted. The socio-emotional distress caused by being bullied did not occur just when she saw her peers in the hallway or in class; it was also in constant messaging and interaction over social media at all times of the day and night. This section discusses the relationship support Victoria needed, how these relationships supported her, and why she needed interventions to support her academic success in high school.

In order to help build a relationship with Victoria, I asked her what pseudonym she would like to use. The question had barely been presented before she said Victoria. When I asked why she chose this name, Victoria said she always thought it was a pretty name.

Victoria’s information revealed that she was relational based; the situations in which she experienced success were always based on her relationships with adults and peers around her. When discussing relationships, she shared:

I am a very social person. I tried talking to most my peers as much as possible. Trying to get a relationship. Understand their understandings about everything I could say that I did have good relationships with them more than some bad relationships.

She passed few classes when not engaged in an intervention and passed none when she did not have a relationship with the educator in the room. There is a direct correlation to her success and a relationship with the adult; she was also more successful when she described a supportive relationship with peers in her classes. Victoria was close to one teacher in classes
during her ninth and tenth grade years. She had a close relationship with the teacher and earned her highest grades—As and Bs each semester—in this class. The relationship was extremely meaningful to her.

From the beginning of her high school career, Victoria was not going to be able to graduate with her cohort because she was not earning enough credits. During her ninth grade year, she earned three total credits, which is half of what she could have earned during that time. During her tenth grade year, she earned two credits of the eight she could have earned. At this pace there was no way she would be able to graduate before the age of 21, which is when students age out of high school. Given the amount of socio-emotional distress from bullying she was enduring, I do not believe she could have increased the number of credits she was earning.

**Caring and supportive relationships.** Relationships were an integral part of Victoria’s experience; they were both supportive, caring, and destructive impacts to her academic progress. Her experience supported answering the sub-questions, “How do students describe their relationships with peers, teachers, and other school personnel?” and “What interventions did students experience during their high school career?” The interpretive codes that emerged from her interview and observation were *bullying*, *destructive peer*, *supportive peer*, and *caring adult*. She shared that she had a close group of friends, but they were not especially important to her. She did not express or discuss having a meaningful relationship with peers. Many high school students, including the other participants in this study, had positive relationships with friends.

Victoria revealed that her peer relationships were a destructive experience for her because she felt bullied by her peers, compounded because it occurred at all times of the day.
and night, in person and through social media. When I asked about her about social media being destructive, she stated:

I do believe social media during school makes it worse because there is a lot of kids that will get on their phones or their laptops and stuff, and get on Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, stuff like that. That will check up on comments and other people’s pages. Try to see what was going on and everyone is now hopping the problem onto the drama. It is like affecting a lot of people, so I feel like social media is making it worse during school hours at least.

While there were incidences in the school during the day, the majority took place over social media. When bullying messages were sent through social media, sometimes they were sent directly to her and other times they were sent for everyone to read and react to. She shared:

I actually had a couple of girls in my class a ninth grade year that would actually taunt me in class when the teacher was out of the room. They would post things and comment things on social media during the class time while I was in there, and try to make me feel very, very horrible. I could not just think straight during class. I was more on the end of trying not to cry in class then trying to focus on my work.

The destructive peer relationship was constant for her and she was unable to disconnect from the negativity. How could she learn when her goal during the class was not to cry? If students do not feel safe, they will not be able to learn. This was a reality for Victoria, which is why we must empower students to bring their voice to situations so adults can intervene on their behalf (Caruthers & Friend, 2015). Victoria also shared this went on well beyond the school day and would take place late into the night.

Victoria made one adult connection she described with passion. It was obvious she made a positive connection with this educator, and it helped her during high school. She has always been passionate about singing, and as she was growing up, people told her she was a great singer. As she transitioned into high school, she and the choir director became close, and he cared for her as she encountered difficult situations in school. This was an important
relationship for her and supported her to stay at school each day (Quin, 2017). She said she could go and talk to him when she experienced bullying from her peers or was having a bad day. During the interview she shared:

We kind of have the same personality, sort of. He kind of knows how I am when it comes to getting angry or upset, or when I am excited or something like that. He knows. Whenever I would go into class, I would also have issues with some girls. Whenever I go into class and I would go to him, be like, “Hey, I am really upset right now. I do not know how to handle this. Can you give me some advice?” He would give me some advice or hey, this happened at home and it is distracting me here at school. He would always help me.

She used him as a resource and socio-emotional support, which certainly helped her during her first two years in high school. This adult connection gave her much needed support. The choir course was one of the few in which she earned passing grades.

She had another caring adult connection with an administrator during high school. She credited this relationship for her being able to successfully complete high school because it connected her with the personalized intervention she needed to earn enough credits to graduate. She described the development of the relationship:

I would not say it was like a close relationship off the bat. It was more like I felt comfortable going to him talking about things. Talking about this kind of stuff about the school because he would not try to defend the school or say the school does this or the school does that. He just made me very welcomed into talking to him about things.

She worked closely with him throughout her high school career, whether it was because she was having drama with peers or needed someone to talk about what she was going through. The administrator having an open ear and caring heart made a difference in her high school experience and changed her high school trajectory to one that was going to lead to earning her diploma.
Of all the participants in this study, she had the most supporting and caring relationships with adults and students in her intervention. She had experienced poor relationships with peers but close relationships with some adults, which showed in her grades. While interacting with a smaller group of students and the same educators every day in the intervention, she described her relationship with her peers as a leadership role. She specifically shared:

The teacher always called me and talked out of the class because I would always run it. I would tell my classmates, Hey, you need to focus. Hey, you are doing this wrong. This is what you need to do for you to finish. I want to see you on that stage with me at the end of the year. I was very helpful when it comes to my classmates and I always had relationships with them.

As a leader in the class, many times she would encourage her classmates to stay on task and keep working. This was a role she had never had before in school. The educators in the program were supportive, and she appreciated the support she received from them. The connections she made in the intervention are key to her success. She shared:

At the intervention we (peers and adults) acted like a family. We would always help each other. We would always joke around with each other. We would always talk to each other and make sure each other was okay and stuff like that.

Because of these relationships, she was able to earn more than 10 credits her first year working through HSAP.

**Support interventions for graduation.** The documents and interview responses showed that Victoria struggled in high school from the beginning. This was an important theme because it helped answer the questions, “What interventions did students experience during their high school career?” and “What choices did students have about the interventions that were implemented to support their work toward graduation?” Intervention emerged as a theme from her observation, interview, and documents based on the interpretive
codes school-based, flexible/student-focused, and IEP. When Victoria was in the comprehensive high school, she never earned more than two credits per semester, while most other students were earning four credits a semester. She was struggling to earn credits, and the only credits she was earning were mostly based on the adults in the classroom.

Regarding intervention, Victoria discussed during the interview the feeling that her school gave up on her because she had learning disabilities. She shared:

I felt like the school actually gave up on me just because I do have learning disabilities. I have dyslexia and Attention Deficit Hypertension Disorder (ADHD), but my mother seems to think, well she thinks I have something more than those two things. The school refused to test me for anything (else).

For a student to feel a school gave up on her is certainly concerning and not the goal of any educator. She said the Individual Education Plan (IEP) had been discontinued before she had transitioned to high school. While all IEPs have transition plans for students who move off the Tier 3 intervention, Victoria’s was not set up or implemented successfully. IEPs are meant to be a major support for students based on their needs, and only 7% to 10% of students qualify for this type of support (Maier et al., 2016).

Victoria discussed a school-based intervention in which she was placed to help her catch up on credits. She liked that it was a flexible environment because she was able to work on the subject she chose at the time. She was enrolled in several courses because of the number of credits she needed to earn. She said what did not work was the inability to reach out for help from the educator in the classroom. The classroom had 25–30 students who worked independently on a computer-based learning program, and the educator sat at her desk and engaged with the students only a limited amount. When reviewing her documents, I observed she did not earn any credits while engaged in this intervention. While she enjoyed
the flexibility of the program, it did not equate to credits earned. The lack of a caring adult relationship was a factor in her lack of success.

Victoria was also engaged in the *school-based* intervention room. She was able to go to the room when she was struggling in her traditional classroom. She liked being able to go into the room and work on assignments because the environment was flexible. She said her struggle with the intervention room was she did not always work on what she should have been working on. While the educators in the intervention room would check on her frequently to make sure she was working on her assignments, she was able to choose her work. She did experience success in the intervention room, but not enough to make up for her performance in classes overall.

While she felt that the school gave up on her, she did connect with one educator who worked with her on the possibility of transitioning into alternative programs. As Victoria looked at different Tier 3 intervention programs, she wanted a situation that was flexible and student-based. She wanted a situation in which she would have a relationship with the adults. As they discussed options, she felt a new program would be best for her education, and she decided to transition into the High School Alternative Program, which is a program designed for students who are behind academically and in need of a supportive intervention. A key piece of the program is the educators involved in it are focused on building relationships with students while supporting them academically, which closely fit Victoria’s learning style.

As she transitioned into HSAP, she was apprehensive about the program but knew having a three-hour-per-day program would benefit her because she was not experiencing success in the traditional high school setting. The program allows students to move as quickly as they can through computer-based classes, and they earn credit by mastering the
content of the classes. As she settled into the intervention, she immediately began experiencing success. The documents showed she earned eight credits during her first semester in the program. When compared to earning two credits previously during her best semester, this was a substantial accomplishment. I wanted to find out why this occurred and why there was such a dramatic difference.

