Summer 2018

Factors that Influence Students' Decisions to Either Drop Out or Graduate from High Schools in a Western Kentucky School District

Donna Kay Crouch
Western Kentucky University, donna.crouch@graves.kyschools.us

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE STUDENTS' DECISIONS
TO EITHER DROP OUT OR GRADUATE FROM HIGH SCHOOLS IN A
WESTERN KENTUCKY SCHOOL DISTRICT

A Dissertation
Presented to
The Faculty of the Educational Leadership Doctoral Program
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

By
Donna Crouch

August 2018

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE STUDENTS' DECISIONS TO EITHER DROP OUT OR GRADUATE FROM HIGH SCHOOLS IN A WESTERN KENTUCKY SCHOOL DISTRICT

Date Recommended ___4-30-2018___

_____
Sam Evans, Chair

_____
Gary Houchens

_____
Robert Lyons

_____ ___6/18/18___
Dean, The Graduate School   Date

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my future husband, Michael Joe Frazier; my children, William Grayson Dietz, Chandler Tate Dietz, and Andrew Terry Dietz; my nieces, Khepreisha Robinson and Au'Jha Robinson; and my parents, Glenda Crouch and the late Billy Crouch. Without their unwavering love, patience, and support throughout this long journey, I would not have been successful in completing this work, which has been a dream of mine for a very long time.

CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE STUDENTS' DECISIONS
TO EITHER DROP OUT OR GRADUATE FROM HIGH SCHOOLS IN A
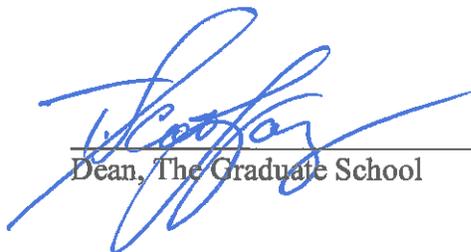## WESTERN KENTUCKY SCHOOL DISTRICT

Donna Crouch   August 2018   119 Pages

Directed by: C. Samuel Evans, Gary Houchens, and Robert Lyons

Educational Leadership Doctoral Program   Western Kentucky University

The purpose of this research was to identify and examine trends in the themes and patterns revealed in the qualitative analysis of the focus group interviews. Data were derived from responses from 21 graduates and six dropouts who answered questions from interview guides. Findings from the analysis indicate both graduates and dropouts experienced similar barriers throughout their academic career. The barriers identified were institutional, situational, and dispositional. Six themes were identified from the three barriers. They included employment, educational/remediation services, attendance, discipline and/or legal issues; educational values, and student-educator relationships. According to the data, these themes were not mutually exclusive to any one barrier. In some of the responses, the themes overlapped into more than one barrier categorization.

CHAPTER I: STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

History of Traditional Classrooms

Education in the United States has evolved since the 17th Century. In that era, students of all ages and grade levels were in the same room with the same teacher. The school year was designed around the planting time for the students to help their families with the tasks of the seasons. Students would drop out of school at varying ages to help their families with those duties of the seasons. During those early years in American schools, an education was a privilege and was meant for socialization as well as a basic education. In the mid-1800s Horace Mann worked to change education in America by creating a system based on the belief that every child was entitled to an education with the same content exposure called the "common school." This movement spurred compulsory attendance laws, the first enacted in Massachusetts in 1852 (Friedman & Friedman, 1979).

Even with compulsory attendance laws, high schools were considered selective institutions that had only a few elite students enrolling and graduating. Not until after World War II did high schools become community institutions that educated a more diverse population of students and helped them transition successfully to adult life (Dorn, 1996).

Over the centuries, schools have changed from the one-room school houses to different versions of larger structures with multiple classrooms that have teachers who teach a variety of curriculum disciplines. Because of this evolution in education, every classroom is not a match for every student. This "mismatch" between the student needs and the type of environment suggests that schools are often not accommodating or

accepting of students for their maximum development socially, emotionally, and intellectually (Powell & Powell, 2011). Using this premise, traditional schools are not doing an adequate job of educating America's children because hundreds of thousands of children dropout of school every year and many more are not meeting the benchmarks to be college and career ready (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

This study examined a rural school district in Western Kentucky that recognized an increase in dropouts in 2002. Thus, the school district began an alternative school different than any other of its kind at the time in the state, a non-punitive alternative school to help non-traditional and at-risk students graduate with a high school diploma. Since its establishment, this alternative high school has had more than 685 students graduate with a high school diploma, most of whom entered the workforce, a post-secondary educational setting, or a branch of the military services. In this study, the interventions used at this school and the case study district's traditional high school were explored as participants shared their opinions and experiences of what did and did not influence their decisions to graduate or dropout of the traditional or alternative schools.

Background

Dropouts have and continue to plague local, state, and national economies. One consequence of higher dropout rates is lower tax revenues (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011). Dropouts often find employment, but their wages are significantly lower than those of graduates. The state and local economies suffer because of less educated populaces. This plight makes it difficult for the state and local governments and organizations to attract new businesses to the areas. At the same time, "these entities spend more on social programs because their populations have lower educational levels"

2

(Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011, p.3). On the other hand, high school graduates provide economic and social benefits to society. These graduates earn more money, thus producing economic growth and positive social progression (Hanushek, Woessmann, Jamison, & Jamison, 2008).

While the United States' system of education has made strides in providing educational opportunities for a larger portion of the population, schools in this country are not meeting the needs of all students, and some are ultimately becoming *failing schools* (Murphy & Meyers, 2008). The term *failing schools* has many connotations. In this context, *failing schools* is indicative of schools not meeting the needs of every child, especially those children who have been "mismatched" with an educational setting. This mismatching of student and school has caused another plight: high school dropouts (Dorn, 1996; Faubert, 2012).

As the demands of society change and the population's cultural diversity increases, more students come to school with a plethora of circumstances in their lives that modern schools are not equipped to handle (Leek, 2009). However, from this pool of diverse learners, the schools must generate the next generation of mathematicians, technicians, engineers, scientists, and doctors (Holdren & Lander, 2012). This need for schools to generate the next generation of learners leaves several questions to be answered. Those include, but are not limited to, the following: How are "failing schools" supposed to meet the needs of the next generation of learners? Who will need to help make those needed changes? Where will the resources (i.e., financial or fiscal, personnel, professional development) come from? Is this "failing schools" condition causing

students to drop out of school? How are actions by society going to affect "failing schools" and student success?

To solve the dropout problem and issues surrounding it, Powell and Powell (2011) suggested that the United States educational system must make systemic changes to help match the school to the students' needs by having high expectations, offering collaborative learning, providing emphasis on problem-solving, and making learning relevant, which are all key components to helping students succeed in developing 21st Century and soft skills, i.e., critical thinking and problem solving, communication and collaboration, creativity and innovation application, imagination and invention, digital literacy skills, and career and life skills (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2009). Within this premise of change, the U.S.'s educational system has many different approaches to education including various kinds of public schools such as traditional public, charter, alternative, magnet, and virtual/online schools; and diverse types of private schools such as boarding, magnet, language immersive, private special education, Montessori, parochial, and religious schools. These schools attempt to educate students with different needs.

The traditional public high school featured in this study has approximately 1,350 students with a curriculum that includes advanced placement, college, general education, and special education courses. The Western Kentucky alternative school featured in this research is a non-punitive school and has approximately 50 students with a curriculum that includes general and special education, honors, and advanced placement courses. It serves students with unique needs that cannot be addressed in a traditional classroom setting.

Governed by the local school district board of education and a site-based

decision-making council, the traditional high school in this study has ranked

distinguished by Kentucky Department of Education's assessment standards in recent

years. Based on 2016-17 test scores, this high school ranked 207th out of 1262 schools in

Kentucky and has a student-teacher ratio of 19:1 with about 73 teachers (KPREP 2017:

Kentucky Department of Education school scores, 2017). The high school requires the

standard 1,062-instructional-hour mandate as set forth by the Commonwealth of

Kentucky. The school offers direct, blended, and online instruction. All students are

required to perform 30 hours of community service over their four years in high school.

In addition, seniors are offered internship and leadership opportunities as well as dual

credit classes at a nearby community college and university. To aid in teacher

performance, up-to-date professional development is provided for teachers with training

in differentiated instruction on an ongoing basis. Thus, instruction differentiation occurs

in the classrooms as well.

The alternative high school in this study, which has an advisory board consisting

of in-district administrators and the neighboring district administrators, has been

recognized in the Kentucky Department of Education's Top 14 in 2014-15 school year's

"Best Practices Sites" and has been on a National Dropout Prevention Center's model

program list for the past 10 years.

Due to its small size and design, an alternative program/school in Kentucky does

not have to meet the standard instructional-hour requirement as does a regular traditional

high school in Kentucky. However, the alternative school in this study requires 20 hours

per week in attendance and 25 assignments completed with a 70% or above score on each

assignment as set by its advisory board. It offers extended school hours with an open campus setting (i.e., evening classes and after-school tutoring); blended, online, and direct-instruction; small group and one-to-one instruction; specially-designed instruction with individualized graduation plans; small class sizes (average student-teacher ratio 10:1); job-shadowing or internship opportunities; school-to-work cooperative experiences; differentiated instruction (i.e., lessons based on students' learning abilities, student groups by shared interest, formative assessments, continuous assessment based on each student's needs, opportunities for kinetic learners, core content audio lessons, and multiple opportunities to learn materials); personal growth opportunities (i.e., Manhood Mondays, Damsel Defense, and Functional Fridays); community and civil service experiences; and a high school diploma.

In conclusion, educational stakeholders need to become aware of student needs and changes in teaching and learning strategies through programmatic changes and professional development to prevent *failing schools* (Murphy & Meyers, 2008). In addition, stakeholders, like the ones in the school district featured in this study, must step out of the mindset of the "traditional" classroom with standard seat-time or mandated instructional hours for all students because that system is leaving many students behind, especially compared to others across the globe (Pletka, 2007). In addition, stakeholders must offer students differentiated instruction, settings, and opportunities to create educational settings that are accommodating to every young person no matter their ability or disability. Finally, making education match all children's needs will hopefully become the new "traditional school."

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the factors students identify as important contributors to their decision to remain enrolled in or drop out of traditional and alternative schools. The study provided insights on the following issues: The school district in Western Kentucky that is featured in this study does not have 100% graduation rate, limited research has been done using focus groups or from the perspective of the students, finite number of studies have compared students' and dropouts' perspectives, and no literature exists comparing the two groups in both types of high schools in the Western Kentucky school district. The factors that students identify as dropout contributors were summarized and classified through qualitative analysis based on focus groups. Results represent patterns and trends of variables that influenced students' decisions either to discontinue or continue their secondary education.

The intent of the current research is to add depth and breadth to the knowledge base on why students decide to remain enrolled in school and graduate and why some students decided to drop out. This issue was examined through the perceptions of traditional high school and alternative school graduates from the 2012 to 2016 school years in a specific Western Kentucky school district. Within the context of the problem outlined above, the central research question for this study is as follows: What are the themes and patterns that characterize students who elected to remain enrolled or dropped out of traditional or alternative schools in a Western Kentucky school district?

Research Questions

The study utilized qualitative data to develop interviews and focus groups. The researcher conducted interviews to get more in-depth insight on the factors that influence

students to drop out of school versus the factors that influence students to stay in school. In addition to the interview guides, a short questionnaire for each focus group was used to obtain demographic/sociological information from focus group participants. The demographic/sociological information collected included current grade/graduation year, special education participation, parent/guardian educational status, and school of enrollment. The focus group information collected consisted of perceptions and experience as described by graduates from a traditional high school in Western Kentucky and graduates from an alternative school in the same district and dropouts from both schools from 2012 to 2016. Neutral sites were used to conduct the focus group interviews.

To support the purpose of this study, three research questions were developed. Each research question contrasted data from both the traditional and alternative school students. The research questions are as follows:

1. What are the institutional factors that influence students' decisions to drop out of or to stay in school?

2. What are the situational factors that influence students' decisions to drop out of or to stay in school?

3. What are the dispositional factors that influence students' decisions to drop out of or to stay in school and graduate?

Definitions

Alternative School or "Alternative education program" - means a program that exists to meet the needs of students that cannot be addressed in a traditional classroom setting but through the assignment of students to alternative classrooms, centers, or campuses that

are designed to remediate academic performance, improve behavior, or provide an enhanced learning experience. Alternative education programs do not include career or technical centers or departments (Kentucky Revised Statutes, 2013).

