

AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

Susan Lori Bogen for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education presented on June 10, 2015.

Title: Perceptions of “Dropouts” Recovered as Adults:
A Life Course Case Study on Older High School Graduates

Abstract approved:

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Research has established that poor outcomes are the future for those without a high school diploma—yet students continue to drop out and become members of that population. The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the experiences and perceptions of individuals who did not complete high school within the traditional age-graded time-frame, yet subsequently graduated from an adult high school program. Currently, in the United States, few secondary options exist for over-age dropouts. New Mexico and Indiana, however, are two states that allow public funding to pay for high school without imposing upper age limitations. For this case study, adult high school programs were identified in the aforementioned states, and purposive samples were selected. Eight participants were selected from the Gordon Bernell Charter School in New Mexico and 13 from Indiana’s Excel Centers. Of the 21 participants, 15 were female and six were male. Ages ranged from 21 to 70 years old. The study’s theoretical framework was anchored to Transformative Research, embedded in Social Constructivism, and analyzed through a Life Course Perspective. Life course

examines complex interchanges and choices between individuals and their environments within time, socio-cultural, and economic constraints; and considers the effects of accumulated advantages and disadvantages. In this research, the themes that developed from interview responses were categorized and analyzed within the following five life course dimensions: a) time and place; b) linked lives; c) agency; d) timing; and e) life span development. A key finding revealed that changes in perspective had occurred over time—because the time and place changed—bringing participants to a new era in their lives. This change provided insight into past choices. Initial choices to drop out of school had become regret, but individuals were empowered to make different choices when given a new opportunity to finish high school. Timing also played into their decisions to return to high school when facing the needs of their growing children. Indications that people seek to grow and develop in positive and socially accepted ways over the life-span were evident in participants' diverse age groups and successes in graduating. These findings suggest that policies prohibiting public education beyond age 21 may need to be reviewed. Findings also implied that the cumulative disadvantages most of the participants had experienced in their youth had presented them with few perceived options regarding completion of high school. However, new opportunities allowed students to accumulate advantages that provided life-changing turning points and facilitated changes in life trajectories. Although results may not be generalizable to the greater population, sufficient insights exist to initiate a conversation around how adult high schools could help recover lost investments in secondary non-completers. Implications of this study have the potential to impact future policy and program development, inform adult education practitioners, and stimulate further research.

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Perceptions of “Dropouts” Recovered as Adults:
A Life Course Case Study on Older High School Graduates

by
Susan Lori Bogen

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I understand that my dissertation will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my dissertation to any reader upon request.

Susan Lori Bogen, Author

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The author expresses sincere appreciation to many more people than I may remember to mention—or have sufficient space to list. Regardless, I must first acknowledge my dear husband who has amazingly supported me throughout these many years! Thank you, Michael—I love you. My family and friends are obviously those who have endured and sacrificed the most through this endeavor, so I must acknowledge my sweet daughters—Jaimi and Anna, and my super sons-in-law—Jared and Sean, as well as my five amazing grandchildren—Gracie, Elena, Jude, Eyrie, and Ethan. Without my best friends—my sister Connie (who always was available to critique and edit my drafts), and my sister in heart, Kristl (who always makes me feel special), my resolve would have dissolved.

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Although it hasn't always seemed so, I believe God's timing is perfect, and I pray that in some small way this work will bring Him honor. Thank you, Father.

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DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to my little sister, Carrie Anne Asay. She loved and was loved by many here on earth, but endured tremendous cumulative disadvantages over her life course. I love you and miss you, and I'm thankful the riches of heaven more than compensate.

Chapter 1

“Education costs money, but then so does ignorance”
(Sir Claus Moser, Daily Telegraph, London, 21 Aug 1990).

Introduction

In today’s world, students who drop out of high school are less likely to have jobs than graduates—and are more likely to have lower paying jobs if they are employed at all (Rumberger, 1987; Stearns & Glennie, 2006). Lower earnings from this population result in fewer taxes paid and a subsequent reduction in funds to support social services. Such reductions further impact dropouts themselves, since their generally poorer health adds to the likelihood that they will be dependent on health-related social services (Burrow & Smith, 2007). With increased odds that dropouts may be involved in criminal activities, costs of incarceration can also be added to the issue’s monetary effects (Tavakolian & Howell, 2012).

Statement of the Problem

There are a significant number of students in the United States who drop out or fail to complete secondary education requirements each year. Some find their way back, but many do not. For this population the chances of finding employment—in particular living wage employment—are much lower than for those who obtain their high school diploma (Rumberger, 2012; Buschmann & Haimson, 2008). Multiple studies have been conducted in order to determine the causes for the drop out phenomenon (Bridgeland, Dilulio Jr., & Morison, 2006; Suh, Suh, & Houston, 2007; Stearns & Glennie, 2006), and a variety of

preventions and interventions have been tried based on the results of those studies. Very little research, however, has been completed regarding dropout recovery and re-entry options. Dropout recovery and re-entry are terms referring to programs to reengage those students who have stopped attending school, and have not re-enrolled anywhere for at least 180 days. There is sparse research on these aspects of the dropout problem, but this is especially true when the students are over the age of 21 (Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy, 2013).

Focus and Significance of the Study

There are not many free secondary education pathways available for those who drop out and who are now over 21 years old. Neither are there consistent funding streams available to pay for the secondary education costs of these adult-aged students (Berliner, Barrat, Fong, & Shirk, 2008). Even the most common alternative to the high school diploma—the General Educational Development (GED) certificate—has costs associated with it. Some colleges and young adult programs do cover expenses for certain demographic groups, but funds are limited and eligibility requirements are strict. Furthermore, the benefits of a GED are debatable, as recent studies have indicated it is not a comparable option (Zajacova, 2012; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). In a study of three separate GED policy innovations, findings suggested the GED may even function as an incentive for students to drop out of high school early (Heckman, Humphries, LaFontaine, & Rodríguez, 2012). As such, additional and equivalent options for those who do not finish as expected are needed to offset the stark

social stratification and power deprivation that frequently results from a lack of basic education (Kerckhoff, 2001).

Practical significance.

In the 21st Century, training and educational needs for societies are progressively changing. With 10,000 baby boomers turning 65 each day from 2011 to 2030 (Cohn & Taylor, 2010), insufficient replacement workers—both in numbers and in skills—are anticipated (Minton-Eversole, 2012). Not only is there a lack of available workers for many of the managerial positions currently being vacated, there are also imminent science and technology jobs that may need workers who can keep up with almost daily occurring developments. Many of the new jobs will have need of a trained workforce that calls for less than a four year degree but more than a high school diploma (Carnivale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010).

Current and future economics situate global competitiveness as more than just a goal—it is a necessity (Executive Office of the President; Council of Economic Advisers, 2009). Because of this, it is imperative to have a highly and aptly educated workforce. There no longer exists an abundance of unskilled, labor-based work opportunities available to young men and women who have less than a post-secondary degree or credential. There are even fewer work options for those without a high school diploma (Rumberger, 2012). Of those that do exist, they rarely provide a living wage. Recovering and reconnecting the considerable number of dropouts, who are now adults, may result in discovering an untapped and plentiful reservoir for meeting such workforce needs (Bridgeland & Mason-Elder, 2012).

Scholarly significance.

There is a gap in the literature about dropout recovery and the population of young people who age out of the option to return to public high schools. To make sure all individuals are well-educated, the concept of providing a seamless path from kindergarten through college has been put forward (Pitre, 2011). However, tied to this concept remains the society-assigned determination that at age 18, a student becomes an adult and should have completed his or her secondary education. Considering that children enter elementary school at varying developmental levels, and with different skill sets in place, this frequently proves to be unrealistic (Ready, 2010; Lee & Burkam, 2002). Even so, the traditional expectation in the United States is that all students will complete elementary and secondary school within the same basic age-based timeframe (United Nations World Youth Report, 2003).

Although studies have looked at who is not completing high school and why, and many efforts have been made to address the issues, insufficient evaluative research has been completed on prevention and intervention program effectiveness (Rumberger, 2012; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009; Quinn & Poirier, 2006). In spite of the many programs currently available, plans developed specifically for the purpose of recovering those who have already dropped out are relatively unheard of (Reyna, 2011). Recovery efforts on behalf of those who age out and no longer qualify for basic state-funded public education are even less common. Illuminating the perceptions and experiences of study participants from this last

category may add to the literature on factors that advance recovery efforts, inform policy makers, and influence forward-thinking school system changes.

Personal significance.

Over the course of the last twenty years, my career in education has allowed me to develop close relationships with marginalized populations in my community. I have first-hand knowledge of the struggles these families have faced, and the hardships students have experienced as they failed to graduate from high school. This study is paired with a personal hope that findings may stimulate additional efforts to develop effective dropout recovery strategies and promote the possibility of state-supported adult high school programs. Such programs have the potential to transform the educational and workforce systems and to provide needed turning-point transitions along the life courses of many (Mezirow, 2000).

Purpose of the Study

“There is no greater crime than to stand between a man and his development; to take any law or institution and put it around him like a collar, and fasten it there, so that as he grows and enlarges, he presses against it till he suffocates and dies.”

(Henry Ward Beecher, New York Times, January 5, 1861)

When students don't complete their basic education, they are much more likely to experience negative impacts over their lifetimes. Many end up in a cycle of poverty and are then less likely to be able to support the academic needs of their own children (Bridgeland, Dilulio Jr., & Morison, 2006). The purpose of this research was to explore and uncover the perceptions and experiences of students who returned to, and completed, high school as adults in order to

increase understanding that may augment future research, inform policy-making, and improve educational opportunities.

Many former students have not actually dropped out of high school, but rather have aged out of the public education system prior to attaining the goal of graduation. Aging out isn't a concern, however, in a small number of states that have no age limits on enrollment. As per the tenth amendment, each state in the United States has the right to set its own policies and practices in public education (U.S. Const. amend X). The intention was to allow each state to develop plans that meet the specific and varying needs of each community. Public schools traditionally serve students from kindergarten through twelfth grades, with ages generally ranging from five to 18. According to Sizer (1997), "The ages within which schooling is required are arbitrary, the result of custom rather than of science" (p. 34). While some states have set the maximum age of enrollment at 19 years, others have not imposed a threshold (De Souza, 2006; Colesanti, 2007). The majority of states, however, have established 21 as the maximum upper age limit for receiving a free secondary education. With attainment of this threshold age, associated state funding is also terminated (Bridgeland & Mason-Elder, 2012).

Research questions.

This study invited members of the target population (adult learners) to share their perceived realities and personal reasons for stopping, then returning to, and ultimately completing high school. As such, the research questions guiding this study were:

1. What factors are perceived to have most influenced the initial decision to drop out?
2. What factors are perceived to have influenced the decision to return?
3. What factors are perceived to have supported the successful completion of this program?
4. What factors are perceived to be in place to support continued education?

Theoretical Framework/Research Perspective

The theoretical framework driving this study was anchored to *Transformative Research* (Mertens, 2009), embedded in *Social Constructivism* (Vygotsky, 1978), and analyzed through a *Life Course Perspective* (Bengtson & Allen, 1993; Elder, 1998).

Transformative research is the term used by Mertens (2009) to define an encompassing range of approaches that include *Critical Theory*, feminist perspectives, *Critical Race Theory (CRT)*, disability and gender issues—as well as participatory and emancipatory approaches. For an educator this has special significance, as working with students requires having an open mind and the ability to be flexible to accommodate the academic needs of all learners. As a teacher, I see education as a tool for emancipation and freedom from many undesirable human conditions. I also believe ethics of care and social responsibility are part and parcel of my vocation. In addition to CRT, I am influenced by *Cultural Studies*, which looks at ways race and culture advantages and disadvantages different groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). There are many nuances and variations in approaches connected to researchers who

desire to improve the social condition of human beings. From my perspective, however, Critical Theory is the parent of the various positions and multidisciplinary characteristics that align my views.

To provide the background for Critical Theory, reference is made to the Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt, Germany—later known as the Frankfurt School. According to Bottomore (1984), the institute developed with the intention of becoming a permanent center for Marxist studies (p. 11). Bottomore also depicts the school's history as four major periods that delineated the change and growth out of Marxist concepts into critical social thought. From 1923 to 1933 the research focused on development and change from a very positivistic stance. When Horkheimer (a Jewish-German philosopher and sociologist) became the director of the institute, the change toward more philosophical research resulted in the exile of the school to North America. The new Nazi government retracted Horkheimer's *venia legend* (license to teach), and the institute was closed. During this time period, Marcuse (a German-American philosopher, sociologist, and political theorist) and Adorno (a German sociologist, philosopher, and musicologist) had joined the institute and made significant contributions toward the development of a more critical theory of research. The Frankfurt School returned to Germany in 1950 with many of the major ideas associated with critical theory in place (1984, pp. 12-13).

In 1956, Habermas (a German sociologist and philosopher) began studying at the Institute under Adorno and Horkheimer (Marcuse stayed in North America). Habermas had initially been pro-Nazi but eventually became aware of

the “...brutal nature of Nazism and began his long interest in studying and promoting democracy, the thread that he himself said ties his work together” (Crawford, 2009, p. 187). He has since produced many works that illustrate his interdisciplinary interests and how they have developed into current critical theory.

Social Constructivism in this study alludes to Vygotsky’s (a Soviet psychologist) stress on the role of social interaction in the construction of cognition. In education this has specific application in regard to interaction between the learner (would-be knower) and the teacher (more-knowledgeable other) utilizing the zone of proximal development—the area between what a student already knows and what they are capable of learning with the help of another (Dixon-Krauss, 1996).