Victoria shared what she experienced at HSAP and how transformational it was for her academic career. She beamed when describing her experience at HSAP and was proud of the work she had accomplished in the program. She talked about the “family” at the intervention and that the staff cared so much about her and wanted her to be successful. Specifically, she shared:

At HSAP, we had acted like a family. We would always help each other. We would always joke around with each other. We would always talk to each other and make sure each other was okay and stuff like that. We always acted like an actual family. They allowed her the space to bring her voice to the classroom and be a leader (Shiller, 2009). She shared she would work with students who were struggling or not on task and that this was something she would have never done while in the traditional programming of her comprehensive high school.

Setting and environment. Victoria found success in the HSAP program. A theme that was a large part of Victoria’s success in her academic progress was setting and environment. Her success in school was greatly impacted by where she went to school and the people she interacted with each day. The themes that emerged from the observation and interview were flexibility, engaged, distracted, and teacher-focused. Victoria’s success was dependent on the setting and environment, because if she had a relationship with the educator, she was successful. She discussed her struggles in comprehensive high school, the
majority of which were with her peers. She was never able to find a sense of safety at school so that she could learn. The academic classes in which she experienced success were based on having an adult who cared about her and with whom she had a relationship.

She shared the environment she preferred; when all three elements aligned, she experienced great success. While working in the intervention that propelled her to graduation, she had flexibility within the environment where she could work at her own pace with caring adults around her who cared about her personally and a setting focused on her success as a student. She shared about the classroom in which she was most engaged:

I know it sounds kind of ridiculous, but the room had couches and comfortable chairs in there that made you really feel comfortable that you can actually focus instead of feeling really uncomfortable in the chairs. The room made it feel like home. If you ever needed to, you could talk whenever. You can ask questions whenever. When all three of these came together, she was able to show how smart and successful she could be in high school academic work. She needed to find the right fit for her personal learning style in order to be successful at the high school level. She demonstrated her ability to completely shift her academic trajectory from not being able to graduate high school before she turned 21.

She experienced several school-based interventions that supported her learning but not to the degree she needed because they were teacher-focused rather than being flexible enough to support her learning. The documents showed she was not able to maintain the pace of credit completion her peers were accomplishing, and she was definitely not catching up based on how far she was behind. Being distracted was a challenge for her in the comprehensive high school environment because of the students who were bullying her in the hallways and classrooms, but when she transferred to HSAP she had a small group to
work with. The small, flexible environment was an environment and setting she thrived with her peers and the educators in the room.

The alignment of relationship-based adults, student-focused environment, supportive peer interaction, and flexible learning helped create a setting in which she was the most successful she had ever been since elementary school. She encouraged educators to:

Just keep pushing on your kids. I also would not ignore any of them. Even if the smartest kid in class knows what he is doing, you still need to. He or she needs to have an eye kept on them because sometimes they might be too stressed about being an overachiever. Everybody also has their own problems that need to be addressed at some point, as well. I would also give advice to say make your students feel like they are at home. It is more comforting. Make your students feel like they are actually welcomed in the classroom.

Case 6 – Michael

Michael has an electric personality. As soon as we started to speak about the study and what he would experience, he was excited to participate. He was the most outgoing participant in the study and spoke openly during the interview. As an example, his interview was an hour and a half long, while the others were about an hour. Michael picked his name because of a famous basketball player he had learned about on YouTube and because he was passionate about the sport. This section describes Michael’s high school experience; the themes of relationships, setting and environment, and intervention emerged during his case.

Michael did not experience much success in high school but described his experience positively. He enjoyed the social part of high school and enjoyed being at school. Michael liked talking about his relationships with peers and with a multitude of adults during his high school career. During the interview he shared:

There was a like a specific group of people that I hung out with, around in high school. It was like a small group, and maybe like twelve people. So, like I had like one of my friends in every single class with me, and then the rest were just in
different classes. The twelve of us were close. Like we all had things in common and did the same things for fun.

He had a peer relationship which did not support his learning; they would meet at school for the purpose of leaving the grounds and skipping school. He began receiving interventions early in his high school career which were not successful because he was not present to take advantage of the support. He did believe they might be successful, but he admitted he was not attending enough for it to make a difference in his academic career.

Michael lit up when he talked about his immediate family—his sisters, mother, and father. When speaking about his family he shared:

My dad, he is really successful, he owns his own business. My Mom is also getting into the Mary Kay make up thing, but my dad was always the one to push me. He pushes me the most, saying, if you get this done you will have a good future. My dad would say, you really know what you are passionate about and what you want to do at school.

He talked about one of his sisters:

So, she’s always been like really good at math. She would always help me with my Math. But I always ended up flunking Math. Like every time. But, I mean, like I passed my Algebra A, my Algebra One, with flying colors, by myself, but then once it got to like Geometry.

He talked the entire interview about his dad, and it was not until the end that he shared he was talking about his step-dad. While he made this distinction, it was obvious he had a close relationship with him. He described his dad as one of the smartest people he knew. Research shows parent support helps students finish high school, and his father influenced him to continue to work on his high school education (Froiland & Davison, 2013). He shared both of his sisters graduated from high school through alternative programs: “Well my sisters they had to go to ACE.” He knew they graduated from alternative programs, and he may have planned to graduate this same way. He did not say he was planning on graduating using an
intervention, but he said he never had a sense of urgency while attending the traditional high school.

Michael’s academic progress while in high school was below what would have been needed to graduate with his cohort. While attending the comprehensive high school programming, he averaged passing four classes a semester, which would have extended his high school career by two years if he had maintained the same pace without an intervention. The classes he was passing were mostly elective classes such as band, physical education, and woodworking. He struggled and was not successful in his core classes, which included language arts, math, science, and social studies. His most successful semester was during the first semester of his tenth grade year, while being supported through an intervention.

**Intervention.** The theme intervention emerged from the analysis of the documentation, interview, and documents, because interventions were a significant part of his high school academic experience. Intervention codes of *school-based, flexible/student-focused, HSAP,* and *socio-emotional support* occurred 15 times. This was the second highest occurrence of codes in his case. Michael experienced a number of interventions and had insight to share with educators. His information assisted in answering the questions, “What interventions did students experience during their high school career?” and “What choices did students have about the interventions that were implemented to support their work toward graduation?”

Michael fell behind his peers from his first semester in high school. After Michael struggled, the school decided to place him in the academy program. Each day Michael would spend part of his day in a *school-based* intervention with an educator-to-student ratio of 1:12. He described the school-based intervention known as Academy:
Then, when I got to the Academy. The way I got into it I think was my ... the ending of my freshman year, I got pulled in by another teacher from the Academy. And they said, “We would like to put you into this program because we see that you’re struggling with your classes and your attendance. And with here,” they said, “we’re kind of strict with that, but, I mean, if you do skip too much, then you will get warnings. Every time you skip, you will go to ISS.”

There was support within the program, and students’ grades were reviewed every week, instruction was provided in classes in which the students were struggling, and socio-emotional support was also available from a counselor assigned to the program. Michael explained when he attended the school-based intervention regularly, he performed well in school and appreciated the extra assistance. When he chose not to attend, his grades were poor, and he was not successful. He did not blame this on the educators in the program but simply stated it as a decision he made to not attend school.

He shared two significant socio-emotional events that occurred in his home when he was in elementary school and at school when he was in middle school. His house caught on fire, and he shared his memory of it during the interview:

I was in a house fire, and I was left in there like 45 minutes. And then my Dad came rushing in and grabbed me and threw me out a window.

This caused mental health issues for him and his immediate family. He described suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome and anxiety after the fire. While in middle school he described being small compared to the other young men his age. During middle school he shared the experience:

I used to be like really short, like my seventh grade year I was like four eight. Yeah. I was pretty short. And so that was like a big thing I would get made fun of for. And then there was one person my freshman year that insulted my Mom, and so I got into a fight with him, and ended up getting sent to the principal’s office.
These two events caused mental health needs for him. He received socio-emotional support from the school and through interventions, but he said he did not know if it was enough while he was in the comprehensive high school. Michael, stated:

> While in the academy and at HSAP there were several people who would check in on me each day. They could tell if I was down and needed help. I knew when I went there they would help which made me want to go each day. I did not have that support at (comprehensive high school).

During his school career, he said his mental health was worse during his eighth through tenth grade years. His mental health needs would place him in a Tier 3 support system, but he did not discuss receiving any type of support through the comprehensive high school (Maier et al., 2016). These issues would more than likely create a need for support outside of what a school can provide as well.

Michael talked about the experiences of his older sisters while they were in high school. He shared they both went to an alternative school called ACE within the high school as an intervention to ensure they could graduate. The district paid for every student attending the ACE school on a per-pupil basis. Both of his sisters were able to successfully complete high school but were not in a traditional high school. They earned diplomas and were able to state that on job applications and college entrance applications, but their GPA would not allow them into a four-year university unless they attended a two-year college first. Michael knew about this Tier 3 intervention before beginning his high school career (Buffum et al., 2012).

As Michael was finishing up his 11th grade year, he had earned only 11 of the 24 credits required to graduate. Michael was going to have to extend his high school career for two more years if he was going to graduate, and this would require him to earn credits at a
higher rate than he had during previous years. Based on this information, he and his
counselor sat down to discuss different Tier 3 options for him to graduate at a quicker pace
than attending high school until he was 20 years old. After looking at the State Options
Program and the High School Alternative Program (HSAP), they determined HSAP would
be the best fit based on his desire to be in a student-focused environment. He explained:

The ability to come in and start working on what I wanted to work on was great for
me. I could come in and work on one class the entire time or work on four or five
classes each day. It helped a lot to be able to make that pick.

