AN EFFECTIVE DROPOUT PREVENTION PROGRAM
FOR URBAN STUDENTS

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
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AN EFFECTIVE DROPOUT PREVENTION PROGRAM FOR URBAN STUDENTS

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There have been limited qualitative case studies exploring effective urban dropout prevention programs. Specifically, few studies have presented a conceptual orientation based solely upon the polyphonic voices of dropouts themselves to solve the dropout crisis in America’s public schools. The aim of this study was to bridge this literature gap by presenting the collective stories and ideas from 12 adult urban dropouts who left their public high school to attend an urban dropout prevention program. Framed upon three major strands to predict reasons students depart from school, data produced new knowledge of what I refer to as a potential cure to the silent epidemic. Consequently, this study added to the literature by emphasizing (a) social/emotional concerns that are associated with students’ decisions to quit school, (b) interventions and practices implemented by effective dropout recovery programs to increase graduation rates, (c) reasons students desire alternative educational designs, (d) reasons students do not desire online recovery programs, and (e) vital warnings for administrators of dropout recovery programs.
“Hear the word of the Lord…

Because the Lord has a charge to bring

Against you who live in the land:

“My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge:

Because you have rejected knowledge…”

Hosea 4:1, 6

To my soul mate, Dr. Nathaniel D. Russell

I dedicate this study to you as

Your love, patience, and support

Challenged and inspired me

To pursue this dream.

I love you with all my heart.
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CHAPTER I

Introduction

A recent study commissioned by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation warned that our nation is in the midst of a silent epidemic – the dropout problem in America’s public high schools (Bridgeland, Dululio, & Morrison, 2006). The study drew attention to the dangers of the silent epidemic and implored educators and political leaders to heed the voice of dropouts themselves to explore a panacea for this national epidemic. The dropout crisis deserves national attention as large numbers of dropouts are linked with devastating social costs and consequences to society (Groth, 1998; Hoyle & Collier, 2006). Economically, society as a whole greatly suffers when students leave school prior to obtaining a high school diploma. Murray and Naranjo (2008) and Darling-Hammond (2007) reveal that dropouts presently make up about 50% of the US prison population and earn approximately 50% less money in their lifetime than a typical college graduate. Accordingly, Hoyle and Collier (2006) report that dropouts are a significant financial burden to the US government as approximately $260 billion are lost annually in wages, taxes, and community services. Hoyle and Collier further assert that the dropout crisis is an American social tragedy with regard to economic global dominance as large percentages of dropouts are adversely impacting America’s ability to sustain the medical, educational, and overall social needs of its community.

The Gates study (Bridgeland et al., 2006) cautioned that dropouts earn approximately $9,000 less annually than students who graduate from school and $1 million less over their lifespan than students who obtain a college degree. In addition, dropouts typically exhibit (a) low wage jobs with little opportunity for promotion, (b)
higher rates of unemployment, (c) poorer physical and mental health, (d) incarceration for committing criminal acts, (e) death row status, (f) dependence on government programs, (g) single parent status with children who also drop out, (h) less income during their lifespan, and (i) higher divorce rates (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Catterall, 1987; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Fine, 1991; Grossman & Kaestner, 1997; Murray & Naranjo, 2008; Roperick, 1993; Rumberger, 1987; Rumberger, 1995; Stearns & Glennie, 2006; and Witte, 1997).

Since the launching of Soviet Sputnik in 1957 and the appearance of the Nation At Risk report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education in 1983 (Coeyman, 2003) America faced an emergency for national security and public schools became the scapegoat for difficulties in the global economy of the 1980s (Spring, 2005). Consequently, the federal government responded with “quick-fix” policy reforms that have persisted to the present (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Fernandez & Shu, 1988; Spring, 2005; and Weiner, 1989). The first solution was the National Defense Education Act of 1958 to provide federal support to schools. The pursuit of global interests stimulated a standards movement which led to the development of our current policy solution - The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). From Eisenhower’s 1958 National Defense Education Act to Bush’s 2001 No Child Left Behind Act, educational policy became key to American military and economic global dominance (Spring, 2005).

For the first time under federal law, the federal government is holding school systems accountable for reporting annual academic progress in addition to attendance and graduation rates. School systems must track this data in an important and meaningful way (Orfield, 2004) and financial incentives are attached to meeting specific performance
goals (Bisinger & Crippin, 2008). Moreover, districts receive Local Report Cards (LRCs) based on specific standards to earn an overall rating of effectiveness. These standards include annual achievement testing in addition to attendance and graduation rates. Under NCLB, schools are required to (a) provide highly qualified teachers, (b) design strategies to close the achievement gap between minority and disadvantaged students and their more advantaged peers, (c) increase reading and math scores, and (d), demonstrate that students make adequate yearly progress. The ramifications of failing to demonstrate satisfactory progress can be devastating. Not only can the federal government shut down a poorly performing school; parents must be informed in writing of the rating and granted the right to send their child to another school. Even worse, the job security and reputations of school administrators are often at stake, as continuous poor ratings can result in a loss in funding and students (Eaton, 2007).

Consequently, Hoyle and Collier (2007) report that principals are consciously or unconsciously engaging in unethical behavior manipulating and distorting data “behind the scenes” to make their schools “look better” (Hoyle & Collier, 2007). However, they suggest that this data fudging is secondary to a primary “loosely coupled” organizational design that has yet to clarify a “one best method” to accurately report dropout rates (Holye & Collier, 2007). Hence, allegations of unethical behavior on the part of school administrators to intentionally falsify dropout data to improve dropout rates must be interpreted in light of this present organizational system.

Though this federal policy solution appears to be tackling the silent epidemic from a legal perspective, there remain significant limitations to our knowledge to understand this complex phenomenon (Rescher, 2006). As displayed in the Gates study (Bridgeland,
et al., 2006) there is a lack of feedback from dropouts themselves to understand this disease. Furthermore, Greene (1966) and Hoyle and Collier (2006) indicated that there is no universally agreed upon definition of dropouts, or the terms dropout percentages, dropout numbers, or dropout rates. There are no consistent methods of counting the percentages of students leaving school and there are ubiquitous disparities in how dropouts are counted among individual states within the US. To make matters even worse, national statistics presented in US Census Bureau reports, and methods used by state education agencies often report inaccurate and misleading information (Holye & Collier, 2006; Orfield, 2004) resulting in further confusion to estimate the magnitude of the dropout disease. Despite the movement to improve accountability by monitoring graduation rates as a part of NCLB, there is a need to improve current dropout reporting and data management systems within US school systems in an effort to solve the silent epidemic. This lack of reliable data regarding the number of students actually dropping out of school is contributing to the dropout problem as misleading data reveals no urgency to the public to design dropout prevention programs to keep students in school (Montecel, Cortez, & Cortez, 2004).

Quintessentially, the dropout phenomenon in America’s public schools is clearly an educational issue that our federal government is attempting to solve. This concern is especially evident in urban school systems (Hoyle & Collier, 2006). The Gates study underscored the impact of this concern and warned school leaders and politicians to design interventions to solve this dilemma. One might ask why is there such an urgency to address the dropout problem when historically there have been high dropout rates since the 19th century. To understand this question, it is important to explain the difference
between a dropout percentage and a dropout problem. In retrospect, corporate America could handle high percentages of dropouts who lacked the academic skills to be adequately prepared for the workforce (Fernandez & Shu, 1988). In fact, America appeared to accept and even encourage the acceptance of an untrained citizenry as there was a demand for farming and manufacturing workers (Montecel, et al., 2004).

As a result immigrant, minority, or poor populations with minimal instruction or formal education could easily obtain employment. As such, there was no awareness of a silent epidemic as there was no apparent urgency. The difference at present rests in the fact that there has been a dramatic change in the marketplace since the turn of the century and corporate America can no longer provide jobs for dropouts to have a meaningful impact upon our current social systems (Fernandez & Shu, 1988; Hoyle & Collier, 2006). The Gates study illuminated the present and future impact of this change and warned educational and political leaders to improve public educational institutions to remain competitive in a growing international market (Fernandez & Shu, 1988). In sum, the Gates study introduced a medical analogy to describe the urgency of the dropout disease in our nation. By equating the dropout crisis with a silent epidemic, he implies a need for medical intervention to cure the disease.

From a medical perspective, there is a distinct intervention process consisting of primary, secondary, or tertiary phases (Gatchel, 2004). The terms primary, secondary, and tertiary are used to refer to treatment or intervention to address medical concerns (Gatchel, 2004). Within this continuum of care, modalities may be classified as passive or reactive to address specific medical issues (Gatchel, 2004). Accordingly, primary care or prevention offers a passive or proactive approach to prevent disease through early
identification of risk factors in an asymptomatic phase. In contrast, secondary or tertiary
care or prevention presents an active or retroactive model to treat maladies in a
symptomatic phase. In these phases, diagnoses are required and interventions are needed
to prevent future complications. If the condition continues to worsen tertiary
interventions are needed to provide urgent or emergent treatment to prevent disability or
death. The phrase an “ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” suggests the need to
address risk factors in a preventative state in order to obviate the need for secondary and
tertiary “emergency room” interventions (N. D. Russell, personal communication, June 21, 2009).

Because the Gates study claims that the dropout crisis is of epidemic proportion,
there is an urgent need for secondary and tertiary interventions to stop further
transmission of the disease throughout public schools. The disease is clearly in a
symptomatic phase and will continue to spread if left untreated. His retrospective
qualitative study may be classified as a secondary or tertiary prevention approach to find
a panacea for this disease by exploring risk factors presented by dropouts currently
diagnosed with the disease. Along this line of reasoning, NCLB may also be classified as
a reactive or retrospective modality as it is a “quick-fix” policy reform to cure the silent epidemic. To this end, this study will investigate if school systems are utilizing proactive
or reactive “emergency room” approaches to solve the dropout crisis.

Conceptual Framework

The Gates study was unique in that it utilized a theoretical orientation typically
absent in prior studies – that of students themselves to analyze the dropout problem in
public school systems. He proposed a new line of research based on organizational theory
(Hazen, 1993) to listen to the voice of dropouts themselves to investigate the etiology of the infectious dropout disease. Organizations consist of diverse groups of people with “polyphonic” voices created through individualized perceptions and experiences (Hazen, 1993). Though some voices in organizations receive ultimate attention, others are notoriously ignored and disregarded (Hazen, 1993). The Gates study emphasized this dynamic within America’s public schools and encouraged educators to consider a new theoretical framework to regard the voice of dropouts. Hearing their collective stories and ideas fosters polyphony to discover new strategies to understand and change organizations (Hazen, 1993).

In the same way, Montecel, Cortez, and Cortez (2004) introduced a paradigm shift in the research on dropout prevention programs. They recommended holding schools accountable to design strategies to address the silent epidemic, rather than putting the responsibility on students and their families. Although prior research has placed the onus on studentry to solve this national crisis, Montecel et al. (2004) challenged researchers and political leaders to alter paradigms portraying dropouts as liabilities to schools. Instead, dropouts should be depicted as valuable assets to schools and citizenry because they possess “clues” to vital risk factors in the asymptomatic phase of disease. Thus, this methodology emphasizes an early warning system or exploration of individual factors to gain their perspective to make schools better rather than focusing on individual or family factors that place them at risk for dropping out of school. This shift from viewing dropouts as assets rather than liabilities emphasizes the importance of designing strategies to encourage students to stay in school and experience academic success as
opposed to analyzing risk factors and the need for dropouts and their families to be
“fixed” (Montecel et al, 2004).

When considering Hispanic dropouts, this recommendation for a paradigm shift is
especially beneficial to solve the silent epidemic because traditional risk factors to predict
students that will quit school (e.g., family earnings, educational attainment) have been
ineffective (Fernandez & Shu, 1988). Put another way, Hispanic students are dropping
out of school at significantly higher rates than other minority groups in national samples
in the absence of exhibiting traditional risk factors associated with quitting school. As
such, Hispanic students may be valuable assets to schools to analyze why they are
leaving school at alarming rates even when they display no obvious risk factors.
Therefore, this new paradigm strives to cure the silent epidemic by strengthening schools
to promote a skilled workforce to enable America to maintain global dominance to
effectively compete against other countries.

It is important to note that this paradigm presents a new way or advocacy
approach of looking at a well-known educational issue in America (Sim & Van Loon,
2006). The topic of failing to hold on to students before they obtain a diploma is nothing
new under the sun. Since the late 19th century researchers, educators, and political leaders
have worked to end the dropout crisis yet students continue to leave school (Fernandez &
Shu, 1988; Montecel et al., 2004). The Gates study revealed a new advocacy lens based
on arguments proposed by three critical theorists: Jacques Lacan, Marx/Freud, and Henry
Louis Gates (Sim & Van Loon, 2005). This new advocacy lens framed the silent
epidemic based on feedback from dropouts themselves to explore a cure to the disease.
Jacques Lacan

French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (Benvenuto, 1986) introduced a deconstructive lens to search for new truth to understand the dropout crisis by considering new ways of looking at the same old thing to obtain new answers. Influenced by the processes of phenomenology, he actively listened to the authentic voice of students without predetermined notions to gain new knowledge to solve the *silent epidemic* (Benvenuto, 1986). His approach opposed traditional theoretical orientations utilizing structuralist/concrete/post-positivist lenses to scrutinize and verify data predict reasons students left school. Theories from this older concrete view portrayed students as liabilities and indicated that grade retention, poor early academic performance, and income levels predicted early school withdraw (Balfanz & Legters, 2001; Entwistle Alexander, & Olson, 2005; Finn, Gerber, & Boyd-Zaharias, 2005; Stearns & Glennie, 2006). Though these traditional studies provided useful information regarding the dropout crisis, they failed to employ critical pedagogy valuing the ethical issues of (a) primacy of student experience; and (b) primacy of voice (McLaren, 2004).

As such, the Gates study drew attention to Lacan’s deconstructive lens by emphasizing the need to pay close attention to the authentic voice and personal experiences of marginalized students (Creswell, 2005) to obtain new knowledge from dropouts to search for new answers to cure the *silent epidemic*. In effect, the Lacanian lens presented a guide for the Gates study to answer questions about a former educational issue by exploring new circumstances revealed by student voices. It illuminated the aforementioned ethical considerations-primacy of student experience and voice and spoke to the possibility that the voice of dropouts themselves provided the best picture to
understand why students quit school. In fact, the main purpose of the report was to approach the dropout issue in America from a perspective not typically considered in past studies - that of dropouts themselves. Their main desire was to give dropouts’ stories and insights a voice through a phenomenological research study. This form of qualitative inquiry accentuated the essences to shared experience of being a high school dropout in America’s public schools (Merriam, 2002). Gates desired the study to be a wake-up call to policymakers and stakeholders alike to summon the national will to address the high school dropout epidemic.

Other theorists (Greene, 1988; Palmer, 1998; Wheatley, 1992) presented a deconstructive lens to consider the importance of student voice and experience. As stated by Greene (1988) student experience examines the interrelationship between freedom, possibility, and imagination in public education and empowers students to actively analyze their unique experiences to transform social practices in public schools to solve problems. Correspondingly, voice explores the human soul and values identity, integrity, and relationships (Palmer, 1998). Voice offers an “emancipatory” alternative to empower students to engage in praxis by naming the obstacles within their school, families, and themselves impinging on their sphere of freedom. This alternative also enables them to create their definitions of power and share their stories and perspectives to transform social practices in schools.

In the same way, Strike, Haller, and Soltis (2005) mentioned that educators must begin to embrace and explore ideas and beliefs resulting from student voice and permit them to be challenged in order to effectively solve problems in our educational system and refine and improve ideas. Still, Wheatley (1992) proposed new science to discover
insights and explanations about why things are unfolding the way they are in America’s public schools. In *new science*, freedom of expression results in chaos, which is the last state before a system plunges into random behavior where no order can exist. As student experience and voice is made the center of attention and shared within educational organizations, new ideas emerge to seek alternative views. These ideas then collide and contest the meaning of specific practices in danger of becoming lost and enfeebled. Though *new science* results in a system of chaos, Wheatley asserts that in nature, chaos is always partnered with order. Consequently, truth eventually comes forth from a process of criticism and debate as opinions and ideas are shared (Strike, et al., 2005).