A life course perspective posits that within this process of transforming learning interactively, actions and reactions have the potential to contribute to development in the form of cumulative advantages or disadvantages (Dannefer, 2003; Mezirow, 2003). For the purposes of this study, contributions from the greater *Critical Theory* envision transformational learning opportunities, delivered from turning point junctures, which facilitate transitions into subsequent stages in the life course (Graber & Brooks-Gunn, 1996; Mezirow, 2003).

Definitions.

The Common Core of Data (CCD) is the Department of Education’s primary database on public elementary and secondary education in the United States. CCD is a comprehensive, annual, national statistical

database of all public elementary and secondary schools and school districts, which contains data that are designed to be comparable across all states (U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics). As such, the following terms have been defined from their database resources.

Dropout:

The CCD definition of a dropout is an individual who:

- Was enrolled in school at some time during the previous school year;
- Was not enrolled at the beginning of the current school year;
- Has not graduated from high school or completed a state- or district-approved educational program; and
- Does not meet any of the following exclusionary conditions: transfer to another public school district, private school, or state- or district-approved education program; temporary absence due to suspension or school-approved illness; or death.

Dropout recovery:

Dropout recovery refers to the efforts to reengage and reenroll students who have stopped attending school, and have not re-enrolled in any school for the previous and continuous 180 days.

School completer:

A school completer is an individual who graduated from high school or completed a state- or district-approved educational program upon receipt of formal recognition from school authorities. A state- or district-approved educational program may consist of special education and district or state-sponsored preparation.

Event dropout rate:

The event dropout rate estimates the percentage of high school students who left high school between the beginning of one school year and the beginning of the next without earning a high school diploma or an alternative credential (e.g., a GED).

Status dropout rate:

The status dropout rate reports the percentage of individuals in a given age range who are not in school (public or private) and have not earned a high school diploma or an alternative credential. The rate is calculated using the Current Population Survey (CPS) data with supplemental information from the American Community Survey (ACS) for all analyses of those in institutionalized group quarters. It focuses on an overall age group as opposed to individuals in the United State's school system, so it can be used to study general population issues.

Averaged freshman graduation rate:

The averaged freshman graduation rate estimates the proportion of public high school freshmen who graduate with a regular diploma four years after starting 9th grade. The rate is calculated using data from the CCD. It focuses on public high school students as opposed to all high school students or the general population and is designed to provide an estimate of on-time graduation from high school. Thus, it provides a measure of the extent to which public high schools are graduating students within the expected period of four years.

General education development (GED):

At the request of the military, the GED® test was first developed in 1942 to help returning World War II veterans finish their high school studies and re-enter civilian life. The GED® tests first became available to civilians in 1947 when New York implemented a program to award its high school diploma to those who passed the exams.

Delimitations

- The study was limited to two programs: one in Indianapolis, Indiana and one in Albuquerque, New Mexico.
- Responses of the participants were restricted to their perceptions of personal experiences.
- Due to the specific interest in older high school completers, participant ages were confined to those aged 21 and over.

Limitations

- Because the study was limited to two programs in two states, this may prevent generalizability (Myers, 2000).
- As the former director of an alternative high school, the interpretive nature of qualitative research in the second phase may reflect my bias and influence the analysis of the data.
- The age-limits of the participants may prevent generalization outside of the sample.

Summary

In reviewing the continuing problems associated with those who have not finished high school, prospects for work opportunities appear to be few. Efforts to obtain an alternative and equivalent education are arguably futile. While there has been much research completed on topics related to dropping out of high school, and what the causes of dropping out are, there has been very little investigation related to students who age out of high school. This population has significant value, as they represent losses in past investment and increases in potential future returns. In completing case studies on adults over the age of 21 who failed to complete high school within the expected timeframe, this study illuminated factors that contributed to their success in obtaining publically funded high school diplomas. Findings may inform program development and contribute to increased awareness regarding adult high school needs. This has the potential, in turn, to lead to policy change and educational reform.

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

This chapter reviews literature that constructs the setting and necessary background knowledge to preface research on dropout recovery from a life course perspective. Many resource materials were accessed via the Oregon State University Valley Library online. Through EBSCO, peer-reviewed articles were located in Academic Search Premier and Educational Research databases. Primary keywords searched for were: dropouts, high school dropout and recovery, dropout prevention and intervention, adult high school, secondary transitions, history of public education, Life Course Theory, and education policy. The dissertations and books were located through the Oregon State University (OSU) Library search engine, and online through the Google Scholar search engine. Key works by Rumberger (1987, 2012) and Elder (1998) were reviewed. Additional resources were found at Linfield College in McMinnville, Oregon and George Fox University in Newberg, Oregon. Government websites were utilized for student data statistics.

In order to develop the background for this study, the literature review was organized into four sections. The first section begins with the historical purpose of public education to provide a brief accounting of school development and change of control over time. This is significant in order to understand the influences that have affected current education policies. The second section focuses on dropping out and aligns with one of the guiding questions to explore research on the reasons why students leave school. This is included to increase

understanding about the complexity behind dropping out and to place the study in context. This section also looks at the many reasons attributed to dropping out and its ramifications for the individual as well as society, including a section on criminality as it pertains to dropping out. The third section addresses what efforts have been made in attending to the drop out phenomenon, including background on approaches—plus adult basic education options. The final section looks at life course theory to establish its application in education settings and suggest how it may inform student transitions.

Historical purpose of public education.

“There is no reference to schools in the Constitution of the United States, and yet education has made possible both its original composition, and its ongoing implementation” (Pelikan, 2005, p. xiii). It seems a strange occurrence that the Constitution excludes the mention of education—although it is the primary vehicle by which Americans learn about, develop, and sustain the ideal of Democracy it represents (Fuhrman & Lazerson, 2005). However, a look at the evolution of public education reveals how it developed and how it has sequenced through many changing purposes and influences.

The original transmission of instruction in the United States was an informal passing on of cultural norms and traditions connected to families and the groups of humans they lived with (Goodlad & McMannon, 1997). With the passage of time and societal development into communities, the first mandated purpose of schooling was one prescribed by the founding fathers to ward off the delusions of “the devil” through literacy and the consequent reading of scriptures.

This view of education as a means for moralization aligns with the traditions of the first public schools (Fuhrman & Lazerson, 2005; Spring, 1998). According to Ornstein and Levine (1984), this is considered the *Permissive Era* of education, which lasted from about 1642 until 1821. During that time period, government allowed schools to be formed, but parents still had total authority over their children's educations.

Not all youth, none-the-less, were educated by the church and family during that era. The elite or wealthier members of society found tutors or private institutions to provide education for their young, and it was generally accepted as normal that there were high and low stations in life. Those with more means would naturally be expected to pursue leadership roles in their communities and direct those of lesser means as necessary for the development of civilized society. As the perceived needs grew for socializing youth toward becoming virtuous citizens, more formal facilities became common. The stage was set for that structure when in 1647, the general court of Massachusetts Bay Colony decreed that every town of at least fifty persons should (but was not forced to) provide an elementary school for its children (Reuben, 2005).

From the 1790s to the 1820s, preparation for citizenship became the next priority in education. The push to institute public schooling was bolstered by Thomas Jefferson's argument in defense of the need for a democracy (Darling-Hammond, 1996). He believed that a public education could be provided that would instruct citizens to be self-governing and would safe-guard them from tyranny. This belief is supported in Darling-Hammond's statement that "Public

education is central to the promise of American democracy” (1996, p. 41).

Jefferson introduced legislation that would expand the structure of schooling into stratum that included free common schools for the younger white children, tuition-based grammar schools for the more advanced, followed by college for those intended for leadership. Tuition would also be charged for college except for a few poor boys who showed evidence of good character and uncommon intelligence (Reuben, 2005). Jefferson’s intentions, however, were more politically motivated than they were altruistic. His belief was that “...talented youth could be found among the poor, and if separated from their families and educated properly, they could become patriotic and valuable leaders” (p. 3).

The *Encouraging Era* (Ornstein & Levine, 1984), although relatively brief, brought a focus to the principles of becoming literate, hardworking, and industrious citizens. Massachusetts again led the passage of public school law by requiring each town to form a school committee, followed by enacting a law to require towns to develop public high schools. As the involvement of government in school regulations grew, the perception of parents as able guardians over their own children’s education became suspect and quickly brought the era to a close (Coulson, 1999).

The *Compulsory Era* (Ornstein & Levine, 1984) endured from 1855 until 1980. The establishment of schools became mandatory, and parent control over school choice was transferred primarily to government. Between 1852 and 1913, compulsory school enrollment and attendance became law in all states (Coulson, 1999). As taxes had to be paid for the support of the schools, more business

people became involved in the politics of education. They supported compulsory attendance as a way to offset the danger of youth being idle, and as a method to ensure training in the development of compliance that would foster orderly conduct among their laborers. This was also touted as a positive intervention to address problematic behaviors, in general, throughout communities (Reuben, 2005). Teaching students to be well-behaved and moral fit well with industry's desire to have an obedient labor force. As such, economics entered as a key player in the educational focus during the industrial revolution (Glaeser, Ponzetto, & Shleifer, 2007). As labor conditions changed over time, the focus grew to be more about access and practicality. The ensuing vocational training was directed at helping students prepare for careers. It also developed as a means for supporting self-sustaining communities and fostering societal bonds (Corcoran & Goertz, 2005).

The current era began in 1980 and has been referred to as the *Freedom or School Choice Era* (Milton Friedman Foundation, annual updates). Parental authority increased, and an array of options around school choice developed. A steady progression of states modified the compulsory regulations to allow for homeschooling; with all states having the option in place by the middle of the 1990s (Coulson, 1999). Throughout the 20th Century, national economic development and individual mobility continued to influence education and school choice. Among those options for the 21st century, vouchers are currently available in 18 states and the District of Columbia (DC). This means that parents in those states can choose to have their children attend private schools and their

tuition will be paid with state funds. Fourteen states have also enacted tax credit-funded scholarship programs that allow tuition, donations, and educational costs to be tax-deductible. Charter schools are now allowed in 42 states and DC. The eight states that as of this writing do not have charter school laws are: Alabama, Kentucky, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, and West Virginia. The laws differ among states as to what the varying options look like, but the principle idea is that state funds are available to support education outside of regular public school boundaries (Milton Friedman Foundation, annual updates).

Dropping out.

More than a million students in the United States fail to finish high school each year (Snyder & Dillow, 2010; Symonds, 2012). Based on a traditional school calendar, this number represents approximately one student dropping out every 9 or 10 seconds. Depending on how dropouts are defined and counted (status versus event—see definitions), the numbers may go up or down to suggest the problem is improving or regressing across the nation (Montecel, Cortez, & Cortez, 2004). Discrepancies in how each state has historically reported dropouts have also led to new agreements among state governors to develop a more standardized system (Reyna, 2011). Regardless of the rates, however, the dropout issue is a very serious matter with consequences that are far reaching (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Fox, DePaoli, Ingram, & Maushard, 2014).

Reasons for dropping out.

Researchers have agreed that dropping out of school is a cumulative process rather than an incidental occurrence (Pittman, Irby, Tolman, Yohalem, & Ferber, 2003; Rumberger, 2012). Myers (1996) studied developmental factors that were determined to be associated with students at-risk of becoming a dropout. As a framework for her work, well-developed theories by Bowlby—Attachment (1988), Erikson—Stages of Development (1966, 1978), and Bandura—Social Learning (1989) were examined. Although every child is unique, Myers (1996) found that similarities among the stages of development helped to organize topics around the dropout dilemma. In the study, students were asked to complete histories of their school lives. These were followed by interviews with the students and their parents. School records were also reviewed in order to add validity to their remembrances. The developmental theories were then used as a framework for positioning and interpreting the results. In her summary, Myers (1996) stated that:

At-risk youth do not develop in a vacuum. They develop within the multiple contexts of their families, communities, and cultures. Adolescents' high-risk behaviors are influenced by peers, relatives, and other adults with whom they come in contact as well as schools, religious organizations, and community groups to which they belong. At-risk youth are a product of environmental and social influences (p.80).

Numerous other studies have been carried out to determine which students drop out and why (Bridgeland, Dilulio Jr., & Morison, 2006; Suh, Suh, & Houston, 2007; Stearns & Glennie, 2006), with no solitary cause among the

findings. Researchers have, however, agreed that certain issues appear more frequently and consistently. Yet how these issues are categorized, varies depending on the focus of the study.

According to Suh, Suh, and Houston (2007), a review of previous research educated low socioeconomic status (SES), poor academic performance, and behavior problems as the most commonly mentioned factors associated with students at risk of dropping out of school. In their study, they used these factors as membership categories. Out of the 135 possible dropout predictor variables, they fit 20 into each category in multiple configurations. Regression analysis was then completed accessing data from the National Longitudinal Study of Youth 1997 to see which combinations of risk factors were the most significant predictors of dropping out. Of the 135 factors, only eight of the 20 were consistently present across all three groups. The common ones were: frequent absences, household size, highest grade completed by mother, whether living with biological parents, number of schools attended, having sex before age 15, plans to go to college, and optimism level about the future (Suh, Suh, & Houston, 2007). While able to identify the elements, in what specific ways the factors influenced the predictions depended on the category—suggesting that prevention strategies could be further developed based on individual group memberships (2007).