Most importantly, this was the intervention he chose to engage in. He loved the student-
focused, flexible environment, and Michael said choosing this intervention and taking
ownership of his education was the most important part of the experience. The flexibility of
class schedule also made a difference:

I had some electives that I needed to do. But then there were some electives that I
needed. I mean, I needed electives, but I could choose whatever class it could be. The
teacher heard me talking about Edgar Allen Poe, and like dark books, witches and
stuff. She was like, “Well, would you like a Gothic Literature elective that could help
you move up in a class, and also you can enjoy the class as well.” I was like, “That
would be fine.” She added to it, and it was really long elective, really long class, and I
was like, “Ah, oh no.” But I got done with it in like three weeks.

His first semester in the program was the most successful he had had academically in
high school. Choice was an important part of his HSAP experience, and he was able to have
more ownership in his learning path which leads to higher student achievement (DuFour et
al. 2010). Another positive feature of HSAP was that he did not change classes or move
around during school but instead stayed in one space while he worked toward his diploma.

**Caring and supportive relationships.** Michael was a young man who seemed to
thrive on relationships, which is a theme that emerged from his interview and observation.
He shared rich information about how relationships impacted him positively and negatively.
Caring adult relationships was his largest influence, with the code emerging 18 times during his interview and observation. This theme provided insight to the question, “How do students describe their relationships with peers, teachers, and other school personnel?” This section also discusses Michael’s relationship with his family, which is not part of the question but an important aspect of his experience in high school.

The codes that supported this theme were supportive peer, caring adult, and destructive peer relationships and bullying. He was a social person during his high school career and had several caring relationships with educators. He connected with several teachers through academics and personal connections. His peer relationships were varied because he considered everyone in the school his friend, but his closest friends were not always a positive influence on his education. Michael missed a significant amount of school because of the influence of his closest friends and the destructive relationship he had with them.

When he met his girlfriend, he shared this perspective of their relationship:

Then I started, like, messing up, and not going to school enough anymore. And then my teachers, they tried to make...because they knew that I was doing really good before I met her, so they...because me and her had a bunch of classes together, they separated us from each class, to make it easier for us. But somehow we would always find a way to like meet up with each other, every time. Because like I would be in one classroom, and then she would be in the other classroom, next to me. And then, so like, without the teacher seeing me, and I would like sneak over and go to her classroom, and like sit behind her. And then she wouldn’t notice me for a good, like, ten minutes. And then I just be like, “Ah.” And scare her, and she would scream in the middle of the class. It was priceless.

He described his attendance during one semester of school as going to classes once a week. There were few weeks when he was attending school more than three days. When he missed school, he was also with a friend who negatively influenced his behavior.
In response to the interview question, “How do you describe your relationship with peers?” he said:

I was friends with everybody. There were some people that did not like me very much, but that is only because they are just jealous. People just get jealous for no reason. Like the reasons that if they were jealous that because I knew everybody and I was friends with everybody, but it is the fact that they just do not know when to stop with negativity. But there was like a specific group of people that I hung out with, around in high school.

Michael liked and enjoyed being friends with everyone and had peer relationships, but this did not equate to being successful academically in school. He participated in an extra-curricular activity that provided him the opportunity to interact with over 100 people on a daily basis. While he described being friends with everyone, he had been bullied in elementary and middle school because of his small size, and this created depression as he transitioned to high school. Michael said:

The depression came from, all through elementary school, and like partly through middle school, I was bullied a lot.

He described being depressed and having anxiety during his ninth and tenth grade years, and he said these feelings were a reason he skipped school frequently. Students must feel safe in order to learn and be successful (Nichols & White, 2001). While worrying about being bullied during these years he never once mentioned a person by name or being fearful in school. The concern of being bullied seemed to carry from his middle school experience.

He had a strong relationship with several adults, and this was represented by the code caring adult relationships. Michael described several different adults he connected with in a variety of ways. They took an interest in his academic success and personal growth. I thought it was interesting that one of the relationships he discussed was with his strength and
conditioning teacher, since he had described being bullied and picked on in middle school.

When discussing this relationship, he shared:

> He was a teacher that I actually kind of grew a relationship with. He was like still pretty mean, but you could tell that like when you were doing something, and like he came over to help you, that he actually did care. I went to his class my sophomore year for Strength and Conditioning, to...they just started doing power clean. So, I was like, “Oh.” I was like, “I can’t do that. My doctor told me I can’t do that.” So he said, “Okay.” He’s like, “We will start you off at a low weight.” He was like, “We’ll start you off at like 75 pounds.” And he said, “If you can do that, then within two weeks we’re going to move up to a different weight.” And he’s like, “I’m going to work with you on this and make sure that you get to a higher weight.” Then so I got to like at least 180.

The teacher was willing to work and support him during his growth in the class. Michael was proud of his accomplishment because he more than doubled the amount of weight he was lifting, and the teacher had worked with him.

His experience at the Academy intervention is another example of *caring adult* support. He talked about the support and encouragement he received from the educators who supported the students in the program. The educators provided breakfast on some days and event gifts before winter break:

> When it came around Christmas time, I think it was Christmas time. They had like a Christmas tree set up, and they had a bunch of presents lined up on the wall. Like little bags. And each of them had like lotion, ear buds, or headphones, or like some kind of candy, or anything. And then they had a table full of tacos that you could eat, and they had cupcakes and everything. And I was like, “Wow, these people really do care.”

The educators also worked to get to know the students outside of academics. They would try to find him when he was skipping classes or even before school, so he did not have the chance to skip classes. When he did miss class, they would sit with him to try to understand why he was choosing not to come to class. This was valuable to him because he appreciated
them speaking with him (Shiller, 2009). The extra support the educators provided meant a lot to Michael. He expressed this, even though he was skipping class nearly every day.

He also received caring adult support from one of the educators working in the library/media center. When he went to the library, he would spend time speaking with the educator about a variety of topics, but mostly about music. This was not necessarily a support that equated to higher grades, but it was a relationship that made a difference to him personally. He described the relationship and the time they spent together discussing music. While discussing his experience in the library he shared:

And every time I would go down there to like get some books, or something, I would talk to her because me and her both loved rock music. Like she would sit there and listen to her rock music playing out loud. When I would grab books, I would sit there and talk to her about like different bands and stuff like that, and kind of bond with her about that.

He also spoke highly of one of his history teachers, Mr. Smith. He mentioned how many of their conversations would go beyond talking about the history class. Mr. Smith would ask about what was going on at home and if there was something he could do as a teacher to support Michael improve his grades in his class and others. Both of these relationships meant a lot to Michael. He appreciated them both taking an interest in him outside of academics and genuinely showing interest in him as a person. Michael did not give a definitive answer about why these adult supports did not equate to being more successful academically.

The caring adult relationships he talked about the most were with his family. He talked highly of his sisters and dad. When he described his sisters, he talked about how smart they were in math and English. He received help in geometry and English from one of his
sisters, and even though it did not always mean he passed the class and earned the credit, he liked working with her on his classes.

He described his dad in this way:

And then my dad, he just knows everything. He is crazy intelligent. He knows all about Math, History, English and Science. You need to get your diploma.

His relationship with his dad meant a lot to him; I could tell by the words he used that his dad believing in him gave him pride in his work and provided motivation for him to persevere through his school. He was proud his dad owned a small business to support the family. Michael also shared his mother sold Mary Kay and was able to help the family as well. Family was very important to him, and he took great pride in talking about them.

**Setting and environment.** The setting and environment meant a lot to Michel’s academic success. The interpretive codes that emerged were *flexibility, teacher-focused,* and *distracted.* When I analyzed his documents and interview, it was apparent Michael experienced a variety of settings and environments while he was in high school. Observing him allowed me to see him be successful in an alternative academic setting and environment. In the review of his documents and interview transcripts, it was apparent his greatest success was when he was engaged in an intervention. The interpretive code *engaged* emerged because of the success he experienced while engaged in the Academy and not skipping school.

The support he received from educators while accessing the Academy intervention helped him earn more credits than in previous semesters, but he admitted he did not fully engage in the intervention and take advantage of it. The relationships with adults and the flexible space allowed the intervention to work for him. The educators allowed the
participants in the academy to work on what they wanted, but they had to continue to work on their academic work. The program was a teacher-focused intervention, but the flexibility of the program supported his learning. This theme helped answer the questions, “What choices did students have about the interventions that were implemented to support their work toward graduation?” and “What message did participants provide to educators to encourage students to stay in school and progress toward graduation?” The challenge with the Academy intervention was Michael’s self-described being distracted while working in the intervention. He enjoyed learning with his peers and educators, but he also said he skipped school frequently and was easily distracted by peers or his computer. While being interviewed he shared:

I would mess around just a little bit in class, but I would still get my work done, but she would get on to me all the time. Like, it was me specifically that she would target, because she knew that every time I was doing my work, and my girlfriend was across the room, like I’d be like sitting there texting her on my laptop or something like that.

The times he was in the program he found success, and he felt the flexibility in the program and being able to bring his voice and opinion helped him stay engaged (Shiller, 2009). He described incidences when he would distract himself in class:

Like there will be days where like I finish like a class, and I have time, like 45 minutes left, I will watch a movie on my laptop, or listen to music or something to not work on anything.

His success had more to do with the adults in the program who allowed students to have flexibility than the program itself.

Flexibility was a code that emerged from the other intervention program where he found academic success. While engaged in the High School Alternative Program, he was able to have flexibility in what he was studying. One of the examples he used when describing the
program was an English course entitled Gothic Literature suggested by his teacher based on conversations he had engaged in with her. He said that his teacher asked, “Well, would you like a Gothic Literature elective that could help you move up in a class, and also you can enjoy the class as well?” This course was not available in his traditional high school course offerings, but in HSAP he was able to have access to more online courses that would count toward his diploma. He took the online course and was able to complete it successfully because he had the flexibility to move quickly, it was a subject he was interested in, and he was able to have a say in what he wanted to learn.