*Marx/Freud*

In addition to the Lacanian lens which placed emphasis upon a deconstructive view to illuminate the authentic voice and personal experiences of dropouts, Marx/Freud recommended a second lens based on the theory of economics and hidden truths to frame the dropout crisis (Sim & Van Loon, 2005). When considering the *theory of economics* in Classical Marxism, there is a need to maintain the two major classes (e.g., Capitalists, Proletariat) in society (Sim & Van Loon, 2005). Capitalism demands a proletariat “laborer” who must work for the capitalist “owner” to obtain wages in order to survive. Thus, within Marxist economic thought, there is a need to “push” the future labor force of students out of school to maintain the American capitalist system (Sterns & Glennie, 2006). Hence, according to Greene (1966) the dropout problem in the United States is not a school problem; it is an American economic problem. Montecel et al., (2004) reported that thousands of students depart school annually yet society and citizenry do not seem to really discern the significance of the problem.
When analyzing the *theory of hidden truths*, Marx/Freud presented a unifying idea of unconscious drives of classism and racism that actively inhibit Americans from realizing the significance of this disease. It also exposed underlying meanings to explain why community leaders seem to accept the departure of so many poor students from the public educational system each year. According to Marx/Freud, there is a need to purge a certain percentage of students from the school to prevent all of them from equally obtaining a diploma to become producers rather than workers in the market place. Fine (1991) underscored this viewpoint and asserted that low-income students and students of color were often being excluded and denied the opportunity to obtain a high school diploma. The Gates study further supported Greene (1966) and Fine’s (1991) perspectives by reporting that society truly suffers when students leave school because it results in a lack of productive workers to contribute to the community. Nonetheless, the powerful truth regarding the dropout is that maybe society doesn’t want them all graduating as capitalist society needs a proletariat or worker class to submit to the capitalist or producer.

It is well known that America’s public school system was not created for minority and low income students and have not been very successful in educating them adequately (Fine, 1991). Though researchers have been exploring the dropout crisis for over 40 years, Bridgeland (2006), Montecel (2004), and Orfield (2004) mention that the general public is still unaware of the detrimental affects of the dropout issue. This suggests that members of society may be employing powerful defense mechanisms to unconsciously repress the reality of the dropout problem to exclude uncomfortable thoughts and feelings from their consciousness. Do educational and political leaders unconsciously accept the
exodus of almost one third of public school students annually to promote the need for a lower class of workers? Truth be told, the dropout problem is truly silent if people are unaware of an embedded drive to oppress certain students from graduating from school.

*Henry Louis Gates*

Along these same lines, Henry Louis Gates (Sim & Van Loon, 2005) proposed the third lens of poststructuralist-postmodernist based on the *theory of Black criticism* to analyze the *silent epidemic*. He offered an advocacy lens to gain insight into the African American experience in America. Consequently, when seeking to design interventions to address the national dropout problem in America, there is a need to gain insight into the hidden experiences of Black people. Axiologically, as a multi-racial female, I value new knowledge to understand why dropout rates for Black students are substantially higher than White youths. Each and every year in the US, an alarmingly high percentage of poor and minority students quit school and graduation rates nationwide are approximately only 50% for Black students (Murray 2008; Orfield, 2004; Singham, 2005). Nearly 40 percent of African-American and Latino students attend a high school in which the senior class is consistently less than 60 percent of the size of the freshman class four years earlier (Balfanz & Legters, 2001) yet the federal government only budgets $1 million to monitor dropout rates (Orfield, 2004).

When analyzing these well-known statistics from the lens of *Black criticism* coupled with Marx/Freud’s *theory of economics* and *theory of hidden truths*, do people have an awareness of embedded racism that is contributing to the *silent epidemic*? Another question worth asking is society unconsciously or consciously promoting a paradigm that some students are incapable of learning because they possess innate
cognitive limitations (Cooper, 2005). If national statistics from the US Census Bureau displayed graduation percentages year after year that indicated only 50% of White students were graduating from school, would society be more concerned to find the panacea to address the silent epidemic? Would there even be a need for a report from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation encouraging a national summons to address the dropout crisis?

Summary

In summary, the Gates study introduced a new advocacy lens to find a cure to the silent epidemic in America’s public schools. It utilized a conceptual framework based three advocacy lenses developed by Jacques Lacan, Marx/Freud and Henry Louis Gates. According to these theorists, the dropout problem remains unchallenged due to unconscious drives of classism and racism that are actively inhibiting Americans from realizing the dangers of this disease.

Rationale for Study

Ontologically, the ever-increasing departure of students from school prior to obtaining a diploma is not a new or rare problem within our “at-risk” educational system. Since Sputnik and A Nation at Risk, researchers (Balfanz & Legters, 2001; Bridgeland, DiJulio, & Morison, 2006; Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2005; Fine, 1991; Finn, Gerber, & Boyd-Zaharias, 2005; Fine, 1991; Greene, 1966; Roderick, 1993; Rumberger 1995; Stearns & Glennie, 2006) unveiled reasons students left school. Moreover, researchers (Cortez, & Cortez, 2004; Curley, 1991; Fernandez & Shu, 1988; Finn, Gerber, & Boyd-Zaharias, 2005; Franse & Siegel, 1987; Hargroves, 1986; Hoyle & Collier, 2006; Montecel, Patterson, Beltyukova, & Berman, K 2007) presented promising dropout
prevention approaches to treat the silent epidemic. Even though all these studies have added to our knowledge, there remain considerable limitations as the cancerous dropout cells continue to spread throughout the bodies of urban schools. In spite of decades of research on dropouts and prevention programs, one may ask, how can there be a silent epidemic.

Findings from researchers (Curley, 1991; Groth, 1998; Hoyle & Collier, 2006; Littky, 2002; Malloy, 1995; Montecel, Cortez, & Cortez, 2004; Pallas, Natriello, & McGill, 1987; Weiner, 1989) suggest the disease continues to spread due to (a) unreliable and inaccurate reporting of dropouts to state education agencies; (b) higher standards and high-stakes testing; (c) perceptions that dropout prevention programs are dumping grounds offering minimal skills or practical knowledge to meet societal demands; (d) reactive and punitive interventions utilizing police officers, criminal justice systems, or public prosecutors to deal with the problem; (e) poor teacher preparation programs; (f) inequitable distribution of funding and support services to districts with diverse students and (g) emphasis on changing students rather than school systems. With a current mandate from NCLB to dramatically raise graduation rates by 2010, it is imperative to continue to research a cure to this devastating disease. Urban CEO school superintendents are especially challenged to meet this requirement (Hoyle & Collier, 2006) as there is limited federal funding or a universally accepted dropout prevention program for states to implement. Since the mandate of NCLB, researchers (Fernandez & Shu; 1988; Hoyle & Collier, 2006) reported that states and school systems throughout the US have undertaken manifold initiatives to design dropout prevention programs to address the problem.
After closely investigating the explanations of these programs, they classified them into six types. The first emphasized a counseling/mentoring program and daily individualized support from a teacher. The second highlighted a work-study program consisting of daily instruction in addition to vocational training to provide students the opportunity to work. The third accentuated new creative learning activities and parental involvement. The fourth drew attention to the benefit of an alternative design such as a smaller setting to provide instruction to students. The fifth stressed new strategies to improve attendance rates and the last recommended positive reinforcement strategies consisting of rewards and incentives to encourage students to stay in school. Hoyle and Collier (2006) also analyzed the 38 interventions used by 10 urban school systems in Colorado, Texas, California, Florida, Oklahoma, and Utah. Astoundingly, they learned that these urban districts often utilized *reactive* penalizing strategies such as the courts, juvenile justice system, probation officers, or prosecutors to decrease dropout rates. There was no specific emphasis on *proactive* dropout prevention approaches such as early intervention or the formation of professional learning communities to understand the needs of children who may be at-risk for poor academic achievement. As a result, no remarkable change in dropout rates was observed in these urban areas (Hoyle & Collier, 2006).

Thus, the purpose for this case study is to add to the body of knowledge already available in the literature to promote effective design dropout prevention efforts to help educators meet the mandate of *NCLB* to increase graduation rates to 90% by 2010. This study is not intended to recommend a “one-best dropout prevention system” but to reveal information about the design and practices of one urban dropout prevention program that
may be applied to other urban school districts to assist with interventions to improve graduation rates.

Research Questions

This case study pursued the answers to these research questions:

1. What are the factors that cause urban students to drop out of school?
2. What interventions are needed to encourage students to stay in school?
3. What does an effective urban dropout prevention program look like?
4. What new and unique ideas is this program using with its dropouts?
5. What design and instructional strategies is this program using?

Definition of Terms

Axiology: The study of values.

Capitalist: Person of the upper-class in society who has wealth or capital.

Case Study: In-depth exploration of a single group or organization.

Classical Marxism: Theory of economics that there must be a worker class in society.

Director of Dropout Prevention Program: Chief Academic Officer of the charter school.

Dropouts: Students who leave their assigned public school to attend a charter school or alternative program before obtaining a high school diploma.

High-Stakes Testing: Use of a single test to determine academic achievement of students.

IEP: Individualized Educational Program outlining goals and interventions for students with disabilities.

Local Report Cards: Publication released by the US Department of Education to provide an overall rating of effectiveness of schools.
**Nation At Risk Report:** Publication released by the US Department of Education that warned about the country’s future competitiveness in the world economy.

**New Science:** Theory that order comes from chaos.

**Polyphony:** Collection of student voices to understand personal insights and experiences.

**Ontology:** The study of knowledge.

**Phenomenological:** Essential underlying meaning of the essences and shared experiences of dropouts.

**Proletariat:** Person of the lower-class who works for a capitalist.

**Rural:** Characteristic of country or agricultural areas.

**Silent Epidemic:** The dropout problem in America’s public schools according to Bill Gates.

**Sputnik:** Man-made satellites launched into space by the USSR in 1958.

**Suburban:** Characteristic of a residential area near the border of a city.

**Theory of Black Criticism:** The need to gain insight into the hidden experiences of Black people.

**Theory of Economics:** The need to maintain a class structure in society consisting of capitalists proletariats.

**Theory of Hidden Truths:** Unconscious drives of classism and racism in society that promote a class structure.

**Triangulation:** Utilizing multiple sources of information to understand a phenomenon.

**Urban:** Characteristic of city as distinguished from rural or suburban areas.
*Urban Schools:* Public agencies in metropolitan areas with higher percentages of economically disadvantaged, non-English speaking, minority, and low-achieving students.

**Limitations**

This study was limited in three ways. First and foremost, generalization was a concern as this study was based on information gathered from twelve students attending one charter school. Data from LRC indicated that 89.9% of the total student population at the school were Black and 93.2% of students were classified as economically disadvantaged. The average student daily enrollment of the school was 145. Findings represented strategies and practices of one urban dropout recovery program to enable students to obtain a high school diploma, and may not be applicable to other urban educational settings. Additionally, the charter school presented in this study utilized a traditional educational design with a certified classroom teacher. As opposed to some other dropout prevention programs that offer an online curriculum or the opportunity for students to work from home, participants in this study desired to attend a program where they had to sign in daily, and interact with teachers and other students to fulfill graduation requirements. Accordingly, results may likely reflect students with a particular personality that desired this form of educational design. Their views and perceptions may vastly differ from those of students who prefer an online program without daily interaction with teachers and peers.

Moreover, the charter school analyzed in this study had a designation of Academic Watch on the US Department of Education’s LRC which indicated it was not the most effective urban dropout prevention program for consideration. It only met two
out of eleven state indicators with respect to 11th grade Ohio Graduation Test Scores and graduation rate. However, since this study was seeking to present effective dropout prevention approaches, it is important to note that the charter school obtained 100% graduation rate which was above the 86.9% minimum state standard. This rate is high because the dropout recovery program was established with students’ already dropped out and overage. Thus, the school was held to the same calculation formula resulting in a 100% graduation rate. Future percentages will likely decrease as calculations will be based on students who started as a cohort and graduated four years later.

Though the program failed to achieve an overall designation of excellence, Paige (2006) reported that charter schools often serve a disproportionate share of minority or “at-risk” youth who are unable to succeed within a traditional educational setting. Over 40% of students who enrolled in charters are considered to be “at-risk” or previously dropped out of school. Moreover, Leonard (2002) indicated that although charter schools often struggle during their early years, parents perceive the programs to be best for their children. Based on the fact that the charter school received a 100% graduation rate, this researcher’s intention was to focus solely on strategies that enabled the charter school to achieve its high graduation rate. Even though other state indicators were not met, ideas and interventions presented in this case study may be useful to educators when designing dropout prevention programs to improve graduation rates in their own educational settings.
CHAPTER II

Review of the Literature

Introduction

A large body of research presents long-standing evidence to support Gates assertion that there is indeed a *silent epidemic* in America’s public schools. This disease is especially evident in America’s urban schools (Curley, 1991; Franse & Siegel, 1987; Groth, 1998; Hoyle & Collier, 2006; Noguera, 1996; Patterson, Beltyukova, & Berman, 2007). Consequently, urban CEO school superintendents are especially challenged by the dropout problem and eagerly seeking strategies to cure the *silent epidemic* (Hoyle & Collier, 2006). Though the Gates study included data from 467 students attending schools in 25 different locations including in big cities, suburbs, and small towns, Green (2001) asserted that the dropout *epidemic* is in actuality an “urban problem.” Whereas, small rural schools tackle insufficient funding and increased demands upon superintendents to deal with administrative tasks to meet mandates of *NCLB* (Canales, Tejeda-Delgado, & Slate, 2008), large urban high schools struggle with unique concerns.

Above and beyond growing dropout and absenteeism rates, they are frequently faced with violence, drugs, teen pregnancy, teacher/principal turnover, classism/racism, inadequate resources, aged facilities and limited postsecondary options (ERIC DOC, 1981; Franse & Siegel, 1987; Noguera, 1996). Hoyle and Collier (2006) report findings from the Children’s Defense Fund that every nine seconds, a high school student quits school. Moreover, they report data from the National Center for Educational Statistics that many dropouts are disabled, representative of minority groups, or poor. Among African Americans or Hispanics, less than 50% graduated from 45 urban districts in the
US (Green, 2001). Similarly, only 50% of urban students from a single-parent home graduated from high school (Hoyle & Collier, 2006).

Urban schools are filled with an ever changing student body often victimized by high poverty and welfare rates. Wolf (1978) reports that students in urban schools are also two times more likely to display sub average academic achievement on standardized tests when compared to their rural or suburban peers (Wolf, 1978). The challenges faced by urban public schools are extremely unique in that they are required to educate all children in spite of devastating issues such as being homeless, starving, sick, or non-English speaking (Noguera, 1996). In essence, urban environments consist of social and economic forces that present significant challenges that may adversely impact urban schools (Noguera, 1996). Urban schools and environments are linked in such a way that efforts to solve the silent epidemic in urban schools must consider the impact of individual, institutional, and racial/cultural issues typically observed within urban areas (Mark & Anderson, 1984). These issues present three major strands to frame the dropout problem in urban environments to predict reasons students depart from school.

**Individual Factors**

Individual factors suggest that youth who leave school are pushed or pulled out of school (Stearns & Glennie, 2006). They do not typically make spur-of-the-moment decisions to drop out of school. Rather, from a developmental perspective, there is a clear and distinct pathway to leaving school (Finn et al., 2005; Roderick, 1993; Stearns & Glennie 2006). When closely analyzing individual push-out factors, Fine (1991) and Murray and Naranjo (2008) indicated that being poor was the greatest predictor of leaving school. Still, Roderick (1993), Rumberger (1995) and more recently Neild and
Balfanz (2001) and Finn et al., (2005) suggested that grade retention was the most single powerful “signal” of dropping out of school (Fraas, 2003). They reported that retained students were more than three times more likely to quit school than students who never repeated a grade. Likewise, first-time freshman who were not promoted to tenth grade exhibited a dropout rate close to 60%. Though there seemed to be widespread consensus among teachers that grade retention was an effective interventions to improve the academic performance of students, Roderick (1993) found that youths with early grade retentions performed no better than their peers who were placed in grade. In fact, he found that knowledge of being overage for grade (older than other students in a class) during the adolescent years, adversely impacted students’ social emotional status and contributed to feelings of isolation, poor self-esteem, and poor attitudes to school. Freshmen students who failed to obtain necessary credits, typically dropped out of school at rates five times greater than sophomore students who successfully obtained enough credits to move to the next grade (Roderick, 1993). The growing number of failing freshman unable to successfully transition to sophomore status has been classified as the “freshman bulge” and is having a devastating impact upon urban districts in particular (Patterson, Beltyukova, & Berman, 2007).