From a slightly different perspective, Mac Iver and Mac Iver (2009) found that primary contributors influencing dropping out could be organized under individual factors and institutional factors. They referred to these individual

elements as “The ABCs of Disengagement...absenteeism, behavior problems, and course failure” (p. 5). The factors can be further categorized into those that “push” students out and those that “pull” them out (Jordan, McPartland, & Lara, 1999).

Push factors are those that happen from the inside of school. These may include poor grades, bullying, a lack of positive peer connections, policies on discipline, or negative teacher relationships and/or interactions (Tuck, 2011). How these affect genders and cultural identities may vary, but they are circumstances that essentially convince the student that leaving is a better choice (Stearns & Glennie, 2006).

Examples of “pull” factors include employment and family responsibilities. This again may be defined differently from male versus female perspectives and family culture. A male may be more inclined to find a job to help support his family (parents, siblings, and/or wife and children), whereas females may more readily leave school to help provide care at home for siblings, elderly parents or grandparents, and/or own children (Jordan, McPartland, & Lara, 1999). Considering that many prevention and intervention programs focus on how to “fix” a student (Montecel, et al, 2004), it is essential to understand that institutional as well as home life characteristics may be major factors to address (Rumberger, 2012).

The impact of dropping out of school is divisible into two basic categories: those personal to the dropout (and their families), and those to society (in general). According to Catterall (2011), “Individual benefits of completing high

school include additional lifetime personal income, reduced reliance on various public services, and reduced costly behaviors such as crime” (p. 1). Societal benefits are associated for the simple reason that individuals are connected to communities, and communities develop and grow based on their individuals.

Projections by Rouse (2005) for the symposium on the Social Costs of Inadequate Education, estimated that one high school dropout averages approximately \$260,000 less in earnings in his or her lifetime than a graduate. Orfield (2005) calculates the lifetime earning difference of dropouts to be even higher, at a price tag of \$270,000. The tax payments from those earnings would amount to about \$60,000 per dropout from Rouse’s projections, or \$71,000 based on Orfield’s numbers. According to an Issue Brief by the Alliance for Excellent Education, “...if the students who dropped out of the Class of 2011 had graduated, the nation’s economy would likely benefit from nearly \$154 billion in additional income over the course of their lifetimes” (November, 2011, p. 1).

Criminality and dropping out.

Extensive research by Sampson and Laub (1993) yielded evidence of significant correlations between education and crime. The results of their study suggested that the more academic achievement a person had, the less crime involvement would occur. Conversely, poor school attachment increased the potential for delinquent behavior (1993).

Using extant information on 1,000 subjects originally gathered over 18 years by Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck for their 1950 study, *Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency*, Sampson and Laub (1993) analyzed the data to determine the

effects of schooling factors on delinquency. Their hypothesis was that “...weak attachment to school and poor school performance will increase delinquency” (1993, p. 103). Using Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) method of regression analysis, Sampson and Laub looked at the relationships between nine structural background factors: “household crowding, family disruption, family size, mother’s employment outside of the home, family socioeconomic status, foreign-born status, residential mobility, and father’s and mother’s criminality/alcoholism” (p. 106), on attachment to school and school performance. The results indicated that school attachment was negatively affected by: being in a large family, experiencing low socioeconomic status, having parents in aberrant activities such as heavy drinking and crime, and having a lack of strong community ties. Similar findings were discovered for school performance (1993).

These factors (school processes) were then added to the previous nine (structural backgrounds) to determine effects on both official and unofficial delinquency status. Both OLS Linear and Maximum Likelihood (ML) Logistic regression analyses indicated that “...attachment to school has a very large negative effect on delinquency” (Sampson & Laub, 1993, p. 110). Although various other factors of both formal and informal social control contribute to development of delinquent behavior, this study did suggest strong connections between poor school attachment and the increased likelihood of criminal involvement (1993).

In looking at the positive connections, Lochner and Moretti (2004) explored what economical “social return” school attachment and academic

achievement had. Across data from the Census on incarceration, Uniform Crime Reports from each state's arrest records, and National Longitudinal Survey of Youth self-reported data, Lochner and Moretti found consistency in the finding that criminal activity is significantly reduced by increased schooling (2004). In their analysis, they report that for each additional police officer hired at \$80,000, a reduction in crime returned an economic value of approximately \$200,000.

Although this is a good return, Lochner and Moretti compare it as follows:

To generate an equivalent social savings from crime reduction would require graduating 100 additional high school students for a one-time public expense of around \$600,000 in schooling expenditures (and a private expense of nearly three times that amount in terms of forgone earnings). Of course, such a policy would also raise human capital and annual productivity levels of the new graduates by more than 40 percent or \$800,000 based on our estimates using standard log wage regressions. So, while increasing police forces is a cost-effective policy proposal for reducing crime, increasing high school graduation rates offers far greater benefits when both crime reductions and productivity increases are considered (2004, p. 183).

Clearly, both the economical and social returns of diminished crime are worth additional investments in time and attention toward increasing educational achievement.

Efforts to stop dropping out.

Just as there have been studies focused on the causes related to dropping out, there have been strategies and programs developed to address them. Some strategies have expanded into comprehensive programs, while some have remained smaller community-focused applications. Despite these efforts, graduation rates for high school students "...have hovered around 75

percent for the past forty years” (Rumberger, 2012, p. 207). Even so, it isn’t from a lack of investment in the problem that this percentage has remained so constant—at least if monetary support is an indication. Over the last three decades, the federal government has spent in excess of three billion on dropout prevention and intervention issues. Between the Annenberg Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, another three billion plus has been donated to address the dropout phenomenon (2011, p. 207).

In reviewing several analyses of studies that were designed to evaluate effective dropout preventions or interventions in public k-12 institutions, Rumberger (2012) noted that each author had assigned different criteria and standards for identifying which studies to include as rigorous scientific research. Each analysis also varied in its interpretations of the results. Regardless of the effectiveness attributed to strategies and programs, Rumberger suggested there are three main approaches used: “targeted, comprehensive, and systemic” (p. 208).

Targeted approach.

The targeted approach is generally the one used by school districts because it takes minimal effort and is the least expensive to implement. With this tactic, students are targeted based on identified risk factors and either provided with additional services or placed in an alternative program or school. Rumberger (2012) points out that there are three caveats to this approach; one is limited success in lowering the dropout numbers because adding services or moving a student to an alternative program may not address the underlying

causes of student failure. If the curriculum and instructional techniques remain the same—and they are the cause of disengagement in the first place—additional services or a change of placement won't fix the problem. The second drawback is the elevated chance for program or service termination when school budgets get cut. Many programs are grant funded, and when the funding sunsets so do the programs. The third concern is that alternative programs and schools often carry a stigma and the assumption that students enrolled in such programs are “bad” kids (Rumberger, 2012), thereby carrying less hope of success and more expectation of failure.

Comprehensive approach.

Comprehensive reform addresses whole school change. This can mean developing a complete set of strategies and ensuring their use throughout a district. It can also mean completely changing staff—suggesting a base line to start fresh from—and/or starting a new school. Charter schools have flourished under this reform, and their existence has fostered much political discussion. Charter schools have less restrictive rules and regulations that allow for innovation and flexible formats. Many traditional public schools feel they cannot compete with charters in their district. However, in communities that adopt comprehensive reform through building relationship-based partnerships, charter schools can be another entity to collaborate with. Comprehensive reform acknowledges that schools do not have all the resources that each student needs, so consequently seeks to develop connections with organizations and service agencies that do (Pittman, et al, 2003).

Systemic approach.

When the systemic approach is utilized, a policy is implemented that affects all students. Two examples per Rumberger (2012) are a) compulsory attendance parameters, and b) increased diploma requirements.

Raising compulsory ages of attendance means requiring students to attend from minimum to maximum ages based on prevailing consensus or research that indicates improved rates of graduation and/or decreased rates of dropping out. A 1991 study on the effects of compulsory schooling on education and earnings (Angrist & Krueger), used birth dates as a natural measure to determine this. The argument for using this measure was that those born earlier in the year, would reach the age requirement for being allowed to drop out of school before those born later in the year. Although the study did yield some evidence that overall attainment from additional time in school was correlated with higher wages than those with less time—questions remained regarding overall benefit. For example, how does retention of those who do not want to be there affect students around them who do? (1991).

A second systemic change occurs when schools or states increase high school graduation requirements. The intent behind this type of change is to challenge students in order to keep them engaged. Dee (2003) suggests results are dependent on what the student's demographics are. As he explains it:

...in looking at the results for students separated by race and gender, both types of reforms had fairly large and statistically significant effects on the probability of completing high school for some groups. For instance, higher course requirements significantly reduced the probability of graduating from high school

for blacks and for white males, but not for white females. Among black students, higher curricular requirements reduced the probability of graduating from high school by roughly 2 percentage points—four times the impact that these reforms had on white males (p. 68).

On the other hand, he noted that those who did graduate with the higher requirements experienced a slight increase in employment probability. Because of the variables in adopting and implementing additional requirements from within a state to across states, however, Dee concludes that standards-based reforms could really only be compared on a subjective level at that time (2003).

Adult secondary options.

Options for completing adult secondary education vary from state to state, as well as from community to community. If an individual asks about what options exist for secondary education after leaving high school without a diploma, common responses will include the GED. The GED exam, however, has changed significantly since its inception. Its original purpose was to provide a way to measure skills in order to give returning veterans credit for what they had learned. It was also a credential they could use for college admission requirements (Hanford, Smith, & Stern, 2013). Since its inception in 1942, the GED has been revised five times. The first three times were mostly minor changes, with the first major change in 2009 and the most recent in 2014. Although these changes have increased the difficulty of the tests (there are five of them), the perception of the regular high school diploma as having more value has still held (Heckman, Humphries, and Kautz, 2014).

There are a handful of other options for adult education, but they are generally specific programs targeted at specific populations. One is the Job Corps; a vocational training program for out-of-school youth who must meet strict criteria to be eligible (jobcorps.gov). The Job Corps was started in 1964 and is run by the United States Department of Labor. There are 125 centers across the United States that together serve approximately 60,000 students. Research completed in 2001 concluded that the benefits of the Job Corps program exceeded the costs (McConnell & Glazerman). On the other hand, Muhlhausen (2007) interprets those findings as trivial and points out that a similar study in 2003 (Schochet, P. Z., McConnell, S., & Burghardt, J.), directly contradicts those findings.

Secondary programs that assist adults ages 25 and above for no or low cost, are usually run by a state government agency. These programs generally fall into one of three categories: adult basic education (ABE), adult secondary education (ASE), and English as a Second Language (ESL). According to a compilation of data called *The Blue Book*, prepared by the National Council of State Directors of Adult Education (NCSDAE), "Adult education programs serve 1.8 million of the 93 million who could benefit from services" (2014, p. 2). Although the number served might suggest busy centers providing education to adults, the reality is that the number is a small percentage. Unlike common knowledge about the GED being an option, adult education programs are not standardized and are often not known about. There is also great diversity in where such programs are held and what they actually teach, which prevents

many people from making a connection. As an example, the table below lists the names of the adult education agency from each of the states.

Table 1. Titles of State Adult Education Agencies

State	Name of State Agency
Alabama	Adult and Community Education Program
Alaska	Adult Basic Education
Arizona	Adult Education and GED Testing
Arkansas	Arkansas Department of Workforce Education
California	Adult Education
Colorado	Office of Student Support
Connecticut	Connecticut Adult Education
Delaware	Delaware Adult Education
District of Columbia	Adult and Family Education
Florida	Adult Education
Georgia	Office of Adult Education
Hawaii	Adult and Community Education
Idaho	Adult Basic Education Office
Illinois	Adult Education and Family Literacy
Indiana	Department of Workforce Development
Iowa	Division of Community Colleges
Kansas	Adult Education
Kentucky	Kentucky Adult Education
Louisiana	Louisiana Community and Technical College System
Maine	Adult Education
Maryland	Division of Workforce Development and Adult Learning
Massachusetts	Adult and Community Learning Services
Michigan	Adult Education Unit
Minnesota	Adult Basic Education
Mississippi	Adult Education Programs
Missouri	Adult Education Office
Montana	Division of Adult Basic and Literacy Education
Nebraska	Adult Education
Nevada	Career, Technical, and Adult Education Office
New Hampshire	Bureau of Adult Education
New Jersey	New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development
New Mexico	Adult Basic Education
New York	Adult Education and Workforce Development
North Carolina	North Carolina Basic Skills Program
North Dakota	Adult Education Unit

Table 1. Titles of State Adult Education Agencies (Continued)

State	Title of State Agency
Ohio	Ohio Board of Regents
Oklahoma	Adult Education and Family Literacy
Oregon	Department of Community Colleges and Workforce Development
Pennsylvania	Bureau of Postsecondary and Adult Education
Rhode Island	Office of Career, Technical and Adult Education
South Carolina	Office of Adult Education
South Dakota	Adult Education and Literacy Office
Tennessee	Division of Adult Education
Texas	Texas Workforce Commission
Utah	Adult Education Services
Vermont	Adult Education and Literacy
Virginia	Office of Adult Education and Literacy
Washington	Office of Adult Literacy
West Virginia	Adult Basic Education
Wisconsin	Wisconsin Technical College System
Wyoming	Adult Basic Education Office

Even if such programs were commonly known, most are minimally funded and already have waiting lists of potential participants (NCSDAE, 2014).