A teacher-focused setting in which he did not find success was in-school suspension. He talked about skipping a lot of classes and as a result, the school placed Michael in in-school suspension. This was a room where students would be placed and stay for half or all of the day, based on what the administration felt was appropriate. The setting provided flexibility, in which Michael had experienced success, but it did not provide the socio-emotional support other settings provided. He needed both in order to be academically successful. When talking about in-school suspension (ISS):

Every time I ever saw him was when I was in ISS. And I was in ISS quite a bit because I was skipping all the time. He would always talk to me.

The educator in the in-school suspension room was kind to Michael based on his description, but he did not describe the educator as someone who checked in on his academics and held him to a standard.

When observing Michael in the classroom, it was easy to see his preference for a flexible learning environment in HSAP. His documents showed academic success and engagement when he was in the intervention; he earned more credits in one year than he had
the previous three years combined. The number of credits he was able to earn in such a short amount of time, according to his documents, was remarkable. He was engaged and thrived in the flexibility of the environment.

Michael was an interesting young man who had strong ties to and great pride in his family. He enjoyed being social with his peers and admittedly found peers to influence him to make poor decisions. His sisters’ experience I believe showed him there were alternative ways he could graduate with an intervention while being supported by adults. He experienced several socio-emotional traumas in his life before high school that certainly impacted him personally. The house fire and being bullied had an impact on his academic growth that was hard to measure, but most importantly, he was able to complete high school through an alternative program.

**Cross-case Analysis**

Cross-case analysis is defined as searching for patterns, similarities, and differences across cases with similar variables and outcome measures (Miles et al., 2014). This style of analysis was used to gain knowledge from each case, compare and contrast each of the six cases, and then identify the commonalities from each of the cases. This created new knowledge that educators can learn from. Being able to engage in rich analysis served to help illuminate the study and crystallize my research (Ellingson, 2009). Themes within the notes were reexamined and amended during the process to ensure I was challenging my thinking. The cross-case analysis required me to look at the interrelationships of each case more thoroughly. I categorized the similarities and differences in each case using the interpretive codes and descriptors. I identified the important interpretive codes and the ways in which they were related to each other. The refinement of the data permitted me to make further
comparisons and more refinement. In order to check my initial thinking, I created a system to
tally the occurrences of the interpretive codes, which resulted in identifying the themes of the
study. The themes that emerged from the documents, semi-structured interviews, and
observations were relationships, setting and environment, and intervention.

Cross-case analysis allowed me to examine the experience of each participant and
compare it to other cases. Comparing each of the cases provided a rich, holistic approach of
each participant’s unique experience. I was able to compare the cases and make meaningful
connections to the participants’ experiences (Khan & VanWynsberghe, 2008).

Table 1

Cross-case Analysis

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<th>Pickle</th>
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<th>Blimpie</th>
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<th>Victoria</th>
<th>Michael</th>
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Note:  
S = Strong Presence (10 or more occurrences)  
M = Moderate Presence (5 or more but less than 10 occurrences)
The first step was to review the documents before the interviews or observations were completed. While analyzing the documents, I could measure how the students performed at different times of their high school career based on the feedback the school was providing. The documents told me the interventions they had experienced during their high school careers and when they received them. I could glean the setting and environment from the documents because I had background in the school district. I could identify where the students were experiencing each class because I had worked in the comprehensive high school setting for 15 years.

When looking at the documents through the lens of relationships, there was not a correlation until after the interview took place. Once the interview had taken place, I could see how relationships with teachers equated to academic success in the classes they taught the participant. The interview also provided insight into the situations in which the students struggled and how they related to their academic progress. Each theme was apparent in all three data sources for each participant except for the relationship theme for DB and Pickles. This theme did not emerge for Pickle and DB for different reasons. In the State Options program, Pickle remained mostly in the comprehensive high school even though he was in a different program. DB was able to be successful in the comprehensive high school and successful in the High School Alternative Program.

Each of the themes from the semi-structured interview (see Appendix D) developed while being coded. Each of the participants discussed relationships with adults in the school building and their peers. Relationships was a leading piece of the interview, and even when the questions were focused on what interventions were experienced and what advice they
would give educators, every participant discussed relationships. Every participant discussed the adults who worked in the intervention as a way to describe the intervention’s effectiveness. When asked what advice participants would give, every one of them spoke about the need to know the individual student and being able to meet their needs as the most important mechanism a school can implement to ensure students graduate with their cohort.

The observation for each participant brought insight to the documents and interviews, which had been completed prior to the observation. The observations provided the most insight into the setting and environment theme. Seeing each participant interact with teachers and peers helped me deepen my understanding of the students’ experiences. The experience of observing the students also made me go back to take a fresh look at the documents and interviews that had already been conducted. The observation data provided a new perspective and helped expand and further develop my understanding of the students’ experiences. Each of the themes emerged during the observations in the participants’ alternative setting.

**Conclusion and Research Questions**

In this section I report the themes that emerged during the collective case study and how they were seen in each of the cases. All of the participants were asked the same set of questions, which focused on answering the four sub-questions. While the responses of each participant were based on the same questions, each one’s story was driven by their personal experience, and each told a different story of their high school journey. After the interview, observation, and documents were collected, the participants were allowed to validate what had been shared and found, because it was important for each participant to know they were represented accurately.
I consistently revisited the data and examined and analyzed each theme to ensure
validity and reliability. Each one of the themes was scrutinized, examined multiple times,
questioned by me, and reviewed by the participants in order to ensure validity and reliability
of the data along with accuracy in reporting the themes. As I analyzed the individual
interview data in conjunction with each of the observations, I was able to create a clear
picture of what the participants experienced during their high school career and not being
able to graduate with their cohort. After I completed the coding of the observations,
interviews, and documents, three themes emerged from the data: environment and setting,
relationships, and intervention.

As I met with each of the participants to ensure they agreed with the findings, they
had the opportunity to share any additional information and ask questions about what I had
found. The participants were able to confirm the themes I identified as they answered the
sub-questions for the study. This was a key part of ensuring reliability and validity. A
discussion at the conclusion of this section focuses on the central question of the study.

**How Did Students Describe their Relationships with Peers, Teachers,
and Other School Personnel?**

The participants had a large amount of information to share about relationships they
had with peers and adults that greatly influenced their academic program in high school.
Both of these relationships were influential in the participants’ ability to progress through
high school. Peer and adult relationships were not always a positive influence, but there was
always an impact on the participants’ academic progress. The impact peer relationships had
on the participants did not surprise me, based on my experience as a high school teacher and
administrator.
Three of the participants experienced significant bullying and/or socio-emotional events during their high school career. That students reporting bullying was not surprising; what was surprising was the constant bullying two of the students experienced both inside and outside of the school day, all of it occurring with peers they interacted with at school. They were unable to find freedom from the destructive interactions. Victoria even described her experience as, “I was more on the end of trying not to cry in class then trying to focus on my work.” Michael shared that his friends were able to easily talk him into skipping school on a regular basis even though others in the school wanted him to attend regularly. Not all peer influences were destructive; Michael’s journey was dramatically influenced by a relationship that ended poorly during his ninth grade year, but it was his relationship with a young lady that kept him on track during his fifth year of high school. He credited her with helping him see that he could earn a high school diploma.

Caring adult relationships had the most influence for all of the participants in the study; each of them talked about them most positively. Many of the relationships they discussed were deep-seated, and the adults genuinely cared about them as a student and a person. Not all of the adult relationships were with teachers, but all were with educators that influenced them in the school setting. One of the participants described an adult in the school as her “school mom,” who was constantly checking on her and making sure she was attending school. Victoria shared she felt that one of the adults in her comprehensive high school was the only person who did not give up on her and was there to support her during her transition to the HSAP program that helped her graduate. Every participant in the study described having a caring adult relationship in high school which positively influenced their progress toward graduation and ultimately their ability to earn a high school degree.
For me, the most important learning from the study was the power of relationships and how they both positively and negatively impacted the participants’ academic progress. As educators we must ensure every student within a school building has an adult who cares and knows about them beyond the high school setting. Educators must strive to build a genuine relationship with every student.

**What Interventions Did Students Experience during their High School Careers?**

Students were able to experience a variety of interventions throughout their high school career, ranging from school-based interventions created and made available by the school, to more student-focused interventions in which students were able to identify what intervention would be most valuable based on their learning styles. All the interventions students experienced were developed with students in mind and were designed for them to be successful academically. Some were interventions intertwined within the school day such as the Intervention Room and Individual Education Plans supports, while others were within the school but with a shorter schedule and more focused, personalized instruction.

The Intervention Room and IEP supports were part of the school for each of the participants. While DB had the opportunity to access the IEP supports throughout the day, it was a Tier 3 intervention that ultimately led to his ability to complete high school rather than a support directly related to his IEP (Maier et al. 2016). For two other students, the IEP supports were removed before they began high school even though both participants felt the accommodations from their previous IEP would have been helpful to their academic support.

The student interventions were more intensive and student-focused, with the student-to-teacher ratio being much smaller than classes in the traditional comprehensive high
school. The interventions the students engaged in had ratios of 10–12 students per one educator. Student choice was an integral step in the student-focused intervention in determining what intervention would best fit each participant’s learning style. The State Options program and the High School Alternative Program were both programs students could engage in to find academic success and the ability to progress toward graduation. A factor that made both of these options successful for the students was the relationships the students built with the educators in the program.

The relationship the adult educators built with the students was the reason they found success in school. Every participant discussed having caring adult relationships and how much it made a difference in their academic success. While listening to and observing the participants describe their relationships and interact with the adults, it was obvious it was a key part of their success toward graduation. When analyzing the interviews and observations with what the documents showed, it was apparent the relationship was a key factor in their ability to earn credits. The participants all had adult influences that supported them as they progressed toward graduation.