Moreover, academic achievement during the early years of schooling, larger class sizes, and classification with a learning disability may be associated with pressuring students to depart from school. With regard to academic performance, the odds of dropping out of school were much greater for students who displayed poor academic achievement during their early years of schooling than for students who obtained higher grades (Finn, Gerber, & Boyd-Zaharias, 2005). Likewise, when reviewing the impact of
class size, AERA (2003) suggested that students in larger classes are at a greater risk for not graduating from school. Still, the percentage of students with documented learning disabilities surpassed the national averages for students not classified with a learning disability (Murray & Naranjo, 2008). When analyzing the combination of income and academic achievement, Balfanz et al. (2004) and Finn et al. (2005) suggested that dropouts from high-poverty schools routinely displayed poorer academic preparation and performed significantly below benchmarks used to measure academic success. Also, when examining the interaction of income, academic achievement, and classification with a learning disability, dropout rates for low income youth with a documented learning disability were roughly two to six times higher than dropout rates for higher income youth (Murray & Naranjo, 2008).

Above and beyond income, early academic achievement, and having a learning disability, Blum (2005); Clark, Shreve, and Stone (2005) proposed that a lack of solid adult/student connections may lead students to lose interest in school. They advised that an unsafe unsupportive school environment, void of parental and community involvement, may contribute to overall school disengagement or a lack of connectedness. Although these studies did not specifically look at dropout rates, they were useful in that they reviewed factors that may be associated with students’ resiliency to persist with their formal education. For instance, they found that a physically and emotionally safe school environment with positive adult and student relationships may be needed to increase the academic success of students. Students who were connected to at least one caring adult in school were less likely to become pregnant, commit suicide, or use drugs. Murray and
Naranjo (2008) indicated that these types of studies are beginning to investigate the concept of educational resilience among students who are “at-risk” of not graduating.

Unlike Blum (2005) and Clark et al. (2005) who did not explore dropout rates, Murray and Naranjo (2008) investigated the impact of being poor, Black, and learning disabled and dropping out of school. Utilizing a qualitative research investigation, he proposed four “protective factors” relative to individuals, families, teachers and peers to substantially decrease dropout rates. In essence, African American students who were at-risk of not graduating demonstrated educational resilience when they had (a) an individual drive to succeed, (b) supportive parents, (c) caring teachers, and (d) the ability to avoid deviant peers parental involvement. These findings were consistent with Blum and Clark et al., who specified that educational resilience, may impact students’ decisions to leave school.

When closely analyzing pull-out factors, Entwisle et al. (2005) put forward that employment or family responsibilities may force students to stop going to school. They reported that disadvantaged urban teenagers were often forced to earn money to help support their families. Having an adult job at age 15 significantly increased the risk of dropout rates because once they began working they were likely to feel pressured to continue working, as their families often depended upon the added income. Urban teenagers with adult-type jobs in manufacturing or business were more than six times as likely to drop out of school after year 12 as those with teen jobs in lawn mowing or babysitting. This was likely due to the fact that an adult job is more difficult for a 15-year-old that has not developed effective time-management skills to balance work and school.
Institutional Factors

Institutional aspects take account of national and local school policies that may be significantly impacting the increasing number of students leaving school. First and foremost, current national policies requiring high-stakes testing might be pressuring students to quit school (Littky, 2002). Nationally, nine of ten states with the highest dropout rates routinely report graduation rates. Students that fail to pass high-stakes testing may quit school because once they get a low score on an aptitude test they may lose motivation to pass the tests (Littky, 2002). This high-stakes testing dilemma may be especially significant for school districts with large percentages of nonwhite students. Despite the fact that the dropout quandary has not historically be considered to be a civil rights dilemma, recent reports from The Civil Right’s Project indicated that it is worsening for nonwhite students due to educational policies and high-stakes testing (Orfield, 2004).

Another policy using test scores to guide retention decisions may be contributing to students’ decisions to leave school. Because researchers (Finn et al., 2005; Neild & Balfanz, 2001; Roderick 1993; Rumberger, 1995) reveal that retention is a powerful factor to push students out of school, it is interesting to note that some large urban school systems are endorsing policies to use high-stakes tests to decide which students need to be held back in their current grade (Eaton, 2007). Though President Bush signed NCLB into law to promote academic progress and improve graduation rates, policies resulting from the law to use the test to retain students may be further exacerbating the dropout problem.
As well, disciplinary policies and school factors (Stearns & Glennie, 2006) may be discouraging students from continuing with their formal education. Students who miss a certain number of days are often suspended and expelled from school which may lead them to fall further behind and have difficulty catching up once they return to school. Consequently, students who fail to show up for school are often denied the opportunity to come to school. This form of disciplinary policy may send a very confusing message to students regarding the importance of staying in school.

**Racial/Cultural Factors**

Racial/cultural factors propose ethnic and racial issues that may be contributing to the noteworthy percentages of students leaving school. When considering ethnic and racial issues, current statistics indicate significant findings regarding dropout rates. Researchers (Orfield, 2001; Singham, 2005; Murray & Naranjo, 2008) have consistently reported that high school graduation rates nationwide are approximately 75-78% for White students; 50-56% for Black students; and 54% for Latino students. Nearly 40% of African-American and Latino students attend a high school in which the senior class is consistently less than 60% of the size of the freshman class four years earlier (Balfanz & Legters, 2001). Correspondingly, Murray and Naranjo, (2008) report startling findings that the lifetime earnings for African American dropouts were estimated to be $100,000 - $200,000 less than White dropouts. Black dropouts are often detached from the school culture and incapable of achieving an adequate level of comfort and success (Brooks-Williams, 1987). They also fail to view a quality education as a means to achieve greater mobility and success in the future (Richardson & Gerlach, 1980).
A report for the American Council on Education, the Education Trust, and the Schott Foundation, further showed that black male students represent a worst-case scenario for any group attending a US public school. African American male students spent less time in advanced college placement or college prep courses and were subjected to more disciplinary suspensions and expulsions than any other group in our public schools. More black males received a GED in prison than graduated from college (Varlas, 2005). Author and educational consultant, Kunjufu, (Varlas, 2005) revealed that in many cases, schools who served Black boys displayed inadequate resources, a curriculum with low expectations, and a bountiful supply of unqualified teachers. Experts that tracked the progress of Black boys frequently found inattention to learning styles, misinterpretation of zero tolerance policies, and a lack of commitment to create a caring and nurturing learning environment (Varlas, 2005).

In a previous study for a mentorship project at Ashland University, I conducted a qualitative study with 28 adult dropouts, students, ages 18 and older, who withdrew from their assigned public school to enroll in a charter school. The purpose of the study was to explore reasons dropouts left school, if they desired an alternative educational design, and if they exhibited significant social/emotional problems in comparison to same aged peers. Data were collected through observations, individual and focus group interviews, questionnaires, and standardized tests. Fourteen of the participants were male and 14 were female. The racial breakdown included the following: (a) 32% African American, (b) 47% White, (c) 14% Latino, and (d) 7% Asian.

The study indicated that dropouts left school due to ecological (e.g., classes too big; poor supervision); psychological, (e.g., poor coping skills; depression); and
sociological (e.g., lack of support at home and community; uncaring teachers) factors. They desired an online charter school with more choice and flexibility to obtain needed credits to graduate in a shorter amount of time; and more security, supervision, and individualized attention from teachers. Moreover, when analyzing data from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) dropouts displayed higher levels of anxiety, depression, and inadequacy. They also displayed poor interpersonal relations, low self-esteem, and often felt sad, hopeless, and misunderstood.

Conclusion

In summary, the silent epidemic is running rampant through America’s urban schools. Its impact is so devastating to society that it is worthy of national attention. Though NCLB is mandating an increase in graduation rates by 2010, urban school leaders are especially challenged to find a cure to the silent epidemic. Framed upon three major strands to predict reasons urban students depart from school, a large body of research reveals the devastating impact of individual, institutional, and racial/cultural factors transmitting the disease. As a result, there remains a need for further research regarding the dropout problem, to delve into stratagems to encourage urban youths to remain in school.
CHAPTER III

Methodology

In this chapter I will describe my selection of a qualitative case study and illustrate the necessity of a phenomenological approach as a form of inquiry for data collection. I will also discuss important ethical issues I considered while conducting this study.

Rationale for a Qualitative Case Study

An exploration of an effective urban dropout prevention program based solely upon feedback from dropouts themselves is quite limited in the literature. More attention needs to be devoted to research on dropouts and recovery programs created to assist them in completing graduation requirements (Groth, 1998). With a mandate form NCLB to increase graduation rates by 2010, a qualitative case study to obtain a panoramic view and detailed description of a single urban district’s strategy to solve its dropout problem is of the essence. A qualitative case study is a rich concentrated investigation of a single organization, person, or group (Merriam, 2002). This methodological design allows the researcher to focus solely upon a particular entity to obtain an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon based on triangulation of information (Creswell, 2005). In order to be a case study, there must be an exhaustive examination of a particular institution or unit (Merriam, 2002) to enable the researcher to determine the effectiveness of a specific program. Phenomenological inquiry emphasizing the shared experiences of students attending an urban dropout recovery program, may offer valuable insight to urban school leaders to develop or redesign programs to cure the silent epidemic.
This study selected a qualitative case study with an emphasis on a phenomenological approach to explore the dropout crisis. It illuminated the successfulness of a large urban district’s dropout recovery program through an analysis of dropouts’ shared experiences. The goal of the study was to provide valuable insight of strategies that may be beneficial to urban school leaders to develop or redesign programs to cure the *silent epidemic*.

**Phenomenological Approach**

Qualitative research is a comprehensive exploration of a problem based on an analysis of information provided by participants in their natural location (Creswell, 2005). According to Merriam (2002) qualitative research designs have gained national attention over the past two decades and are especially beneficial in the absence of a specific premise to explain an extraordinary phenomenon such as the *silent epidemic*. Phenomenological research explains the meaning and perspectives of individuals concerning an issue they have experienced (Creswell, 1998). Though many researchers suggest that all qualitative research is phenomenological as it seeks to explore and understand issues, Merriam (2002) asserts that phenomenological research designs are unique in that they emphasize the meaning or structure of a particular experience shared by a group of individuals.

With regard to the *silent epidemic*, a phenomenological form of inquiry is optimal to explore the unique perspective of dropouts who have first-hand knowledge of the disease as well as successful recovery programs. In order to discover a cure for this malady, it is crucial to listen to the polyphonic voices of dropouts (Hazen, 1993) to hear their stories and experiences, to gain insight into reasons they quit school. It is also vital
to hear their voices to obtain their recommendation of what a successful recovery program looks like. Dropouts are therefore critical to understand the components of an effective recovery program as they are able to make sense of the problem and provide knowledge and truth to understand the \textit{silent epidemic}. In contrast to quantitative/positivist designs which utilize \textit{numbers} to test hypotheses, qualitative designs draw upon the essences and shared experiences of people to understand a concern (Merriam, 2002).

Despite the fact that researchers (Curley, 1991; Fernandez & Shu, 1988; Franse & Siegel, 1987; Hargroves, 1986; Hoyle & Collier, 2006; Montacel, Cortez, & Cortez, 2004; Patterson, Beltyukova, & Berman, K 2007) in several studies have utilized qualitative research methodologies to explore the \textit{silent epidemic}, none demonstrated a qualitative case study with phenomenological inquiry analyzing an urban district’s recovery program. They enumerated (a) risk factors characteristically associated with dropouts (e.g., poor academic achievement, family income); (b) inappropriate strategies usually employed by recovery programs (e.g., courts, police officers) to keep students in school; (c) recommendations to reduce freshman failures (e.g., building community, improving relationships); and (d) effective interventions to improve urban schools (e.g., partnerships with businesses, sharing of resources). Yet, they lacked information derived from the essences and experiences of dropouts themselves.

In the same way, the Gates study applied a qualitative research design with phenomenological inquiry to obtain feedback from dropouts themselves to add to the research to understand the dropout phenomenon. It presented students’ suggestions of what it would take to help students stay in school but, failed to define dropouts’ collective
perceptions of a successful urban recovery program. Similarly, Groth (1998) employed phenomenological inquiry by presenting the shared beliefs that dropouts believe recovery programs are beneficial to enable students to finish school. Nonetheless, the author concluded that urban dropout recovery programs are dumping grounds that fail to teach dropouts needed practical skills. The study did not focus solely on data from dropouts to describe a successful urban prevention program. As such, there was no qualitative case study utilizing a phenomenological form of inquiry to demonstrate the success of a large urban district’s dropout recovery program. This study adds to the literature by presenting dropouts’ personal beliefs and perceptions of an effective urban dropout prevention program as a potential cure for the silent epidemic. To ascertain dropouts’ beliefs and perceptions, the researcher spent several weeks at an urban dropout recovery program to explore the following research questions:

1. What are the factors that cause urban students to drop out of school?
2. What interventions are needed to encourage students to stay in school?
3. What does an effective urban dropout prevention program look like?
4. What new and unique ideas is this program using with its dropouts?
5. What design and instructional strategies is this program using?

Participants

Participant Characteristics

This study is based on feedback from twelve participants who were recruited by the researcher. All participants were informed that the study would be conducted in two phases and encouraged to attend both phases the study. During phase one, participants were asked to complete the “letter to the superintendent,” and BASC-2 standardized
behavioral questionnaire. During phase two, students were asked to participate in a taped two hour focus group interview session. Although all twelve students were invited to attend both phases of the study, only three participants were able to attend both sessions. Due to their busy work schedules, family obligations, and transportation issues, most were unable to keep both appointments. As such, nine students completed only the first phase and three students completed only the second phase. However, I asked the three students who attended the second phase to also complete the “letter to the superintendent.” Due to time constraints, I did not ask them to complete the standardized behavioral questionnaire.

**Demographic Information**

To select participants for the study, a Family Interview list for the 2008/2009 school year was obtained from the secretary of the large urban district’s dropout recovery program. This list included 225 students currently or previously enrolled in the program and their phone numbers. I randomly called students on this list to seek their participation in the study. Regarding demographic information, seven participants were female and five were male. Eleven participants were Black and one was White. Six participants were graduates of the program and six were in the 11th grade. It was remarkable to note that approximately 50% of numbers on the list were disconnected and the researcher was only able to speak to about 20% of students. Within a two week period, I was only able to interview 12 students in all. Students expressed consent to participate in the study by volunteering their time to willingly come to the charter school to complete the interviews. Participants selected for the study were (a) adult dropouts, 18 years or older; (b) previously withdrawn from their assigned public school; (c) currently enrolled in the
program; or (d) a recent graduate of the program. Only adult dropouts were selected to participate in the study to prevent the need to obtain without permission from a parent/guardian.

Pseudonymity

To maintain confidentiality, I informed participants that they would be given a pseudonym. During phase one of the focus group, all participants agreed to the use of a pseudonym to conceal their identity. Amazingly, during phase two all participants opposed the recommendation to use a pseudonym and requested that I use their own names in the final report so their opinions could be shared with others to understand why they quit school.

Ethical Considerations

I had to consider three important ethical issues when conducting this phenomenological study. The first involved protection and confidentiality. I obtained approval from the Human Subject Review Board at Ashland University prior to conducting research at the charter school. I gave each participant a consent packet and reviewed the purpose of the study prior to requesting their written consent. Participants were informed of their rights to withdraw from the study at any time or refrain from answering questions if they began to experience any feelings of discomfort. They were also told that the focus group interview would be recorded and that their identity would be protected by giving them a pseudonym. I outlined my intentions to protect participants’ identities and store all data, tapes, and information in a locked attic to which only she had access. Participants were also asked if they had any questions or concerns prior to signing consent forms.
The second issue pertained to bracketing and phenomenological reduction (Merriam, 2002). As per Merriam, these strategies challenge researchers to analyze any personal biases or assumptions and set them aside when conducting qualitative studies. For instance, I had to objectively document all feedback from dropouts whether or not it aligned with my views and opinions regarding reasons students left school or the effectiveness of prevention programs. Because I aimed to present data depicting a successful program, I was careful to note data from dropouts that might have indicated an opposing view.