Regardless of the degree of accessibility to programs, or the effectiveness of prevention and intervention strategies, efforts continue toward that end. Currently, however, research on successful strategies to bring out-of-school youth back to school—and to stay in school—is limited (Montecel, et al, 2004). Many dropouts return to school at least once before they eventually drop out for good (Bridgeland & Mason-Elder, 2012). For those who then age out of traditional high schools, they are no longer the focus for any dropout prevention or intervention efforts and simply become another statistic (Hamilton, Sullivan, Bundy, & Ferish, 2006).

High school graduation is an expected accomplishment for students in the United States and serves as a significant transition point. Students who fail to complete high school also fail to receive transition help connecting them to additional education and/or employment, which is typically provided in their senior year. Without specific transition points or access to help cross into post high school opportunities, prospects for gainful employment or additional training are diminished (Ross & Gray, 2005).

Life course theory.

The life course theory is frequently referred to as the life course perspective. It is connected to the study of lives and social change within structural contexts over time. Within its sociological framework it is useful in studying a variety of phenomena. “Life course theory has five distinct principles: (a) time and place; (b) life-span development; (c) timing; (d) agency; and (e) linked lives” (Black, Holdlitch-Davis, & Miles, 2009, p. 39). Hutchison (2013) defines the life course perspective as that “...which looks at how chronological age, relationships, common life transitions, and social change shape people’s lives from birth to death” (p. 8). She also suggests that to better understand a person’s life, it is useful to start with an event in their personal history. In applying this advice to my study on recovered dropouts, the focused event was their graduation from high school as adults—which ties them in time both to their past and their future.

As a theoretical model, the life course perspective has been growing over the last half century with considerable contributions from Glen Elder, Jr. The life

course emerged as Elder was searching for a developmental theory that sought insights from "...historical forces on family, education, and work roles" (Hutchison, 2013, p. 384). In Elder's introduction to *The Life Course as Developmental Theory*, he stated the premise of his work was "the notion that changing lives alter developmental trajectories" (1998, p. 1). The hallmark studies that influenced his move toward development in context of a person's historical events were begun at the University of California, Berkeley. They were: the Oakland Growth Study, the Berkeley Guidance Study, and the Berkeley Growth Study. These studies and use of prior data were also instrumental in the growth of longitudinal research on human development (Elder, 1998).

In his work, Elder (1998) viewed certain historical events in a person's life as life transitions. These include moments such as starting first grade, graduating from high school, or getting married. Such events as these are powerful in their ability to direct social paths. Whereas people have the ability to employ human agency in choosing their paths, "...all life choices are contingent on the opportunities and constraints of social structure and culture" (p. 2).

In researching life course theory, it was noted that the five principles need not be conceptualized as individual linear units that begin at one point and connect to the end point. Rather, they are integrated components that have distinct characteristics as part of a whole. For clarity sake, however, information on the individual pieces was delivered briefly in the following order to align with the structure of the study: (a) time and place, (b) linked lives, (c) agency, (d) timing, and (e) life span development.

Time and place.

In looking at how time and place interact within the life course, it is important to understand these constructs from a socio-historical point of view. Examples would be where an individual was born, or a family was placed in time, in relation to world events or situations—such as during the Civil War as a young Black family in the South, or during the Dust Bowl for a farmer in the Great Plains. How would the times and places affect the life trajectories or pathways of those navigating through such difficult circumstances? Humans as social beings are shaped by contexts and events that occur over time, which in turn influence identity, development, and direction (Elder, 1998).

Linked lives.

Lives are lived interdependently throughout generations. People are connected at birth, which sets in motion their relational trajectory. Over time, additional links are formed through experiences and opportunities in concert with other life course elements. Extended family, friends, neighbors, teachers, and other community members all form links as children grow into adults. Some are good, and some are not, but all make a difference (Moen & Hernandez, 2009).

Agency.

The concept of agency is described skillfully by Bandura (2001). In his description, Bandura discusses the importance of understanding the components of agency, including intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness. An agent needs to give thought to the plan of making something

happen, and commit to it. As forethought, goals are set with the result in mind, and a course of action is developed. Regulating the self and inspiring continued effort are self-reactive, and believing in one's capacity to make the plan happen is self-reflective. The last piece is absolutely essential. As Bandura states, "Efficacy beliefs are the foundation of human agency" (p. 10).

Timing.

There exist events in life that are typically expected to occur in one's life. Starting school, becoming a teenager, obtaining a driving license, graduating, getting married, and having children to name a few. Timing of when such events occur, however, does not happen identically for every individual. This can subsequently affect life trajectories in many divergent ways. For one example, if a young teenage woman becomes pregnant, she may decide not to finish school. The timing of this one event will most likely influence the course of her life in dissimilar ways than that of a young person who doesn't experience early parenthood (Elder, 1998).

Life span development.

One way of looking at life span development, is to evaluate how much things remain constant as well as to evaluate how much things change. Although humans are designed to learn—regardless of age—that doesn't necessarily equal growth in a positive direction. Regardless of what pathway an individual chooses to take, life advances (Baltes, 1987).

Connected to the life course perspective is the concept that through institutions and social structures, life events are age-graded and rooted in

relationships that hinder or bolster behaviors. The effects of these age- and relationship-based life events can accumulate in either positive or negative ways, and can be construed as advantages or disadvantages in development. Durlak and Dupre (2008), in an article about educational differences over the life course, bring attention to the studies that have shown education as “inversely related to morbidity, disability, and mortality...” (p. 1254). This is especially significant in schooling, as the effects can indicate how the “...*cohort* processes and age-related *social-structural* and *institutional* processes...” (Dannefer, 2003, p. S327) such as dropping out and subsequently graduating after reentering high school (or not) accrue advantages (and/or disadvantages) in students’ lives.

Summary of Literature Review

Looking at the history of education in the United States revealed an expansion from the family- and community-directed teaching of values, to federal- and state-directed expectations and requirements for schooling. Along the pathway to the present, many students across generations have started and then stopped going to school. At some junctures, there have been sufficient opportunities to sustain life and provide for a family without a prescribed amount of formal education. At the present time, however, less is afforded to those without at least a high school diploma. In response to the realization that the number of graduates has not significantly increased over several generations, there have been various attempts to prevent students from dropping out of school. Some efforts have shown modest success, but the percentage of those who do not finish has not shown significant change. From the life-course

perspective, there is a trajectory that is determined in part by: the time and place people are born to; the lives they are linked to; the timing of when events happen in their lives; what are perceived to be the choices they can make; and how they develop over time. Along this trajectory there are transitions and turning points that are affected by accumulated advantages and disadvantages. Education is a foundational component to life in society, and has the potential to continue its influence throughout an individual's life.

Chapter 3

“Education of a liberating character is a process by which the educator invites learners to recognize and unveil reality critically” (Freire, 1985, p. 102).

Research Design and Method

This chapter contains a description of the case study research design, the process for determining location and case study participants, and data collection and analysis methods.

Case study approach.

According to Yin (2014), a basic theme in completing case study research is “...that empirical research advances only when it is accompanied by theory and logical inquiry, and not when treated as a mechanistic data collection endeavor” (p. xxvii). Although traditionally viewed as a type of “soft” research, Yin argues that properly completing case studies is “...one of the most challenging of all social science endeavors” (p. 3). This approach is well-suited to a study on dropout recovery, as it examines the perspectives of participants in a real world context. With scant data on adult dropout recovery in dropout literature, a case study inquiry addresses the condition where there may be “...many more variables of interest than data points” (p. 17).

This study sought to illuminate factors that contributed to the successful completion of high school for dropouts who returned as adults. The case study method, as outlined by Yin (2014), was chosen to answer underlying how and why questions regarding dropout recovery for adults. It examined how and why certain factors, as revealed by informants and other documentation, contributed

to the leaving, returning to, completing, and continuing education of adult dropouts.

Another reason for choosing case study was because of its fit with process investigations (Merriam, 1998). Seeking to understand contributing elements that support successful dropout recovery is a process, as was the process participants went through when they dropped out of school. Results from this study may have implications for policy and practice in education, and for recovery program development, as well as for influencing changes in current regulations that prohibit older persons from completing high school.

As a transformative design, this case study sought to bring to light the core issues of power and social justice as it looks into dropout recovery. In searching for meaning and understanding, transformative researchers are concerned with how realities from varying levels of privilege interact between those being studied and those who study them. It is through this process that they look to understand phenomena through socially constructed interactions (Mertens, 2011).

Connected to a desire to stimulate positive change in education are my assumptions that certain circumstances currently exist. They are listed below in order to further alert the reader to my own suppositions and biases as a student researcher and to acknowledge my role as a participant. The following statements are derived from my own observations, studies, and experiences as a veteran educator. As per Yin, these propositions are stated to direct “attention to something that should be examined within the scope of study” (2014, p. 30).

Assumptions

1. There exists a chasm in public education between secondary and post-secondary training that is greatly complicated by traditional policies and practices.
2. Policies and practices that are age-graded and cohort driven produce cumulative disadvantages for older youth who drop out of high school.
3. Appropriate and positive educational transitions and options to finish high school for dropouts over the age of 21 are not readily available or known.
4. The transitional ages between adolescence and adulthood are crucial to support.

Study Participants

In order to find eligible participants, the first step was to determine which states provided public, cost-free secondary education for adults. This was challenging because the majority of states exclude the provision of a free public secondary education to residents over age 21 (De Souza, 2007).

In the search for potential states, access to a fifty-state analysis by the Education Commission of the States (ECS) was consulted (Mikulecky, 2013). The analysis indicated that the only states without a maximum age limit for providing a free public secondary education were: Alaska, District of Columbia (DC), Florida, Hawaii, Nevada, Rhode Island, Tennessee, and Utah (Mikulecky,

2013). With further investigation, however, I was able to locate documents that indicated limitations in Alaska, DC, Hawaii, and Rhode Island as well—but no limitations in Indiana or New Mexico. The seven states, therefore, with statutes that revealed adult-aged students could be eligible for high school diplomas supported by state allocations were: Indiana, Florida, Kansas, Utah, Nevada, New Mexico and Tennessee.

An additional refinement of potential states was garnered from previous case studies on the “adult re-entry pipeline” (Boeke, Zis, & Ewell, 2011). The purpose of the 2011 study was to collect and document states’ efforts regarding provisions for non-traditional pathways to post-secondary education. The following states were initially identified as having a well-developed focus on programs for adult-aged students: Connecticut, Indiana, Kentucky, New Mexico, Ohio, Oklahoma, Texas, and Wisconsin. For the purposes of the proposed study, Indiana and New Mexico were the only states that had both a free secondary education regardless of age AND a developed effort toward adult-aged students. Prior knowledge of adult high school options yielded information on the Excel Program in Indiana. Additional input from members of my doctoral committee provided a connection to the Gordon Bernell Charter School in New Mexico. Access to gatekeepers in each program was subsequently established.

The Excel Center Program

The Excel Center concept was developed by Goodwill Education Initiatives, Inc. (GEI), an affiliate of Goodwill Industries of Central Indiana. The goal was to partner with public institutions in order to help adults complete their

secondary education. The first Excel Center opened in 2010 with the goal of serving 300 students. That number of enrollments was attained quickly, and the waiting list grew to over 1,300 in the first year (King & Shea, 2011). At the time of this study, eight more campuses had been added with more being planned. Because of the success of the Excel Center model, other states had asked for assistance in replicating the program. As of this writing, Goodwill of Memphis, Tennessee plans to open the first out-of-state Excel Center in the fall of 2015 (<http://goodwillmemphis.org/excel-center>).

Although the Excel Centers focus on adult learners, they look similar in operations to a traditional high school. Similar processes such as enrollment, class schedules, and attendance are still essential components—but with much more flexibility and wrap-around services available. The Excel model is defined as:

...a high school designed to work with adults who have dropped out of school. Structured to meet the unique needs of older students, the Excel Center includes an array of supports that address life needs outside the classroom, including childcare, transportation assistance, and balancing school with work” (GEI, 2012, p. 6).

Three primary focus areas are fundamental to The Excel Center’s success: (a) academic structure that fits non-traditional needs [flexibility], (b) transition support to relevant practical college programs and careers [local industry certifications], and (c) life “coaching” that assists students in learning how to overcome previous and current barriers to school success (GEI, 2012).

Gordon Bernell Charter School

The Gordon Bernell Charter School (GBCS) was established in 2007 (Pauls, 2011). It was named after Gordon Bernell, who was the program director for 19 years at the Bernalillo County Jail in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Bernell trained as a lawyer, but found his niche as a passionate—and compassionate—educator. He initiated and oversaw many literacy and volunteer programs, was loved by all, and was known for his honesty and integrity. These were only some of the qualities that led to the school being named after him (Logan, 2004).

The vision of GBCS, according to an anonymous blog post, is to “Change lives from the inside out” (What is Gordon Bernell, 2013, para 4). The program serves adult high school drop-outs who are: incarcerated at the Bernalillo County Metropolitan Detention Center (MDC); enrolled in the Bernalillo County Community Custody Program; on probation or parole; or simply individuals in the Albuquerque area who are over 18 and want to complete their high school education (2013).

Like other high schools, GBCS has a principal, a secretary, teachers, and students. It has classrooms and offices, and art work on the walls. It is comfortable, with a relaxed and accepting atmosphere. GBCS is the only school of its kind in the Albuquerque area—and maybe in the state. Regardless of its unique mission, it struggles to justify state funding each year. Unlike the Excel Centers, it has no corporate partner like Goodwill.