**What Choices Did Students have about the Interventions that were Implemented to Support their Work toward Graduation?**

As each of the participants progressed through high school, they had more choices in which intervention they were going to engage in, which correlates with the research of Buffum, Weber, and Mattos (2012), who described it as a triangle, with each tier being a more intense intervention and more student-focused. The comprehensive high schools would monitor students during their ninth grade years, and as they needed more support, the school would place the participants in interventions they had within the school. Plato and the
Intervention Room were the two interventions most students experienced in the study, and the participants did experience some success in the intervention. Plato and the Intervention Room did not create enough academic progress for the students to eliminate the need for additional support. Participants were able to use the Intervention Room for academic support and work with the educators in the room for socio-emotional support.

The interventions that did create success for each of the participants were those in which they had the most input in determining which would be best for them personally. This determination was done with support and guidance from school personnel. The participants described the experience of picking their intervention by using phrases like “we,” “I felt,” “he trusted me,” and “I needed a program that….” What a powerful experience for the students. I could see that each participant felt empowered when they were describing the experience of determining the intervention they felt would be the best fit for their learning style. Based on the study, the participants’ ability to bring their voice into the space was a powerful part of their academic progress.

One participant had access to the resource room based on qualifying for an Individual Education Plan. As part of the plan each year, a meeting is held to discuss the accommodations for which the student qualifies. The student also has the opportunity to share with the team what would be the best fit for them personally. While the interventions fit within what the school could provide, it did include different options for IEP students.

**What Message Did Participants Provide to Educators to Encourage Students to Stay in School and Progress toward Graduation?**

The last question the participants were asked was about advice they would have for educators moving forward. Each of the participants discussed relationship with students as
the most important thing educators can do for students to create the base for students to be successful. Each spoke to the importance of having a person at the school who genuinely cared about them as a person and not just how they did academically. This suggestion is not completely surprising, considering what helped them be successful. Each of them had at least one adult who deeply cared about their academic progress, but also and more importantly, their personal growth. One participant shared:

Even if the smartest kid in class knows what he is doing you still need to check on them. He or she needs to have an eye kept on them because sometimes they might be too stressed about being an overachiever. You have the smartest kids in class might not always have the best place at home where their parents might push them to do this. I would just keep an eye on everybody because everybody has an issue at some point.

I think this is an important perspective. When the participants were providing advice, they were thinking about all students and not just students who struggle. The participants were aware that all students experience difficulties in school and need additional support.

Several of the participants also discussed to never give up on students. One participant experienced difficulty personally and felt that the school gave up on her; but she was not the only participant who wanted to make sure the school supported all students. This is an interesting perspective from students who needed intensive interventions in order to be successful. All students need support at some point in their high school career, and it is important the school has the capability and awareness to provide support for all students regardless of how they are performing academically. The participants shared that it is key to not let the superficial answer of “I’m okay” be enough when adults see students struggling. Early intervention and support are crucial, and if a school does not intervene, a student will need a more intensive intervention later.
Finally, students talked about choice and having a voice as key pieces of a student’s academic success. The participants all had a strong voice when determining which intervention to choose when they were far behind their peers academically and needed support. Each of the participants had chosen an intervention program based on what they felt was going to fit their learning style, and they were all experiencing more success in the program than they had in their comprehensive high school. They were able to bring their voice to the conversation alongside a trusted educator and select the best intervention to help their learning style and preference.

**Summary**

The purpose of this collective case study was to learn from the experiences of high school students who did not graduate with their cohort. Throughout this study I was intrigued by the common experiences and codes when a cross-case analysis was done. While there was intersectionality between participants, each participant had a unique story. Each student had certain situations that shaped their high school career, and I saw how resilient young adults are in their ability to push through adversity. The challenges ranged from having to receive treatment in an intake facility, losing the support of an IEP, and being bullied while at school and through social media, but each participant was able to overcome the obstacles. Each participant had challenges during their high school career and could have given up, but with the support from educators, they were able to focus on their academics and move toward finishing their high school diploma. While the participants had to extend their high school career and work toward earning a non-traditional diploma, they each engaged in the process and were moving forward. Even though their post-high school options are not the same for
their peers who graduate traditionally, they still have a piece of paper that shows they are learners.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this qualitative collective case study was to explore the central question and sub-questions to learn from the experiences of high school students who had not graduated with their cohort (Creswell, 2013). Six participants who did not graduate with their cohort or who were going to graduate through an alternative program took part in this study. The participants shared documents from their high school experience, including their transcripts, in addition to participating in a semi-structured interview before being observed in the classroom. This study was undertaken because there is a need to learn more about students who are unable to graduate with their cohort and to determine how comprehensive high schools can better serve all students.

This process allowed me to develop my skills as a researcher while using collective case study technique through a qualitative lens. Throughout this process I was able to interact and learn from students who struggled in high school and did not graduate with their cohort. The students shared their personal experiences and described the challenges they faced in high school. The process was a great opportunity for me to learn from students the best ways to support their learning and matriculation in high school.

The intent of the study was to gain a deeper understanding of what students experience during their high school careers when they do not graduate with their cohort. Specifically, I wanted to know about their relationships with peers, teachers, and other school personnel, what interventions they experienced, what input they had in the interventions, and what advice the participants had for educators. Theme analysis was conducted to identify the common components of the documents, interviews, and observations. The themes that
emerged for each of the participants were relationships, setting and environment, and intervention.

The participants repeatedly discussed the need to have an adult advocate as a key piece of their success during their high school career. The participants had supportive and destructive relationships with peers, but everyone had at least one adult who helped push them to success during high school. Most participants had several adults who supported them during their high school careers. Staff members must make it a point to guarantee every student has a staff member who knows them and will support them based on their specific needs or who can identify the right person to support their learning. High school students, even when they are at large comprehensive high schools, need an environment and setting that can be flexible and personalized to their needs, especially when they have challenges in their lives—which is what each of our participants experienced.

The participants experienced a variety of interventions during their time in high school. Most of the interventions were school-based at the beginning of their careers, and as they fell further behind their cohort, the interventions grew to a higher intensity with more individualized support. As the participants received more individualized support, they had more personalized support from staff members. Students did not have much choice in what interventions they experienced during their ninth and tenth grade years. When they were moving to a Tier 3 intervention, their input became much greater (Buffum et al., 2012). At that point the students were part of the decision-making process to determine the best intervention that would fit their needs. The students were able to bring their voice to the conversation, which was a key to their experience (Friend & Caruthers, 2015). With students able to bring their voice and supported by adults, they were able to focus on work and their
classes. Students were experiencing success in their Tier 3 intervention. Schools must bring students’ voices into intervention opportunities and provide flexibility in their support for students. Students who had input into their interventions had the most academic success.

The participants had recommendations for educators as we continue to try to ensure we meet their needs and ensure they are able to successfully complete high school. The participants wanted educators to get to know their students and realize the challenges they have; they need a learning environment that can be flexible enough to meet their unique learning needs. The participants recommended that educators listen to their students and what they need to support their learning. Comprehensive high schools must be agile enough to be able to meet each student’s needs as different events occur in their lives.

The purpose of this descriptive case study research was to create a deep understanding of programs; once understanding has been developed, institutions will be able to make researched, data-driven decisions based on results (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Simons, 2009). The qualitative findings provided in this paper are designed to provide the reader potentially new knowledge about the support students need in comprehensive high schools. The descriptions of the themes in this study provide information from the participants about their experiences in high school and what can support their steps toward graduation.

**Recommendations for Educators**

**Leadership for Relationships**

High schools and society continue to have challenges with graduation rates and ensuring all students successfully complete high school. When students are not successful in high school, it impacts society because these individuals are more likely to require financial
assistance during adulthood. The leaders in our high schools must guarantee every student is connected with a caring adult and the relationship moves beyond a superficial level (Shiller, 2009). Each of the participants discussed the caring relationships they had with at least one adult. This relationship led directly to them being able to experience academic success during their high school career.

High school leaders know relationships are important, but leaders must prioritize the need for teachers to build relationships with students in a more authentic and deeper way. This would be transformational for the students and adults in the building (Wilkins, 2014). High school teachers cannot use the number of students they interact with as a reason to not have all students connected with an adult. When I taught math, I usually interacted with approximately 150 students on a yearly basis, and it was a challenge to connect with every student. A different way to approach the challenge is not requiring every teacher to connect with every student they have in class, but ensure each student has an educator in the building who cares about them and works to know more about them than what can be read in the yearbook or on their transcripts. Gasper et al. (2012) reinforced this idea by showing students who have support from teachers are more successful. Every participant in this study had an adult in the school who supported them and helped them achieve success academically. The participants who did have success while in the comprehensive high school had relationships with the educator in the classroom.

Peer relationships are key influences on students and can positively or negatively support students toward graduation (Mikami et al., 2011). This was evident in the study, with some students having supportive peer experiences while several others found their peer relationships destructive to their academic progress. Participants shared they were bullied by
peers and would skip school rather than go to class. Students mentioned not feeling safe
during class; if they do not feel safe, they are not going to learn. Peer relationships and
influences can also be supportive. One of the participants spoke highly of his relationship
with a peer—how his girlfriend kept him on track while working toward graduation. Leaders
must support supportive peer relationships and teach young people how to develop
supportive relationships with peers and interject when relationships are destructive.
Educators must take direct action against destructive relationships. Leaders must monitor
peer relationships and must step in when there are poor peer relationships.