The third principle pertained to equal value and respect (Strike, Haller, & Soltis, 2005). Data from the 2009 LRC indicated that 89.9% of dropouts attending the recovery program were Black and 93.2% were economically disadvantaged. Moreover, data indicated that the program met only 2 out of 11 indicators which suggested that students performed below required proficiency levels in all five academic areas. Thus, this population was classified as economically and educationally disadvantaged and could be considered as “burdens” to schools. However, Montecel et al. (2004) challenged researchers and political leaders to alter such paradigms portraying dropouts as liabilities to schools and to replace it with paradigms viewing dropouts as assets. I regarded dropouts as valuable assets possessing significant worth and value to understand the dropout problem and treated participants with utmost respect. I empowered dropouts by informing them that their feedback was necessary to obtain knowledge and truth to encourage students to stay in school. I also encouraged them to freely express their ideas and recommendations to improve public schools. Because I was employed by the large urban public school district that was currently sponsoring the dropout recovery program,
I was cognizant to recognize my own biases and refrain from providing personal opinions as feedback from dropouts differed from my ideals and perceptions regarding public schools being best for students.

Data Collection

*Informal Letter to the Superintendent*

To understand reasons students left their assigned public school to attend the dropout recovery program, participants were asked to write an informal letter addressed to the superintendent. This was a qualitative interviewing technique that allowed participants to express their reasons for leaving their assigned public school in a written form. Because participants were asked to refrain from discussing any sensitive subject matter during focus group interviews, this form of inquiry permitted students to write about any delicate issues that might have caused them to feel uncomfortable discussing in the presence of myself or their peers.

*Standardized Behavioral Questionnaire*

To facilitate an understanding of who dropouts were, the Behavior Assessment System for Children – Second Edition (BASC-2 SRP-A) was chosen as the standardized behavioral measure. It was a norm-referenced self-report behavioral assessment designed for adolescents ages 12-21 to provide comparisons with same age peers. The BASC-2 SRP-A, yielded adequate to excellent reliability and validity in general and clinical samples (http://www.pearsonassessments.com/technical/basc2.htm#8). The coefficient alpha reliabilities for internal consistency were .89 for composite scales and .79 for individual scales. Test-retest reliabilities yielded average correlations .82 for composite scores and .75 for individual scales across all age groups. The BASC-2 was determined to
be a valid measure of behavior and personality as it was designed according to content from teachers, parents, children, and psychologists. It was also developed utilizing DSM-IV and DSM-IN-TR criteria, in addition to other behavioral assessments. With regard to construct, convergent, and discriminative validity, the BASC-2 is similar to the Achenbach, Conners-Wells’ Adolescent Self-Report Scale, Beck Depression Inventory-II, Children’s Depression Inventory, Revised Children’s Manifest Anxiety Scale, Brief Symptom Inventory, and Minnesota Multiphasic Personality-2TM, and the former version of the BASC. Correlations between subscales were generally in the .70s and .80s when analyzing similar content. Likewise, correlations with the previous BASC were in the .90s (http://www.pearsonassessments.com/technical/basc2.htm#8).

The BASC-2 SRP-A assessed potential personality and behavioral concerns as well as emotional disturbance and positive qualities. It measured if dropouts perceived themselves to exhibit clinically significant or at-risk levels of emotional difficulties on composite, clinical, or adaptive scales within the past six months; and if they perceived themselves to experience critical areas of concern. It also provided an analysis of content areas, secondary to other scales to determine a need for additional follow-up. Although the BASC-2 was designed to provide triangulation of ratings from parents, teachers and students, the researcher opted to use only self-report ratings of behavior. Thus, levels of emotional functioning and social emotional status would be based on feedback from dropouts themselves, rather than parents or teachers. The BASC-2 was divided into two groups. In the first group, participants rated questions as true or false. In the second group, participants selected one of four answer choices. These included a rating of never, sometimes, often, or almost always.
Focus Group Interview

On a separate day, all participants were invited to return to the charter school for a structured focus group interview. I opened a discussion to seek participants’ responses to twelve open-ended questions. This meeting allowed participants to verbally express their ideas as a group. I believed that this format provided a thicker more in-depth portrayal (Merriam, 2002) of reasons students leave school and the benefit of attending a dropout recovery program. In contrast to the first phase which required participants to write down their ideas without having the opportunity to discuss the dropout problem as a group, the second phase appeared to motivate students to share more ideas as they heard their peers express their views. Specifically, I desired to hear their reasons for leaving their public school and their perceptions of the dropout recovery program. Data from dropouts was triangulated to note emerging themes to propose ideas and strategies to understand how urban schools may address their dropout problem. The reliability and trustworthiness of the design was determined by the use of substantial description of data presented by dropouts. I desired to present new ideas and strategies urban schools may consider in solving their dropout problem. Proposed recommendations were consistent with data collected from dropouts attending the recovery program.

Data Analysis Procedures

Creswell (1998) suggested that case studies draw upon various sources of information including observations, interviews, documents, and audio tapes to note in depth descriptions of a particular case. Merriam (2002) further asserted that themes arise after the researcher’s initial observations are refined and endlessly shaped into categories to describe a phenomenon based on people’s experiences. The data analysis process was
quite recursive, beginning with the original entry into the dropout recovery program and
enduring to the end of the entire research process. Having an a priori approach aided in
the data collection and analysis process which included member checking as well as
triangulation of information obtained from BASC-2 questionnaires, letters to the
superintendent, and the taped focus group interview (Creswell, 2005). Member checking
and triangulation were the primary strategies employed to substantiate reliability and
accuracy of findings when interpreting data (Creswell, 2005). Member checking is
defined as a course of action that summarizes feedback from participants and takes
information back to students to confirm if interpretations are a fair representation of what
was presented during the interview (Creswell, 2005).

During the first phase of the focus group interview, I administered “letters to the
superintendent” and BASC-2 standardized questionnaires. At the close of the interview, I
performed a preliminary analysis of the “letters to the superintendent.” I coded the data
for common themes and made notations at the top of the letter. According to Weiss
(1994) coding is a primary process involved in analyzing interview material. The thought
in coding is to connect what participants say during interviews to concepts and categories
that will appear in the report. In this case, I made notes of themes that appeared in the
letters and then met with participants individually to conduct a member check to clarify
and confirm if my interpretations were correct (Merriam, 2002). If my explanations or
themes were imprecise, I modified my notes to match their perceptions of the problem.

In the same way, triangulation is defined as a process of substantiating evidence
from different methods of data collection (e.g., documents and interviews) to validate
findings (Creswell, 2005). Triangulation permits researchers to use multiple sources of
data collection to note emerging themes (Merriam, 2002) to understand issues. By drawing upon several sources of information and individuals as the basis for data analysis, researchers are able to develop a report that is both reliable and accurate (Creswell, 2005). After reviewing the “letters to the superintendent,” I scored and analyzed data from BASC-2 questionnaires for behavior or personality concerns. As a school psychologist licensed by the state of Ohio, I have been thoroughly trained to administer and interpret standardized behavioral ratings to determine the existence of emotional problems adversely impacting educational performance. I consulted with a statistician at Ashland University regarding the best method to present results for a qualitative study and was advised to report percentages of students who disclosed clinically significant or at-risk levels of concern on individual scales. I also reported percentages of students who disclosed critical factors of particular interest and items related to DSM-IV-TR diagnoses indicative of mental health concerns.

During the second phase of the interview, I ran the taped focus group interview. I prepared a list of twelve questions and audio taped the session. During the interview, I listened attentively to participants to scrutinize, summarize, and organize data for common themes. After each question, I conducted a member check to determine if my perception of the findings were commensurate with participants’ perceptions. At the close of the second interview session, I transcribed the taped conversation. Although I had the option to hire someone to transcribe the data, I believed it was best for me to do the transcribing as Merriam (2002) adamantly declares that qualitative researchers are the most important instrument for data collection and analysis. I listened to the audio tape over and over and found myself automatically coding data for universal themes.
Listening to data over and over again enabled me to have a more thorough description of information shared in interviews. I was amazed how much I missed during the taped session even though I perceived myself to grasp all that participants shared during the interview. Once the transcription was completed, I coded data for common themes and began the process of triangulating findings from BASC-2 questionnaires, “letters to the superintendent,” and audio tapes. Themes from all sources of information were then sorted into categories. As proposed by Weiss (1994) sorting is another distinct analytic process involved in analyzing interview material. Coding supplies the materials for sorting and integrating data; however, sorting may also lead to additional coding. With the advancement of computers and word-processing programs (Weiss, 1994), I was able to cut and paste material from my typed transcription to support themes presented in my report.

Once triangulation, coding, and sorting of data were complete, participants were invited to a second focus group interview. Results were shared with dropouts to determine accurateness of data analysis. Necessary changes were made according to recommendations from dropouts.
CHAPTER IV

Results of Data Analysis

The purpose for this case study was to add to the body of knowledge already available in the literature to promote effective dropout prevention efforts to help educators meet the mandate of NCLB to increase graduation rates to 90% by 2010. According to Gates, there is an urgent need for new knowledge, based on feedback from dropouts themselves, as their voice has typically been ignored and dismissed in the literature pertaining to the silent epidemic. In order to effectively add to our knowledge to truly understand the dropout problem in our public schools, it is vital to go directly to the source currently impacted by the problem to research a cure to the devastating dropout disease. In this chapter, data obtained from 12 adult dropouts attending an urban dropout recovery program in a large urban area, henceforth referred to as African American Academy, will be presented.

Though the Gates study was eye opening as it alerted society to the dangers of the silent epidemic by seeking feedback from dropouts to understand reasons students quit school and their recommendations of interventions to encourage students to stay in school, it had two limitations. First of all, the researchers in the Gates study did not seek feedback from participants to understand strategies utilized by a specific urban recovery program. The 467 participants represented 25 different areas of the United States consisting of suburban areas, large cities, and small towns. As a result, there was no model of an effective dropout recovery program for urban educators to consider when attempting to design programs to decrease dropout rates. Moreover, the Gates’ study did not provide a thick rich description of who dropouts were. The researchers disclosed that
the participants were from various ethnic and racial groups who dropped out of school. Specifically, there was no investigation of their social/emotional status and its impact on their decisions to quit school.

Because I am a licensed school psychologist who has frequently observed students with emotional disturbances quit school, I desired to delve further into an exploration of dropouts’ social/emotional status to determine if they posit mental health concerns as reasons they quit school. As such, the following section will report findings based on feedback from 12 urban dropouts to investigate (a) reasons urban students leave public schools, (b) recommendations of strategies utilized by a specific urban recovery programs, (c) social emotional concerns of dropouts, and (d) the impact of social emotional concerns on their decisions to leave school. As described in the methodology, data were coded and sorted from focus group interviews and “letters to the superintendent” to understand reasons these 12 dropouts quit school prior to obtaining their high school diplomas. Although participants disclosed several reasons they quit school, the majority expressed that they left their public schools because their classes were too crowded.

*Environmental Factors*

For example, Peter stated that he “…left school due to a clustered environment and more than enough needed students in one classroom;” and Breann voiced, “there were a lot of distractions and the teacher couldn’t teach the way she wanted to and the way I needed her to.” In other words, Peter and Breann believed that their public school teachers had too many students on their caseloads which inhibited them from effectively attending to the individual needs of their students. Breann’s comment that the teacher
“couldn’t teach the way she needed her to” confirms her uneasiness with failing to obtain the personalized support she desired. Correspondingly, Justin expressed that he quit school because “…you have all them students and you go through eight periods of all them students.” His statement conveyed his discomfort with having to be around large groups of students throughout the entire school day. Moreover, he said, “that’s why I think they get frustrated after all them periods going with all them students.” This declaration implied his dissatisfaction with the high caseloads that caused his teachers to become burned-out and stressed from having to teach so many students for eight periods a day. In contrast to these students’ comments that emphasized distress from an excess of students in their classes, two female participants implied that the classrooms were “crowded” because the physical space in which the classes were held was small and filled to overcapacity.

For instance, Breann reported that “the classroom sizes were twice as big as they are here [the charter school].” She implied that the physical size of the charter school classrooms were more spacious than her public school classrooms. The lack of space in her public school caused her to feel cramped. Similarly, Lanoke stated that there was a “… big classroom setting in little classrooms.” Her reflection indicated her dissatisfaction with receiving instruction in a small classroom packed with students. Thus, these participants suggested that they left school because there were too many students and the classrooms were filled to capacity. Some of them focused on the quantity of students per class whereas others emphasized the physical structure and capacity of the classrooms. Nonetheless, these five dropouts indicated that they left school due to environmental concerns in their former public schools.
Additionally, three male students added that they left school due to safety/security issues and negative peer pressure from other students. To begin, Peter revealed that some students quit school because they were “scared of the environment.” He described that he was fearful in his public school because many students brought the “hood” into the school. In other words, Peter expressed concern that there were gang members in his public school. Justin confirmed this problem when he stated that he quit school because “it was too many gun shootings and you know people was starting to act crazy and then the riots came so you know it just started getting all bad after that …” He further disclosed that his peers tried to fight with him, get him to smoke weed, and influenced him to change his behavior. He stated, “…in big groups….you show your ass off and try to get up there… but you really changing your personality when you in front of all them people…” Even worse, Nathaniel alleged that his peers enticed him to break the law and get convicted for criminal activity. He testified, “…it was too many students… I caught felonies and everything in school and it was too many people around me….I didn’t stay in class always skipping…”

In essence, these three adult males described their public school environment as having too many peers to negatively influence their ability to reach their full potential in school. It was the researcher’s perception from conducting group counseling sessions with high school males to improve coping and social skills, that these male students lacked appropriate skills to face peer pressure in their public schools. Thus, they failed to focus on their school work because they chose to follow their peers. For example, Peter mentioned, “…so its either you get with it [focus on graduating from high school] or get lost [follow peers from the hood]” Likewise, Justin stated “…you have to really pick out
your main [analyze the purpose for school] and focus on your own group…is you the popular person or you the dope head or you the drug dealer.” In other words, Peter and Justin expressed to the researcher that they made a conscious decision to establish a goal to graduate from school rather than worrying about trying to fit in with their peers whom they perceived to be more interested in fighting and drug dealing.

Retention factors

Another reason these students indicated that they quit school is because they were unable to meet the demands of the regular education curriculum. For instance, Theresa reported, “it seems like a lot of kids drop out because their grades are too bad to even graduate.” Equally, Nathaniel stated, “I reason I left public schools is because I wasn’t making good grades;” and Vance commented, “…I was too far behind.” As a result of making poor grades and failing to keep up with the regular education curriculum, these students indicated that they failed their classes and needed to repeat them in order to advance to the next grade. Yet, one student described that she did not understand that the classes she did not pass during her freshman year would follow to her sophomore year. She mentioned, “I didn’t realize that…. if you don’t pass a class you got to take that class with you the next year and you got to pass it on your own time. Well, that sets somebody up to fail.” Another student expressed that she did not comprehend that she would not be able to participate in high-stakes testing because she failed a class during her freshman year. Breann stated, “I didn’t pass one of my classes in the 9th grade so I wasn’t able to take the OGT on time to graduate with my class.” Hence, in addition to juggling freshman and sophomore courses, participants who failed their 9th grade classes in their public schools were denied access to take the OGT. Consequently, this could
further exacerbate their feelings of discouragement and personal failure, further fueling their decisions to quit school.”