Gatekeepers

Initial contact with the Excel Program's Director of Strategic Planning and Development confirmed the willingness of the center to host this study and to facilitate contact with potential participants. I experienced the same receptiveness for my study from the Director of Gordon Bernell Charter School. With this support, and committee approval, I completed case studies of graduates from both programs. Initial communications were sent via the directors, inviting graduates of the programs to participate. Upon securing at least five willing participants in each state, interviews were scheduled. Individual interviews in Indiana took place in five of the eight Excel Center school locations over a three day period. In New Mexico, two separate group interviews were completed on two different days in two different locations. When interview sessions were finished, each participant was asked to complete basic demographic information. This data was used to provide a snapshot of participant diversity.

Data Collecting Procedures

The following table outlines the procedures used for data collection and analysis. In addition to manually sorting themes, and looking for patterns, *NVivo* software for qualitative research was utilized for organizing and analyzing data.

Table 2. Data Matrix

Research Questions	Data Needed	Data Sources	Data Collection Methods	Data Analysis
What factors are perceived to have most influenced the initial decision(s) to drop out?	Factors given by participants	Graduates, Staff	Interview, Observation, Field Notes, Staff Survey	Pattern Seeking, Tabulation of Frequency in events, Explanation building
What factors are perceived to have influenced the decision to return?	Factors given by participants	Graduates, Staff	Interview, Observation, Field Notes, Staff Survey	Pattern Seeking, Tabulation of Frequency in events, Explanation building
What factors are perceived to have supported the successful completion of this program?	Factors given by participants	Graduates, Staff	Interview, Observation, Field Notes, Staff Survey	Pattern Seeking, Tabulation of Frequency in events, Explanation building
What factors are perceived to be in place to support continued education?	Factors given by participants	Graduates, Staff	Interview, Observation, Field Notes, Informal Inquiry	Pattern Seeking, Tabulation of Frequency in events, Explanation building
	Demographic Information	Participants	Information form	Cross case synthesis

Strategies to ensure soundness.

Interviews were taped and transcribed by the researcher, and verified by respondents for accuracy. As themes and other data were compiled and analyzed, participants were also asked to verify whether the information gathered was correct and whether interpretations of the transcripts were representative of intended meaning. To ensure soundness, each participant was asked the same set of guiding questions. Staff surveys and media sources from each school

were used as additional sources for triangulation of data. This provided an audit trail of evidence to support the findings from the analysis.

Strategies for protection of human subjects.

In compliance with the policies of Oregon State University, all guidelines and procedures were strictly adhered to. All participants were given pseudonyms in order to protect and safeguard their privacy, and each participated on a voluntary basis only. Participants were given the opportunity to cancel their involvement at any time during the study. All data collected, including tapes and transcripts, were secured in a password protected laptop.

Chapter 4

Findings

This chapter reveals the findings of data collected from both individual and group interviews. The order recaps the purpose and theoretical perspectives that framed the study; follows with demographics and participant descriptions; and presents what was disclosed from the data and their connections to the life course perspective. The chapter closes with a concluding summary.

Purpose and Theoretical Perspectives

The purpose of this research was to explore the perceptions and experiences of those who had dropped out of high school as youth, but returned to finish as adults. The results contribute to scant research on adult dropout recovery and secondary education options, and may inform future policy changes and program development. The theoretical framework for this study evolved from a desire to inspire change. My foundational beliefs are that change happens over time and grows from complex and meaningful relationships with and among others. It is also inherently affected by circumstances that exist and occur over a lifetime. These components of belief are central to theories revealed through *Transformative Research* (Mertens, 2009), *Social Constructivism* (Vygotsky, 1978), and the *Life Course Perspective* (Bengtson & Allen, 1993; Elder, 1998).

Demographics

Only minimal demographics were gathered from the participants—to provide a snapshot of the diversity of study participants. However, additional

data was obtained about overall student attributes from the respective participant institutions. This was done in order to get a more complete picture of who has been enrolling in, and graduating from, these adult high schools. The study's participants are represented in Table 3 and Figures 1-3 below, followed by the overall demographics reported from The Excel Center Schools and The Gordon Bernell Charter School:

Table 3.

Basic Demographics of the 21 Participants interviewed.

State	Male	Female	Age 21-30	Age 31-40	Age 40 +	Have Children at home	Working	Enrolled in College
Indiana	3	10	7	5	1	8	9	11
	23%	77%	54%	38%	8%	62%	69%	85%
New Mexico	3	5	2	6	0	4	3	5
	37.5%	62.5%	25%	75%	0%	50%	37.5%	62.5%

There were a total of 21 participants in the study. In Indiana, there were three males and ten females. A total of five sites (different schools, but same program) were visited, with either two or three interviewees at each. New Mexico had eight participants; three males and five females. I met with two graduates at an arranged location for the first interview, and with the other six at the downtown public facility. I did not visit the original facility located inside the jail per IRB agreement.

Although not evident from the sample in Table 3 above, there are notable differences in age comparisons between the two schools. The Indiana program has older students on average than the New Mexico program. Per an email

communication on January 26, 2015 with Goodwill Education Initiative Director of Network Development and Advancement, nearly 50% of Excel Center students are over 25 years of age.

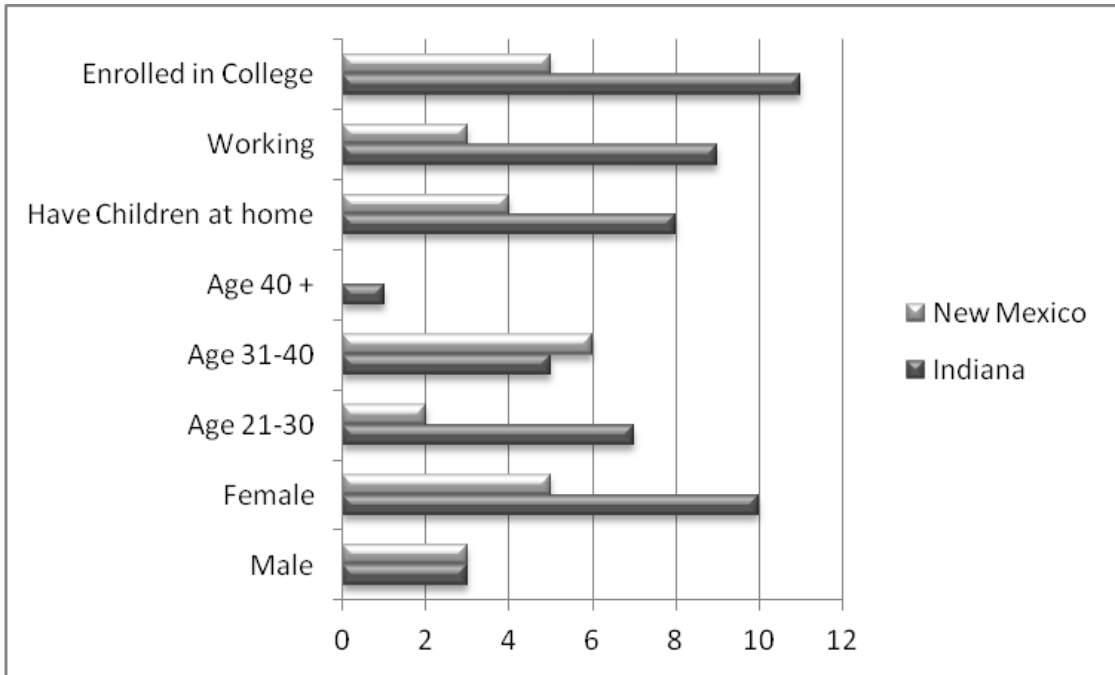


Figure 1: Comparison demographics of study participants from both states

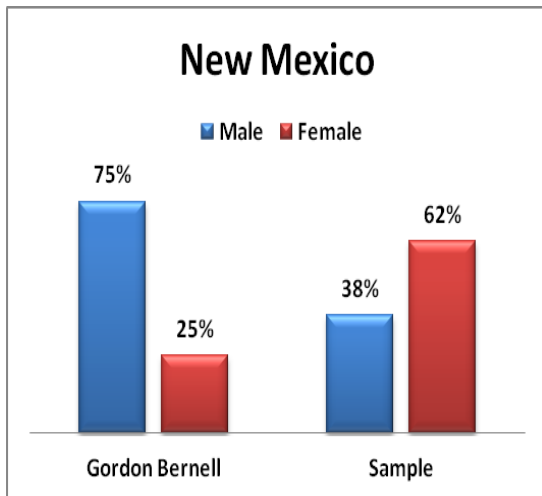


Figure 2: Genders of New Mexico Students

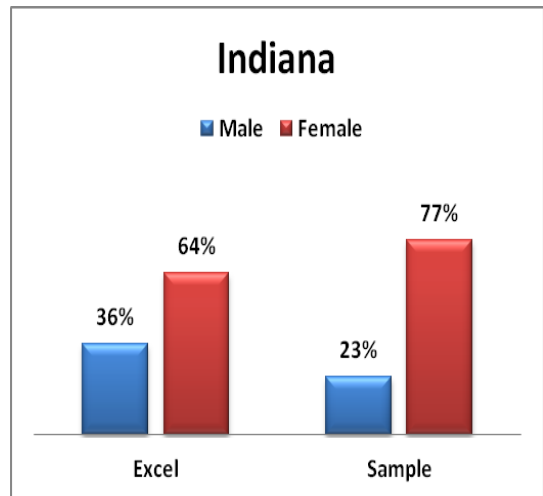


Figure 3: Genders of Indiana Students

Even though the number of participants in this study was small, a comparison was made with the population to see if the sample was at all representative. In the New Mexico study, there were far more males in the whole school population than in the interview sample. School enrollment did not disaggregate the numbers in order to determine such factors as incarcerated students versus non-incarcerated students—or associated genders. This is important in a comparison because The Excel Center Schools are not located inside a jail system as is the Gordon Bernell Charter School.

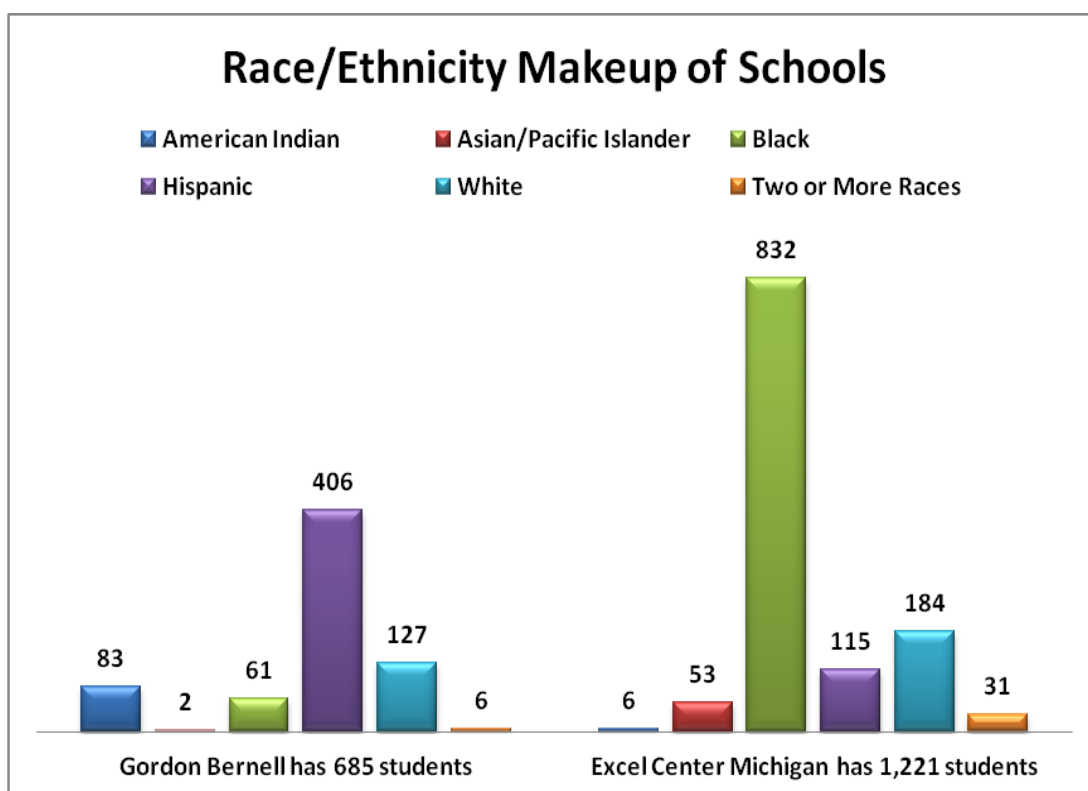


Figure 4: Ethnic Group Representation

The numbers were much closer in Indiana, but there were still considerably more females in the sample than in the school overall. As represented in Figure 4,

Hispanics represent more New Mexico students, and Blacks are more represented in Indiana.

Participants.

Whereas the above tables and figures provide a quantitative glance at what students of adult high schools look like demographically, the following section will serve as a personal introduction from a more qualitative perspective. Although pseudonyms were used to protect the privacy of members, other characteristics remain unchanged. Site connections have been omitted as an additional safeguard to their privacy.

Susan.

Susan was bullied. Every day she had to face the same girl and the same bullying until she finally fought back. Even after the police were involved, the school administration was either unwilling or unable to move Susan to classes where she wouldn't have to be near the bully. Feeling unsafe, Susan felt that since the school wasn't going to remove the offending girl, she had no choice but to remove herself. She tried to get her GED—for over three years—but needed more than just being handed a book to study. She married and raised a family, and her husband always provided well for them—but Susan never felt good about herself because she didn't have her diploma. It became even more difficult for her as her children grew older.