Blended learning - (Also known as hybrid or mixed-mode courses) are classes where a portion of the traditional face-to-face instruction is replaced by web-based online learning (Blended Learning Toolkit, n.d.)

Demographic data – The statistical data of a population, especially those showing average age, income, education, etc. (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Demographic data can be useful in identifying biases (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009).

Dispositional factors – Barriers related to internal attitudes and perceptions about the learner himself or herself (Cross, 1981).

Distance learning – The delivery of education through television, correspondence, radio, internet, online, or web-based programs (Cross, 1981).

Dropout - A dropout is an individual who was enrolled in school at some time during the previous school year and was not enrolled on October 1 of the current school year or was not enrolled on October 1 of the previous school year although expected to be (e.g., was not reported as a dropout the year before) and was not graduated from high school or completed state- or district-approved educational program and does not meet any of the following exclusionary conditions: transfer to another public school district, private school, or state- or district-approved educational program, temporary school-recognized absence due to suspension or illness, or death. (Smink & Schargel, 2004, p. 11)

External Locus of Control – The extrinsic influences in one's decision making, i.e., blame, either positive or negative (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

General Educational Development (GED) – The only high school equivalency credential

recognized by all 50 states in the United States. The GED tests students in the basic

subject areas of reading, writing, math, science, and social studies. (What is the GED

test? 2015).

Kentucky Graduation Calculation - According to Kentucky Department of Education,

the new graduation calculation for the 2015-16 school year is as follows: Number of

cohort members who earned a regular high school diploma by the end of the 2015-16

school year divided by the "number of first time 9th graders in the fall of 2012 (starting

cohort) plus students who transferred in, minus students who transfer out, emigrate, die

during school years 2012-13, 2013-14, 2014-15, and 2015-16" (KDE, 2015).

Institutional factors – Barriers that discourage working adults from furthering their

educations. Those barriers include, but are not limited to, educational expense,

inconvenience in scheduling or travel requirements, and course availability (Cross, 1981).

Internal Locus of Control - Individuals blame the circumstances or the process of

occurrences that influenced their decisions on themselves or their own actions (Deci &

Ryan, 2000).

Pattern - "Repetitive, regular or consistent occurrences of comparable actions or data"

(Saldaña, 2015, p. 12).

Project-based learning – Project-based learning (PBL) is used to teach students to explore

real-world problems and challenges. It is used across disciplines and in both traditional

and alternative schools (David, 2008).

Service learning – Learning practices with "a combination of academic or educational activity with community involvement wherein learners become engaged in activities directly with the community-based-organization" (Jordan & Schraeder, 2001, p. 21).

Situational factors– Barriers that result from one's situation in life at any given time (Cross, 1981).

Stakeholder – Any person/group with a vested interest in the educational outcomes at public schools, with such interests including but not limited to: the life success and potential of students and their families; the quality of working conditions for those who are employed at or rendering services to public schools; and the credibility and reputation of those who are charged with the responsibility of producing educational outcomes, paid or unpaid, e.g., students, parents or guardians, community members (including the religious community, teachers, school staff, administrators) (Model Code Working Group, 2012, p. 13).

Theme - "A term often mistakenly used to signify code or category - is an extended phrase or sentence that identifies and functions as a way to categorize a set of data into 'an implicit topic that organizes a group of repeating ideas'" (Saldaña, 2015, p.13).

Significance of the Study

"Inaction on dropout prevention is an acceptance of the immoral notion that public education is wasted on some children. It is an admission of ignorance about a global economy that requires all the talents Americans can offer" (Polis, 2013, p. 7).

The U.S. has experienced an extremely large number of dropouts in high and middle schools across the nation, three-quarters of a million annually (Gomperts & Nagaoka, 2017). This study is based on focus group interviews comprised of former

students from a school district in Western Kentucky. This school district has made several district-wide programmatic changes in the past decade to curtail the dropout rate.

These programmatic changes included the following:

1. The school offered extended school hours with an open campus setting. It was open Tuesday and Thursday evenings from 5:30 to 8:30 p.m. to accommodate students who were employed full-time.

2. The curriculum was blended with online learning and direct instruction within the classrooms.

3. One-to-one instruction was available to each student every day.

4. Students were given specially-designed instruction with individualized graduation plans.

5. Class sizes were small with a student/teacher ratio averaging 10:1.

6. Students were given job-shadowing or internship opportunities as well as school-to-work cooperative experiences.

7. The teachers and administrator were carefully selected to promote high achievement and success in an alternative environment.

8. A high school diploma was offered at the district's alternative school.

The actions this district have taken to prevent students from dropping out make it unique in attempting to understand why students do or do not pursue their high school diploma. This is not just an issue in the school district in Western Kentucky or the Commonwealth of Kentucky; dropouts are a nationwide epidemic. Nearly 700,000 of U.S. freshmen will not make it to graduation with their fellow cohort members (Gomperts & Nagaoka, 2017). That means that nearly three-fourths of a million young

people will have all their prospects for a successful life halted due to their dropping out of school.

Even though it is a nationwide epidemic, "in recent years, the graduation track record of our 15 million U.S. public high school students has steadily increased. Overall national graduation rates for public school students have climbed 4.2 percentage points in the past four years, up from 79 percent in the 2010-11 school year to the current 83.2 percent."(Gomperts & Nagaoka, 2017).

Researchers like Gomperts and Nagaoka (2017) do not fully understand why this phenomenon is occurring; however, they found that reaching the increased graduation goals depends principally on how educational administrators, teachers, parents, and the community support high school freshmen. Hanover Research's *Best Practices in Raising High School Graduation Rates* (2014) suggested similar resolve for understanding the phenomenon adding that the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy recommends that school-wide reform with targeted interventions are the two-pronged solution that school districts need to focus on when trying to curtail the dropout epidemic.

This study will explore the Western Kentucky school district's reform and targeted interventions with the information gathered in the focus groups of graduates and dropouts from the Western Kentucky school district.

The following descriptions highlight specific contributions of the current study to understanding this epidemic in the Commonwealth of Kentucky and the Western Kentucky county featured in this study.

First, the total population of the county in Western Kentucky was 37,421 (US. Census Bureau, 2015). Of that population, 26.6% had less than a high school diploma or

equivalent, 38.9 % with high school diploma or equivalent, 17.9% with some college, but no degree, 4.0 % with an associate's degree, and 12.6% with bachelor's degree or above. Thus, this county is representative of many low educated rural counties across Kentucky and other southern states. This information is significant to the study because it provides background to the Western Kentucky county's educational attainment and the need for it to increase.

Second, based on the United States Department of Numbers' American Community Survey in 2015, the median household income for Kentucky was $42,958 in 2014. To further aggregate that number, the University of Kentucky's Center for Business and Economic Research's Kentucky Annual Economic Report (2015) implies that those in Kentucky who have a bachelor's degree or higher earn $62,955; some college/associate degree, $38,907; high school diploma, $34,379; and less than high school diploma, $27,584. Kentucky had the fifth highest poverty rate in the nation. In addition, Kentucky ranks 47th out of the 50 states in bachelor attainment. This information is significant to this study because it provides a frame of reference to barriers for learners.

Third, the Kentucky Department of Education's School Report Card for the school district in this study in 2014-15 listed the dropout rate of 0.7% for that same school year, retention rate of 1.0%, an attendance rate of 96%, and a graduation rate of 92.9%. These figures are based on the four-year cohort data. The five-year cohort graduation rate for the district was 94.6% for the same year. In that same year, the Commonwealth of Kentucky had a graduation rate of 89 percent.

Fourth, this study incorporated the 2013 law in Kentucky raising the dropout age from 16 to 18. Adoption of the higher compulsory attendance age was voluntary for school districts until 55 percent of the state's districts adopted the change, at which point the law became mandatory across the state.

Fifth, Kentucky's public schools graduate about 40,000 students each year; however, student graduation rates vary from year to year. Schools and districts desire to have 100 percent graduation rate in their respective schools and districts. To achieve that goal, students must earn a minimum of 22 credits as required by the state and meet any local district requirements for additional credits. For example, for students in the 2017 class, the Western Kentucky school district in this study requires its graduates from the traditional high school to have 24 credits in alignment with the state standards (four English; three mathematics, Algebra I, geometry, and Algebra II; three social studies; three science; one-half health; one-half physical education; one fine arts; seven academic and career-interest, standards-based learning electives, and demonstrated performance-based competency in technology). Included in the state's requirements for graduation is the following requirement: a math course as determined by the district that ensures college and career readiness which can be counted as an elective. If a student does not meet the college-and-career-ready benchmarks for mathematics, a transition course will be required to address remediation needs. For the 2018 graduating class and beyond, 26 credits will be required for graduation as well as being college and career ready to graduate from the traditional high school in this study. The Western Kentucky school district in this study's alternative school requires a minimum of 23 credits earned for a student to graduate.

Sixth, Polis (2013) suggests that when students drop out, school districts take the responsibility to re-engage these students and get them back in the classroom whether it be the traditional school or an alternative school. In many cases, school districts make that effort to no avail and the dropout enrolls in a General Education Development (GED) program.

Seventh, this study is also different than others because the researcher may have to use social media to contact the potential participants for the study. This is uncommon because most traditional studies have not utilized this technique to petition for participants to take part in the research.

Finally, this study, in its final form, could be replicated so that other school districts and other entities will be able to modify it to their needs to assess the variables that influence students to drop out of schools in their counties or independent districts.

The current study does not explore the behavior-based (punitive) type of alternative schools. Rather, it attempts to provide information on voluntary, non-punitive alternative programs for students with unique needs, especially students who will drop out or have dropped out. Specifically, this research focuses on the factors that influence students' decisions related to staying in or dropping out of school and what locus of control is the foundation of those decisions. This study should provide useful information on the perspective of students who have graduated or dropped out of an alternative school and/or traditional school for future district facilities and curriculum and instruction decisions. The literature will help answer the central research question, "What are the themes and patterns that characterize students who elected to remain enrolled or drop out of traditional or alternative schools in a school district in Western Kentucky?"

Summary

The Western Kentucky school district featured in this study has not had a 100% graduation rate in more than a decade. Kentucky's expectation is that all students will graduate high school. As noted above, KDE's school report card for 2014-15, 0.7% of students dropped out of the high schools in the Western Kentucky school district. In 2013-14, 1.5% of students dropped out of the high schools. In retrospect, 1.9% dropped out in 2007-08 school year, 1.4% dropped out in 2008-09, 0.8% dropped out in 2009-10 school year, 1.4% dropped out in the 2010-11 school year; 0.9% dropped out in the 2011-12 school year; and 1.5% dropped out in the 2012-13 school year. In that time period collectively, 10.1% of the students dropped out of the Western Kentucky school district's two high schools.

Second, in 2013, 13.1 percent of the 360,830-working age (18 to 64) Kentuckians did not have a high school diploma or equivalency credential, ranking Kentucky 37th in the nation on that category (Spalding, 2015). In a 2015 unpublished report by Kentucky Department of Education, 89% of students graduated in Kentucky in their four-year cohort which was an increase from the 2010 graduation rate of 76.68% using the current graduation formula (Kentucky Department of Education, 2011). For the 2014-15 school year, Kentucky had a 11% dropout rate among public school students in grades 9 through 12, according to state education department's most recent statistics.

Chapman, Laird, and Kewal-Ramani (2010) have reported that a non-high school graduate will earn more than a million dollars less in income over a lifetime compared to those who have a bachelor's degree. Dropouts are twice as likely to slip into poverty; three times more likely to be unemployed; and eight times more likely to end up in prison

(Miller, 2006). People without a high school diploma are less likely to receive job-based health insurance and pension plans; less likely to be healthy and to live a long life; half as likely to vote; and four times less likely to volunteer and make other kinds of civic contributions (Baum & Ma, 2010).

Third, based on the literature review conducted for this study, most of the studies that have been done on dropouts have been quantitative studies (Guerra Perez, 2009; McFadden, 2010). These studies are helpful in that they provide us with empirical data on common reasons why students drop out. A qualitative study utilizing focus groups would provide more depth and breadth in understanding the phenomena of dropouts because it can address sociological, academic, and demographic reasons students drop out of high school while providing specific scenarios, background data, and detailed case descriptions of each participant in the study.

Fourth, the literature suggests that other research studies examined dropouts from the perspective of the educators and administrators (McFadden, 2010), but rarely give the perspectives of the dropouts themselves in qualitative form. It also suggests that the roles of the educators and administrators have been examined, but that dropouts' and graduates' roles have not been analyzed thoroughly in other studies.

Fifth, in reviewing the literature, this researcher found that it is uncommon for a study to focus on graduates' and dropouts' perspectives in alternative school and traditional high school settings.