**Online Credit Recovery Programs**

Although most of the participants in this study voiced that they attempted to recover credits through their public school’s credit recovery program, many of them articulated disappointment that their school only offered an online credit recovery program. One student in particular stated that she did not desire to take recovery courses on a computer. Lanoke said, “I’m not a computer person… I’m not computer focused. I can’t do classes on a computer.” Even worse, students expressed displeasure that the program was only offered after school. This design was especially challenging for them because of their work and family obligations. For an illustration, Amy revealed, “well… in… high school to get a little bit more help, you have to go to after school programs but maybe some people can’t. Then, what happens?” Theresa added, “You have to make it up on a computer after school … and you’re there until 5:00…and you go home you have to work and you’re tired its just too much for a lot of people.” Justin added, “Some of the people…got things to do like kids got babies or you know you got to take care of the moms before you got to go, or your grandmothers.” Similarly, Lanoke said “… I’m juggling two jobs… my first job is from like six in the morning ‘til like ten and I go to my other job after that… you just can’t do it... and you could be taking care of family.”

It was remarkable that two of these students declared that they tried to recover credits at other charter schools before they enrolled in African American Academy (e.g., Virtual School, Life Skills) but, these programs also employed an online curriculum. Vance mentioned, “…I left to go to Virtual and then I figured it wasn’t a good program
so I came here…. I didn’t know Virtual was on a computer.” As well, Lanoke said, “Life Skills wasn’t for me at all… I would rather just do a class in a class setting…” She clarified that she preferred this option because “…it’s an actual school.” Her choice of words (actual school) indicated that she did not perceive online charter schools to be “real” schools. Further probing of her comment revealed that she formed this opinion after she observed one of her friends complete several online courses only to find out that all the work was lost and there was no teacher to account for completion of all the assignments. For this reason, she only wanted to attend an “actual school” with an “actual teacher” who could confirm she turned in her work.

**Graduation Policies**

As well, participants reported that they quit school due to stringent graduation policies that required them to take electives or a foreign language. They perceived these obligations to be unnecessary and inconvenient for adult students. For an illustration, Justin commented, “so, they graduation policies they need to change too. They need to take out second language…why you need to learn a second language…I don’t really care about learning Spanish or French.” Still, Peter disclosed, “I mean they told me I couldn’t graduate because I didn’t have a high school gym credit.” Peter and Justin expressed that they did not believe that an adult student should be denied the opportunity to graduate just because they lacked a Spanish or physical education credit. Similarly, Peter voiced unhappiness with his public school’s disciplinary policies which he perceived pushed him out of school. He indicated, “well I didn’t leave I got kicked out….when I went to school I was out of school more than I was in it… I just got suspended every other day…just getting suspended for little stuff.” Leland agreed, “I left public schools because I was
getting in a lot of trouble.” These reasons indicated to the researcher that these two males believed they were forced out of school by possible zero tolerance policies they believed should be changed.

**Uncaring Teachers**

Besides concerns with environmental factors, retention factors, online credit recovery programs, and graduation policies, a significant number of these urban dropouts cited that they left their public schools because of uncaring teachers. They reported that their teachers were unhelpful, burned-out, disrespectful, and neglectful. To begin, Vance mentioned, “the teachers… wouldn’t be willing to let me make catch up and get all my other work… I was too far behind and no one was trying to help me get back on track.” The same, Justin said, “my last school had no good teaching skills….teachers cared more about themselves than they jobs…You think one of them teachers ain’t gonna get frustrated tired and … just want to snap … and you didn’t do nothing to them?” Still, Peter disclosed, “…my teacher act like my probation officer…just the way they talk to me. …they bring they personal problems to school… I had a teacher… and they feet would be on the table listening to their ipod.” Lastly, Theresa said:

Yeah a lot of the teachers can be really disrespectful towards you like if they don’t see you going places in life then they just won’t put any effort into it. I’ve had teachers say things to me and to even other teachers about me. Like this one teacher freshman year told me that I would never be able to hold down a job and I would never graduate high school. I would never go to college because I would always be late.
In the same way, Lanoke commented:

I think that teachers need to take some type of classes like respect classes or understanding their students classes or something like that…one of my favorite teachers, he went a took a hip hop class…he was a white man married, didn’t have no kids so he decided to go take a hip hop class to help him understand his students…I respected him for that because he was just trying to get a better understanding and a better relationship with his students

Quintessentially, these participants expressed that their teachers displayed low expectations for their learning and failed to establish close relationships with them. They implied to the researcher that their teachers didn’t understand them and demonstrated the “soft bigotry of low expectations” and “self-fulfilling prophecies” that they were incapable of learning.

Another area of exploration was if these dropouts’ believed that students who quit school have been convicted for any criminal activity. Because I personally witnessed a student in my middle school class drop out of school because he went to a juvenile detention center and never returned to school, I was interested in their opinions regarding this matter. Despite the fact that five of these 12 participants believed there was a correlation between dropping out of school and being a convicted felon, none of them viewed it as a reason students quit school. For an illustration, Lanoke said, “It’s not always about having a felony….It’s not always about getting your record or stuff like that.” Equally, Nathaniel reported, “I’m still in school and I’m a convicted felon;” and Vance said, “I got a felony three so don’t feel bad.” Moreover, Peter commented, “I don’t
think everybody that drop out is a criminal… I think some people just have problems. Some people…can’t even stand they own parents. They just don’t like people... its just some people just can’t take… the environment.”

Likewise, Theresa added, “I know a lot of other people who dropped out because of their own personal issues and that has nothing to do with whether… they went to jail or if they got if they’re a convicted felon…”

When analyzing their responses to this question, it became evident that two students’ believed being convicted for criminal activity might have less of an impact upon students’ decisions to quit school than experiencing emotional difficulties. I was truly amazed by these last two statements because they supported my view that students may be quitting school due to social/emotional problems. Moreover, five students eluded to psychological issues that led students to leave school.

*Psychological Factors*

For instance, Lanoke said, “people get bored… sitting in the classroom for hours... I know… a couple girls…and they either be …having sex inside of buildings or giving oral sex…you get a reputation…so people just decide to leave.” Likewise, Jackie expressed, “one of the reasons why I left my public school is because…I was involved in a fight my second week of senior year and ... I wasn’t going to let the childish girls… be the reason I don’t graduate.” Finally, Nathaniel said, “The reason why I left public schools is because… I couldn’t stay focused because all of the stuff that was going on. I like to talk to other kids and walk the hallways.”
Furthermore, two dropouts disclosed to the researcher that they quit school because they were diagnosed with a bipolar disorder and had difficulty coping in the school environment. For example, Amy said:

I left school because I had a lot of health issues, mainly mental one with me being bipolar. I missed a lot of school because I was in and out of the hospital. I was always suspended for fighting or cussing out teachers.

Then I had my son who is my world and that’s when I said to myself that I need to get myself together for him and myself.

Moreover, Theresa stated:

I got bored and started to skip class...I dropped out because of my own personal issues... I am bipolar...I was sick a lot so I missed more than a few days of school...the lack of counseling did not help. Lastly, in December of my senior year, I was raped. Due to all of the above reasons, I saw no point in continuing my education.

These findings were especially fascinating because I did not anticipate that students would freely disclose their social/emotional concerns during interviews. I only intended to utilize BASC-2 self-reports to investigate if dropouts revealed emotional problems that led them to quit school. I believed this form of inquiry to be less directive and in alignment with my intention according to the Human Subject Review Board guidelines to avoid delving into sensitive subject matter during interviews. Therefore, I intentionally omitted questions pertaining to emotional problems in the list of research questions to guide the taped focus group interview in phase two of the study. The fact that dropouts provided insight into their behavioral and emotional disturbances without
any solicitation further supported my deduction that students are likely leaving school due to experiencing significant social/emotional problems. I was very shocked that two respondents disclosed diagnoses of bipolar disorder as I advised all participants during the introduction of the study to avoid discussing information of a sensitive subject matter. I was also surprised that they openly shared this diagnosis as students with this disorder are frequently classified with an emotional disturbance in the public school setting. It is my opinion that some school personnel perceive this classification to be very stigmatizing to students and advocate for them to be classified with another label such as an Other Health Impairment to prevent them from having difficulty obtaining acceptance to college, the military, or other post-secondary programs that might gain access to their school records.

As presented in the methodology, this case study utilized phenomenological inquiry to obtain feedback from dropouts to understand the silent epidemic. Specifically, this study added to the literature by presenting dropouts’ perceptions of potential personality and behavioral concerns as well as emotional disturbance. It measured if dropouts perceived themselves to exhibit clinically significant or at-risk levels of emotional difficulties; and if they perceived themselves to experience critical areas of concern. Because neither the Gates study nor studies presented in the literature review examined the collective voices of dropouts to delve into their social/emotional status, I decided to administer BASC-2 questionnaires to understand who dropouts were. By completing BASC-2 self-reports, dropouts disclosed additional insight into reasons they quit school in addition to recommendations to motivate youth to remain in school. Accordingly, this next section will provide results from BASC-2 self reports completed
by the nine participants who completed phase one of the study. This standardized behavioral questionnaire explored if dropouts disclosed psychological problems in comparison to same age peers. In keeping with the objective to amplify the voice of dropouts themselves, only BASC-2 self-reports were administered to the nine participants.

As shown in Table 1, responses from nine urban dropouts disclosed “clinically significant” levels of attention problems and of feelings of inadequacy. When compared to same age peers, these results indicated that dropouts have difficulty listening when people are talking; paying attention to teachers; and getting things right. They often feel they fail at things and never quite reach their goals. Moreover, these nine dropouts reported “at-risk” levels of relations with parents, social stress, self-esteem, and somatization. These results revealed that they have difficulty getting along well with their parents; feel uncomfortable around their peers; believe they are not good at things; and often experience physical symptoms without a known medical cause. A review of critical items further illustrated that these dropouts feel misunderstood, hate school, and feel sad. Still, many of them revealed that they feel their life is getting worse and worse; feel that they don’t care anymore; believe other kids hate to be with them; and hear voices in their head that no one else can hear. As such, these findings implicated that dropouts exhibit a great deal of pessimistic thoughts, are not very hopeful about their futures, and experience thought disturbance.

To ascertain if dropouts were at-risk for mental health problems, findings from BASC-2 self reports were linked with items from the DSM-IV-TR to suggest possible diagnoses of established psychological disorders. Findings displayed that these nine
dropouts reported items related to a DSM-IV-TR diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder; Generalized Anxiety Disorder; and Major Depressive Disorder/Bipolar Disorder. Their reported levels of depression, anxiety, and attention concerns may warrant concern since current data from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) proposes that in any given year, about 9.5% of adults within the US experience a depressive illness; and approximately 26% of adults endure mental health issues. Mental disorders are a leading cause of disability in the US and about 45% of adults suffer from two or more disorders simultaneously. Accordingly, data indicated that these nine dropouts experienced significant social/emotional difficulties that likely contributed to their decisions to quit school. Moreover, their disclosures of Attention Deficit Disorder, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, and Major Depressive Disorder/Bipolar Disorder were consistent with data obtained in interviews and letters to the superintendent.
Table 1. BASC -2 Self Report Results

**Percent of Dropouts Reporting Clinically Significant Levels of Concern**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subscale</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attention Problems</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Inadequacy</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Percent of Dropouts Reporting At-Risk Levels of Concern**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subscale</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relations With Parents</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Stress</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Esteem</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somatization</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Percent of Dropouts Reporting Critical Items**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subscale</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feels misunderstood</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hates school</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feels sad</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel life is getting worse and worse</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel they don’t care anymore</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believe other kids hate to be with them</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hear voices in their head that no one else can hear</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The values represent percentages of dropouts who disclosed clinically significant, at-risk, and critical social emotional concerns on the Behavior Assessment System for Children, 2nd ed., self-report.
Table 1 (continued). BASC-2 Self Report Results

Percent of Dropouts Reporting DSM-IV-TR Diagnoses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disorder</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generalized anxiety disorder</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major depressive disorder and bipolar disorder</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The values represent percentages of dropouts who disclosed social emotional concerns associated with DSM-IV-TR Diagnoses on the Behavior Assessment System for Children, 2nd ed., self-report.
After concluding the investigation of reasons students quit school, I asked participants to provide their reflections of strategies to improve the schools. In the following section, their perceptions of components of a successful dropout recovery program will be reviewed.

**Smaller Classes**

Most participants indicated that an effective school offers smaller classes with caring teachers. For example Leland expressed, “I chose [African American Academy] because…it’s less students.” Similarly, Vance said, “…a charter school, yeah you like it because the classrooms are smaller and stuff like that.” Still, Peter said, “I think they teachers actually care.” They agreed that smaller classes provided more caring teachers to offer individualized attention to enable them to experience academic success in school. For instance, Marie stated, “the teachers [at African American Academy] provided better individual attention than those of a pubic school. They seemed to care more about my education and future.” In a similar voice, Amy mentioned, “this school really does cares about the student and also it being a small school than the teachers learn more about the student as a person and see what need education wise.” As well, Theresa reported, “I like the small class sizes because every student can get the attention that they need.” Lastly, Vance commented, “…it means more one-on-one help.”

**Individualized Assistance**

Two students also mentioned that they received individualized assistance to prepare for their post-secondary education. For instance, Peter commented, “Oh yes they did help me out….they put me through this little program….then they hooked us up with automotive technology classes.” Justin confirmed Peter’s statement and said, “yeah, they
helped us out … they actually put us in college….if I had never came here I wouldn’t have even thought about college. … they gave me opportunity that’s why I’m in college… and taking more classes.”

An analysis of these students’ comments indicated that a successful recovery program offers individualized assistance to help students pass classes and prepare students for their future. I was amazed by comments from two participants that endorsed my own viewpoint as a school psychologist. As a multi-racial female school psychologist who has worked in various school districts in Ohio and Texas, I have personally observed the mistreatment of many African American students in public schools. I have observed teachers deny them access into the classroom by putting them in the hallway or sending them to the office to sit for hours; or be hand-cuffed by police and taken out of the school prior to having the opportunity to talk to the principal or disciplinary team to explore the nature of the problem. Moreover, I have observed administrators recommend Black males for expulsion for getting into fights whereas, their White peers were granted the opportunity to remain in school. Even worse, I have observed Black boys, under the age of 12, be classified with mental retardation and thrown into self-contained special education classes that provide unchallenging curriculums to adequately prepare them for high-stakes testing.

Because of the aforementioned negative experiences, I serve as an advocate for all children as I adamantly believe that all students can learn. Educators have the ultimate responsibility to teach them the way they learn best and to challenge every student to reach their full potential based on their learning styles. Some students are auditory learners whereas others are visual learners. Some students like online dropout recovery
programs while others prefer a traditional program to obtain their high school diploma. Still, some students have documented learning disabilities or emotional disturbances and require repetition and clarification of information, extended time to process information and complete assignments, and counseling support in school. The researcher was delighted that two students emphasized her personal philosophy.

Lanoke stated:

I think that a successful one [urban recovery program] takes more time and is one on one with the students and tries to understand the exact problem because every student isn’t the same and every person isn’t the same....the successful program would sit there and discuss the problem and try to figure out what they need to work on with that person and then figure out what their agenda is and what their schedule is on to graduating and checking up with that student to making sure that they’re still on that path within a month or two or three. Not saying that they’re supposed to be that student’s person that takes care of them or is looking after them but they’re making sure they’re on the road to graduation

Vance declared:

You getting the same work at a faster pace but they teach them to you at a slower pace because they got time to explain it to the five or ten kids that’s actually in the class… they don’t mind going back over the instructions again instead of just telling you, “Read the directions” and ask if you need any help on certain questions they would fully go back through the whole thing. You getting the same work at a faster pace but they teach them to you at a slower pace because they got time to explain it to the five or ten kids that’s actually in the class.
Flexible Scheduling

Besides smaller class sizes to provide individualized attention to teach students at their own pace, dropouts reported that an effective dropout prevention program implements flexible schedules to accommodate students’ work and family commitments. For an illustration, Leland mentioned “[African American Academy’s] hours is better than going to school for 8 hours.” Equally, Marie reported, “I felt that the charter school would be a faster and easier route for me to go;” and Jackie expressed, “…because of the flexible hours I get in and get out. That is the biggest reason!”

This flexibility allowed students the choice to attend an afternoon session for only three hours a day as Peter revealed, “…they hours 11:00-2:00 was great for me…you got an option.” Even better, the schedule also permitted students to go to school and still have time for work as Theresa added, “I liked the flexibility of the schedule … I had to work… pay my rent … pay my bills and…going to school here, I got out early enough to go to work.”