Nancy.

Nancy got pregnant her freshman year of high school and got kicked out of her house. Although she tried to continue her education, the school asked her to drop out before it became obvious that she was pregnant. She wasn't given any options and felt forced to go from teen to immediate adult. After marrying and starting her family, Nancy was able to secure an excellent job and continued advancing in her company for many years. When the economy fell, however, she was downsized and didn't have the credentials to reenter the workforce. She looked into GED classes, but didn't feel it was what she wanted to do.

Morton.

Morton didn't drop out. He did everything he was supposed to do. He completed all of his courses and received all of his credits. Morton's worst behavior problem throughout high school was being tardy to class a few times. Because he had his credits, he was even allowed to walk the stage with his class wearing his graduation cap and gown—only to receive a certificate of completion. Morton didn't pass his final Graduation Qualifying Exam (GQE), thus making him ineligible for a regular diploma. He felt cheated.

Christine.

Christine didn't consider herself a dropout. When she turned eighteen the support checks stopped going to her foster mother, so her foster mother withdrew Christine from school and stopped supporting her. Christine was not able to re-enroll herself as she did not have access to either her birth certificate

or her social security card. By the time she was able to get the help she needed from a state agency, Christine was already almost 20 and expecting a child. She tried the GED, but her pregnancy forced her into bed rest and she wasn't able to continue after that.

Janae.

Janae became pregnant and her only support was her single-parent mother. Janae felt obligated to work to provide for herself and her child since the father did not help. She tried to finish via the GED but did not get the direct help she needed. Janae even tried a fee-based adult high school program, but had three children by that time and could not afford to continue. As her kids progressed in school, Janae found it more and more difficult to help them with their homework. She also felt awkward trying to motivate them to stay in school when she had not done so.

Darrel.

Darrel dropped out of school because of economical difficulties at home. He worked to help support his parents. He also had serious health issues that made his attendance irregular, and he stopped going to school after he obtained 46 credits. Darrel thought that only 40 credits were required to graduate, so he believed that he was finished anyway. None-the-less, he lacked sufficient credits in specific core areas and found out right before graduation that he would have to attend summer school in order to get his diploma. Darrel signed up for "Day Adult" school, which was designed for students from the ages of 16 to 22, but he never attended. Sometime later, Darrel ended up in prison after committing

armed robbery. During the three years he was incarcerated, he had plenty of time to think about his future. He remembered his brother telling him how smart he must be to have passed a statistics course, which made Darrel think about pursuing the GED. Yet after reading a newspaper article about how the GED was not going to be accepted at four-year colleges, Darrel changed his mind.

Denise.

A military “brat” was how Denise described herself. During her school years, her dad was in the Marine Core and they lived back East. Denise was in an advanced placement program and doing well, but her dad was transferred to the West Coast where the school did not have a similar program. She found herself doing work that was two to four years behind her. Regardless, she tried to continue, but after two years of extreme boredom she quit. A year later she met her husband, and they have been raising children together over the last two decades. Denise did try a night school once, but decided with an infant, a toddler, and another baby on the way, that it was just too much for her. Then, after she turned 21 she did not know of another program that would take adults until this one came along. Denise had “felt like an idiot” all of the years she was pushing her kids to finish school, because they knew that their mother had not finished her own schooling.

Delila.

Delila had a lot of family problems when she was in high school, which influenced her decision to run away from home. She had struggled in school—mostly with math—but really had a difficult time getting through adolescence in

general. Because she had run away, and felt she was unable to return home, she couldn't re-enroll in school until she turned 18. After years past, Delila found a good counselor who was able to help her, and who encouraged her to enroll at the Excel Center. The counselor told Delila that she believed the adult high school program would help her gain self-confidence and direction for her future. Delila's husband also encouraged her to return and complete her high school education—even though it meant giving up a source of income for their family.

Max.

Max never went to high school. His mother left him when he was three, and his dad was in the military. This meant traveling all over when his dad was transferred, which resulted in Max attending over 30 schools before even being old enough for high school. His average stay at each school was about three months before he would have to move again. This piecemeal education eventually pushed Max so far behind that he felt he had no option but to quit. Max taught himself many things over the next ten plus years—even helping his younger sister with her homework—but he did not think he would ever have the opportunity to actually enroll in a high school and get his diploma. Fortunately he was able to find a good friend, with a good family who took him in and encouraged him to get more education.

Courtney.

Courtney was excelling in school when she got pregnant. She had to go to work to support herself and continued attending school until it just felt like she couldn't do both. She then studied for the GED, but when she took the test it

was completely different than the study materials she had used, and she failed. After working full time for many years as a single mom, she really wanted a change, but didn't know what else to do. When she saw the adult high school opportunity, she enrolled even though by then she was pregnant with her fourth child.

Priscilla.

Priscilla's mother got pregnant—not Priscilla—her mother. Because her mother was also unemployed, Priscilla went to work full time to support them both. She tried to juggle both school and work, but then she started to lose her hearing, which made it difficult to understand the teacher at her school.

Choosing work seemed the easiest option at that time. Priscilla went to take the GED right away, but didn't pass. After that she went from one GED program to another without success. Even though she was working, and had found a good paying job, Priscilla desired more for her family as well as for a career for herself that she would be happy doing for the rest of her life.

Belva.

Belva started skipping math class—a dreaded subject for her—and hung around with friends who did the same. One day the friends didn't show up at the person's house they usually went to, and Belva found herself in a compromising situation. When she realized she was pregnant she knew she would have to quit school—there were no other options at that time and place. Over the years as a mother and then grandmother, Belva pushed the importance of completing high school to her family—yet felt hypocritical knowing she hadn't finished. She had

successfully overcome a bad marriage and had attained success in many areas of her life, but she still felt a nagging need to get her diploma and set the example straight. Belva began working toward a GED, but health problems put an end to those efforts. When she saw the opportunity for an actual high school diploma, she knew it was meant for her.

Mary.

Mary had to move during high school. She had already been struggling with a disability when she realized that her new school was considerably farther ahead of where her old school had been. She was overwhelmed, but tried to do her best until she was told that she would not graduate with a regular high school diploma. At that point, Mary stopped attending regular school and started to take GED classes. Disappointingly, the classes she needed that would offer her extra support were not compatible time wise with her needed job. On top of these troubles, she wound up in a very bad marriage. When all the negatives were about to overwhelm her, she heard about the adult high school program and made some life-changing decisions.

The experiences the above participants recounted had many shared threads, but each was still unique to the individual. The participants represented a variety of characteristics, yet supported the overall “picture” painted by prior research of what can cause someone to drop out of high school. The following findings place participants’ experiences within a framework of the life courses these individuals had taken, which led to their dropping out of school.

Data in the life course.

This study was framed within the life course perspective. As such, the themes that developed from the interview responses were categorized inside the following five life course dimensions: time and place; linked lives; agency; timing; and life span development.

Time and place.

Time and place refers to the reality that who a person is and becomes is intrinsically woven into when and where they are born and/or raised—time historically and place geographically. Within this time and place, connections, cultures, and associated norms are instilled both voluntarily and involuntarily. Analysis of the interview data revealed several themes that substantiated this premise.

The first theme that was noted was a change in cultural mores toward teen pregnancy. Several participants stated that becoming pregnant had prevented their continued attendance in school. As Belva told me, “At that time you didn’t continue school if you were pregnant.” Nancy’s comment was, “I dropped out my freshman year, and it was after I learned I was pregnant with my daughter; that was in ‘94, so it’s not quite like it is now. People who are in that situation have so many more options now.”

Another cultural change was in the process that previously had been required in order to obtain work. Nancy stated,

I was always lucky enough to be able to kind of sell myself into really good positions, and back in the 90s and early 2000s I don’t think that people really checked credentials as much like they do

now. I had been with the same company up until early 2009 and I was downsized because the doctor group had split. I had been working in neurology, and when I realized how hard it was to reenter the job market and find something,...it was just a totally different world from what I knew because people wanted transcripts; they wanted proof of college education; they wanted things that I couldn't provide; so I faced a really tough time trying to find employment.

A second theme aligning with time and place was how local school policies reflected the historical time and geographical place affecting the actual choice of schools for some participants. As Susan explains it,

Back then they didn't let you [just transfer schools]. You had to pay to go to another school—like \$1,500 dollars—you could go anywhere as long as you had a ride. Now you can go to any school you want—as long as your parent takes you, you don't have to pay the tuition. I was like—yeah—they didn't do that back then so I was stuck.

Other students were affected by moving to a different state. As Priscilla, who had struggled with a disability stated,

Well, I actually lived in California. When we moved here, it was in 2006. I was a junior and when I hit my senior year—I actually have ADHD, so I have a disability—and I barely got here and we were so far behind...the schools out there are way behind.

Morton was affected by the added requirement of having to pass an exit exam in order to attain a high school diploma. In his words,

I didn't really drop out of high school. What happened was I had all of my credits but I didn't pass the GQE [graduation qualifying exam], which is required to pass in order to get a high school diploma. But, without passing that you will not receive your high school diploma. Unfortunately I did get all my credits, but I didn't pass that so I walked the stage in high school, cap and gown and everything, but what I received was a certificate of completion and to me, I thought it was a useless piece of paper and I took the test again but I had no preparations for it and I just failed miserably.

All but one participant indicated a preference for a high school diploma over a GED certificate. This fits under time and place because aspects of the GED have undergone change over a historical time period. Several mentioned their belief that employers also view a diploma as more valuable. One student actually experienced this in her own job as a manager. Janae gave her rationalization as follows:

I wanted a GED at first because I thought it would be easier and I could just do it and be done with it. But then I got to thinking that I was a manager of a job and we were letting people go...I mean we weren't letting people go, but if you have a GED and someone has a high school diploma, we are going to. I was always wondering why...and I didn't want to go look for a job and be that person who always got shot down because I got a GED over a high school diploma.

Other replies expressed by participants' indicated similar perceptions of the diploma versus the GED, such as:

If I had to choose, I would choose the high school diploma because it was what I should have done in the first place. It's what I've always desired—more over the GED.

I feel like the high school diploma will be better off. I just listened to people talk about how most places will look at you more if you have a high school diploma versus a GED. It was that—or also it was just something that I wanted—I wanted my high school diploma. Usually students with GEDs are the ones who have been expelled or dropped out and I did neither one of those, so...I feel a GED is a shortchanged for me and I feel that I really deserve a high school diploma because I completed all twelve grades.

To me a GED is just kind of—I don't want to say 'loserish'—but it just seemed kind of a societal perception of it and I knew I did want to continue on to college and I felt that it would be more difficult with just such limited credentials.

I did not want the GED. I've heard here [Indiana] they are going to do away with it so why would I want something that's not going to be worth anything?

I refused all these years to do a GED. My personal opinion is a GED is a copout.

The last theme that was identified under time and place was related to the economy and the desire to get a better job. Fifty-seven percent of the participants were parents, and they expressed a desire to be able to provide better for their children. Other students stated they were not satisfied with the jobs they had and saw the diploma as a step toward being able to secure higher-paying work that they would find more satisfaction in doing. As Courtney put it, "The last position I worked I was an office cashier and I was stuck there for three years—because I wasn't moving anywhere—after awhile that routine gets to you, so I wanted a change." Christine stated emphatically, "I'm tired of working for minimum wage!"

Linked lives.

Four themes surfaced from the data under linked lives and the premise that "Lives are lived interdependently and socio-historical influences are expressed through this network of shared relationships" (Mortimer & Shanahan, 2006, p. 13).

The first theme that became apparent was the impact initial family and friend relationships had on schooling during adolescence. These relationships included foster care parents, military parents, single parents, and peer associations. Statements such as: "Once I turned 18 the checks stopped--so she

[foster mother] stopped with me” and “My mom left when I was three and my dad was in the military and we traveled all over.” Another student said, “My mom didn’t value the education plus she got pregnant and wasn’t working.” Other students admitted they “...started skipping math class and hanging out with friends” or “...her and the rest of the crew I was hanging out with [influenced decision to drop out].”

The second theme that materialized from the data was linkage to the next generation (children) and each parent’s desire to provide better for their children—along with the belief that a high school diploma would help each parent obtain a higher standard of living for themselves and their families. In addition to improving their own education, parents expressed the conviction that the example of finishing their education would help their children complete their own schooling.

The third theme under linked lives was how others had come into the students’ lives through the adult high school experience and countered previously negative “family-type” relationships. One young mother expressed that returning to high school was, “...the best opportunity I have had in life...and for the first time ever I can say I can look up to anybody or felt that anyone showed any kind of affection on me that I would say they are a good role model...”

The last theme that was uncovered in connection with linked lives was the importance of community. Across all sites, there was evidence of how integral the high school relationships in a school community were to each student’s

success. Each student expressed over and over how important and influential the staff had been in their adult high school experience.

Agency.

Two prevalent themes emerged from the data within the agency premise. The first revealed that perceptions changed choices. Several students, who stated they had dropped out because of a pregnancy as a teenager—and had needed to care for their children—were facing a similar situation as adults. Many were still raising children, and some had even enrolled in the adult high school when they were pregnant. They faced the same or similar situation, but the perception of it being a barrier had changed. Agency—having the ability to choose—was in play in both scenarios, but age and experience had somehow changed the perception of the choice from being a reason *not* to attend school, into being a reason *to* attend school.

The second theme was agency in choosing personal relationship links. Although the lives the participants described as being connected to during adolescence may not have been a choice, the close associations in their adult lives, were. Choices to connect with the school staff and classmates were also claimed as being key factors in helping participants finish school this time around.