Finally, no other literature exists on graduates' and dropouts' views in both high school settings, much less specifically in the Western Kentucky school district in this study. This study focused directly on this one school district as the population and sample

18

being studied. It provided insight to the school district's administration on possible

operational changes throughout the grade levels to keep students within the district from

dropping out. This study could also be used as a guide for other school districts to do

similar research in their own systems to make like changes. This is significant due to the

high dropout rates in many school districts throughout the Commonwealth of Kentucky

as well as in other states in the U.S.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

This review analyzes existing research regarding why students choose to stay in high school to receive a diploma and why some students choose to drop out of traditional and alternative schools in a Western Kentucky school district. Many studies have identified factors that influence students' decisions on whether to remain in school or drop out, but none of them address students of far Western Kentucky schools as this one does by using focus groups as a data collection method. Schools in a Western Kentucky school district have not had 100 percent of its seniors to graduate in any given year (Kentucky Department of Education, 2015), nor has any other school district in Kentucky. None of the other states in United States have every senior graduate from their high schools either. About 700,000 students drop out annually, according to Gomperts and Nagaoka (2017).

The following questions were addressed in this study of dropouts in a school district in Western Kentucky:

1. What are the institutional factors that influence students' decisions to drop out of or to stay in school?

2. What are the situational factors that influence students' decisions to drop out of or to stay in school?

3. What are the dispositional factors that influence students' decisions to drop out of or to stay in school and graduate?

Although local, state, and federal governments have been focusing on preventing students from dropping out by implementing a variety of programs, those programs have

not been 100% effective (National Dropout Prevention Center, 2014). However, program strategies have been effective by including reductions in truancy, improvements in attitudes toward school, accumulation of high school credits, and reduction of problem behaviors (Cash, 2004). These programs address issues or barriers that deter students, no matter their ages, from pursuing or continuing their educations (Cross, 1981).

In her 1981 study on adult learners, Cross suggested obstacles that students face fall into three categories: situational barriers, which are events that occur in one's life at any given time, for example, a loss of a job, death in the family, or lack of time, money, or child care; institutional barriers, which are classified as practices and/or procedures that discourage students from participating, for example inconvenient work schedule or location, fees for classes, or inconvenience of study majors at a particular school; and dispositional barriers, which are related to attitudes, self-confidence, and/or self-perceptions toward themselves or their learning capabilities.

By using the literature reviewed for this chapter and the information collected through the focus group sessions, the researcher answered the central research question: What are the themes and patterns that characterize students who elected to remain enrolled or drop out of traditional or alternative schools in a school district in Western Kentucky?

Historical background

Dropouts

Completing high school is not always a priority for many students across the United States (Dorn, 1996; Smink & Schargel, 2004). Those students who do not complete school or graduate from high school are considered "dropouts." According to

the National Education Goals Panel (2000), 46 states and the District of Columbia "usually report" dropout data through the Common Core survey to the USDE's National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES); however, only 22 of those states and the District of Columbia use the common definition adopted by Smink and Schargel (2004) as defined on Page 9 of this study.

Dropouts have a variety of reasons why they decide not to finish school. Some students drop out because they become bored with school; miss too many days and cannot catch up; spend time with people who were not interested in school; have too much freedom and not enough rules in their lives; fail academically (Azzam, 2007); become pregnant or become a parent; have to get a full-time job to help the family financially; have social anxiety issues; were ill-prepared for entering high school; had to care for a family member; or have legal issues (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006). The list of reasons can be extensive and can include a combination of explanations why a student chooses not to complete a high school education. Whatever the reasons, Bridgeland et al. (2006) suggest that the circumstances causing students to drop out are not sudden events, but more than likely a process of occurrences over a span of time.

Researchers have different descriptors depending on how a student quits school or terminates their high school careers to describe the various kinds of "dropouts." (Crain-Dorough, 2003). For example, a "push out" is an undesirable student that the school tries to force out of school (Haley, 2007); the disaffiliated, disengaged, disinterested is a student who has not bonded to anyone in the school or the school itself, therefore, wants nothing to do with the school or contact with it (Schoeneberger, 2012); the "educational mortalities" are students who are unable to complete graduation requirements before

aging out; "capable dropouts" are students who are academically skilled enough to graduate but do not value a diploma enough to do so or are not sociologically prepared to meet the school's demands (Wayman, 2000); and finally, the "stopouts" are students who quit school and return in a year or so of dropping out (Hout, 2000).

Dropouts in Kentucky

Approximately 6.5% of Americans ages 16 to 24 years old are high school dropouts living in the United States. This number does not include those who have been institutionalized, according to High School Dropouts (Kena et al., 2016). Calculated another way, 3.5% of all the students in the nation drop out of school each year and in some urban (and rural) areas, the numbers soar as high as 50%. Due to the high number of dropouts across the U.S., the Commonwealth of Kentucky started an initiative in 2008 to lower the number of dropouts. Recently, Kentucky has gone so far as to increase the age that a student can drop out from 16 years old to 18 years old by legal mandate.

Meyer and Holliday (2012) report an estimated $4.2 billion in lifetime wages were lost due to more than 6,200 students dropping out of high school in 2010 in the Commonwealth of Kentucky. This cost the state an estimated $162 million in health care costs. That amount could have been saved if those students would have earned their diplomas. "The state's economy could see a combination of crime-related savings and additional revenue of about $87.4 million each year if the male high school graduation rate increased by 5%" (Meyer & Holliday, 2012, p. 4).

Individual districts in Kentucky are going above and beyond this Graduate Kentucky initiative by trying to curtail the number of dropouts they have in their schools. Many of them are designing new programs using different teaching and learning

strategies such as blended learning, service learning, project-based learning, place-based learning, and distance learning. Some districts have started their own non-punitive alternative schools while others have chosen to establish academies within their high schools that cater to at-risk students, in efforts to stop students from dropping out. They are doing this not only to help the student be successful enough to graduate from high school, but also to help them become college and career ready when they are prepared to enter the workforce or post-secondary education. Giving students college and career-readiness skills while they are still in high school will help them stay in school and be more successful in working within the communities in which they live.

This initiative also helps decrease the dropout rate, thus increasing the graduation rate and playing an important role in the Kentucky and U.S. economies. Because of all the efforts of the Commonwealth of Kentucky schools, Kentucky ranked 10th out of the 50 states in the nation in the 2013 national Quality Counts survey of the states' education performance (Musgrave & Warren, 2013). It is like the adage, "It takes a village to raise a child." These days it takes the village to educate a child as well. For schools to be successful, all stakeholders must take part in educating our students and help keep students from dropping out because that decision affects every aspect of one's life (Best Practices in Raising High School Graduation Rates, 2014).

According to the Graduate Kentucky State Steering Committee, "increasing Kentucky's graduation rate is tied to not only educational achievement, but also to workforce development, economic development, and increasing the quality of life in the Commonwealth" (Meyer & Holliday, 2012, p. 4). The dropout initiative by the Commonwealth is just another way for citizens to help improve the quality of life and

boost the economy. As of June 2016, the Commonwealth of Kentucky spent more than

$1.9 billion on welfare benefits for its residents, many of whom were not high school

graduates. In another study, the Commonwealth ranked 8th in the most dependent of all

50 states on welfare benefits. That means that there are 42 other states that do not have as

many people receiving welfare from the United States government as the Commonwealth

of Kentucky (Kiernan, 2016).

Kentucky has a total of 1,912,500 individuals employed, per the U.S. Bureau of

Labor Statistics figures for state employment in November 2015. As of the first quarter of

2016, the Commonwealth has 777,300 participants on food stamps, according to the U.S.

Department of Agriculture figures for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

(2016); 50,185 recipients for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF),

according to the Department of Health and Human Services figures in January 2016; and

794,500 enrolled in Medicaid, according to the Kaiser Commission on Medicaid and

Uninsured figures in June 2011.

Per Steigleder and Soares (2012), one way to boost the economy, workforce, and

quality of life is through education and training program (i.e., sector partnerships,

registered apprenticeships, "learn and earn" training models, career pathways, and

contextualized education). The boost in these aspects of the communities is likely not to

happen with so many students dropping out of school.

Dropouts have plagued local, state, and national economies. A consequence of

higher dropout rates is lower tax revenues (Alliance, 2011). Dropouts are often employed

but their wages are significantly lower than those of graduates. The state and local

economies suffer because of the less educated populaces. This plight makes it difficult for

the state and local governments and organizations to attract new businesses to the areas. At the same time, these entities spend more on social programs because their populations have lower educational levels. Contrary to this, high school graduates provide economic and social benefits to society (Alliance, 2011). High school graduates earn more money, thus producing economic growth and positive social progression.

Variables Associated with Persisting Until Graduation or Dropping Out

Kamenetz (2015) and Hanover Research's *Best Practices in Raising High School Graduation Rates* (2014) literature suggest that themes identified in students choosing to remain enrolled in school include the following: positive student-teacher relationships, grades of B average or above, 94% attendance rate or above, involvement in school-related sports, organizations, or activities, opportunities for credit recovery, advanced placement courses, and early college acceptance. Nanney (2016) suggests that the themes for both graduates and dropouts include family support, school support, attendance, grades, and conflicts with teacher/administrators. Those themes suggested by Kamenetz (2015) and Hanover Research's *Best Practices in Raising High School Graduation Rates* (2014) would fit under the categories of Nanney's 2016 research. Themes identified by teachers, counselors, and former students in an interview study by Wallace (2016) for students choosing to drop out of school include the following: behavioral issues, peer and work-related influences, family structure, school environment, poor student-teacher relationships, academic problems and poor grades, poor attendance and truancy, and little or no involvement in school-related activities or community.

Patterns indicated by students choosing to remain enrolled in school include the following: positive peer pressure, family values and promotes importance of education,

school or organization participation (United States Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1998), good grades, and healthy lifestyle (Berezow, 2017).

In this literature review, the researcher found that patterns emerged within different studies that indicated why students choose to drop out of school include the following: little to no value put on education in home, living in poverty, staying in violent neighborhoods, facing continual peer pressure, having a lack of positive adult role models (Wallace, 2016), homelessness, bullying, extended illness, teen pregnancy, working full time to support the family, and long-term suspension or expulsion from school (Bowers, 2017).

Bowers (2017) found that negative trends emerged in the themes and patterns described by the participants in her study. The distinct similarities between the leading causes for dropping out and the effects of childhood poverty were significant. She stated, "While poverty alone does not determine if a student will leave high school, it is a risk factor that influences the decision" (p. 16). In a similar study, Wallace (2016) suggested that when major employers leave and/close, school attendance decreases, many families' socioeconomic status changes, jobs become scarcer, therefore, more students drop out of school to find work. Positive trends indicated by the themes and patterns described by the participants in Wallace's 2016 study show that when new businesses come to the area or when established businesses expand, graduation rates stay stable or increase.

Theoretical Framework

To understand the many reasons why high school students make the decisions or choices they do, one must understand the complex structure of the education system at various levels. The theoretical framework that was identified and discussed in this research focused on teachers' effectiveness in the classroom and how it affects students' decisions to either drop out of school or remain in school and graduate by using Charlotte Danielson's framework on teacher efficacy and performance evaluation.

The Danielson framework is designed to be use in today's diverse classrooms. It clearly describes what teachers should know and can perform within their classroom and in the teaching profession. Danielson's work is fundamentally based on the works of Abraham Maslow and Albert Bandura. Although Danielson's framework has four domains as described below, Domain 2 undergirded this research.

The four domains of Danielson's work and their respective components are described as follows:

1. Domain 1 – Planning and preparation components define to what extent a teacher has command of the subject he/she teaches, demonstrating knowledge of students, setting of instructional outcomes, demonstrating knowledge of resources, and designing coherent instruction (Danielson, 2014).

2. Domain 2 – The classroom environment components consist of the interactions that occur in the classroom and the teacher's ability to create an environment of respect and rapport, establishing a culture for learning, managing classroom procedures, managing student behavior, and organizing physical space. The elements of this domain include the following: teacher interactions with students, positive and supportive student

interactions with each other; establishment high expectations for learning and achievement, management of groups, transitions, materials and supplies, classroom routines, and volunteers and paraprofessionals. Others include effective teachers convey conduct expectations, monitor student behavior, respond to student misbehavior, and ensure safe and accessible classroom environment (Danielson, 2014). Vaughan (2008) and Danielson (1996) suggested that the interactions are themselves non-instructional; however, they are necessary for effective instruction. Educators who are proficient in this domain establish comfortable and respectful classroom environments, which cultivates a positive culture for learning and creates a safe place for risk-taking (Vaughan, 2008).