Students also had opportunities to modify their schedules to attend school one to two days a week as the need arose.

Lanoke stated:

Yeah. You got your options. You handle your business the way that you think that is best for you…I worked it out with [the school counselor] where I only have to come here like one or two days…out of the week and check with my teachers and see what I got to do…because the students here are the type of students that just want to go ahead and get it done and over with… get their OGTs done and leave
They believed that an effective school utilizes credit flexibility alternatives to enable students to graduate quicker. Two of them really liked the option to take a mastery test rather than the actual course because they felt they already knew the course material and didn’t need to sit through an entire year long course. For instance, Peter said, “…we get to take our mastery test…. but the teachers that I had, they told me I could just take my mastery tests and I graduated quick so I was happy about that… you got an option.” Equally, Theresa expressed, “I like the mastery test because like I said earlier… I knew the material so I just took the mastery test and I was done with it, so I liked that.

Furthermore, two dropouts indicated that successful recovery programs allow students to graduate without taking electives. For instance, Marie said, “I liked the fact that charter schools do not require you to do all of that extra stuff such as gym and health only the necessary things;” and Amy mentioned, “them focusing on academics only really helped me. I didn’t have to worry about gym and art to go on to the next level.”

On another note, three participants were happy that they could take the OGT and regain their freshman and sophomore credits if they passed all areas of the graduation test. For example, Marie said, “I like the way things are done to help you pass the OGT test.” Next, Breann mentioned, “in [my public school]…I couldn’t make them up in time so that I could graduate with my class. Once I got to [African American Academy] I was able to take it even though I was behind.” Furthermore, Vance said, “…if you do wind up passing the OGT test then you still got all your credits for that class from basically tenth grade on down. Then you can start working on your other credits that you need to graduate.”
Role and Relationship of Administrator

Last of all, three participants cited that a successful recovery program provides a supportive administrator who knows how to effectively relate to adult dropouts and design a comfortable and nurturing environment. Even though they mentioned that their former administrator, [Dr. Gause] was assigned to another school, they shared that they really liked his leadership qualities and desired for him to return to the African American Academy. They emphasized three primary characteristics of his leadership that they liked. First and foremost, these three participants revealed that he respected them. For an illustration, Lanoke mentioned, “…he didn’t talk down to us because he knew most of us were …18 or older. He respected us... Secondly, he established a supportive and nurturing environment that enabled students to express their feelings. For example, Lanoke commented, “he tried to help us make our decisions…. make this a comfortable environment.” Likewise, Peter stated, “he would sit down and talk to you and let you state your opinion… if you do something he wouldn’t just click the draw and kick you out, he gave you the chance.” Thirdly, understood and trusted his students. For instance, Peter reported:

I mean [Dr. Gause] used to tell us to go on smoke breaks….he used to see we was stressed out he be like go hit your cigarette right quick just make sure you come back. He used to let us walk to the store. [Dr. Gause] knew the kind of kids he had. He knew some kids were trouble makers; some kids was just seeking support and attention

Dr. Gause seemed to have close relationships with his students and knew when they needed a “time-out.” He didn’t reprimand them for smoking a cigarette or leaving the
premises because he emphasized their adulthood. As a final point, he rewarded them with incentives, field trips, and special “fun days” when they displayed good attendance. For instance, Lanoke declared, “he used to give us gift certificates. I remember like if you were here like the whole week for the OGT or something… he would give you a gift certificate. Peter supported Lanoke’s view and stated, “…he used to give us money for coming to school. I remember I got $50 one time for Kroger’s… we went on more field trips than I ever did…. They had that bouncy thing back there…” Likewise, Nathaniel reported, “we went to Cedar Point… Yeah. I like that they did… fun day… they cooked out… they had basketball… they had a whole bunch of little stuff with a boxing ring with some big old gloves…” It is my impression that these participants were basically disclosing that they had a close relationship and connection with the administrator. It appeared that they worked up to their fullest potential with him because they knew that he believed in them and had high expectations for them to graduate.

Though all of the participants in this study cited reasons they liked the dropout recovery program, three of them mentioned that they regretted losing their privileges to attend their public school’s extra curricular programs. For example, Vance commented: “Only reason why I regret it is because…. if they could work charter schools into your original high school, like so you can still go to prom and play sports and all that…” Similarly, Justin said, “…I’m kind of mad I didn’t have like what I had like prom and stuff like that but, when I came here I’m really getting my stuff done instead of worrying about people.” Still Lanoke commented:

I wish I would have did stuff a little bit different, because whereas a charter school, yeah you like it because the classrooms are smaller and stuff like that but,
at the same time, you don’t have a basketball team, a football team, you know homecoming, your prom, you know what I’m saying your prom was like all important to a lot of people for high school and you know you got to come to a charter school that’s a consequence that you have to face or you have to deal with….They shouldn’t have to put up with all the consequences but…

Above and beyond these students’ regrets, I would like to present another development that arose in the study. Because the objective was to hear the voice of dropouts to understand their essences and experiences, one student, Lanoke took it upon herself to discuss aspects of the program she believed to be ineffectual. By providing an opportunity for voice and listening to participants, Lanoke elicited students who attended phase two of the study into a discussion that would not likely have occurred if she not been there. Because of the intention to establish a safe atmosphere for students to speak whatever they desired to share, the researcher learned that these dropouts were disgruntled by some recent changes that have taken place since the former administrator, Dr. Gause, has left the school. Lanoke angrily exclaimed her dissatisfaction with the first change immediately after Peter mentioned that the midday session from 11:00 to 2:00 worked great for him to help him obtain his diploma. She interrupted Peter and stated, “it’s not even 11:00-2:00 no more….the hours is 8:00-11:00 now….It was a morning and afternoon session…it used to be.”

When Peter heard her comment, he quickly rebutted, “I don’t care…I don’t go here no more.” Their verbal exchange suggested that they were becoming upset with each other. However, to my amazement, Peter and Lanoke seemed to realize the tension and employed a psychological defense mechanism to project their “anger” onto the
administration of the program rather than each other. The researcher established this opinion when Peter responded, “that’s cuz they done got wack man;” and Lanoke agreed, “they done got stupid now especially since [Dr. Gause] done left.” Peter and Lanoke thus attacked the “administration” by calling it “wack” and “stupid.” What was more intriguing, after this dialogue, Lanoke later disclosed her opinion regarding the implications of this change upon students currently enrolled in the dropout recovery program. She asserted:

With schools like this now they falling into a commercial state because they are trying to be I say they’re trying to be commercial, they’re trying to get more students for more money and its, the classrooms are becoming crowded like before like I was saying…. So amongst bringing more people into the equation you’re bringing both sessions together too. So, that brings on just like…you know just like [the public school] setting and that’s what causes people to drop out.

Peter once again supported Lanoke’s view and stated, “I like that they didn’t used to be commercial like they used to care what people used to be like…” Accordingly, Vance joined the “team” and disclosed, “I don’t think it should be like, like they turning it into an urban public now…. Cuz now you got like fifteen… twenty people in a class and then like somebody start clowning and the whole class clowning.”

In essence, Lanoke encouraged Peter and Vance to express their true feelings regarding the adoption and implementation of the administration’s recommendation to remove the afternoon session. These three participants thus warn that the classes are now becoming too crowded. As a result, this change offers significant implications to leaders of recovery programs since participants in this study indicated that crowded classes were
one of the primary reasons they left their public schools. They were concerned that students will drop out of the recovery program if the classes continue to become crowded. To address the concern, Lanoke and Vance recommend that the administration open more schools and focus on the needs of the students rather than “making money.” For instance, Lanoke said, “…they need to get more locations if that’s what they want to do….their thing right now like is money and it’s not focused on the students and it’s evident to the students because we’re not dumb…” Too, Vance reported, “I think they should just have like different buildings like Focus….Focus got like eight different schools….that’s how they should do this school.”

Turning now to the next issue, Lanoke and Peter complained that the new administration is deemphasizing their adulthood. They indicated that the current administration denies their freedom to take breaks or leave the premises. For instance, Peter reported, “we used to get smoke breaks;” and Lanoke stated, “…we used to be able to go outside and smoke when we wanted to, now we get hassled for it and we can get…expelled or suspended for smoking right here…” They revealed that if students leave, they are told, “don’t come back.” Moreover, they revealed that the current administration is contacting their parents to report school related concerns. For example, Lanoke stated, “and the teacher’s be calling your parents like you really have a guardian and like most of these kids don’t have kids;” and Peter commented, “yeah like you calling a parent of another parent…like I’m a parent and you calling my parent?” Still, Lanoke expressed her frustration with the security cameras. She reported, “yeah, I don’t like the cameras…that big old monitor…you can see a whole bunch of places…what I do in the building is your business, but when I leave, it really ain’t your business.” After hearing this, another
student, Theresa, appeared empowered to express her true feeling about the security system. She angrily stated:

She’s exactly right! I’m an adult. I’m 18 years old. I’m supporting myself so I can pay my bills, why are you watching me all the time? Why do you feel the need to treat me like a four year old and keep me on camera every time I’m here like the entire time I’m here?

This comment from Theresa was most shocking as up to this point, she had been the most soft-spoken person in the interview and only provided responses that displayed positive qualities about the program. Nevertheless her voice stood out loud and strong as Lanoke enticed her to share a negative aspect of the program.

In conclusion, Lanoke disclosed one more problem with the dropout recovery program. She reported dissatisfaction with the current teachers. She declared:

What I don’t like about [African American Academy’s] teachers, is um… they’re very inexperienced…their teaching methods are…they suck…yeah especially you need to see the new teachers….actually, they’re firing some of them….but, they’re very inexperienced and they are you know they’re fresh out of school, it’s like their first job….so, hell they might as well know just as much as me….I been to school long as them so it’s like you know I think that they should have a better selection of teachers.

Once again this comment offered a significant implication to leaders as the participants in this study indicated that another primary reason they left their public school is because of uncaring teachers.
Conclusion

In summary, results from “letters to the superintendent,” BASC-2 questionnaires, and transcribed audio tapes, revealed that these 12 urban dropouts left school prior to obtaining their high school diploma due to (a) environmental factors (e.g., too many students, crowded classrooms); (b) academic factors (e.g., retention, online credit recovery courses); (c) educational policies (e.g., graduation policies, elective requirements); (d) psychological factors, (e.g., social problems, mental health concerns); and (e) sociological factors (e.g., uncaring teachers, family issues) factors. They disclosed that an effective dropout recovery program offers (a) smaller with caring teachers; (b) more individualized attention; (c) greater flexibility to recover credits; (d) supportive administration; (e) work-study training; and (f) and external rewards. Some of them regretted leaving their public schools; however, they implied to the researcher that they would still choose the charter school over their public school to have smaller classes.

Because I aimed to design a study to hear students’ polyphonic voices, I was challenged by one participants’ influence that took the interview in an entirely different direction than intended. This participant empowered students to establish a strong team concept as they collectively shared their voices to also share ineffective aspects of the program. Though I was initially challenged by this “chaotic experience,” to hear students describe their displeasure with some recent changes that have been implemented, I realized that “order” emerged and brought forth new knowledge to explore a cure to the silent epidemic. This new knowledge indicated that ineffective recovery programs fail to (a) provide flexible schedules to students, (b) emphasize their adult status, and (c) provide experienced teachers. Consequently, these “negative” features provided valuable
insight to redesign urban recovery programs to make them even better to encourage more students to obtain their diploma.
CHAPTER V

Summary

Introduction

A recent study commissioned by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation warned that our nation is in the midst of a silent epidemic – the dropout problem in America’s public high schools (Bridgeland, Dululio, & Morrison, 2006). The Gates study proposed a medical analogy to describe the devastating impact of this issue and introduced a new advocacy lens based on arguments proposed by critical theorists, Lacan, Marx/Freud, and Gates (as cited in Sim & Van Loon, 2005) to frame the silent epidemic. This new advocacy lens accentuated urgency for political and educational leaders to hear the authentic voices of dropouts themselves to explore a panacea for this national disease. Though Gates asserted that dropouts are the key source to cure the silent epidemic, critical theory implies the adverse impact of unconscious and conscious drives of classism and racism that contribute to complacency to grasp the devastating implications of this disease. Because I have personally witnessed the departure of many students, especially African American males, from their assigned public school prior to obtaining their high school diploma, I felt personally convicted to do my part as an educational leader to solve this problem.

Hence, I willingly acknowledged the upsetting reality of this problem and accepted Gates’ challenge to design a study to hear the voice of 12 urban dropouts who left their assigned public school to attend an urban dropout recovery program. Like Gates, I utilized a qualitative research methodology with phenomenological inquiry for data collection to seek their view pertaining to five primary research questions to explore
cure to the *silent epidemic*. I relied solely upon their feedback to analyze perceptions of individual, institutional, and racial/cultural factors they believed contributed to their decisions to quit school. Then, I investigated their recommendations of strategies and interventions employed by effective dropout recovery programs. As a result, this final chapter will present my analysis of data garnered from the five proposed research questions, implications of this analysis for leaders; and recommendations for future research.

*Question 1: What are the factors that cause urban students to drop out of school?*

As proposed by researchers Finn et al. (2005), Roderick (1993), and Stearns and Glennie (2006) these dropouts indicated to me that they did not make a spur-of-the-moment decision to leave their public school. Rather, they described a distinctive blueprint that pushed or pulled them out of school (Stearns & Glennie, 2006). The process to dropping out of their public schools began with having too many crowded classes with an excess of students. This surplus of students inhibited their ability to focus and remain task oriented in class because they were too easily distracted and negatively influenced by their peers. They lacked an appropriate locus of control to display appropriate social and coping skills and were enticed to skip classes, use drugs, and got in trouble with the law as a result of being around so many students eight hours a day. Next, these dropouts reported that their teachers were uncaring and often disrespectful towards them. They implied to me that their teachers were burned-out and displayed high levels of stress due to having to teach so many students eight periods per day. They were disrespectful, talked down to them, and displayed low expectations for them to learn.
They also failed to provide individualized assistance or work to establish close relationships with them.

As these participants disclosed so many complaints about their teachers, I formed an impression that they felt their teachers let them down. They held their teachers in high regard and set very high expectations for them to help them learn. I perceived students established these lofty expectations because they expressed having such poor relationships with their parents and caregivers. In contrast to their parents who failed to provide support they needed at home, they seemed unable to tolerate their teachers who provided limited academic support because their teachers were getting a paycheck to teach them. They perceived their teachers to be responsible for their learning; not their parents. Consequently, when their teachers failed to live up to their expectations, they left to seek an alternative educational environment that provided more caring teachers. This view is commensurate with findings of researchers Blum (2005); and Clark, Shreve, and Stone (2005) who reported a correlation between poor teacher/student relationships poor student academic success. Though Blum and Clark et al. did not analyze strategies to decrease dropout rates in particular, they suggested that students display greater academic and social outcomes when they had closer connections with at least one caring adult.

The next item on their blueprint to dropping out included failing their classes. Students indicated that the overabundance of students and uncaring teachers inhibited their ability to receive individualized assistance to pass their classes. As a result, they lacked sufficient credits to advance to the next grade level. Many of them revealed that they had to repeat their freshman year and take credit recovery courses. This was extremely problematic for one participant who informed me that she was also denied
access to take the OGT. Hence, she was retained in her current grade which is consistent with findings of researchers (Finn et al., 2005; Neild & Balfanz 2001; Patterson, Beltyukova, & Berman, 2007; Roderick, 1993; Rumberger 1995; Wolf 1978) who proposed individual factors such as sub average academic achievement, retention, and the “freshman bulge” that hindered students from graduating from school. Moreover, these dropouts mentioned various family and work obligations that led them to quit school. They had to juggle jobs and care for babies, mothers, or grandmothers which further exacerbated their ability to pass their classes. Many of them exclaimed that they could not arrive to school by 8:00 am or stay after school until 5:00 pm because of their work schedules. Thus, they fell behind in their classes and could not find the time to make them up. These findings were consistent with Entwisle et al. (2005) who cited individual employment and family factors that forced students out of school.