Timing.

Children's academic needs and parent's need to improve their situations were the prominent themes that fit under the principle of timing in the life course. The timing of when events happen in life varies significantly, and the interview

responses indicated that when the parents—as adults—became unable to help their child with homework, the need to obtain additional education became urgent. Participants also expressed that having spent time living in the world as an adult and having experienced the effects of a poor education on job opportunities and associated pay had resulted in changes to their previously perceived ability to get by with less education.

Life span development.

Accomplishing previously set goals and having a desire to move beyond former barriers were the two themes that related to life span development. As children the participants had been introduced to schooling, and were set on a trajectory that was expected to culminate with their high school graduation. In conjunction with that goal, many expressed a need for social development much like adolescent high school students. In a study on high school as a rite of passage completed in 1998, the observation was that, “Students currently use high school as a rite of passage experience to meet their developmental goals apart from their academic experience” (Collinson & Hoffman, p. 4). The study also identified the expressed needs for social development opportunities. Opportunities for learning how to get along with others, becoming independent, and getting involved were still necessary ingredients as adults—regardless of age or stage in life—although the contexts looked a bit different.

One example of this was made known to me by Susan, who had been bullied in her hometown high school. Without the adult intervention and protection that she needed at school, she had felt she had no option but to drop

out. For 19 years she had regretted her decision and had felt bad that she had never finished. Then when she found out about the opportunity to complete high school as an adult, she was ecstatic! She was also determined to make sure that no one in her new high school would ever go through what she had experienced as a teenager in her old one. To that end, she related how she was able to prevent teachers from being harassed or bullied. In her words,

My thing is...I've always protected the teachers in this building. You ask them—if a student comes...they know I have their back 100%. There are times when a student will cuss a teacher and the teacher can't handle it. You need to remember where you are at. You have to be stern, care about their education and want them to stay, but you can't let them distract the others, either. I was in a room once, when a young girl –she was young--18 or 19—she was cussing one of our volunteer health teachers. He's an ER nurse at community hospital—so he volunteers—the school doesn't pay him to be here... She was just cussing him and I had enough. I told her she had one more time to say something negative and I'm getting out of my chair. Needless to say, she never ever talked to him like that again. These aren't little kids. These are grown adults, and the other adults in the room are not going to let anything happen.

Janae's need to become independent was markedly different as an adult than as a teenager. Her teenage self had become pregnant and she had felt she needed to work and support her children, while her adult self had given up a stipend from Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) in order to attend The Excel Center. The TANF program provides cash assistance and supportive services to assist families with children under age 18, with the goal to help them achieve economic self-sufficiency—but finishing high school did not fit within the parameters of what was required. As Janae tells it,

When I was on TANF, you have to go to classes where they teach you how to get a job, or they will cut you off, so I lost the TANF

benefit. I said, “You want me to come sit in a classroom for you all to tell me how to get a job, so when I go to get the job, they aren’t going to hire me without a high school diploma so what was the point?” They said, “Well, it’s your choice.” I said, “Well, you can keep the \$289 because I’m going back to school,” so they cut it off and a lot of students they cut off because they choose to come here and get their high school diploma. We know that most jobs...if you don’t have a high school diploma...they don’t hire you. I guess the city doesn’t understand that.

Regardless of the fact that Janae had no extra support and really needed the money, she felt so strongly about her need to finish that she gave up the TANF benefit.

Nancy, who dropped out in ninth grade, graduated from The Excel Center with multiple honors and scholarships. She couldn’t say enough good things about her experience—but it wasn’t all about what it did for her academically; she expressed how it helped her in other ways as well. Nancy recounted,

I accomplished more in high school as an adult than I probably ever would have as a teenager. Being here and really putting my all into it I got all my credits...with a 4.0. Plus, I was the student council president for eight terms...I still am... actually I was here speaking to students today... so it got me out into the community, it helped me be a better team player... it helped me just working with people and also not being afraid to ask for help and showing a vulnerability. Because that’s tough to admit you need help. If you are willing to put yourself out there here, there is nothing these people won’t do. They’re like my family now.

Nancy was even working to bring the prom dance to the adult high school level because so many had never had the opportunity to experience it. Her choice to become involved had also led to her having more job opportunities. She had even been featured on the PBS news hour!

Summary of Findings

Findings from this study revealed a change in perspective over time. Some change occurred because the time and place had changed—bringing participants to a new era in their lives. With this change came lived experiences that provided insight into past choices. The initial choice to drop out of school had become regret, but they were then empowered to make alternative choices when given a new opportunity to finish high school. Timing also played into their decisions to return to high school as they faced the needs of their growing children, and found the support of caring staff and varying familial connections to reinforce those decisions. The indication that people seek to grow and develop in positive and socially accepted ways over the life-span was evident in the diverse age groups documented among the participants and the supporting demographics of collective Excel Center schools. Additionally, unfinished business connected to dropping out had been concluded through the completion of high school as an adult. This business included accomplishing previously set goals, turning barriers into challenges that could be overcome, and addressing the social needs to deal with unacceptable behavior from others (standing up to bullying) as well as developing more positive and healthy adult relationships.

Chapter 5

This chapter provides a recap overview of the study and conclusions drawn from the life course framework. A discussion ensues that explores the findings and implications, and final recommendations are presented.

Overview

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions and experiences of adult high school graduates in order to add to the literature and increase knowledge on adult dropout recovery and secondary school options. This may also inform future program development and improvement decisions, and increase conversations around needed policy changes. Arbitrary age-cap regulations that decrease educational opportunities for over-age adults may need to be reevaluated as to purpose and consequences.

Literature on the history of education was reviewed in order to identify the purposes of schooling, and to place the study in context. From the beginning of formal schooling through the industrial age to the present, written accounts have illustrated changing purposes over time. Following the history section, information on the dropout phenomenon was presented in order to shed light on the complexity of the topic. Every year more than one million students stop attending school for various reasons. Among them, the three top influences have been socioeconomic status, family background, and school attachment. According to Pagani, Vitaro, Tremblay, McDuff, Japel, and Larose (2008), the more specific factors have been the mother not graduating from high school, the student being from a single-parent household, and the student having been

retained a grade in elementary school. Types of prevention and intervention efforts were examined to learn what attempts have been made to try to resolve some of the challenges connected to dropping out of school. The last section of the review revealed information regarding the life course perspective that framed the study.

Two states were identified as having public, no-fee adult high school programs without age limitations. In Indiana, the Excel Center began as an initiative of Goodwill's education group. The one school has now become a hub for eight Excel Centers, with more growth anticipated within the state—and replication models being started out of state.

In New Mexico, the Gordon Bernell Charter School was born inside an Albuquerque jail, where its namesake—Gordon Bernell—shared his love for education with inmates under his care. Initial GED options for incarcerated youth transformed into a regular high school program complete with diploma. In order to continue serving students after they were released, a school was founded that is now open to any adult in the area who has a desire to finish high school.

Four questions were developed to guide the semi-structured interviews:

1. What factors are perceived to have most influenced the initial decision to drop out?
2. What factors are perceived to have influenced the decision to return?
3. What factors are perceived to have supported the successful completion of this program?
4. What factors are perceived to be in place to support continued education?

Participants were selected from a purposive sample of graduates—or soon to be, graduates—over the age of 21, from Indiana and New Mexico. In Indiana, participants from five of the eight Excel Center sites were interviewed. At least two interviews were conducted at each site, with a total of thirteen qualified participants. Five additional students volunteered to be interviewed, but were not yet 21 so did not meet qualifications for this study. The sites were chosen because they had been established for several years, whereas the others were relatively new locations. The sites visited were: The Excel Center for Adult Learners—Michigan Street, The Excel Center—Decatur, The Excel Center—Meadows, The Excel Center—Franklin Road, and The Excel Center—Anderson.

In New Mexico, two group interviews were conducted on two different days with a total of eight participants. Two participants showed up for the first interview and six for the second one. All interviews were audio-taped and kept secure on a password-protected laptop. Each interview was later translated into individual transcripts. Pseudonyms were ascribed to each participant as an additional privacy protection measure.

Discussion

The data for this study was guided by research questions designed to explore the perceptions and experiences of people who had finished high school as adults. The theoretical framework for the study was the life course perspective—which also provided the structure for coding and analyzing the data. As such, the themes that developed from the questions were gathered into one of the following life course categories: (a) time and place, (b) linked

lives, (c) agency, (d) timing, and (e) life-span development. A synopsis of each category's themes and findings is detailed below, followed by related discussion:

Time and place posits the development of a person as being shaped by what historical time period they belong to, and where they are placed in the physical world during that time. This positionality consequently determines cultural affiliations and associated norms and traditions. Data gathered from the interviews disclosed three major themes within time and place: (a) changing attitudes, (b) moving, and (c) workforce requirements.

Changing attitudes toward teen pregnancy and the GED can be attributed, in part, to changes in the law. When Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 was signed into law, attitudes had to start changing about females attending school while pregnant. Up until that time, it was legal to expel pregnant girls from school lest they become a bad influence on other girls (per the prevailing cultural attitude of the times). This study revealed that although progress was made, attitudes were still being held in many institutions (and unlawful actions were even taken) well up into the 1990s. This was clearly indicated by four of the participants who were asked to leave school because they were pregnant—one as recently as 1994. Even though students are now allowed to complete school, the problems associated with teen pregnancy are far from being solved. In 2005, Wiemann, Rickert, Berenson, and Volt completed a study to measure the extent that a pregnant adolescent felt stigmatized by her condition. Their conclusions indicated that many pregnant adolescents face feeling isolated and judged, suffer from depression and low self-esteem, and are

more likely to experience a drop in achievement and consequently drop out of school (Wiemann, et al, 2005).

Many students who drop out of school opt for taking the GED exams. The initial target population for the GED, however, was not general residents. It was developed for a specific purpose related to returning soldiers—not as a replacement for the high school diploma. Although for many years it served as an equivalent, today fewer employees and military recruiters see it as an equal substitution (Zajacova, 2012; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). This is partly due to changing needs of the workforce. Where industrial labor only required a general education, today's technology-driven world needs specialized skills obtained from specialized training. Participants in this study realized the need for an education that would connect them with local career opportunities to train for. Both the Excel Center Program and the Gordon Bernell Charter School were noted to have well-developed transition services for students to address such educational needs.

Inconsistency in policies and curricular requirements across secondary educational institutions has created numerous problems for students. Several individuals from the study made the decision to drop out of school after having to move. They had to change to schools that were set up with completely different systems and policies than the students had previously experienced. Some students fell behind and couldn't catch up or they just gave up. Others had already learned the concepts being taught and were too bored to stay in school. Many states are currently moving to Common Core State Standards to address

alignment issues in our highly mobile society. Although this may speak to some concerns, there is widespread controversy about whether this addresses the paramount issues and dilemmas facing the system of public elementary and secondary education currently in place (Welner, 2014).

Mobility in the United States is one of the highest among developed countries (Heinlein & Shinn, 2000). Although the effects of moving depend on the context, and whether a residential move includes a change of schools and communities or not, many studies have revealed various social and educational problems connected to relocating during adolescence (Gasper, DeLuca, & Estacion, 2010; Adam & Chase-Lansdale, 2002; Haynie & South, 2005). As several participants disclosed, moving had contributed to their decision to drop out. This was true whether it was because a different curriculum made it more difficult to overcome the challenge of a disability; the lack of a challenging curriculum created boredom; or the frequency of moving every three months inhibited the opportunity to connect to new schools and new peer relationships.

Another policy inconsistency noted was that of states requiring students to take exit exams in order to receive their diploma. Morton was a victim of this policy when he received a certificate of completion in lieu of a diploma.

According to the Center on Education Policy's (CEP) 11th annual report on state high school exit exams, "Several key questions about the success of exit exam policies remain unresolved. For example, have exit exams actually raised student achievement as intended?" (p. 4). There is also the worry that "Disparities in passing rates for different student groups continue to be a concern

in states with exit exams” (p. 4). Other studies are more direct in their assessment of exit exams, also known as High Stakes Testing (HST). Nichols and Valenzuela (2013), cited studies of Orfield, 2004; Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004; Valenzuela, Fuller, & Vasquez Heilig, 2006; Warren, and Jenkins, & Kulick, 2006, in referencing the evidence of increased risk of dropping out of school for poor and minority students when faced with having to pass an exit exam to obtain a diploma (McIntosh, 2012).

There are increasing skill and experience requisites for entering the workforce. Ninety-five percent of this study’s participants referred to the difficulty they faced when trying to obtain good paying jobs—and ones that were designed for growth beyond entry-level work. One student in particular discovered this when she was downsized with the economy. As a young adult, Nancy had benefited from the unusual opportunity to join a company connected to the medical field. The employer had even provided her with on-the-job type training. Unfortunately, without high school or post-secondary training documents, Nancy found she was unable to reenter the same career field after being laid off. She also realized that almost every job she wanted to apply for required at least a high school diploma or GED—and in today’s world of background checking, she couldn’t just check the box that said she had a diploma when she didn’t.

There exists a surplus of works—scholarly and governmental—dedicated to the problem of under-educated or overly qualified but inappropriately skilled individuals that public schools and colleges are producing. As Mary Fallin, the National Governors Association (NGA) Chair for 2013-2014 wrote, “Ensuring our

states' and citizens' future economic security may require significant improvements to our education system and workforce training programs. It also may require closer relationships among our high schools, colleges, workforce training providers and employers" (Letter, 2nd page, 2013).