Dunkin and Biddle (1974) state that the classroom is a social system. Like Danielson's work on the classroom environment, Dunkin and Biddle's research suggests that classroom management and control is changing from teacher-controlled to pupil-controlled; encompasses direct management of deviancy behavior and pupil-task-involvement or engagement; and representative of reinforcement and behavior modification (Dunkin & Biddle, 1974).

3. Domain 3 – Instruction contains components that are at the fundamental heart of teaching, active engagement of the students in the content, communication with students, use of effective questioning and discussion techniques, use of assessment in instruction, and demonstration of flexibility and responsiveness in the learning process. Danielson (2014) stressed that the primary mission of schools is to enhance student learning.

4. Domain 4 – Professional responsibilities components are associated with being a professional educator, one who encompasses the roles assumed outside of and in

addition to those in the classroom with students, one who reflects on his/her performance in teaching a lesson within the classroom and how he/she can make revisions based on that reflection (Danielson, 2002).

Connections to Danielson's Framework

In this study, Danielson's framework, Domain 2 specifically, assisted in setting the stage for what the researcher discovered in studying the factors that influence students to dropout or graduate in the rural public-school district in Western Kentucky. When examining each positive attributes of Danielson's framework, a connection can be made with them and Patricia Cross's (1981) barriers of learning, institutional, situational, and dispositional. Per Danielson's framework (2014), if an effective teacher is proficient or distinguished in their performance in the classroom, students will learn and achieve without barriers that are present when a teacher's performance is unsatisfactory or mediocre. Some of these attributes described in the framework can be affected or influenced by one or more of the barriers as described by Cross (1981). Examples of this connection include the following:

Institutional barriers (Cross, 1981) – In Domain 2a of Danielson's framework, teacher-student interactions are friendly and mutual caring and respect are demonstrated. In Domain 2b, teacher demonstrates importance and desired conviction of content mastery and teacher exhibits appreciation for students' abilities and high expectations of student effort. Domain 2c, managing classroom procedures, dominates in Cross's (1981) institutional barriers' category. In this domain, routines and transitions are effectively and efficiently performed. In Domain 2d, an effective teacher plays an important role in student behavior in the classroom. Teachers must respond to student misbehavior

effectively; they address and monitor behavior with subtlety and put in place preventive measures to control student misbehavior. Finally, Domain 2e describes safe (Danielson, 2014; Maslow, 1968, 1993, 2013), physically appealing, and instructionally-oriented classrooms that promote student achievement. In this domain, proficient and distinguished teachers have all needed resources such as technology, learning materials, and alignment between the learning activities and the physical environment (Danielson, 2014).

Situational barriers (Cross, 1981) – Domain 2a describes attributes including students respectfully correct other student's mistakes and offer suggestions without fear of feeling ridiculed by either the teacher or other students. In Domain 2b, teacher exhibits her satisfaction with student work and learning. Domain 2c describes students using their time productively and students redirect their classmates who are not on task. In Domain 2d, students respectfully intervene with classmates' inappropriate behavior and take an active role in complying with conduct expectations or rules.

Dispositional barriers (Cross, 1981) – In Danielson's framework in Domain 2a, students exhibit respect for the teacher and contribute to high levels of civility among all members of the class. Students feel valued and at ease taking intellectual risks. Interactions between and among students are polite and respectful. (Danielson, 2014). In Domain 2b, students feel confident and comfortable enough to help their peers, to take initiative upon their own learning, and to ask questions to understand the content. In Domain 2c, students take pride in their work and their class by encouraging classmates to be more efficient. Domain 2d, managing student behavior, delineates students participate in the class rules. Students behave appropriately by taking an active role in monitoring

31

their own behavior and their peers'. Lastly, Domain 2e affects students' sense of safety and confidence. Similarly, Maslow (1968, 1993, 2013) describes personal safety as a basic need in the development of a person's personality and his or her journey to developing self-actualization.

When Charlotte Danielson became an educator, she addressed the relationship between teacher learning and student achievement through the idea that students would have increased opportunity to learn when teachers advanced their skill sets. Danielson discovered that student success should not be based on socio-economic background, which often is the cause of low expectations (Danielson, 2002; Maslow, 1954).

Domain 2 of Danielson's framework outlines five components: creating an environment of respect and rapport, establishing a culture for learning, managing classroom procedures, managing student behavior, and organizing physical space. These basic components align with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1954), which are safety and psychological needs, as well as the love/belonging and self-esteem and Bandura's theory of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Bandura & Walters, 1963).

Physiological Needs

When building on Maslow's work, educators and the schools must consider how the classroom meets the needs of each student. In the physiological category, food, water, breathing, sleep, and even excretions must be considered. Relating to the physiological needs, Cross (1981) described barriers/factors that affect the student's decision to stay in school or drop out of school. Those factors that are related to a student's physiological needs are situational barriers, which are events that occur in one's life at any given time, such as the loss of a job, death in the family, lack of transportation, no familial or friend

educational support, home responsibilities, employment responsibilities, or lack of time, money, or child care. While theme factors are not physiological in nature, they influence physiological needs, according to Cross (1981). If situational factors exist, students' physiological needs are not met in some way (Cross, 1981). Students who have a lack of money often suffer from lack of appropriate shelter and hunger, which affect students' cognitive, academic, and psychosocial function and wellbeing (Alaimo, Olson & Frongillo, 2001).

Safety and Security

In the safety category, Maslow (2013) stated the freedom from fear helps students develop a sense of security in body, of resources, of morality, of the family, of health, of property (Desautels, 2014). Part of building that sense of safety, schools must provide this basic need by providing a "safe haven" for each academic day. They can do this by developing a safe and supportive school culture and climate, which is an aspect of an institutional factor as described by Cross (1981).

If schools fail to provide a safe and secure learning environment, students fear for their stability and security. In such environments, students are unable to concentrate or focus on their learning. They are more focused on staying alive and unharmed than they are focusing on their education (Maslow, 2013; Noble & McGrath, 2016).

Love, Belonging, and Relationships

The next category, love and belonging, is crucial to anyone's positive relationships with other people and within oneself (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Maslow, 1954). Students who have a sense of belonging and connectedness at school and community are more likely to actively participate in school, be more engaged in the

classroom and other school activities, such as clubs and organizations in schools and in their communities; and have a more positive perception toward school and other authority figures. They also act more supportively toward peers and are more socially competent; have higher self-expectations; display greater respect toward authority figures; accept more responsibility in their own behavior; and achieve at higher levels of involvement in school (Desautels, 2014; Noble & McGrath, 2016). This is the area in which parent and community involvement are important.

Becker and Luthar (2002) concluded that students are more likely to take intellectual risks within an environment where they have formed a positive and supportive relationship with the teacher. Furrer and Skinner (2003) found that students who had a strong sense of belonging also demonstrated higher levels of academic motivation, enthusiasm, and both behavioral and emotional engagement with school. These interactions include words and actions in which the teacher demonstrates he/she is interested in the students' lives inside and outside the classroom. Interactions such as these also convey that the teacher cares about each student and their achievements, no matter what those may be (Danielson, 2008).

The teacher must provide those things to motivate students to grow and mature as learners thus ensuring students want to learn and continue to learn throughout life. Danielson et al. (2009) suggested that students begin to establish a feeling of being connected or form a relationship with the others in the classroom including the teacher. Students and teachers work together to form a camaraderie where they feel a sense of belonging, resulting in moving to another level in the hierarchy of needs to building self-respect and self-worth (Maslow, 2013), all the while participating in an effective

classroom environment. Danielson et al. (2009) suggested in the framework for teaching that in such an environment high performing teachers have a classroom characterized by high cognitive energy with high expectations for all students where the teacher and students alike value learning and hard work. In this type environment, students gain greater satisfaction and a sense of genuine power from being successful and mastering the rigorous content and establishing pride in their capabilities.

Self-Esteem

When students see themselves as unable to achieve, they develop a belief that they are inferior, weak, worthless, evil and/or shameful in our society (Maslow, 1968). However, our society, including most of our schools, values academic success, athleticism, and physical attractiveness. When students do not excel in any or all the areas, they often feel like they do not measure up to the social standards imposed upon them (Cross, 1981; Maslow, 1954, 1968, 2013). Thus, students often drop out of school by removing themselves from the environment they deem caustic or dangerous. These characteristics can be described as dispositional barriers (Cross, 1981).

Dispositional barriers/factors include self-doubt, past academic failures, lack of joy or fatigued, procrastination due to lack of self-confidence, lack of interest in school and the content, and lack of vision for future success. Students faced with these barriers often feel defeated. When these "defeated" students remove themselves from the school environment, they sometimes move into other situations that could be even more dangerous, but in which they feel valued, for example a gang or other criminal environment (Maslow, 1993, p. 186).

This area is a vital part of Danielson's framework Domain 2, Part A. It demonstrates a creation of an environment of respect and rapport where students participate without fear of put-downs or ridicule from anyone within the classroom or school. Part B demonstrates the establishment of a culture for learning, wherein students take initiative in improving their quality work, and have high expectations. This part also focuses on the recognition of students' efforts and persistence to complete assignments (Danielson, 2014).

Self-Efficacy

Once schools become successful in providing a safe, secure, compassionate learning environment, the student often desires to be a lifelong learner, which is a goal that effective educators try to instill in their students. For teachers to be able to convey that message to their students, they must encourage a positive attitude toward education by communicating the importance of the work with enthusiasm and a commitment to the value of the content (Danielson et al., 2009).

Psychologist Albert Bandura (1997) defined this as self-efficacy, one's belief in one's ability to succeed in specific situations or accomplish a task. Self-efficacy is like building one's self-esteem, but going one step up the hierarchy of needs to self-actualization. Therefore, building one's sense of self-efficacy is crucial to enhancing one's self-actualization by having a vision or dream, setting goals and accomplishing tasks to reach that vision, and facing challenge in the process of attaining that dream (Maslow, 1954). In Danielson's framework (Danielson et al., 2009), she describes this as students actively participating and being curious and attentive to their tasks or assignments because teachers have set the stage with respectful interactions for a

positive, supportive, and friendly classroom setting where the students feel valued, loved, capable, and comfortable to tackle the activities. Maslow's work (2013) suggested that if "you can dream it you can be it."

Summary

This literature review highlighted educational barriers/factors that influence students' decisions to stay in school and graduate or to drop out of school. Danielson's studies outlined teaching and learning strategies regarding teacher effectiveness in Domain 2 of her work. Her detailed framework was grounded in Maslow's hierarchy of needs as they relate to student success in the classroom. In addition, Danielson's work was built on the work of Bandura's self-efficacy theory (1963). In considering each layer of the research mentioned above, Cross's 1981 perceived barriers of learning, situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers, was related to both Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Bandura's self-efficacy theory.

In describing what makes students stay in school, Danielson's framework states that effective teachers who possess the attributes of being accomplished or exemplary play a major role in providing students with Maslow's description of meeting physiological needs and a safe and secure learning environment as well as establishing the student/teacher relationships that make way for students to feel loved and a sense of belonging to build students' self-esteem and self-actualization, in alignment with Bandura's self-efficacy theory.

Cross's work focused on factors influencing students' decisions to drop out of school, which includes situational barriers, those factors arising from situations in one's life at any given time; institutional barriers, those factors related to educational activities

or environments that discourage students from succeeding; and dispositional barriers,

those factors related to attitudes and self-perceptions of a learner (Cross, 1981).

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

A qualitative methods design consisting of student interviews and focus groups was used to identify the factors that influenced students' decisions to drop out or to remain in one traditional school and one alternative school in Western Kentucky. These reasons were identified for students who attended a traditional high school and for students who attended alternative high school between the years of 2011 to 2016. This study provides information so the researcher could ascertain an understanding of factors influencing actions of graduates and dropouts who participated in the focus groups. This data assisted in answering the central research question for this study, which is "what are the themes and patterns that characterize students who elected to remain enrolled and drop out of traditional or alternative schools in a Western Kentucky school district?" Additionally, through an examination of the participants' responses in transcripts, the researcher gained greater insight into factors that influence students to remain in or dropout of the school district in this study.

Research Questions

This study examined the institutional, situational, and dispositional barriers identified by former students from the two schools in this study (Cross, 1981). These variables were related to the research questions guiding this study.

There were three research questions associated with this study:

1. What are the institutional factors that influence students' decisions to drop out of or to stay in school and graduate?