As a final point, their blueprint to dropping out included an elevated level of social emotional problems and mental health concerns. Throughout both interview phases, students unveiled many psychological problems that led to their decisions to quit school. I was intrigued by their disclosures of emotional difficulties since neither Gates, nor the other researchers mentioned in the literature review drew attention to social emotional concerns impacting dropouts’ decisions to leave school. Moreover, none administered a standardized behavioral questionnaire to analyze dropouts’ emotional difficulties in comparison to their same age peers. Since I perceived this information to be lacking in the research, I administered a BASC-2 self report to all participants who attended the first phase of the study. Nine participants attended the first phase and results indicated that these nine participants revealed problems characteristic of DSM-IV-TR
diagnoses of (a) Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, (b) Generalized Anxiety Disorder, (c) Major Depressive Disorder, and (d) Bipolar Disorder. A review of all data further revealed that they hate school, feel misunderstood, possess a low self-esteem, feel hopeless, and have poor relationships with their parents.

Above and beyond these standardized findings, analyses of letters to the superintendent and the taped focus group interview disclosed that they lacked appropriate social and coping skills. For an illustration, many of them reported problems pertaining to teen pregnancy, raping, fighting with peers and teachers, skipping classes, using/selling drugs, and failing to follow school rules. Two male dropouts revealed to me that they were convicted felons and two female dropouts shared with me that they had bipolar disorder. They expressed such elevated levels of emotional problems; I deduced that they were not under the care of a mental health professional or physician to receive needed medical intervention. Because I promised in my Human Subject Review Board application that I would not delve into sensitive subject matter of participants’ lives, I refrained from querying their responses to determine if they were using medication or receiving therapy.

I must admit that these 12 students were a tough group as I was challenged throughout both interview phases to keep them on task. Many of them got off task and needed questions clarified or repeated. I noticed that one participant altered his entire demeanor after the tape recording ended. While the tape was rolling, he was overly talkative, fidgety, and often interrupted others who were speaking. However, as soon as I informed them that the focus group was over, he ceased talking and sat still as a mouse. I looked at him with dismay and asked him why he didn’t display that behavior while the
tape recorder was on. He looked at me with confused big brown eyes and provided no response. It appeared to me as if he was not aware of how he was acting.

Although he did not attend phase one of the study to complete the BASC-2 questionnaire, he appeared to display more characteristics of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder than anyone in the group. He was also the only participant that indicated that he was kicked out of school because of his teachers. He mentioned that his teachers were disrespectful and did not allow students the opportunity to express their opinions in school. As I observed his behavior during the focus group interview I envisioned him being subjected to harsh discipline policies in school as he possessed high oral expression skills and probably got in many altercations with teachers. From my experience as a school psychologist who has frequently observed students like him display oppositional behavior in class, I concluded that his behavior likely interfered with his learning in a public school setting. He would have likely benefited from a behavior modification plan consisting of firm clear guidelines, self-monitoring, small group instruction, praise, and incentives to experience success in a regular education classroom setting. Most of all, he would have likely needed a supportive teacher to remain calm and refrain from showing emotion, and provide a comforting environment to enable him to express his concerns.

It was interesting to note that of the 12 dropouts in this study 11 were African American and most complained that they left due to their teachers. Moreover, the only students that complained of being in trouble and kicked out of school were two African American males. These analyses were consistent with recommendations of researchers Brooks-Williams (1987), Stearns and Glennie (2006), and Varlas (2005) that cited
institutional and racial factors such as zero tolerance policies promoting suspensions and expulsions, and discomforting learning environments that often push Black students out of school. It is my opinion that the feedback from these Black males supported Varlas’ and Brooks-Williams’ assertions.

Turning now to an analysis of findings from this study with data reported in the Gates study, participants in the Gates study indicated that they quit school due to (a) boring classes, (b) missing too many days of school, (c) negative influences from peer group, (d) having too much freedom, and (e) failing in school. Though I observed common themes expressed by dropouts in both studies, especially with regard to boring classes, missing school, peer concerns, and failing in school; it was noteworthy that none of the participants in the Gates study mentioned they left school because of uncaring teachers or harsh discipline policies. This was an interesting phenomenon especially since the Gates study reflected views of 467 students representing various racial and ethnic groups. Given a sample size of this magnitude results could be generalized to adequately describe issues pertaining to dropouts. Results from this current study based on feedback from 12 dropouts who were primarily African American could not be generalized to paint a picture of other dropouts. The fact that the Gates study did not provide a breakdown of the specific percentage of Black students, it is unknown if the theme of uncaring and unsupportive teachers was due being African American. It is possible though that this data may support Brooks-Williams’ (1987) and Varlas’ (2005) assertions that Black students do not always perceive their educational environments to be as comforting as their White peers.
Question 2: What interventions are needed to encourage students to stay in school?

Dropouts recommended that their public schools need to be redesigned to provide a supplemental study hall period for regular education students to work with a designated teacher or peer tutor. They desired for the class to be offered daily throughout their 9th – 12th grade school career. I emphasized the term regular because I was truly perplexed by their proposal. I wondered if they realized that students classified with a documented disability typically receive this service per their individualized educational programs (IEPs) to improve their academic success. Even though I have often advocated for a regular education student in process of being considered for special education services be granted the opportunity to work with an intervention specialist to monitor response to interventions, I never imagined recommending this intervention for potential dropouts who failed a class. The fact that dropouts desired an intervention characteristically designed for special education students was quite intriguing and eye opening to me. Many of participants articulated that they often did not know they were failing a class until the end of the school year. Thus, they believed that a daily supplemental period with a certified teacher could not only help them pass their classes but, stay on track to graduate.

Moreover, dropouts advocated for more counseling services to enable them to better cope with personal or school problems. Several female students indicated that they left school due to emotional problems and just needed someone to talk to during the school day. Similarly, many of the male and female participants indicated that they often got in fights and just desired the opportunity to state their opinion or receive peer mediation prior to being suspended from school. As such, counseling support to assist
students with personal problems or peer mediation could likely encourage students with social/emotional concerns to stay in school. During interviews I observed a great deal of inattentiveness, impulsivity, and hyperactivity among dropouts and realized that many of them would likely benefit from behavioral management support in school. Due to the fact that 44% of the nine dropouts that completed the BASC-2 reported “clinically significant” levels of attention problems, which indicated a possible diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, I viewed this recommendation as a “cry for help.”

Next, students desired better teachers to effectively perceive them as adults. It was my perception that they wanted closer relationships with their teachers. They did not imply to me that they believed their teachers were unqualified or lacked literacy skills. To the contrary, they expressed that the teachers were qualified but held low expectations for them to learn. They believed that their teachers sort of wrote them off because they felt they wouldn’t hold a job or accomplish anything in life. This was extremely disheartening for me to hear as 33% of the participants who completed the BASC-2 also disclosed “clinically significant” levels of sense of inadequacy. Moreover, 78% of participants in this study reported that they hate school and 33% indicated experiencing social stress and poor self-esteem in school. A closer analysis of these reports indicated to me that dropouts likely have an “external locus of control” to seek extrinsic rewards and acknowledgement from their teachers to do well in school, rather than an “internal locus of control” to be intrinsically motivated to work up to their full academic potential. In the presence of a teacher who holds little expectation for students to learn, dropouts will
develop a self-fulfilling prophecy to fail because they accept the teacher’s premise that they will not amount to much in life.

As a multi-racial female I felt enraged as I listened to students complain that their teachers wouldn’t help them because so often in American society the news and media depicts Black males as criminals and drug dealers. Yet, the Black males in this study complained that they failed because their teachers wouldn’t help them. Specifically, they expressed that their teachers treated them like they were in prison, and would tell them to just “look in the book and figure it out” when they asked for assistance. To make matters worse, they alleged that their teachers came to school high on heroin and would put their feet on the desk and listened to their ipods when they were supposed to be teaching them! These students perceived that they failed their classes even though they were trying to get help from their teachers.

Likewise, female students complained that their teachers told them that they would never hold a job and excluded them from meetings to alter their schedules. Dropouts desired better communication with their teachers and to be treated as team members to design graduation plans. Although the male and female students in this study reported problems with their teachers, they were aware of their own weaknesses. One student went as far as to divulge that dropouts are a tough group with unique needs and challenges. He urged for educators to realize the type of children that they have and to work to design interventions to provide the support and attention that they need.

When analyzing findings from this study with data reported in the Gates study, dropouts in the Gates study proposed (a) more opportunities for real-world learning; (b) better teachers who keep classes interesting; (c) smaller classes with more individualized
instruction; (d) enhanced communication between parents and school; (e) greater parental involvement; (f) more parental accountability to make sure their kids go to school everyday; (g) increased supervision at school, and (h) better tracking of daily class attendance as interventions to encourage youth to remain in school. Even though I observed that both groups of dropouts desired smaller classes with more individualized instruction and better teachers, it was remarkable that participants in the Gates study only expressed a need for their teachers to keep classes more interesting. This implied that the 467 dropouts in the Gates study displayed more positive relationships with their teachers than the students in the charter school in this study.

Moreover, another inconsistency was noted regarding the need for more parental involvement and support. Dropouts in this current study did not recommend a need for more parental involvement or better communication between their parents and the school. This is likely because BASC-2 self-reports showed that 67% of dropouts reported “at-risk” levels of relations with parents; and 78% of dropouts feel misunderstood and hate school. Therefore, if they hate school and have poor relations with their parents, it made sense that they did not propose a desire for improved communication between their parents and the school. To the contrary, dropouts in the focus group expressed to me that they were upset that the current administration of the recovery program instituted a change to contact parents to report daily absences and other school related issues. They felt it was totally ridiculous that the administration had secretaries attempt to contact their parents because most of them reported that they were supporting themselves and had children of their own. The extreme discrepancies cited by the two groups of participants
implied to me that the dropouts in the Gates study likely had more favorable relationships with their parents than dropouts in the current study.

Question 3: What does an effective urban dropout prevention program look like?

As I analyzed feedback from participants regarding their perceptions of effectual urban recovery programs, I was reminded of Fine’s (1991) assertion that America’s public school system has historically been unsuccessful in educating minority and low income students. Responses from these 12 participants supported this recommendation as 100% of them revealed significant histories for academic and behavioral difficulties that led them to quit school. Data from interviews and standardized reports indicated that these students had very negative school experiences and desired an alternative educational design to obtain their high school diploma. For example, BASC-2 reports showed that these students hate school, feel misunderstood, and feel other kids hate to be with them. These critical items signified that they failed to adjust to their school environment and establish favorable relationships with their peers and teachers.

Likewise, BASC-2 self reports illustrated that they feel sad, believe their life is getting worse and worse, and feel they don’t care anymore. These critical items revealed that they felt hopeless and believed they could not accomplish their goals. In addition to themes obtained from the questionnaires, dropouts indicated that they were bored at school and no longer desired to sit in crowded classrooms for eight hours a day. They especially expressed dissatisfaction with having to participate in high-stakes testing and take electives such as French, music, or physical education. It is interesting to note that even though these students indicated that they regretted leaving their public schools, none of them expressed a desire to return to their public school. Many of them expressed that
the urban recovery program was their last option as they failed in their other efforts to obtain their diploma.

In essence these dropouts indicated that an effective urban recovery program provides three main qualities. First and foremost, successful programs offer smaller classes with caring teachers to provide more attention to students. The attention they desired included not only individualized assistance to pass their classes, but also support to help them design graduation plans, receive vocational opportunities, complete the process to apply to college. Next, effectual programs provide flexible schedules to alter the traditional school day. According to Entwisle, et al., (2005) urban students have many work responsibilities that pull them out of school (Stearns & Glennie, (2006). Many of them expressed to me that they were on their own and had to care for their babies, mothers, and grandmothers prior to coming to school. Several of them also shared that they were unable to come to school by 7:30 in the morning, which is the traditional starting time for most public high schools. They requested an alternative design with a shortened school day and a later start time to enable them to effectively juggle school, work, and family responsibilities.

Similarly, successful schools utilized creative credit flexibility options to help students graduate earlier. Because researchers (Finn et al., 2005; Neild and Balfanz, 2001; Patterson, et al., 2007; Roderick, 1993; Rumberger, 1995) suggested that grade retention was the most single powerful indicator for dropping out of school, adult dropouts require immediate non-traditional unconventional choices to complete graduation requirements. Rather than being 18 years old and stuck in a 9th grade curriculum and denied the opportunity to participate in high-stakes testing due to failure
to pass their freshman classes, students needed speedy alternative designs regain lost credits. By offering mastery courses to test out of required classes and removing requirements to participate in elective courses, students could graduate easier. Furthermore, by allowing access to participate in OGTs without a classification as a sophomore and immediate advancement to “junior” status from passing the exams, students could graduate quicker. From a psychological perspective, these adult students conveyed to me that they felt hopeful as they were finally able to “see the light” at the end of a long boring tunnel.” They stated that they had been in so many schools that they just needed a means to get their diplomas.

Lastly, participants shared that an effective school provides a supportive administrator who emphasizes their adult status. Because BASC-2 reports showed that they had poor relationships with their parents, they did not want to be treated like children. Most of them were supporting themselves and seemed taken aback and totally confused by the recent administration’s actions. Students reported that the administration removed soda from vending machines and replaced it with water, denied them independence to walk to the store, installed new security cameras, and attempted to call their parents or guardians to report school related concerns. One participant expressed utter shock that the administration “assumed” these students even had parents. They also displayed frustration that the administration was trying to help them improve their dietary habits by encouraging them to drink water and monitor their behavior so closely. This indicated to me that they wanted to be trusted as adults while attending urban recovery programs. Although they desired more individualized attention to help them graduate
quicker and transition to their next level, they wanted to be on the same level as their teachers.

**Question 4: What new and unique ideas is this program using with its dropouts?**

When asked to review the new and unique ideas the urban recovery program implemented with adult dropouts, they eagerly shared their views. They seemed so excited about the question that they all began to talk and interrupt one other as they shouted out responses. Because of this chaos, I had to focus attentively to what each participant was saying as I valued their collective voices. A summary of their statements indicated that these adult dropouts mostly appreciated the flexibility of the daily schedule which consisted of two sessions for only three hours per day. The first session began at 8:00 a.m. and the second session began at 11:00 a.m. Rather than spending eight hours each day in school, they were able to attend school for only three hours. Above and beyond this benefit, the program granted students the choice to only attend school two days a week. For example, one student mentioned that she really appreciated the ability to work with the school counselor to redesign a schedule to accommodate her work schedule. She told me that she liked how the charter school allowed her to “handle her business” in a manner she determined was best for her, in contrast to her public school teachers who frequently changed her schedule without even seeking her input.

Furthermore, students liked having the opportunity to regain credits without having to repeat their freshman and sophomore classes. In alignment with the ODE, charter schools were recently granted the opportunity to redesign their own credit flexibility procedures to meet graduation requirements. Consequently, the school implemented a new policy pertaining to high-stakes testing procedures. Per the director
of the recovery program, students who passed all areas of the OGT were reclassified as “juniors” because the OGT was based on standards according to the 10th grade curriculum. Thus, their credit flexibility policy determined that passage of this test demonstrated mastery of the 10th grade curriculum. Because many of the students were overage for their grade and expressed that they wasted so much time in so many classes throughout their school career, they felt such a sense of accomplishment when they were promoted to junior status. Still, students believed that the recovery program offered a new approach to remove the requirement to take electives such as physical education, art, or foreign language. Adult students with babies expressed that they especially appreciated not having to take electives because they had to arrange childcare to come to school. They did not want to have to get a babysitter just to come to school to take a music or art class. Equally, male dropouts stated that they had to work and didn’t want to spend extra time at school learning a language they didn’t even like.

Next, students mentioned that the charter school provided a work-study program to and individualized encouragement and support to go to college. They clarified that unlike public schools that mention possible career options to students, the charter school actually made arrangements for students to work in their area of interest and transition to college. Students mentioned that they even received certifications while in the program before starting college. In addition, students liked how the charter school provided rewards and incentives. Students enthusiastically shared how the administrator of the charter school provided gift certificates to stores or restaurants for meeting attendance requirements during OGT testing. Students also mentioned that the administrator arranged field trips and “fun days” at the end of the grading quarter. Students were
allowed to bring their friends and have the opportunity to interact with their peers and teachers in a relaxed environment. Staff members took pictures and made video tapes and gave them to students. I believed this was an excellent approach since many of these students expressed that they hated school, and perceived themselves as having low self-esteem, and poor relationships with peers and teachers. These external rewards were beneficial to motivate students to improve their attendance because many of them might have lacked an intrinsic motivational system to set and achieve their own goals.