Just as high schools are in a unique position to be the bridges to further education and the job market, Governors are uniquely situated to be the bridge builders. They answer to their constituents for both the development and oversight of state educational institutions, as well as for the economic health and prosperity of the state. The NGA has long realized this. In 2009, *Achieving Graduation for All: A Governor's Guide to Dropout Prevention and Recovery* (Princiotta & Reyna), was published by the NGA—attesting to how the challenges in education are inextricably connected with national policy and success.

Linked lives alludes to the reality that lives are connected and lived interdependently. People are who they are partly because of who is, who has been, or who will be in their lives. One consistent theme that was frequently noted was how initial family members and day-to-day individuals had lasting effects on the lives of the participants as children—good and bad.

As a society, the United States has programs in place to care for those without a safe home. Having more needs than resources, however, has left gaps and fissures in a system that cannot readily be repaired. Just as families are not perfect, neither are systems that have developed to support those that are broken. One of these systems, represented by The National Foster Care

Coalition (NFCC), has a noble mission: “The mission of NFCC is to build momentum for change by harnessing a collective voice and enabling collaborative action to promote the well-being of children, youth and families impacted by the child welfare system” (nationalfostercare.org).

Unfortunately, trying to find enough homes that have an inherent ability and desire to nurture and care for other people’s children is challenging (Beam, 2012). Even when a foster child finds a placement home where he or she is physically safe, the emotional scars and the intrinsic need to belong to one’s own family are not as easily resolved. Many foster care recipients do not receive the extra care needed to offset their circumstances, thus becoming a victim of the system intended to keep them safe (Burley, 2012). The statistics for foster care students in relation to school achievement are foreboding. According to the Washington State Institute of Policy Research (2012), over a four year period, the longitudinal graduation rate for youth in long-term foster care was between 45 and 55%, and the annual graduation rate was 47%. One of those that didn’t graduate was a participant in this study. For Delila, dropping out of high school was a forced situation—not a choice. She didn’t have a choice because the foster parent refused to enroll her or give her the documents to enroll herself. She did finally find an advocate, but by that time she was in a relationship and expecting a child. At 20 years old, she felt it was just too late.

The lives people had chosen to live for themselves changed in their continuing role as a parent—choosing for their children as they grew older differently than they had chosen before they were born. Although initial parental

connections are not a child's choice, certain circumstances may inadvertently thwart school success in numerable ways. A mother's high school completion is one of the strongest indicators for risk of dropping out (Pagani et al, 2008). For this study, background information regarding the participant's parents was not gathered, but those with children all expressed concern about their own children's success and high school completion. Many parents—regardless of educational status—struggle to help their children in difficult subjects like math and science. Having taken advantage of the opportunity to complete high school, the participants in this study spoke of the skills they had gained that now alleviated such struggles to help their own children. It also gave them the skills they needed to pursue additional options for further education or better employment.

The participants expressed the need to be connected and make a difference in a larger community. There are few choices available as to familial connections for a child—or the associated relationships along the path to adulthood. The participants in this study had found that the adult high school was a system developed specifically for adults who had failed to thrive in the traditional institutions of family or education. Because of the structure of the adult high school program, the participants were able to seek assistance from those they perceived to care about them. With the structure set up to understand the population's particular needs, the adult high school allowed for additional opportunities to build connections to teacher/mentors trained to help adult learners at the secondary level.

The institutions also provided the social infrastructure for a community of people who had similar stories, challenges, strengths, and dreams. In caring academic communities, students were then able to rebuild, repair, and repurpose some of their inadequate past. This was made very obvious when one young woman in the study shared that she had experienced positive role models for the first time after enrolling in the adult high school program.

Two prevalent themes were found to align with the premise of agency. The first disclosed that perceptions had changed over time. The perceptions of many participants who had been teenage mothers had gone from not being able to go to school and be a mother, to the *need* to go to school *because* of being a mother.

The study revealed that what had been perceived as a barrier as a teenager, as an adult became a challenge that needed to be met. Many of the adults in the study were teen parents, and they felt that having a child prevented the successful continuation of high school. Their viewpoint as an older parent, however, saw the need for schooling as an imperative if they were going to be able to help their children.

Even though there is no choice in choosing parents or siblings, choices can be made as to whom is acknowledged as family when an adult. Staff members and peers were “adopted” as secondary family-type relationships and made lasting impacts on the participants. They made choices to let others believe in them—giving them back the choice to believe in others. In Cohen (2004), social support alludes to the assistance a person or an organization

provides to help others manage stress and difficulties in their lives. Even when the support is not utilized, the knowledge or belief that someone or some group is accessible for help, if needed, is just as important. Every participant in this study spoke of this type of support being available from staff members at the schools. Even those who were enrolled and attending college spoke of their ability to return to the school at anytime for help or just to say hello.

The effects of how timing of events influenced decisions, was a common thread among participants. The decision to return to school became a priority when children's needs for help with math outpaced the parent's ability to do math. I found it notable that the topic of math came up in the conversations as much as it did. At least four of the participants specifically mentioned math as a factor in their decisions to drop out—or in their choices to skip school that led to dropping out. Particular mention of their more recently acquired abilities to now help their children with math was also a priority topic.

The timing of a poor economy and competition among a surplus of people with higher educational levels also influenced the return to education. The adults in the study experienced and expressed almost unanimously the desire to obtain their high school diplomas. Not only did they see it as having more value than a GED; they saw it as obtaining a goal that was thought unattainable—an unfinished chapter in their lives. Even at 70 years old, its importance was not just in skill attainment, but in being true to one's self as an example of persistence and determination to finish what you had begun.

Time and its impact was a key finding in this study. Relevance is not only in the effect of time, but how time is conceptualized and applied through the life course as well. Although time can be measured, it is less easily defined and understood within its construct of past, present, and future effects. For example, Friedman (2000) investigated age-related awareness of the future and found that prior to 7 or 8 years of age most children were unable to differentiate weeks from months, but could begin to construct their understanding of time in relation to the occurrence of annual events such as holidays and birthdays. In reviewing research on how time and behavior intersect, Strathman and Joireman (2006), identified "...domains of behavior in which time is likely to play a role (goal setting, risk taking, interpersonal relations, and organizational behavior)..." (p. 5).

The final two themes were uncovered within life span development. Every participant talked about how they had wanted to finish what they had started—to complete their journey to a high school diploma. Participants felt empowered after receiving their high school diplomas to move beyond barriers to better jobs and meaningful careers that had previously been out of their reach. Rite of passage addresses the themes under life span development. The beginning use of the phrase "Rites of Passage" has been credited to Van Gennep (1960), a French ethnographer who systematically compared transition ceremonies and noted a similar three part sequence in each: separation, transition, and incorporation. This sequence was seen in each celebration that represented a change of status. The ritual would first depict the "leaving" of one phase or life status; then the transitioning or going through a time and place of separation; and

culminating in being provided a point of re-entry into a changed social position. The most commonly known rite of passage is that which marks the passage from childhood to becoming an adult (Collinson & Hoffman, 1998).

In the United States, there are many cultures who observe the childhood to adult transition, but it is not observed the same throughout society. One celebration that is celebrated cross-culturally, though, is the graduation ceremony (Van Gennep, 2004). In many respects it is the common rite of passage in American society (Fasick, 1988). As young adults complete their secondary studies, the graduation ceremony symbolizes their leaving their youth behind, transitioning out into the world of higher education, work, or family, and ultimately becoming an adult member of the community. Many who have not been able to complete this ritual seem to be trapped in the liminal or transition stage. They've left their youth, but not yet achieved the recognition necessary to re-enter with a change of status (Delaney, 1995). The importance of giving the millions of adults the chance to complete this rite has implications far beyond the stories they have to tell (Fasick, 1988).

Implications for Future Research

This study looked at perceptions and experiences from 21 adults who were able to return to high school and get their diplomas. Two programs in two states were sampled. There were limitations endemic to such a small study, but common issues that emerged from the findings merit additional research. Many of the concerns and challenges that these participants had dealt with as adolescents were being addressed in adult facilities with caring staff and wrap-

around services. Barriers were removed and supports were put in place. More research is needed to look at larger numbers to see if the findings are similar. Additional adult programs could be identified and evaluated from a program perspective, and those who were enrolled in programs like the Excel Center and GBCS, but did not continue, need to be represented to compare outcomes with those who completed.

Pervasive perceptions about the GED being less than equivalent as an alternative to the high school diploma in this study, coupled with the changes over time made to the test, suggest new studies could be useful to determine the extent of the perceptual effect. Studies could also be designed to measure additional factors. Perhaps using the GED as a beginning point for those who already have the skills and need it to enroll in college is still beneficial. As an endpoint, however, maybe the appropriateness needs to be reexamined.

A recurring context of challenges in family support was mentioned by participants. This suggests a need to investigate how adults cope and transition from childhood to adulthood when home life has not been stable. Several factors included foster care, mobility of military and other families, parental dependence on children, and single parenting.

A larger study to compare any differences between genders in returning to high school as an adult, as well as any differences between those with children and families and those without, could be of interest. A longitudinal study may show additional patterns of continued educational efforts and employment outcomes as well.

Hiring practices related to determining which employers and associated industries do, or do not, differentiate between the GED and a high school diploma could be the basis of further research. At what point does the military exclude or include the GED and other alternative credentials would be interesting to examine, as well.

As the first out-of-state Excel Center program opens, it may be useful to study their startup from the beginning to compare with the original program in order to gauge similar or dissimilar successes.

Policy Recommendations

Age-graded education was set up arbitrarily, and the current system that was developed around the needs of agricultural and industrial societies now seems out of date and irrelevant. The NGA brought the issue of eliminating age cutoffs to the attention of state governors before, but only as one idea among many. Although age regulations still need to be considered on a state to state basis, the NGA could bring the concept of developing a more standardized process for removing age constraints to the forefront.

Rather than creating more social service programs that tie requirements of job skills training to monetary stipends, states could ensure better wraparound services are available for high school students and their families. Essential to the discussion of addressing challenges to preventing dropout, is the understanding that the top three factors making students most at risk of becoming drop outs are: having a mother who did not graduate from high school, living in a single parent household, and having been retained in elementary school. Program

development and policy changes could be prioritized to address those issues.

There also appears to be a need for additional school counselors who are more knowledgeable, and more sensitized about the challenges of high risk students when they have parents who have not completed high school.

Rather than spending so much time and money on high stakes testing and common core alignment, more wide-spread economical support and policy changes could tie local labor and industry needs and technology-oriented training to what is being taught in schools. Additional local industry certifications could be developed in addition to diplomas and degrees. To accomplish this, cross-agency training could be developed.

Attention could be directed toward collaboration between and among various agencies, and the coordinating of efforts. States need to be financially committed to provide adult secondary education options—beyond the GED. If state school funding is inadequate to provide for such options, additional funding sources should be identified and pursued. The findings suggest and support the value and need for placing an emphasis on adult recovery programs.

Limitations

My experience as the former director of an alternative high school brings a certain biased view to the study. With the interpretive nature of qualitative research, this may result in a reflection of my bias and influence the analysis of the data. Additionally, the age-limits of the participants, and the small sample from only two programs precludes generalizability outside of the study. With the

wealth of knowledge already known about dropouts, however, findings about this particular segment of that population warrant further investigation.

Summary and Conclusions

As the first section of the literature review indicated, the purpose of education has changed over time. Change can and should happen locally in each community based on area needs. With important responsibilities delegated to the states to ensure educational equity to all residents, perhaps it is time to view the provision of secondary education differently. Adults, especially those who have been underserved or have had their right to a free and appropriate education thwarted for whatever reason, should be able to navigate their way toward a successful future without running into what they perceive as a dead end.

One of the key findings from this study was that events in the lives of the participants had influenced a change in the way they initially looked at the need and urgency for a high school education. Development over the life span had allowed them to exercise their human agency when the opportunity presented itself to counter the initial inability to obtain a diploma. The decision to return to high school and finish as an adult became a turning point in their lives, and ultimately changed the trajectory of where their path had been leading. According to what their data revealed, at the time of the interviews most of the graduates were enrolled in college and had specific plans and goals for new careers.

The variety of ages enrolled at the adult high schools studied suggests that policies prohibiting public education beyond age 21 may need to be revised and new opportunities provided. The importance of the relationships between school staff and peers was also shown to be vital to the students' successes.

As a closing point of import, a former student of mine recently sent a social media message asking me to help him figure out how to finish high school—even though he has aged out of the system. He stated that he tried to find a program that would accept him, but he made too much money to qualify for the one he found. As he tried to pursue the GED, he found he doesn't make enough money to pay for the needed preparatory courses or the exam. He is only one of many who have reached out to me as a former teacher who they remembered cared about them. Although I am no longer teaching, I try to direct students such as these to whatever resources I can find for them, and I keep their name on a list in case additional opportunities come along. Even if every teacher is willing to help those who come through their classroom doors, they do not have the time or resources to help them on their own.

Dropouts cost. They are untapped reservoirs of potential who could have been—and still could be—developed into healthy community members who earn a living wage, pay taxes, raise healthy families, and contribute to society in a number of ways. Without addressing the needs of the dropout population, they will continue to be an added cost related to social services, crime, institutionalization, and health care. For students who do not complete their fundamental education in the traditional amount of time, their options usually run

out when the age clock strikes 21. There may always be those who drop through the gaps and fissures in the transition from youth to adulthood. Changes in policies related to age limitations, none-the-less, could potentially help to reduce the size of some of the disparities in access.

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