2. What are the situational factors that influence students' decisions to drop out of or to stay in school and graduate?

3. What are the dispositional factors that influence students' decisions to drop out of or to stay in school and graduate?

This chapter describes the research methods used in this study and how the data were collected and analyzed. This study explored and examined personal experiences of students who graduated from the traditional and alternative school in the case study district as well as those students who dropped out of both schools. Focus group interviews were constructed to address the central research question that guided this study.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research emphasizes complex and detailed descriptions of social and/or instructional settings (Saldaña, 2015; Slavin, 2007) often by immersing the researcher in the situation for an extended period of time. Marshall and Rossman (2011) found that qualitative research "takes place in the natural world; uses multiple methods that are interactive and humanistic; focuses on context; is emergent rather than tightly prefigured; and is fundamentally interpretative" (p.3).

The keys to the qualitative approach recommended by Marshall and Rossman (2011) guided this process. They included the following:

1. The researcher should keep in mind the trustworthiness of the overall design of the study;

2. Considerations of the ethical issues, assumptions of qualitative approaches or other approaches; and

3. The rationale behind specific data collection methods and their relationship with the research questions.

Methodology

The method for this study utilized focus groups to examine the issues surrounding students' choices to graduate or to drop out of school. In this study, students from a non-punitive, voluntary alternative school and a traditional school, both in Western Kentucky, were selected to participate in focus groups that targeted the factors involving their choices to graduate or drop out of school. The alternative school in this study was established in 2002 as an effort to decrease the number of dropouts in the school district in Western Kentucky. The school has a student enrollment that varies at any given time from 20 to 100 students who range in age from 16 to 60. The school takes referrals from local school principals, assistant principals, counselors, and central office administrators. The students who are accepted into this school must take an entrance screening test and must interview with the principal after a multidisciplinary team meets to complete the referral process. The alternative school in Western Kentucky has been named a model dropout prevention program by the National Dropout Prevention Center in Clemson, S.C., and has had more than 685 students to graduate from the school since its establishment. The curriculum is primarily online curriculum with some project-based learning and service learning integrated into the instruction.

Most of the students who come to the alternative school are dropouts or potential dropouts from local schools. Each young person who enters the alternative school has a unique story as well as a personal reason or reasons why he or she dropped out of school

and decided to re-enroll in a school to get his/her high school diploma. This researcher explored those reasons by conducting semi-structured focus groups.

This qualitative study utilized interview guides developed by the researcher to answer the research questions (See Appendix C). The study examined the opinions and experiences of students who were identified as attending traditional and alternative schools and who can be categorized in one of two categories: those who graduated and those who dropped out. Krueger and Casey (2009) suggested that major issues must be considered when selecting the method of data collection including sampling, the type of population, question form and content, response rates, potential costs of the study, available facilities, length of data collection, and possible comparison data collection methods. As a result, focus groups were selected as the method for this study.

Upon choosing the method of data collection, this researcher chose the settings where the focus groups took place (Fowler, 2009). The researcher considered neutral sites within the county of this case study that helped the participants feel welcomed, comfortable, and at ease. The sites were places that can hold a group of seven to nine people, which is a relatively small group. In considering these neutral sites, the researcher ensured that they are not places known for parties, counseling, or any other location that may stimulate negative emotions or feelings, such as a courthouse or church.

Population and Sample

Qualitative studies traditionally are recommended to have 10 to 12 people, but the ideal size for noncommercial topics are five to eight participants (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Because of a limited population, four students from each of the 2011 to 2016 school years were randomly selected from the traditional and alternative schools. This

grouping was further identified by those who graduated and those who did not. This yielded a total sample of 80 students. Table 1 summarizes the sample composition.

Table 1

Composition of Groupings by Year, School, and Type

	Initial Composition of Groupings				
	Traditional high school		Alternative high school		
	Initial sample		Initial sample		
School year	UG*	UD**	UG*	UD**	Total
2011-12	4	4	4	4	16
2012-13	4	4	4	4	16
2013-14	4	4	4	4	16
2014-15	4	4	4	4	16
2015-16	4	4	4	4	16
Total	20	20	20	20	80

*Ultimately Graduated; **Ultimately Dropped out

Procedures

The study consisted of the following distinct steps:

Step 1: Development of questions from literature

In the development of the questions for the interview guides, the researcher focused on common umbrella themes in the literature including institutional, situational, and dispositional factors that influence students' decisions to drop out or remain in school (Cross, 1981). Patterns in topics that emerged under those themes include attendance, student services (Nanney, 2016), student-teacher relationships (Danielson, 2014; Nanney, 2016; Wallace, 2016), employment (Wallace, 2016), educational values (Nanney, 2016; United States of Educational Research and Improvement, 1998; Wallace, 2016),

43

classroom performance (Berezow, 2017), and instructional strategies (Wallace, 2016).

The questions were developed to align with the common themes and patterns found in the

literature referenced in Chapter 2 of this study.

For content validity, prior to presenting the interview guides to the focus groups, a

content validity index was performed using the expert panel of educators consisting of

two high school principals, two directors of pupil personnel, two alternative school

teachers, one superintendent, and one assistant superintendent. A list of potential

questions (Appendix E) was presented to the expert panel for their review. Upon a

review, each panel member rated each question on a Likert scale of 1 (not relevant); 2

(somewhat relevant); 3 (quite relevant); and 4 (highly relevant). A content validity index

was computed on each of the question items (Appendices F, G, & H). All items received

a Kappa value of >0.871 (Appendix H), which was judged to be excellent (Polit, Beck, &

Owen, 2007).

Step 2: Identification of focus group participants

The sample of students for this study was randomly selected by the district-level

administrators for this study. This process yielded a total of 80 randomly selected

students to serve as focus group participants.

Step 3: Conduct focus groups

Prior to conducting the focus groups, this researcher received letters of support

from the district superintendent, assistant superintendent, and director of pupil personnel

to conduct the research. In addition, this researcher contacted the superintendent for

approval to use one of the district's schools as the site for focus group meetings because

it was a secure and convenient site for the focus group sessions to be conducted.

Following the initial approvals from the Western Kentucky school district officials, this researcher obtained clearance from the IRB (see Appendix A) and began the study.

Potential participants were informed about the study by a letter (see Appendix D) that was emailed, mailed, or delivered in person. Chosen participants signed an informed consent form (see Appendix B). This procedure was repeated for the second round of participants selected. Prior to each session, each participant was given time to preview the interview guide to give them an opportunity to familiarize themselves with the questions to be discussed in the session. Any term unfamiliar to the focus group participants was reviewed before the session began (Fowler, 2009).

After several attempts to contact participants, it became evident that it would be unworkable to get all of the participants initially planned to take part in this study. The researcher scheduled more than 15 focus group sessions that either had no participants or as few as one participant. These initial attempts only yielded 16 participants, most of whom were in the graduation category in this study. The complications experienced in the collection of data will be addressed in more depth in the limitations section of this study.

Because of a low number of participants, this researcher went back to the IRB for approval to use small groups, comprised of former students from both studied groups and both high schools. This researcher also requested from the school district that more participants be randomly selected from the remaining potential former students in the original pool of possible participants.

Upon receiving the approval on the addendum to the original IRB application, the researcher obtained another lot of randomly selected graduates and dropouts from both the high schools. The same issues arose with this set of potential participants as occurred with the first set. Ultimately, a total of 11 students agreed to participate in the focus group sessions.

The format for all sessions was identical. Each participant was provided with an identification number so that their names and personal information would not be disclosed. After the identification numbers were given, the researcher asked the participants several probing questions to serve as conversation starters about their decision-making processes related to school completion. Each focus group was interviewed and digitally recorded.

The focus group sessions lasted approximately 45 minutes in length and timed for consistency. Each session was audio-taped. Participants were given time within the 45-minute timeframe to read the consent form. To affirm that confidentiality and privacy was a priority, the participants were given a copy of the consent form, the IRB approval, and contact information. At this point, an assigned number was placed on the table in front of each participant to assist the note-taker and moderator ensure accuracy of coding during the transcription.

The topics discussed in the focus groups varied depending on the different opinions students shared with in the discussion. The researcher moderated the sessions with the assistance of a co-moderator who was trained in the procedures of focus group procedures (Krueger & Casey, 2009). This helped ensure that the sessions stayed on topic

and did not stray too far away from the intended purpose of soliciting student responses to the various questions.

The moderator communicated clearly the procedural process of the meeting; remained objective, neutral, and nonjudgmental; and conveyed a respect for the participants (Krueger & Casey, 2009). In a semi-structured format, bias in participant responses was avoided because each group received the same questions as Krueger and Casey (2009) suggested. In the event it became necessary for the researcher to intervene, the semi-structured format gave her the opportunity to do so (Seidman, 2006).

After each session was completed, the moderator transcribed the audio-taped sessions for analysis. The moderator had control of the interactions among the participants and was careful not to lead the discussion into a detour as suggested by Krueger and Casey (2009) and Saldaña (2015).

Analysis of the Data

Analysis of qualitative data begins throughout the data collection. Slavin (2007) suggested that researchers need to organize data and generate themes or categories in data analysis. Marshall and Rossman (2011) agreed with Slavin (2007), but added that in data analysis the researcher must test hypotheses against the data, search for various explanations, and then write the report.

In this study, the researcher collected data and organized it by using category construction, which is what human minds do on their own accord as Saldaña (2015) suggested. In addition, a descriptive analysis process was conducted to provide evidence of the views of scenarios, background data, and detailed case descriptions of those participating in the study.

To accomplish this, the researcher analyzed more than 35 hours of transcribed data from the focus groups by using the category construction process in coding the participants' comprehensive descriptions of their individual perceptions into themes and patterns (Saldaña, 2015) as to the reasons why they did not complete their high school education or continued to graduate.

Ethical Considerations

Considering consent, human subjects, and ethics are vital when doing research in the public arena. Ethics in educational research is monitored and evaluated to protect human subjects within the research. Thus, the researcher must maintain ethical and professional standards throughout the investigation process. This process involved submitting the proposal along with the details of the study for review to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) or human subjects' committee (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

When conducting focus-group interviews, ethical issues may arise that center on the dynamics of power and influence that consist in any group (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). In that respect, it is important that participants of the focus groups trust the researcher. That trust must be built to ensure the focus group members feel safe and protected. To assist with this issue, a consent letter was signed as an agreement of confidentiality between the respondent and the researcher at the time and date of the collection of the data.

To maintain and focus on the sessions and the narratives and stories of the participants, the researcher must set aside personal experiences. This ethical consideration is essential to maximize the data. In accordance with the Code of Ethics

and Standards of Practice of the American Counseling Association (2005), the primary researcher and note-taker followed the same mandated standards.

Permission to conduct this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), according to the University's Assurance of Compliance Agreement with the Department of Health and Human Services. The researcher applied for the permission because as defined as the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) as "a systematic investigation designed to develop and contribute to generalizable knowledge" (Interview Institutional Review Board, n.d. para. 3), which included survey and interview research.

Limitations

Initially, the researcher attempted to contact 40 dropouts and 40 graduates randomly selected by the expert panel of school administrators over the course of this study (see Table 1). Following the initial solicitation for participants, the number of returned letters with outdated addresses limited the effective population to only those with accurate, current contact information. Many of the phone numbers and addresses had been changed or were no longer in use.

Second, the second round of randomly selected potential participants yielded a total of 27 participants from both groups. An equal number of participants in each school year was not represented as initially planned. Only 15% of the initial number of dropouts and 52.5% of the initial number of graduates participated, which means out of the initial sample of 40 graduates from both schools, only 21 participated, and out of the initial sample of 40 dropouts only six participated.

Third, only students from two of the high schools in the district were analyzed in this study, which limited the applicability of the findings to those schools. Other schools

in different districts may not be the same as the school district in this study, especially the unique efforts made by the district to address the dropout program.

Fourth, female students who have gotten married were difficult to locate because their last names more than likely changed. Tracing their married names was difficult to do.

Fifth, of the potential participants in the initial round randomly selected, 13 of those were either incarcerated at the local jail or elsewhere in the Kentucky state prison system.

Sixth, technical difficulties were experienced with the audio-recording device in some of the interviews. As a result, detailed notes had to be transcribed for the interviews in which the difficulties were experienced.

Seventh, triangulation was not possible in this qualitative study due to the nature of the type of study and to the availability of different methods to gather related data.

Eighth, the Danielson framework limited the categories of outcomes for this study. The overlapping that occurred in the results of this study could have been more defined if the framework for teachers had not used.

Finally, dropouts and graduates were less likely to respond to efforts to get them to participate in the study than originally thought. This researcher went to job sites, grocery stores, restaurants, and other public establishments searching for potential participants who were on the list of randomly selected former students.