I did not focus directly on family relationships during my interview, but it was a topic
that emerged during the interviews with the participants. The influence of families varied
with each participant but was key for several. One participant spoke about the importance of
his father’s and sisters’ influence on his academic progress. As leaders are able to build
relationships with the parents, they can partner together to support young adults as they move
through school. Froiland and Davison (2013) confirmed the importance of relationships and
the need for teachers to establish strong partnerships with parents and guardians. This
partnership creates an open line of communication between schools and parents, creating
consistency for students in the message they hear each and every day.

All educators—and particularly leaders—must develop a system to ensure every
student has an advocate who knows about the student beyond what can be read in their file.
Teachers are not able to be an advocate for every student in their class, but the school can
guarantee an advocate for every student. An example that made this apparent was when
students at a high school I was involved in were asked who they identified as their advocate;
the number one choice was the gentleman who ran our copy room. He had no idea about the
impact he had made on students and how much they looked to him for advice. Teachers must know there are others who can help fill the role of advocate, and our job is to ensure every student has one (Jeynes, 2010).

Educators must prioritize relationships and determine the best way to connect with students and most importantly, know their story. Knowing their story is part of bringing student voice into the conversation and the education decision making space. Most people who get into education are relational based and want what is best for students. Leaders must ensure every student is connected with an adult in the building while the adult is getting to know their story. Knowing the student and bringing their voice into the conversation creates the best support system for students to be successful. Knowing each student’s story can ensure students receive the best support and have a voice in their education. Bringing more student voice into the decision making space of the high school will create a shift. Student voice will also create a greater relationship between the adults in the school and the students.

Another partnership that must be created is with parents and guardians. Many students have a variety of supports outside of the school day, and school staff must prioritize partnering with those supports. Positive supports with parents and community members create a better learning environment and academic results for students (Gasper et al., 2012). Traditionally these relationships have decreased as students move to higher grade levels, which results in secondary schools having the least amount of interaction with parents and guardians. School leaders must prioritize these relationships with parents and guardians and create multiple opportunities for them to come to the building.
The Importance of Setting and Environment

As students move through their high school careers, the setting and environment are key pieces in their success. I believe schools develop the environment of the school to support students’ academic progress and personal growth. The schools in the study were both large comprehensive high schools with over 1,300 students in the buildings. Each day students moved between classes in what would be considered a typical high school setting. Each of the participants had circumstances in their life that caused the traditional setting to not fit their learning needs. The school’s ability to provide flexibility for students who needed more support was key to each of the participants finding success in school.

Leaders and educators must recognize the need for flexibility in their classroom settings for students. Every participant discussed the importance of flexibility during their high school career and how it empowered them while they were studying. Students preferred being able to make some decisions when they were in class about what they were studying and how they were moving forward academically. The important part of flexibility is that they are still making progress in their class work. Each participant was able to discuss the flexibility they had in some classrooms, so we know it can be created in classrooms. Educators can develop flexible learning opportunities by collaborating with educators who are already creating flexible learning opportunities. Through research we know collaboration is a key practice for teachers to learn together and grow. Leaders must prioritize collaboration as part of a teacher’s weekly schedule (DuFour et al., 2010; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Owens & Valesky, 2011). Leaders must create collaborative practices for teachers to create flexible learning environments.
Students having choice in their learning is a topic each of the participants discussed during their interview. Being trusted to be part of the process allowed students to be part of their educational decision-making. I have seen schools believe they are giving student choice while allowing them to pick between different classes, but we forget as educators that we picked all of their choices because it fit into what we have always done or what we were comfortable with, rather than building classes based on student interest and input. The participants had choice when they were in need of the greatest assistance. They worked with a trusted educator to identify what was best for their learning and fit their needs. Student choice and bringing student voice to the classroom are key to students being successful academically. Student voice being brought into the conversation created the ability for the student to have input about their education (Friend & Caruthers, 2015). As educators we must also keep in mind we are working with young adults. One of the participants was 19 years old, and all were able to serve our country in the military.

When considering setting and environment for high school students, educators must be nimble in their offerings and meeting students’ needs. Comprehensive high schools work to meet the needs of students and provide a variety of opportunities, but what we must keep in mind is making sure we do not get stuck in our offerings and continue to offer courses because it is what we have always done. Schools must be constantly reviewing offerings and look to change them based on student interest and college/career readiness standards. Our current students will be the future workers and leaders in tomorrow’s universities and businesses.
Leading Impactful Interventions

Schools have been developing and implementing interventions for many years, with secondary schools mostly falling behind primary schools. While the national graduation rate has been a concern, there has been little action to change the trajectory. A study by Greene and Winters (2005) showed the graduation rate hovering around 70% in 2000. More recently DePaoli et al. (2018) have reported increased graduation rates of 79% in 2011. Most national studies show a total graduation rate for the U.S. staying at about 80% over the last several years (DePaoli et al., 2018; “Graduation in the United States,” 2013). Young adults who do not graduate tend to rely more on social services provided by the government and are more likely to be involved with the criminal justice system (Maynard et al., 2015). As state departments of education and school districts have prioritized graduation, it has led to high schools developing more intentional interventions for students.

High school leaders must take the initiative and guide this work to ensure schools have the proper interventions to support students. All of the participants in the study needed a Tier 3 intervention and tailored support for them to finally find academic success (Buffum et al. 2010; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015). Each of the participants were able to find success in a relationship-based environment in which they were able to have a voice in determining the best place for them to learn and the best intervention. The personalized, cooperative approach ultimately supported the students in their learning because they were capable of doing the work; they needed an appropriate setting and environment for their learning styles.

As school leaders develop more purposeful interventions, they must look to intervene as soon as they know students are beginning to struggle. Five of the six participants began struggling from the start of their ninth grade year at school. Only one participant did not need
early intervention until he found out he was going to be a father and began struggling academically. Secondary leaders must implement a purposeful approach to helping students who struggle when they begin high school. The first step is to have teachers focus on what they want students to master and determine how they are going to support students when they do not master the content.

Comprehensive high schools must guarantee a viable curriculum with teachers focused on ensuring every student demonstrates mastery of the essential curriculum. When students do not master the essential curriculum, they begin receiving more focused support from the school. This support many times provides students more focused and guided support with a lower teacher/pupil ratio (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Maier et al., 2016). As students need increased support, administrators, counselors, and teachers work to meet their needs. By implementing a relationship-based, personalized intervention plan with student voice as part of the conversation, each student is guaranteed the support they need based on their academic and socio-emotional needs. Comprehensive high schools must move away from teacher-focused, school-based interventions and instead personalize the intervention based on each student. We must move the RTI approach forward by personalizing support for students based on the relationship built with each individual student by guaranteeing them a caring adult relationship.

The Venn diagram in Figure 3 shows that schools must first know the student and by building a relationship and, equally important, identifying what supports or interventions are needed for each student individually. Schools for years have been able to provide interventions, but they were not individualized to the student and instead focused on what the school was able to provide.
Figure 3. Intersection = Flexibility and Individualization.

Students who are receiving effective core instruction, including a viable curriculum, have grade-level and/or subject-level teams who monitor student progress and determine when students need more intensive assistance. School-wide intervention teams are led by a counselor or administrator and need assistance outside of the specific curricular goals that are being taught. Although led by counselors and/or administrators, key staff members are also included. Teachers, social workers, intervention educators, and outside support agencies are included on the teams.

High school leaders must develop support systems and ensure students have quality relationships with adults for early intervention for every student. An important part of building a quality relationship is ensuring students have their voice in the conversation and each student knows they have a voice in their education careers. When educators create, maintain, and update an RTI system with the flexibility to personalize interventions based on the support the student needs, they can provide supports early. Educators can work to
effectively intervene early when students show they are struggling. While each of the participants needed the top level of support, the intervention before Tier 3 was the Intervention Room, which the participants expressed helped but did not effectively move them back on track academically to graduate with their cohort (Jimerson, Burns, & VanDerHeyden, 2016). The individualized experience with an adult who was able to learn about the student’s needs is what supported their academic success. The key to learning about the student needs includes bringing their voice into the educational space. The power of the student’s voice must be part of the personalized education plan (Friend & Caruthers, 2015).

The key implication of this recommendation is not only focusing on implementing an RTI model for interventions. Educators must move beyond RTI by personalizing interventions for each student and ensuring there is enough flexibility to support them. By creating this system, educators can intervene frequently and transition students into and out of the support they need based on their specific feedback. The RTI model is simply a structure; it is truly knowing the students and having teachers collaborating about their success that makes the difference (Flannery et al., 2014; Maynard et al., 2015). Schools must develop systems to support students in their learning and ensure the school knows that help is needed and can respond quickly with the correct support.

The other intervention secondary schools must examine is transitioning students off their IEP when they enter a comprehensive high school. While the student may appear not to need the support in eighth grade, the IEP provides additional support as students transition into high school. Two of the study participants struggled in high school after transitioning off their IEP. Both thought it hurt them academically, and it was a shock to them because they
did not have support at the high school. A case manager may have been able to intervene more quickly and provide support for the students before they fell behind. While acknowledging the lack of academic support, I believe a level of socio-emotional support was missing as well. Many times, the case manager and the students develop a relationship that supports them if they are having a bad day or something has occurred at home. Educators must be cautious when transitioning students off their IEP and monitor their progress academically and socio-emotionally.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

This study identified and examined the experiences of six students who did not graduate with their cohort from two comprehensive high schools within a large, diverse suburban school district. There are several opportunities to continue to explore this topic and research. The recommendations center around creating individualized, flexible learning opportunities to meet the needs of high school students with a focus on relationships, flexible settings, and intervention opportunities for students. My first suggestion is to create a longitudinal study identifying students in their ninth grade year when they fall behind and tracking them through the interventions the student experiences. This would allow the researcher to track whether or not the interventions are effective and explore if schools are implementing interventions based on the student’s specific needs.