Besides this, students disclosed that the charter provided smoke breaks and the freedom to leave the school to walk to the store during the school day. They seemed to really be pleased about having independence to leave and return without being reprimanded for requesting a break. This finding was quite perplexing because dropouts emphasized earlier in the study that they did not desire independence to complete online credit recovery classes; yet, they wanted independence to leave the building. It was also baffling that they even desired to leave the building to walk to the store for a snack because they were only in school for three hours! Nonetheless, this illuminated their preferences to be treated as adults while attending the program. Although they wanted individualized instruction to obtain their high school diploma, they made it evident that they needed breaks to leave the school. This finding is consistent with an observation made during phase two of the study. During the focus group interview, they were asked a series of twelve questions and the participants were told that the session would be audio taped. Towards the end of the focus group, I asked participants what type of pizza they wanted as I promised to reward them with a pizza party after the interview. As I
proceeded to the phone to order the pizza, I asked participants if they would like to take a 15 minute break. They agreed and stood up to prepare to exit the conference room.

To my bewilderment, while I was on the telephone with the pizzeria, I noticed that almost all of them headed towards the front door to leave the building. Some of the students walked down the street and others went to one of the participant’s cars to smoke cigarettes. I immediately became worried and began to think that maybe they did not want to eat pizza and refreshments. I thought they were going to just go to the restroom or get a drink from the water fountain and return to the room. I didn’t realize that they perceived a “break” as an invitation to leave the building or drive away in a car. I was amazed that approximately 20 minutes later, all of the participants returned to the room and were ready to eat. When I asked them where they went, one of the males indicated that he went to visit his cousin who lived in the area. Two other students told me that they left to smoke a cigarette. This experience was so enlightening to me because I learned something new about working with adult dropouts. They desire breaks during the three hour session and these breaks may consist of leaving the building to drive to the store or cousin’s home or going to their car to smoke a cigarette.

*Question 5:* What design and instructional strategies is this program using?

Participants in this study were really pleased with the design and method of instructional delivery implemented at the dropout prevention program. Most students reported that they did not like online schools that required them to work independently at their own pace and complete assignments on a computer to fulfill graduation requirements. Instead, they preferred having the option to get up everyday, come to a school building, and interact with their teachers and peers. This was a fascinating
observation considering the fact that they complained that their public school district only offered an online credit recovery program if they failed a class. The program was only offered after school and was supervised by any teacher who signed up to work for extra money. Students were disgruntled that these teachers did not possess expertise in the subject matter area they were working on to regain the credit. Thus, students felt they were left to themselves to work independently on the computer with no assistance.

In addition to the exceptional form of delivery, students shared that they liked how the charter school kept classes small to provide individualized assistance to enable them to experience academic success. If I had to select the top reason students quit school according to all data presented by dropouts, it would clearly be large class sizes and crowded learning environments. In large classes with too many students, dropouts indicated that students were often pressured to follow a negative peer group and unable to remain task oriented. Moreover, teachers were often stressed and unable to provide accommodations to students. They needed the design of the charter school to provide smaller classes to provide the individualized attention they needed. Dropouts desired smaller classes so much that they were willing to sacrifice the opportunity to participate in their public school’s extracurricular programs. They recommended that their public school offer dropouts the freedom to participate in their public school’s extracurricular activities and events, as they expressed that this should not be a consequence for leaving their public schools. It was important to note that even though they disclosed that they were thoroughly disappointed and angry about losing this privilege, they expressed they would still choose to attend the dropout recovery program instead of their public school to receive more individualized support in smaller class rooms.
Finally, these dropouts revealed that they really liked the former administrator of the charter school. They only had positive things to say about him as they described him as an innovative leader who knew how to establish a comforting and supportive learning environment that enabled them to graduate. They reported that he truly understood their needs and related to them in a way that was vastly different than the current administrator of the program. They stated that he respected them and allowed them to state their opinions. Moreover, they revealed that he avoided utilizing zero-tolerance policies when they failed to follow the rules or contacting their parents to report school related concerns. Instead he implemented a positive reinforcement system to reward them with gift certificates and “fun days” for excellent attendance. Students also reported that he realized their social/emotional needs and encouraged them to take smoke breaks. Quintessentially, he trusted them and was willing to alter the educational environment to fit their needs. My impression was that he was an administrator whose primary focus was to help them graduate quickly.

Participants expressed to me that they were extremely disappointed he is no longer the administrator of the school. They also shared that since he left the program, there have been many changes. In this next section, I will share how one participant, Lanoke, initiated a discussion that took the interview in an entirely different direction by stating aspects of the recovery program that she did not like. Though I designed a study to hear the polyphonic voices of dropouts to understand strategies implemented by effective dropout prevention programs, I unconsciously designed questions that took away their true freedom to disclose how they really felt. I never anticipated that one participant would take the lead and empower other students to join in and share their
concerns. However, given my design, this was a natural consequence of what would likely occur in a focus group when adult students are encouraged to speak their views. As Lanoke revealed her concerns, I initially felt distressed because I believed that I “lost control” as facilitator of the focus group. Interestingly enough, it was fascinating to realize that their negative feedback or polyphony enabled me to discover even more strategies to solve the silent epidemic. These participants’ negative comments were actually suggestions for a “new and improved” urban recovery program.

The “switch” to illuminate the ineffective qualities of the program manifested towards the end of the focus group when I asked students to describe what they liked most about the program. Peter elatedly announced that the hours, 11:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. worked great for him. Lanoke responded with a harsh rebuke that the hours aren’t 11:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. anymore! Peter immediately became defensive when she said this and responded that he didn’t care because he already graduated from the program. I wondered what would happen next as I thought they were going to get into a verbal altercation. All of a sudden, it appeared that Lanoke realized that she upset Peter by publicly refuting his recommendation and immediately changed her tone. She spoke out in a much calmer tone to clarify that the hours were not 11:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. anymore because the current administration recently eliminated the afternoon session.

She then expressed that she didn’t like the charter school anymore because it is becoming too commercial and starting to look like her former public school. After Lanoke shared her dissatisfaction with this change, other students agreed that the classes were too crowded because the two sessions were merged into one session. Moreover, Lanoke expressed displeasure with the recent change in administration and school
policies that de-emphasize their adulthood. She was disgruntled that they are putting water instead of soda in the vending machines; suspending and expelling students for smoking; and telling them not to come back if they leave the premises to take a break. She and Peter then protested that they were upset that staff members are also calling parents because the previous administrator never called parents to report problems. Once she and Peter finished discussing this concern, Lanoke announced her dissatisfaction with the security cameras. This then influenced another student to speak her true feelings that she is unhappy with the cameras she alleged watch her all the time because she is an adult and pays her own bills.

In retrospect, Lanoke was truly an asset to the focus group, because she challenged dropouts to share what they truly believed rather than just telling me what they thought I wanted to hear. I believe that her motive was appropriate, as she wanted me to have accurate information to report in my study. Though the information that was unveiled might have appeared to be criticizing the urban recovery program, a closer analysis of their comments enabled me to formulate strategies to recommend to administrators of urban dropout prevention programs to make them even better.

Leadership Implications

Results from this study provided significant implications for leaders of urban dropout recovery programs. Though research has not adequately delved into the social/emotional status of dropouts, students in this study disclosed significant emotional concerns that contributed to their decisions to quit school. These psychological issues included characteristics of DSM-IV-TR diagnoses of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Major Depressive Disorder and Bipolar
Disorder. As such, students in public schools may likely require additional counseling and supportive services as they may not have resources to obtain professional medical or psychological services. School leaders may want to establish connections with mental health agencies or community centers to offer counseling in the school environment. Because they lack effective social and coping skills, administrators may also strive to establish peer mediation systems or behavior management systems to help students to solve problems rather than implementing zero tolerance policies to suspend or expel them for displaying inappropriate behaviors in school. Removing them from school may send a confusing message that they are not wanted in the school environment.

Additionally, because failing classes in school is one of the primary reasons students quit school, students needed to take alternative credit recovery courses. Dropouts in this study expressed concern that their public school’s credit recovery courses were only offered after school and utilized an online educational design. They expressed difficulty juggling school, work, and family obligations and completing courses on a computer. It is possible that they had difficulty with an online educational design due to their disclosures of ADHD. Students with this disorder often lack the ability to remain task oriented, work independently, and implement good organizational skills without frequent prompts and incentives from their teachers. As a result, school leaders may want to consider providing non-online credit recovery options in addition to online courses as some students exhibit difficulty taking classes on computer. Likewise, school leaders may consider offering these credit recovery courses during the school day in addition to after school as many students are unable to juggle school, home, and work obligations to complete classes to regain lost credits.
To end with, dropouts in this study expressed intense dissatisfaction with recent changes implemented by the current administration. They alleged the administration has deemphasized their adulthood and is watching them on security cameras. They expressed concerned that students are being suspended and expelled for smoking and that they are being told not to come back if they leave the school to take a break. They were also disgruntled that the administration placed water in vending machines, calls parents to report concerns, and utilizes security cameras to monitor them. Due to their expressed apprehensions regarding these policies, administrators of recovery programs might want to consider establishing a method of communicating policies to students in a verbal or written form so that dropouts are aware of changes as well as the purpose of changes. This may enable them to perceive these changes more favorably rather than viewing them as interventions that are deemphasizing their adulthood and watching them in school. Because they are adults, administrators may also consider holding monthly meetings to enable dropouts to express concerns or recommend changes to improve the program to enable more students to obtain their diploma.

Recommendations for Future Research

As this study indicated that the nine dropouts who completed the BASC-2 questionnaire revealed criteria associated with DSM-IV-TR diagnoses of Attention Deficit Disorder, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Major Depressive Disorder and Bipolar Disorder; future studies could explore if there is a statistically significant correlation between having a mental health diagnosis and dropping out of school. Also, because this study indicated that these dropouts did not prefer online credit recovery programs, future research could administer a standardized personality assessment to dropouts attending
this urban recovery program and to dropouts enrolled in another online school, such as Life Skills. The researcher could compare and contrast the two groups to determine a new method to screen students to inform them which type of dropout prevention program would be best for them.

Next, seeing that urban dropouts in this study indicated they left school due to failing classes but only had the option to recover credits through an after-school online program, future studies could examine why some urban high schools are offering credit recovery programs in this manner. Finally, because the dropouts in this study who expressed they were convicted for criminal activity also indicated that their teachers wouldn’t help them succeed in school, future studies could explore the essences and shared experiences of criminals to determine their perceptions of their teachers’ willingness to provide individualized assistance in school.

Conclusion

In summary, the 12 dropouts in this study revealed that they left their public school because their classes were too crowded with an excess of students. They had uncaring teachers and lacked individualized assistance to pass their classes. They displayed significant social/ emotional concerns that further exacerbated their ability to experience success in their urban public school. They desired closer relationships with their teachers, in addition to daily tutoring and counseling support in school. They recommended that successful urban dropout recovery programs offer smaller classes with more individualized assistance, more choice and flexibility, and a supportive administrator. They wanted an alternative educational design to provide a shortened school day and credit flexibility options to graduate quicker. They emphasized a desire to
recover credits in a program utilizing a traditional instructional approach rather than an online curriculum. They regretted losing access to their public schools’ extracurricular events, but believed the recovery program was more effective because it offered smaller classes with more individualized attention. Though they believed that the urban dropout prevention program was highly effective, the design of the study to enable dropouts to share their experiences provided the opportunity for participants to also share their opinions regarding ineffective aspects of the program. Their voices presented new knowledge to design a “new and improved” urban recovery program as well as a warning to educators. As Gates advised educators to hear the voice of dropouts to find a cure to the silent epidemic, these 12 dropouts caution educators of urban recovery programs to avoid becoming too commercial and adopting policies traditionally observed in public schools; and to refrain from implementing policies that deemphasize their adulthood. Most of all, they want administrators to focus primarily on helping them graduate quickly rather than designing interventions to monitor and modify their lifestyles.

This study added to the research by emphasizing (a) social/emotional concerns that are associated with students’ decisions to quit school, (b) strategies and practices implemented by effective dropout recovery programs to increase graduation rates, (c) reasons students desire alternative educational designs, (d) reasons students do not desire online recovery programs, and (e) vital warnings for administrators of dropout recovery programs.
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APPENDIX A

PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM
PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

“A Case Study of an Effective Urban Dropout Prevention Program”

Dear Participant:

A. PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

Alecia Russell, under the director of her advisor Dr. Judy A. Alston of the Ashland University Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership, is conducting a research study to help understand the essences and shared experiences of students who drop out of school. You are being asked to participate in this study because you have withdrawn from a public school to attend a charter school—Academic Acceleration Academy.

B. PROCEDURES

If you agree to be in the study, the following will occur:

1. You will be asked to write an informal letter to the superintendent. This is a paper/pencil task to seek your reasons for withdrawing from school to attend the charter school. This should take about 15 minutes.

2. You will be asked to complete a paper/pencil questionnaire to explore your social/emotional status. This should take about 15 minutes.

3. On a separate day, you will be asked to participate in a focus group interview. During the focus group, you and other group members will be asked to discuss reasons students quit school and recommendations to encourage students to remain in school. With your permission, this session will be audio taped. All audio tapes, data, and information will be stored in a locked attic to which only I have access. This discussion is expected to last about 60 minutes.

C. RISKS/DISCOMFORTS

1. Some of the questions may make you uncomfortable or upset but you are free to decline to answer any questions you do not wish to answer or to leave the group at any time. Please utilize the informal letter and questionnaire to disclose any personal information of a sensitive subject matter. Please refrain from discussing any sensitive or personal subject matter during focus group interviews. Instead, respond to questions of a sensitive subject matter by discussing your perspective of dropouts in general rather than disclosing your personal experience pertaining to questions.
2. Confidentiality: Participation in research will involve a loss of privacy; however, your records will be handled as confidentially as possible. The researchers will ask you and the other people in the focus group to use only first names during the group session. They will also ask group members not to tell anyone outside the group what any particular person said in the group. However, the researchers cannot guarantee that everyone will keep the discussion private. Only Russell and Alston will have access to your study records and audio tapes. After the group discussion has been transcribed from the tapes, the tapes will be destroyed. No individual identities will be used in any reports or publications that may result from this study.

D. BENEFITS

There will be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study. However, the information that you provide may add to the body of knowledge to help education professionals better understand how to redesign public schools to increase graduation rates.

E. COSTS

There will be no costs to you as a result of taking part in this study.

F. PAYMENT

You will be given a gift certificate to a local restaurant after your participation in this study.

G. QUESTIONS

If you have any comments or concerns about participation in this study, you should first talk with the researcher, Mrs. Russell at (614) 276-5263. If for some reason you do not wish to do this, you may contact Dr. Judy Alston, advisor, at (419) 207-4983 or Dr. Randy Gearhart, chair of the HSRB, at (419) 207-6198.

H. CONSENT

You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH IS VOLUNTARY. You are free to decline to be in this study, or to withdraw from it at any point. Your decision as to whether or not to participate in this study will have no influence on your present or future status as a student or employee. If you agree to participate, you should sign below.

_________________________________   ________________________________
Date                          Signature of Study Participant

_________________________________   ________________________________
Date                          Signature of Person Obtaining Consent
APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What do you believe is the primary reason students quit school?

2. What interventions do you recommend to encourage students to remain in school?

3. Do you think students who quit school ever regret it?

4. What does an effective dropout prevention program look like?

5. What new and unique ideas is AAA using with its dropouts?

6. What type of support do dropouts need to return to school?

7. Do you believe most dropouts are employed?

8. Do you believe dropouts have health care?

9. What is it like for a dropout to try to obtain employment?

10. Do you think dropouts have ever been convicted for any criminal activity?

11. Do dropouts desire an alternative educational program?

12. What design and instructional strategies is this program using?