These limitations resulted in a total of 27 students participating in the study. Table 2 describes the initial and final composition for this study.

Table 2

Initial and Final Sample Composition by School Type and Student Grouping

| | Traditional High School | | | | Alternative High School | | | |
| | Initial Sample | | Final Sample | | Initial Sample | | Final Sample | |
Year	UG*	UD**	UG*	UD**	UG*	UD**	UG*	UD**
2011-12	4	4	0	1	4	4	2	0
2012-13	4	4	3	0	4	4	2	1
2013-14	4	4	2	0	4	4	0	1
2014-15	4	4	0	0	4	4	1	2
2015-16	4	4	3	1	4	4	8	0
Total	20	20	8	2	20	20	13	4

*Ultimately Graduated; **Ultimately Dropped out

Summary

This chapter details the methods used to conduct focus groups as its primary source of data collection. Twenty-one graduates and six dropouts from the Western Kentucky school district were interviewed by using interview guides, which were constructed based on empirical and theoretical issues, derived from the literature were used for the interviews. This study addresses the qualitative research, data collection, instrument development, procedures, analysis of the data, validity and ethical standards.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

Introduction

This study examined factors that influenced students' decisions to either dropout or graduate from a traditional high school and an alternative school in a Western Kentucky county school district. After using Danielson's framework (2014) to identify possible themes and patterns, the researcher collected data from interview guides from focus groups in order to explore circumstances of why students made the decisions to remain in or drop out of either school in the school district in this study. This chapter is organized in accordance with the evidence collected for each research question. Each focus group interview was held in a neutral location (i.e., community center all-purpose room, or YMCA meeting room) with sessions ranging from 45 to 75 minutes in length. Each participant was given a copy of the interview guide for reference during the focus group sessions. The note-taker took notes by hand while the sessions were audiotaped. The moderator read the questions and facilitated the sessions. Technical difficulty with the audiotaping occurred in some of the sessions.

Under the dropout category of participants, there were a total of six, one from 2012, one from 2013, one from 2014, two from 2015, and one from 2016. In the graduate category, there were 21 participants, 11 graduated in 2016; one in 2015; two in 2014; five in 2013; and two in 2012. Refer to Table 3 for a breakdown of participants in the nine focus groups.

Table 3

Study Participants by High School and Group

	Breakdown of Study Participants by High School and Group									
School Type	Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2	Focus Group 3	Focus Group 4	Focus Group 5	Focus Group 6	Focus Group 7	Focus Group 8	Focus Group 9	Total
Traditional High School Graduates	2	2	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	8
Alternative High School Graduates	2	0	2	3	3	3	0	0	0	13
Traditional High School Dropouts	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	2
Alternative High School Dropouts	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	2	4
Total	4	2	6	3	3	3	2	1	3	27

Upon completing the category construction process, six major categories of phenomena emerged:

1. Attendance. This theme was determined from students' responses to questions on two interview guides, one for graduates and one for dropouts, on the number of absences they had in the past three years and why those absences occurred.

2. Discipline and/or legal issues. This theme was determined from the students' responses to questions from the interview guides regarding whether or not they

experienced discipline and/or legal issues during their high school tenure, the circumstances surrounding those issues, if any, and what those issues were.

3. Employment. This theme consisted of responses from participants who were dropouts. Students were asked to respond to questions on the interview guides regarding the following: Why did they work? Did they work full- or part-time? Was employment a determining factor in their choices to drop out? The graduates did not comment on this theme.

4. Student-educator relationships. This theme was determined by the repeated responses to the interview guides from the participants in each focus group after they were asked what worked for them in the classroom and influenced their decisions the most.

5. Educational and/or remediation services. This theme emerged when participating former students responded to questions from the interview guides regarding what educational/remediation services were offered in their particular school and if the services improved their performance and/or attitudes toward completion of school.

6. Educational values. This theme derived from the questions on the interview guides as to whether family and/or friends emphasized the importance of graduating from high school and the repeated responses of the participants.

Following this codification, comments in each theme were further classified into positive, negative, or numerical designations. This final classification provided insight to why students made decisions to either quit school or to graduate.

Analysis of Focus Group Responses

Research Question 1

Research Question 1: What are the institutional factors that influence students' decisions to drop out of or stay in school?

Focus groups were asked about what factors influenced their decisions regarding high school completion related to institutional barriers. Institutional barriers revealed in this research were the following: employment (need to work and work schedule or location) and educational/remediation services (and provisions supplied by them).

Employment. The comments regarding institutional barriers from each of the participants yielded limited responses. Only the students who were dropouts responded to the questions on the interview guides that related to employment. Under this theme, several patterns emerged. They include the following: need for more money and hours due to being kicked out of their parents' home or living on their own or having a girlfriend pregnant and needing to provide for the mother and baby.

In Focus Groups 1-6, not one participant expressed that he or she had employment during high school.

In Focus Group 7, the two participants had varying answers about employment. Participant 1 said he got a job at a local (deleted) plant and worked nights. He said this was a necessity because his family needed money. He quit school after getting a job to get more work hours and more rest. "It was hard to work from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. and then go right into school for seven hours."

Participant 2 said he did not quit school to work and it had no bearing on his decisions whatsoever.

In Focus Group 8, Participant 1 said employment was not a factor in her quitting school. She said she just did not believe in herself so she quit going to school. "I don't work now so working was not an issue for me to drop out of school. I wanted out of my house so I got married," she added.

Participant 2 said he had to get a full-time job to support him and his girlfriend who was expecting. "My girlfriend was pregnant and I had to have a job," he said. "I 100% needed a full-time job."

In Focus Group 9, the two dropouts in this group said they needed more hours and had to make more money. Participant 1 said even though he had gone through some terrible medical problems, he and his father did not have a good relationship. As a result, this participant said he was kicked out of his home and had to find a full-time job. He said he got a good job making decent wages at an industrial contract facility. He said he is going to enroll in the alternative school so he can finally get his high school diploma. He said he wanted to go to lineman school.

Participant 2 said he dropped out of school because he was working as a (deleted) at a restaurant, but could not pay his rent doing that. He added that he had to find more stable and higher paying employment in order for him to survive. He said he, too, no longer lived with his parents.

Educational, remediation services. In this theme, participants referenced project-based learning (David, 2008), service learning (Jordan & Schraeder, 2001) as well as the more common educational services such as credit recovery, tutoring, one-to-one instruction, placement in a specialized academy and placement at the alternative school. These services or strategies were designated as the patterns under this theme.

No former student in this study received special education or 504 services during their high school education; however, most of them participated in some type of remediation or educational services.

In Focus Group 1, participants stated they used educational and remediation services during their time in high school. They listed credit recovery, success lab, tutoring before and after school, and placement in one of two specialized academies for at-risk students. Three of the four stated that placement in one of the two specialized academies was the most helpful to them receiving their high school diploma.

In Focus Group 2, both students participated in before and after school tutoring, but nothing else. Each said it was beneficial because neither one of them failed any classes during high school.

In Focus Group 3, four of the six students participated in some kind of remediation services. Two did not. The services they cited included credit recovery, the alternative school, the specialized academy, project-based learning, service learning, and tutoring. Each participant stated that the alternative school was the most helpful in remediation services because they could do the work at their own pace with one-to-one assistance.

In Focus Group 4, all three of the subjects participated in credit recovery, tutoring, and one-to-one instruction. They all agreed the services were crucial in them receiving their high school diplomas.

In Focus Group 5, participants stated they used credit recovery and the alternative school. All three said both remediation services were beneficial, but placement at the alternative school seemed to have helped the most.

In Focus Group 6, the three graduate participants gave different opinions and varied descriptions of the educational/remediation services they utilized during high school. Participant 1 said he did not use any remediation services. He said his motivation came from within himself and he did his own remediation.

The two other students said attending the alternative school worked best for each of them to graduate. Participant 2 said the one-to-one assistance from the teachers at the alternative school is what was the determining factor in him graduating.

Participant 3 stated he believed the self-paced individual instruction seemed to work best for him at the alternative school. He said he had credit recovery at the traditional school, but he did not get the academic support he needed from the traditional school staff.

In Focus Group 7, the two participants stated they participated in all the educational/remediation services offered to regular education students including credit recovery, before and after school tutoring, and one-to-one instruction at the alternative school. Both students were dropouts, but one student re-enrolled in the alternative school to eventually graduate.

Participant 1 stated he enjoyed the project-based learning he did at the alternative school as well as the service learning project that he did in one of the programs the alternative school offered, which was the Workforce Investment Act program (WIA).

Participant 2 stated that in addition to the above-mentioned services, he participated in the specialized academy placement, but was not successful.

In Focus Group 8, Participant 1 said, "The high school didn't meet my needs, but the alternative school did." She added that she needed more one-to-one help than she was

afforded at the traditional high school. "The alternative school teacher came and sat down beside me and helped me work through any question or problem until I understood it. I didn't get that kind of attention at the traditional school.

"We also did service learning by performing community service for the people around in our community. That was so much fun and we learned so much," she added.

Participant 2 in FG8 stated educational/remediation services were very helpful in any success he had in the classroom. "What worked for me was a teacher sitting beside me and asking me little questions that would help either guide me to the answer or guide me to the right way of thinking. When someone explained it like that, I understood whatever I was working on. One-on-one helped a lot."

In Focus Group 9, Participant 1 stated he used the response-to-intervention (RtI) for science remediation service in his traditional school. He added that he also utilized afternoon tutoring. Although he did use the remediation services, he said it did not help keep him from dropping out of school. Participant 2 stated he did not participate in any educational/remediation services during high school.

The key findings for Research Question 1 were employment and educational/remediation services. These themes were the two institutional factors identified by the respondents as being the factors that influenced their decisions to drop out of school or to graduate.

Research Question 2

Research Question 2: What are the situational factors that influence students' decisions to drop out of or stay in school?

Focus groups were asked about what factors influenced their decisions regarding high school completion related to situational barriers. Situational barriers are events that occur in one's life at any given time, for example, a loss of a job, death in the family, or lack of time, money, or child care. The themes that emerged in this study included attendance and discipline and/or legal issues.

Attendance. When categorizing the themes discovered in the data, the researcher discovered that many students had missed more than 50 days in the past three years. In the Commonwealth of Kentucky, a student is considered truant if he/she misses more than 3 days of school and those days are considered unexcused absences, according to KRS 159.150.

According to the high school in this study's handbook, the board policy of the district represented in this study states that students will be excuses for up to 10 days if the absence is accompanied by a phone call to the school on the date of the absence or with a note turned into the school upon return. If these procedures are not followed, then the absences will be considered unexcused. All absences above 10 will result in make-up time hours and will be unexcused without a doctor's note. For each absence above 10, a student will receive six hours make-up time.

Many of the participants in this study admitted they were truant and either had legal charges filed against them for that truancy, or had large amounts of make-up hours they owed to the traditional school.

In Focus Group 1, the participants responded to questions concerning the topic of attendance. All four of the participants were graduates. Two of them said they missed more than 10 days of school, which is considered truant, due to their pregnancies. In

addition, they commented more days were missed because of their children being sick and/or having to go to the doctor. One commented that she missed many times because she could not find a babysitter.

Participant 2 in FG1 said he did not miss many days of school, but when he did miss it was because he "just didn't feel like going." He commented that there are many other more important things to do besides go to school such as sleep and play video games.

In Focus Group 2, the two participants were from the traditional school. Neither one of them had any attendance issues; however, one had to go on homebound for a short period of time due to (deleted) surgery. He added that when he was on homebound, a teacher came to visit him a couple of times a week so that he was not counted absent for the time he was on homebound.

In Focus Group 3, there were six former students who participated. Four of the students missed more than 10 days due to not wanting to go to school, not getting along with teachers or principals, and being bullied. Two of the students said they only missed when they were sick. Three of them had missed more than 10 days and three had missed fewer than 10 days. Participant 6 said he had missed more than 80 days in the past three years because he "was not going to put up with the (expletive) at the school."

"I could go out and make money instead of just sitting on my (expletive) in the classroom not understanding what was going on," he said.

In Focus Group 4, there were three participants, two of whom experienced excessive absences and one of whom said he had not missed any days in three years. The two who had missed more than 10 days said they had truancy charges looming over their

heads until they were 18.5 years old. Participant 2 said she missed numerous days because she had trouble with a pregnancy and had to go on homebound. She added that after the child was born, he/she suffered from several health problems, so she had to miss even more school to take care of her child. Participant 3 stated she missed days because she hated school and almost every teacher she had in class as well as most of the principals.