A longitudinal study focused on identifying students who are struggling during their ninth grade year or struggling coming into high school could further inform practices within a high school. By identifying struggling students during their ninth grade year, the research would be able to pinpoint effective and ineffective interventions on a case-by-case basis. This would allow the researcher to examine the length of time a student may receive additional
support from the school and whether or not a student might no longer need the intervention based on early support. Creating a longitudinal study and tracking students coming into their high school career and during the four years would provide the researcher the ability to track the experience of the student.

Conducting a study that includes both the students and educators directly working with the students would be a powerful way to compare their responses to questions similar to those in this study. This study was focused on the responses and experience through the students’ viewpoints, but each of the students had a strong adult relationship that impacted them. The ability to identify the similarities and differences between students’ and adults’ responses would inform educators’ practices because both perspectives would be available in the same circumstances. There would be value in what matches between the viewpoints of the educators and students, because it would reinforce for the educator what is working in the program. Having both educators and students interviewed would inform educators to compare what they thought was going on with students versus what the students were actually experiencing. I believe educators want to do what is best for all students, but educators have blind spots and misperceptions. Having both sets of information together would make it easier to identify the misperceptions.

As I reflect on the fact that each of the participants in this study needed the highest level of intervention, I am curious about looking at students who enter into and successfully move out of Tier 2 support. These students would have fallen behind academically but then would have received Tier 2 support and moved back to the traditional comprehensive high school schedule instead of needing additional support as the participants of this study did. It
would be useful to compare students who moved out of the Tier 2 support system to the participants of this study, for whom the Tier 2 support which did not work.

Finally, I would suggest using a quantitative and qualitative approach to examine how effective high schools are in intervening with struggling students and whether those students are able to graduate with their cohort. School leaders have access to students’ number of credits earned and the graduation rates. Comparing these to interventions implemented can provide data to gauge the effectiveness of the support students are receiving. Adding in the qualitative piece by speaking with students about their perceptions would add to the richness of the research data. School leaders know data; it is part of their jobs and what is expected in today’s educational setting. Student voice will create another layer for school leaders to consider when making decisions.

**Final Thoughts**

The conclusions and findings in this study will be helpful to me personally and to secondary school educators. The research showed the value of relationships and intervening early on behalf of students. High school must make it a priority to intervene early with flexible, individualized interventions when students need additional support. We cannot allow students to continuously get behind year after year before we provide the necessary support and interventions. If we want to ensure students have the necessary skills and qualifications to be successful after high school, we must provide the necessary support early and often. In order to provide the necessary support, we must know the students.

Building relationships and ensuring every student has a trusted adult in the school is key to knowing what students need in order to be successful. Students must have someone in the school who is looking out for their well-being. There are more students than adults in
schools, so ensuring someone is looking out for every student must be done purposefully and regularly. Adolescence is a tough time for anyone, and students can become lost in large comprehensive high schools. Educators can easily find ways to focus on the students who are most engaged and the subject matter they like teaching and not focus on the success of every student. Every staff member will not be able to build a relationship with every student in large comprehensive high schools. That is why it is important to identify students’ strengths and interests and move them to the educators who have similar strengths and interests.

Schools must understand the “one size fits all” organizational structure will leave students behind. Comprehensive high schools are large, complex organizations with many moving parts, and we must ensure they are adaptable and flexible. When I first started my education career, I worked in a rather rigid environment where the adults and students followed the same pattern each and every day. Students who struggled did not always have an intervention available for their support. Pieces that did not fit into the pattern were discarded or forgotten. Too many times the pieces that did not fit were students who needed support. Sometimes educators blame a student’s home life or something that occurs outside of the school day for their failures. We are well past the point where we can leave these students behind. We must provide the intervention and support to ensure the student can be successful.

As I reflect on the research and this process, I am thankful for the experience and knowledge I have gained by digging more deeply into this topic. The process has provided valuable insight for my future work as an educator.
APPENDIX A

PRINCIPAL PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT

April 2018

Dear Colleagues,

I am currently beginning the research phase for my doctoral dissertation entitled, THE EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS WHO DO NOT GRADUATE WITH THEIR COHORT. This study will provide insight into what students who do not complete high school with their cohort experience regarding interventions and relationships with adults. I would like to ask for your help with participant recommendations for this study. In order to collect rich data for this study, please think of students who:

   a. Are not going to graduate with the students they began with in 9th grade through earning the necessary credits by the May/June graduate date.
   b. May complete high school with their 9th grade cohort by completing the MO Options program by passing the HiSET exam.
   c. Are currently 18 years old.

If students choose to participate in this study, they will be asked to provide their transcripts, grade cards and classes they have enrolled in while in high school. They will also be asked to allow me to observe them in a classroom and engage in an interview with them.

As the researchers, we will do our best to keep the information that students share confidential, but this cannot be totally guaranteed. Persons from the University of Missouri-Kansas City Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves research studies), Research Protections Program, and Federal regulatory agencies may look at records related to this study to make sure we are doing proper, safe research and protecting human subjects. The results of this research may be published or presented to others. Students, teachers and other staff members will not be named in any reports of the results, nor will the school or school district be identified. Rather, pseudonyms will be used in place of names of individuals, schools, and school districts. The participants will choose their own pseudonym.

Although audio recordings will be used for precise interviews, no audio will be used in publications or presentations. If teachers decide to leave the study early, which they may do at any time, all data collected will be destroyed at that point. All of the data collected and utilized for this study will be kept in a locked cabinet in the Principal Investigator’s office, Dr. Shirley Marie McCarther, for seven years after the completion of this study.

Participation in this study is voluntary at all times. If a student chooses not to participate or to withdraw their participation, they may do so at any time without any penalty. If students think they have been harmed in any way as a result of this study, they may contact the
Institutional Review Board at 816-235-5927. While every effort will be made to keep confidential all of the information that teachers complete and share, it cannot be absolutely guaranteed. Individuals from the University of Missouri Kansas City Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves research studies), Research Protections Program, and Federal regulatory agencies may look at records related to this study for quality improvement and regulatory functions.

Please email me the name of any students you feel should be considered as participants for this study. Please email me their name, grade level, and school by TBD. I would like to thank you in advance for your assistance with this research project.

Sincerely,

Mark Maus
STUDENT RECRUITMENT LETTER

My name is Mark Maus and I am a Doctoral Student at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. I am also the Executive Director of Human Resources at North Kansas City Schools. The reason for my email today is that you have been recommended by your Principal to participate in my research study entitled “The Experiences of Students Who Do Not Graduate with their Cohort.” Your Principal has recommended you for this study because you are an individual who has worked through a variety of obstacles during your journey through school since the 9th grade and are currently a Senior in your school.

I would like to invite you to participate in this research study. The goal of this study is to identify what steps high schools should take to support students during their high school careers. The risks to you for participating in this study are minimal, no greater than those you encounter in daily life. The study will last from approximately July 2018–August 2018.

If you choose to participate in this study, you would be asked to do the following:

1. All participants will be asked to provide their enrollments while in high school, their official transcripts and grade cards. This will allow me to understand your journey as a high school student and what classes you engaged in.

2. Participate in one individual interview session with me regarding your experiences in high school. All interviews would be conducted at a time that is convenient for you. Interviews would be scheduled for forty-five (45) minutes. Interviews would be recorded using a digital recording device, and these records would remain secure and confidential.

3. Participate in one observation in the school setting. This will allow me to see you interact with students and teachers in a traditional school day.

The documents, interviews and observation notes would be conducted between now and the end of August. As a participant, you will not be named in any reports of the results, nor will the school or school district be identified. Rather, pseudonyms will be used in place of names of individuals, schools, and school districts. Participants will choose the pseudonym to use during the study. Each participant completing the study will receive a $50 Visa gift card.

If you would like to talk further with me about your participation in this study, feel free to email me or to contact me at 816-518-1110 at any time. If you could, please let me know by July 10, 2018 if you are or are not interested in participating in this research study and I thank you in advance.

Sincerely,

Mark Maus
APPENDIX C

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Through this study it was critical to provide information about how several terms are used during the study. These terms were consistently used by high school educators but are not commonly used outside of high schools.

For the purposes of this paper, cohort is defined as a group of students (Cohort, 2018). A high school cohort is the group of students who start their ninth-grade year together.

A comprehensive high school is defined as a school which admits all children of appropriate age in a given area and provides a range of courses to suit their whole range of interests and abilities (Campbell & Sherington, 2006). The comprehensive high schools participating in this study begin in ninth grade when the majority of students are between 14 and 15 years old.

The HiSET exam (State Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, n.d., State Options) provides students the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and skills to earn high school equivalency credentials by engaging in an exam that measures the skills learned. The HiSET exam for this study refers to an exam high schools offer in partnership with the state of State so students can complete high school through an alternative method.

The High School Alternative Program (HSAP) is a program developed by the school district to support students who need Tier 3 support. Students attend this program instead of their traditional high school schedule. They are in the program each day for approximately three hours and work through classes based on an online learning platform called Plato. Students are able to master the key concepts of the classes at the fastest rate they can.
Mastery is based on assessments developed and implemented in the Plato program. Students receive a diploma, but grades earned through the program are counted as 1.0 on a 4.0 scale.

An intervention is defined as the interference in a person’s daily routine and practice (Intervention, 2018). Interventions for the purpose of this study are systems that schools implement to support students outside the traditional school schedule.

Graduation is defined as a ceremony or event when diplomas are presented and conferred as part of a culminating event in a college or school (Graduation, 2018). In order to participate in the ceremony, students must complete all requirements before the ceremony takes place in May or June.