In Focus Group 5, all three of its participants were severe truants who missed more than 50 days in the past three years. Participant 1 estimated he had missed more than 200 days in that time period. When asked why he had missed so many days, he said, "When I was in middle school, I was told that high school was fun where you do projects all the time and you don't just sit around and do book work. That is not true!" he exclaimed. "High school is one day after another sitting around looking at each other and listening to a boring teacher teach like 'Blah, blah, blah, (expletive)'."

"I started to come back to school regular when the horses came in ag," he said.

Participant 2 said he did not care about school in the least. "The best part of school was socializing with my friends. When they missed to go have fun, so did I." He added he knows more from working out in the "real world" than he learned from kindergarten to twelfth grade. Participant 3 did not expand upon her experiences with attendance.

In Focus Group 6, two of the three participants said they had not missed any school in the past three years. They said they liked school and were not in the habit of being absent. Participant 3 in the group said he was absent more than 50 times in the past three years because he was suspended so many times due to fighting and defiance. He

said his suspensions counted as unexcused absences so he missed more than the average student. He said, "I was always in trouble. I had a smart mouth on me and a bad temper. I fought a lot in school."

In Focus Group 7, the participants, who were both dropouts, stated they missed more than 25 and 30 days of school in the past three years. Both said they had truancy charges filed against them. Participant 1 said he missed so much school because he had "a more overpowering desire to work than to go to school or have a good relationship with my teachers." He added that grades did not matter to him so "going to school was pretty much something to do between jobs."

Participant 2 said he hated school and did not go because he was not going to "deal with the administration over there." He said he did not quit going to go get a job or anything like that. He said he quit going to school because he "hated it and grades were nothing but the teachers' opinions of you as a student."

In Focus Group 8, the two participants were dropouts. Participant 1 said in the last year that she went to school her major issue with attendance was that she had an infestation of bedbugs in her home. "That caused me to miss a lot of school because I had bites all over me and the school considered it like an infestation of lice."

Participant 2 said he missed a large number of days of school before he dropped out because he was trying to find a good job so that he could support his girlfriend who had just alerted him that she was pregnant. He said he hardly ever missed if he was sick, but when he found out she was pregnant, he had to go to doctor's appointments with her or he had to go job hunting. "My attendance in school did not matter to me at that point."

In Focus Group 9, both the participants were dropouts. Participant 1 said he missed more than 360 days of school in the past three years because of medical issues. He said he could not go to school due to his illness. He said he did go on homebound, but it still did affect his grades. He said he was not charged with truancy, but he did get several final notice letters in the mail about his attendance. He said his grades suffered from all his absences.

Participant 2 said he really didn't miss that much school during high school so it was not a big issue for him.

Discipline, legal issues. In Focus Group 1, three out of the four participants said they had no discipline or legal issues. All four of the participants were graduates: two from the traditional school and two from the alternative school.

In Focus Group 2, both of the former students were from the traditional school and were graduates. Neither of these students had any discipline or legal issues.

In Focus Group 3, six graduate participants discussed their experiences with discipline and legal issues. Two of the graduates, both from the traditional school, had no disciplinary or legal action taken against them during high school; however, four of them did. All four who had experienced discipline and/or legal issues faced terroristic threatening, assault, and other similar charges during their high school career. Those four stated that bullying was the main reasons why they received charges for terroristic threatening. Each one said they were being bullied and got tired of it so they lashed out at those who were bullying them. Participant 4 said he also got into a fight about his girlfriend. He said he was defending her honor. Participant 6 said he had disciplinary actions taken against him for being defiant and disrespectful in class.

64

In Focus Group 4, all three were graduates of the alternative school. Two of them said they faced several disciplinary and legal actions such as terroristic threatening, assault, defiance of authority, truancy, and abuse of a teacher. They both said they did not get along with their teachers at the traditional school because "they hated us." They added that the lack of cooperation and negative feelings the (name omitted) teachers had toward them led to their getting into trouble and having negative consequences. They said that alone led to them getting into trouble. When they were asked if their behavior had anything to do with their punishments, they both said, "It did not!"

In Focus Group 5, three participants who were graduates stated they all had to face disciplinary actions in high school. Participant 1 said he had abuse of a teacher charges as well as disorderly conduct. Participant 2 said he just got into one fight, but it was really a violent one so he received charges for assault. Participant 3 said he just served a few days in in-school detention for talking back to a teacher. He said that was just one occurrence so it did not affect his life that much.

In Focus Group 6, the participants had different experiences in disciplinary or legal issues. Two participants said neither one of them had any discipline issues to note; however, Participant 3 said she got into trouble for fighting several times and had to go to in-school detention, Saturday school, lunch detention, and placement at the punitive alternative school. All three of these students attended the traditional school before being transferred to the non-punitive school to graduate.

In Focus Group 7, Participant 1 said he had several charges against him while he was in school. He said he had assault charges for fighting several times as well as truancy

charges for his attendance. In addition to his charges, he said he had several discipline referrals and punishments for skipping class often and disrespecting the teachers.

Participant 2 said he never had any charges as a juvenile in school, but he had several discipline referrals where he had to serve Saturday school and in-school or lunch detention. He added that he "got kicked out of school for saying 'cracker'."

In Focus Group 8, the participants experienced different issues in high school. Participant 1 said he was in trouble several times for fighting and had charges of sexual harassment. He said he also had several placements in the behavior-based alternative school where he was given the placements for disrespect, fighting, and defiance of authority.

Participant 2 said she had no discipline issues other than truancy.

In Focus Group 9, both participants were dropouts. Both former students had no legal issues nor disciplinary action taken against them. One added he had a conference with a teacher about disrupting the class once because he did not have his medication.

The key findings for Research Question 2 as identified by the respondents were attendance and discipline and/or legal issues, both of which are situational barriers that affect students' attitudes toward school completion.

Research Question 3

Research Question 3: What are the dispositional factors that influence students' decisions to drop out of or to stay in school and graduate?

Dispositional barriers are related to attitudes, self-confidence, and/or self-perceptions toward themselves or their learning capabilities. This includes comments from other people that influence students' thoughts about their abilities and self-

perceptions. The categories that emerged from the collected data that aligned with dispositional factors included educational values and student-educator relationships.

Educational values. In Focus Group 1, three of the four participants stated they were encouraged to graduate high school. Participant 1 stated her parents and grandparents motivated her to finish her graduation requirements. "My school principal at the alternative school made the most difference in my decisions to complete my high school. She had faith in me even more than my family did."

Participant 2 stated that no one cared if he finished school or not. He said no one said they cared and not one person encouraged him to get his high school diploma. "If I didn't do it, it was all up to me. I was always told I wouldn't amount to anything, but I guess I proved that I do."

Participant 3 in this group said her family and friends encouraged her to complete her diploma. She said her grandparent told her if she completed high school she would give her a car and pay for her college. "I guess all that was my motivation to graduate. I also wanted to make them proud."

The final participant in FG1 stated he was pushed to graduate by his mother. "She pushed me and pushed me to get through school. I didn't want to disappoint her."

In Focus Group 2, the two graduates stated their families would not tolerate failure and they were unquestionably going to graduate high school. Participant 1 said, "From the day I began preschool, I knew I was expected to graduate from high school. That expectation was made clear throughout my life." Participant 2 agreed stating that no one in his family had ever dropped out of school and that there was never any idea or doubt that he would graduate from high school. Both stated that their families celebrate

graduations for weeks when anyone completes his or her high school education. "It's like a month-long party," one stated.

In Focus Group 3, the five of the former students said they were encouraged to complete school by their families and friends. Participant 1 said his parent would not allow him or his other siblings to drop out of school. "In my home, there was absolutely no question about us graduating. My mother had that expectation for us so we were going to meet that expectation."

Participants 2 and 3 stated they wanted to make their families proud by completing their high school educations. One stated although his parents encouraged him to graduate, he wanted to go to college because he would be the first one to go to college. He said his internal motivation was what influenced his decision to graduate the most.

Participant 4 said her motivation was her son. "I was always encouraged to finish my high school education, but when my son was born, I decided I was going to do it for him. I gotta make my baby proud," she added.

Participant 5 stated his father did not give him a choice to not complete school. He said his parents were supportive throughout his educational career and had the expectation that he would graduate from high school.

Participant 6 said no one encouraged him to graduate. He said the decision was left up to him whether or not to graduate. He said his family did not care about education other than making him go to school so they would not get charges against him not attending school.

In Focus Group 4, three respondents had varying comments on the topic of whether they received encouragement from anyone in their family or friends to graduate.

Participant 1 stated his mother expected him to graduate and that she would not accept anything less. "My momma said, 'Boy, you are going to graduate, or you will not be living in my house'," he said jokingly in the interview.

Participant 2 stated that from the day she entered high school her parents told her that she would graduate. However, she said when her father died she lost hope that she would. She said she went through some difficult times with her grades because of her grief, but ultimately, her mother helped pull her out of it. "That made all the difference in me graduating. My mom being there for me."

Participant 3 said he had a different experience in this family than the other two in the group. He said no one at home ever expected him to graduate or encouraged him to. He said, "I was told to go to school every day. They (his parents) didn't care if I actually did or not. I went just so I could see my friends. I just knew I didn't want to be a loser like other men in my family so I guess in a way their lack of interest was my motivator. I wanted more than being a welfare recipient like my parents."

In Focus Group 5, there were three respondents, all of whom were graduates. Each one said that they were motivated by their parents or grandparents to complete high school.

Participant 1 in FG5 stated he came from a single-parent family and that his mother expected him and his other siblings to graduate no matter what it took. He added that he did not graduate with his initial freshmen cohort, but he did graduate a year later.

"If my mother had not pushed me to get my high school diploma I would have quit when I got so far behind. I ended up graduating with my younger sister. (Expletive) was that embarrassing, but I did it."

Participant 2 stated she did not want to graduate because she had a boyfriend who did not want her to graduate, but her parents did.

"If I had done what he wanted me to do, I would have not graduated and been stuck at home with 10 kids to take care of while he worked at Walmart," she said. "I didn't listen to him. I broke it off with him and decided to move back home. I did what my parents wanted me to do and that was graduate."

Participant 3 stated he got all his support from his mother. His dad had passed away three years before he was supposed to graduate. However, he said he got no support from the educators at his (name omitted) high school. He said, "If I had listened to (name omitted) I would have committed suicide or been a bum on the street begging for money. I got no (expletive) support from anyone at that school."

On the other hand, he said, much of his support came from not only his mother but his principal at the alternative school. He said, "A lot of people talked down to me because I am (deleted) and seemed to think I'm stupid because of my (deleted). Not (name omitted), she always encouraged me to do my best in whatever like my momma did."

In Focus Group 6, all three respondents stated their family and friends encouraged them to complete their high school education. Participant 1 in this group stated that she was one of five children and her parents demanded that each one of them get a high school diploma.

"I may have been in a bit of trouble in high school and hated (name omitted), but I knew come hell or high water I was going to graduate from somewhere," she stated.

70

Participant 2 said he wanted to make his mother proud so he did whatever it took to get the credits he needed to graduate. He said he did have hundreds of make-up hours because he had missed so many days so he almost did not get to graduate, but he made those hours up just in time to be able to walk across the stage at graduation.

Participant 3 said she had some serious emotional issues throughout her adolescence and had to be hospitalized several times and she thought that she would never graduate. However, she said her foster parents always had faith she would graduate with her cohort class and she did. She said that faith is what helped her make the decision to graduate.

In Focus Group 7, the two dropouts said they were encouraged by their parents to complete their high school diploma for the most part, but Participant 1 said his father told him that he dropped out and "Look at me." He said his dad believed he was successful, but was a Social Security disability insurance recipient and had not worked in years. "Mom was the one who really pressured me to graduate."

Participant 2 said his parents really wanted him to graduate, but he had "absolutely no desire to complete his education. I basically wanted to do what I want to do."

In Focus Group 8, Participant 1 stated her family did not care if she graduated or not, but when she got married her husband was a continuous encourager. She stated she eventually re-enrolled in school and will graduate.

Participant 2 stated his mom pressured him to go to school and wanted him to graduate, but he said he "left her broken hearted" because he did not finish. He said she did not want him to be a dropout like her.

In Focus Group 9, the final group had two dropout participants. Participant 1 said he let his mother down because she always encouraged him to graduate. "My mother expected my nine brothers and sisters and me to complete school. I think it was closure to her that she did a good job as a mother."