The State Options Program is a program that allows students who are 17 years old and are not going to graduate with their cohort to take the HiSET exam. If they pass the HiSET exam, they can graduate through the Department of Elementary and Secondary’s program and receive their high school diploma (Wimer, 2018).
APPENDIX D

STUDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Opening Introduction & Description of Project: As a part of my research study, I am collecting data from participants through individual interviews. I am going to ask you a series of questions and audio record your responses. Upon transcribing the interviews and the developing your case, I will send the data back to you in order to review for accuracy. All of your responses will be kept confidential and will only be used for the purpose of this research. Additionally, your identity will not be revealed in my findings. If there are additional questions that I have after analyzing the data, I will arrange a time to conduct an additional phone interview. Let’s get started.

1. How would you describe the relationships you had with peers, teachers, and other school personnel during your high school career?
2. What interventions did you experience during their high school career? (May need to describe interventions when asking)
3. What choices did you have about the interventions you experienced to support your work toward graduation?
4. How did the intervention support your progress and advancement toward graduation?
5. Were their interventions which did not support your progress toward graduation?
6. What advice would you give educators to encourage students to stay in school and progress toward graduation?
APPENDIX E

STUDENT OBSERVATION GUIDE

As a part of my research study, I am collecting data from participants through observations. I am going to observe you in the school setting and take notes while I am observing. After observing you I will send the observations back to you to review for accuracy. All of your responses will be kept confidential and will only be used for the purpose of this research. Additionally, your identity will not be revealed in my findings and the pseudonym of your choice will be used. If there are additional questions that I have after analyzing the data, I will arrange a time to speak with you personally.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Things to look for</th>
<th>Observation notes</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant interactions with other students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant interactions with adults</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Level of engagement and actions by the participant</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Describe the classroom or setting</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX F

STUDENT IDENTIFIER KEY

The following will be used to match the participants identity to the information obtained from the participant. This information will be kept separate from the study information and will be kept in a separate locked file cabinet. The only person with access to this information will be the researcher.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant’s Name</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
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APPENDIX G

STUDENT PARTICIPATION CONSENT FORM
Consent for Participation in a Research Study

The Experiences of Students Who Do Not Graduate with Their Cohort
Mark Maus

Request to Participate
You are invited to participate in a research study to share your experiences during your high school career. The researcher in charge of this study is Mark Maus, Doctoral Candidate, University of Missouri-Kansas City. The study team is asking you to participate because you are a student who is working toward your high school diploma through your school district or earning your diploma through the State Options Program. We need your help to better serve our students in the future. Your voice is missing in research and it is too valuable not to include in the future.

Research studies only include people who choose to take part. This document is called a consent form. Please read this consent form carefully and take your time making your decision. Additionally, the researcher will go over this consent form with you, your family (if desired) and answer any questions that you may have. This consent form explains what to expect: the risks, discomforts, and benefits, if any, if you consent to be in the study.

Background
You are being asked to participate in this study because you have identified yourself as a student who is:

a. Are not going to graduate with the students they began with in 9th grade through earning the necessary credits by the May/June graduate date or have engaged in a 5th year of high school.
b. May complete high school with their 9th grade cohort by completing the MO Options program by passing the HiSET exam.
c. Are currently 18 years old.

As a participant in this study, you have been asked to take part in this research study because of the experiences that you have with professional development.

Purpose
The goal of this study is to identify aspects of our high schools where we can improve how we support students as they progress toward graduation. This study will also provide insight for our secondary educators of systems we can put in place refine our practices and ensure all students graduate. The risks of participating in this study are minimal, no greater than those encountered in daily life.

Procedures
If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an observation while you are attending school, consent to one in-person interview, and consent to providing
the documentation from your high school career (transcripts, grade cards, progress reports). The study will last from approximately April 2018-August 2018.

You and five other students are being invited to participate in a review of your high school documents. Documents are a valuable way to learn more about the classes you have been enrolled in, grades earned, and progress reports provided to update you on your ability to earn credits throughout high school. Transcripts are valuable because of the ability to see progress toward graduation and see the whole picture of your progress toward graduation. All documents will have your name removed and the pseudonym of your choice will be put in place of your name. A pseudonym is a fictitious identify name you will choose to be identified with during this study. A master list of participants with their pseudonyms for further data collection and analysis will be kept on a password-protected computer and the researcher will be the only one with access to the list.

You will also be invited to participate in one individual interview session with the researcher regarding your experiences during your high school career. The interviews will be conducted at a time that is convenient for you and will be focused around your progress toward graduation. Interviews will be scheduled for forty-five (45) to sixty (60) minutes. You will use your selected pseudonym during the interviews. Interviews with you will be recorded using a digital recording device. If you do not want the interview recorded, the interview can be completed without recording. You will review the transcriptions of the interview before data are analyzed. Following data analysis, recordings will be destroyed. The transcription of the interviews will be kept on a password-protected computer and paper copies kept in a locked file.

You will be invited to participate in an observation while you are attending courses at the high school. The session will allow the researcher to see what your time in high school looks like and inform the research. The observation will be scheduled for sixty (60) to ninety (90) minutes. The observation will be transcribed as it is occurring. No videoing equipment will be used during the observation. Once the transcription of the observation is completed and reviewed by you and the other participants, the recording will be destroyed. A paper copy of the transcription will be kept in a locked file. After the study is over, all files will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher’s advisor’s office for 7 years.

**Risks and Inconveniences**

There are not any known physical, social, or economic risks associated with this study; there is also no risk of criminal or civil liability. You may, however, feel uncomfortable describing past and present experiences during high school. In order to minimize these risks, all participation, including conversations, are voluntary and may be discontinued at any time for any reason. Please know we have multiple resources available to support you as you share your experiences. The district has social workers, counselors and multiple partnerships in the community to support you with any resources you may need.

Confidentiality is a potential risk of this research study. In order to reduce this risk, a pseudonym you choose will be used in place of your name on all data collected from you. A
master list of participants with their chosen pseudonyms will be kept for further data collection and analysis will be kept on a password-protected computer and the researcher will be the only one with access to the list. All interviews will be conducted in a location that is determined by you and that you feel will best support your confidentiality throughout this study. Finally, all digital recordings will be destroyed upon the completion of data analysis. This research is considered minimal risk. That means that the risks of taking part in this research study are not expected to be more than the risks in your daily life. There are no other known risks if you choose to take part of this study.

Benefits
There are no direct benefits to you participating in this study. The information you share and the study taking place is designed to inform high school educators and guarantee we are meeting the needs of all students. Indirectly, however, your experiences may lead to a better understanding of how school districts can best support students as they progress during their high school careers toward graduation.

Fees and Expenses
There are no costs for taking part in this study.

Compensation
All participants will be compensated with a $50.00 Visa gift card.

Alternatives to Study Participation
The alternative is not to take part in the study

Confidentiality
As the researcher, we will do our best to keep the information you shared confidential, but this cannot be totally guaranteed. Persons from the University of Missouri-Kansas City Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves research studies), Research Protections Program, and Federal regulatory agencies may look at records related to this study to make sure we are doing proper, safe research and protecting human subjects. The results of this research may be published or presented to others. You will not be named in any reports of the results, nor will the school or school district be identified. Although audio recordings will be used for precise interviews, no audio will be used in publications or presentations. If you decide to leave the study early, which you may do at any time, all data collected will be destroyed at that point. All of the data collected and utilized for this study will be kept in a locked cabinet in the Principal Investigator’s office, Dr. Shirley Marie McCarther, for seven years after the completion of this study.

This study involves minimal risk and therefore you do not need to sign to take part in the study. This adds an additional layer of protection against a breach of confidentiality because a signed consent would connect you with the research.
Contacts for Questions about the Study:
You should contact the Office of UMKC Institutional Review Board at 816-235-5927 if you have any questions, concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant. You may call the researcher, Mark Maus, at (816) 518-1110 if you have any questions about this study. You may also call him if any problems arise.

Voluntary Participation
Participation in this study is voluntary at all times. You may choose not to participate or to withdraw your participation at any time without any penalty. If you think you have been harmed in any way as a result of this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board at 816-235-5927. While every effort will be made to keep confidential all of the information you complete and share, it cannot be absolutely guaranteed. Individuals from the University of Missouri-Kansas City Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves research studies), Research Protections Program, and Federal regulatory agencies may look at records related to this study for quality improvement and regulatory functions.

You have read this Consent Form, or it has been read to you. You have been told why this research is being done and what will happen if you take part in the study, including the risks and benefits. You have had the chance to ask questions, and you may ask questions at any time in the future by calling Dr. Shirley McCarther at 816-235-2451.
REFERENCES


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State Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2019). Options program.


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VITA

Mark Maus was born May 31, 1977, in St. Joseph, Missouri. He was educated at Smithville High School in Smithville, Missouri. He then pursued undergraduate studies and was awarded a B.S. in Education with minors in Mathematics and Science from Northwest Missouri State University in 2001. He later returned to academics to earn a Master of Administration at Northwest Missouri State University and an Education Specialist in Administration from the University Missouri-Kansas City.

In addition to the academic journey, Mr. Maus has spent over 18 years as a Math teacher, assistant principal, principal, and director in Human Resources with North Kansas City Schools and Columbia Public Schools.

Mr. Maus entered the University of Missouri-Kansas City Doctorate in Education: Focus on PK-12 Administration program with a passion for learning more about how education organizations strive to collectively accomplish goals. Understanding educational elements of process, people, structure, and strategy continues to be a source of inspiration for Mr. Maus. Upon completion of the Doctor of Education degree, Mr. Maus plans to continue serving as a public educator and administrator.