Participant 2 of FG9 said his parents could care less if he graduated or not. He said his father kicked him out of the house and expected him to support himself at 17. He said he thinks deep down that his mother had her own way of motivating him to complete his high school education, "but she never wanted to make waves. Everyone else in my family completed school. I was the only one to drop out."

Student-educator relationships. In Focus Group 1, the three of the four graduates agreed that they had positive relationships with their principal and teacher at the alternative school, but not with their teachers and/or principals at their traditional school prior to them enrolling in the alternative school. One student said, "(Name omitted) was always stirring up some (expletive), if she had let me come in and just do my class work and not be (expletive) at me all the time I would not have hated that school so much."

Another student said, "I loved everyone at (name omitted). It saved my life. There no one was (expletive) at me all the time or up my (expletive) about this or that."

All three of the students with the positive experiences at the alternative school cited negative feelings toward educators at the traditional school.

The last of the four participants in this group said he just liked everybody at both schools and that he particularly liked his principal and his agriculture teachers. "I don't

know if it was just the kind of class or coursework itself that I liked or if it was the teachers. I get along with everyone anyway."

In Focus Group 2, participants said they had "great relationships" with their teachers and administrators at the traditional school. One participant said she thought of them as mentors. She said her teachers exposed her to media production where she served on the traditional school's (deleted). "It was a life changing experience," she added. "I call my teachers my friends because they are. They have helped me grow as a person."

The other participant in this group said he had nothing but positive things to say about his teachers. He said when he was a freshman he did not adapt very well due to feeling like an outcast, but as he grew older he befriended teachers as they became his mentors.

In Focus Group 3, all but one of the participants said they had negative relationships with their traditional school principals and teachers, but not at the alternative schools. One participant said, "At (name omitted), someone is always nagging on you for this or that and you are just one of the herd of hundreds. At (name omitted), I was like a part of the family. I felt like every teacher at (name omitted) hated me. I wasn't too fond of them either."

Another student in FG3 said she was hated by all her teachers or at least she said she felt that way. "I walked in every day and someone wanted to start in on me. All I wanted to say to (name omitted) was get the (expletive) out of my face, I feel horrible, my baby is sick, my head hurts, so (expletive) the (expletive) off. I never did though. I couldn't afford to be in trouble and take care of my baby."

Participant 3 in FG3 said he was lost in every class and no one would ever help him understand the way he needed to be helped. "I guess I'm an oddball learner because I have to see and do things to learn them or about them. Most of what we did at (name omitted) was book work or paperwork. I can't work that way. I have to have it hands-on. My teachers and principals didn't seem to understand that at (name omitted). They wouldn't even try to break it down for me. It was 'do it my way or else' in the classes. That made me hate the teachers because it made me think they didn't care about me."

"At (name omitted) we didn't necessarily have hands-on activities, but (name omitted) always broke it down so I could understand it so I could complete my diploma."

Another participant who said she had a negative student-educator relationship said, "(name omitted) told me I would never amount to anything and that I would end up in jail. That made me feel hated by my teachers and (name omitted). I am now manager of a restaurant, living on my own, paying my bills, driving my own car, and not on welfare. That (expletive, expletive) has yet to apologize to me for saying those nasty things to my face."

Another participant said she was not going to comment on the negative things teachers said to her face at her traditional school because she only focuses on the positive things. She had one positive relationship with a teacher at her traditional high school, but had two teachers at the alternative school that she admired and respected.

"With all the negative in the world, I can't focus on it. I focus on what (name omitted) and (name omitted) did for me at (name omitted). If it had not been for them, I would not have graduated," she added.

One of the six students in FG3 said she had no issues with any of her teachers or principals. "I loved all my teachers and principals. They took care of me at both schools. My life just got so hectic that I could not keep going to school six or seven hours a day. I had to take care of my family so I asked to be transferred to (name omitted). It's a perfect program for a student like me."

In Focus Group 4, three graduate participants said they experienced both negative and positive student-educator relationships at their two schools.

"When I was at (name omitted), someone always smiled to greet you and didn't have a bad word to say about anyone. I loved going to school. When I was at (name omitted), the first thing out of (name omitted)'s mouth was negative and offensive. It may not have been a curse word, but it was something critical like 'don't you own a comb or just get out of bed?' It was always something! No one ever said, 'You can do this' or 'I have faith in you.'"

One of the participants in FG4 said, "They always told me 'In the real world people don't treat you nice, so get used to it.' Well, not in my world, people don't talk down to me. That was such a toxic environment over there."

She continued, "I really didn't want to be referred to (name omitted) because I always heard it was for troublemakers. I learned it was nothing like what I had heard. I actually felt like a human being at (name omitted). I was treated with respect even when I wasn't being as respectful as I should have, you know, when I was having a bad day. No one ever yelled at me or talked down to me. Someone would counsel with me or just let me talk. I felt like I was cared about."

The last participant in FG4 said he just hated school and quit going for a long time because of how people talked to him. He said one teacher told him he was worthless and he might as well quit because he was not going to ever graduate. "That (expletive, expletive) had the gall to tell me I was worthless. Then, when I told her I recorded it, she lied. I trust no one at that school especially (name omitted).

"My question is this, 'Why is it that the teacher and the principal at (name omitted) never say negative things like that to students, but they are the ones that get talked about all the time?' Everything I hear about (name omitted) at the high school is negative and that it is not a real school, but since the first day I walked in the door, I always said it was more of a school than any school I have ever attended."

In Focus Group 5, two of the three graduate participants experienced both negative and positive student-educator relationships. One of the participants said she only experienced positive relationships with teachers and principals at both of the high schools she attended. "I think anything relationship is defined by the quality of communication that students have with their teachers. If the student acts offensively then the teacher or principal is going to respond accordingly.

The other two students stated they had negative relationships with teachers at both schools. She said, "At (name omitted) there are more teachers so I had more I did not get along with, but overall I had good relationships with most of them. At (name omitted) I didn't get along with (name omitted) because she was so super strict on us that I was afraid to breathe. (Name omitted) was not like that. She never approached me in an 'on-the-attack' way. She was like 'Let's talk a minute.' instead of yelling or pointing her finger in my face. I guess you could say she did not push anyone's buttons."

76

In Focus Group 6, two of the three participants said they just did not like school so they did not like the teachers. One in particular said he did not get along with one of the principals that was at (name omitted) when he was there. He said, "(Name omitted) always treated the jocks like they were the best and did not wrong. I was an old ag boy so he treated me like (expletive). I slammed him across his desk one time and from that day on we hated each other. I think I was the reason he left (name omitted) or at least that's what I tell myself. He called my work and asked to speak with me a few times and I got fired for getting too many personal phone calls. I had every right to slam him across the desk."

The second participant in this group said she had tried and tried to get referred to the alternative school, so in those efforts, bad feelings grew between her and her academy principal and counselor. She said that it got to the point that she just walked out of school and decided not to go back. She said after a few weeks, she was referred to the alternative school as she wanted. "They were being (expletive) and I knew what I needed to finish my diploma. They wanted to control me. I was 18 and I knew that I was not going to be successful at (name omitted)."

She added that the relationship she built with her alternative school educators is still positive and that she was especially appreciative of all the help she got in applying for college and financial aid.

In Focus Group 7, one participant said he did not get along with the principal at the traditional school, but he did not try to get along with him. He said he only dealt with one principal and that was definitely a negative student-educator relationship. However, he added he had lifelong positive relationships with his agriculture teachers, alternative

school teachers and principal, and one business teacher. "I still talk with those people today. I wouldn't spit on (name omitted) if he was on fire."

The other participant in FG7 said he just got "tired of jumping through all the administrative hoops at (name omitted)." He added that he just quit school altogether. I didn't go to school because I didn't want to ride the bus because the bus driver was a (expletive). I didn't want to go to school because if one teacher wasn't (expletive) at me one minute she was the next. Sounds like I just didn't want to go to school, don't it?" he chuckled.

In Focus Group 8, one participant said she did not have any negative feelings whatsoever with any teacher or administrator. The other participant said all his experiences with teachers and principals were positive except where he decided to break the rules. He said, "I just was being defiant. I didn't have any negative relationships with my teachers or principals. I just wanted things my way and my way only. No hard feelings."

In Focus Group 9, one participant said he had no negative student-educator relationships because he got along with everyone in school. He said he was particularly happy with his vocational classes and the educators there. He said he was referred to the alternative school because he was failing so many of his core classes, but it was not an indication that he had any negative relationship with anyone.

The other participant said he had "a very negative relationship with one of the principals at the (name omitted) high school."

"Can you believe that man told me I didn't have (deleted) even when my doctors called him and verified that I had (deleted)? I wanted to punch that man through the wall,

78

but, of course, I didn't. My mother even took in verification that I had to undergo treatments at two different hospitals not in this area, but that assistant principal told me I didn't have (deleted). How can I not have a negative student-teacher relationship with that man?"

That participant added that he quit school after he went into remission, but consequently enrolled in the alternative school.

The key findings for Research Question 3 identified by the 27 respondents were educational values and student-educator relationships. These themes are dispositional barriers that affect students' decisions related to high school completion.

Summary of Research Findings

An analysis of participant responses resulted in six identified themes undergirding the three research questions in relation to institutional, situational, and dispositional barriers affecting their decisions to complete school or not. These six themes were employment, educational/remediation services, attendance, disciplinary and/or legal issues, educational values, and student-educator relationships. Not all themes were mutually exclusive to an individual research question. For example, in the theme discipline and/or legal issues, which was prevalent under the situational barriers, the accounts given by the participants exhibited attitudes and beliefs that fall under dispositional barriers.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

Introduction

This study sought to answer the central question, "What are the themes and patterns that characterize students who elected to remain enrolled or drop out of traditional or alternative schools in a school district in Western Kentucky?" An additional purpose of this research was to identify and examine trends in the themes and patterns revealed in the qualitative analysis of the focus group interviews. This study considered three research questions:

1. What are the institutional factors that influence students' decisions to drop out of or to stay in school and graduate?

2. What are the situational factors that influence students' decisions to drop out of or to stay in school and graduate?

3. What are the dispositional factors that influence students' decisions to drop out of or to stay in school and graduate?

The data provided a better understanding of why 21 graduates made the decision to stay in school and graduate and why six dropouts decided to quit school. The study was conducted with former students from a Western Kentucky school district. This chapter discusses findings relative to the three research questions, the central research question, and the literature reviewed.

Summary of Findings

This study was undertaken to discover the factors that influence students' decisions to drop out of or remain in high school in a school district in Western Kentucky. Former dropouts of the district's two schools who participated in the study

were asked 19 interview questions aligned with the research questions to share their experiences and opinions as to why they chose not to complete their high school diplomas and if their families, friends, and others emphasized the importance of receiving their diplomas. Former graduates from the same two schools who participated in this study were asked 12 interview questions related to their reasons given as to why they stayed in school and as to how their family, friends, and others impressed upon them the value of a high school education and ultimately receiving their high school diploma. The findings that played a role in the both groups of participants and their decisions to graduate or drop out of school include employment, educational/remediation services, attendance, discipline/legal issues, educational values, and student-educator relationships.

First, quitting school to get a job or to get more work hours was a finding of importance in the dropout category. Four of the six dropouts said they quit school to make money at a part-time or full-time job. All four who stated they quit for employment said finding a high paying job with full-time hours was crucial in their decisions. These results agree with the findings of Cross (1981) that institutional barriers such as employment and educational services influence students' decisions to drop out of high school or to graduate. These results are also considered situational barriers because the respondents stated they needed to make enough money to support themselves and their loved ones. In contrast, the graduate participants stated that getting a job was not a top priority for them and that from graduating high school had to come first.

Second, most of the dropouts and graduates interviewed stated they used one or more educational/remediation service during their high school careers. They identified credit recovery, tutoring, project-based learning, service learning, placement in an

81

alternative school setting, placement in a specialized academy, and one-to-one instruction as the services they used most often. Some of the focus groups' members stated the specialized academy at the traditional high school and the alternative school played a meaningful role in their final decisions on whether or not to complete school.

Third, another finding of importance was that attendance played a significant role in both populations of former students. This is reflective of research by Kamenetz (2015), Hanover Research's *Best Practices in Raising High School Graduation Rates* (2014), Nanney (2016), and Wallace (2015) which stated poor attendance or attendance in general plays a vital role in student success in high school. It also suggested that truancy issues influence another finding in this research, which was high numbers of discipline and/or legal issues affect whether or not students decide to remain in school (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

Fourth, dropouts in this study had more disciplinary and legal issues than the graduates. Of the six dropouts who were interviewed, two had been arrested either in school or in the community at least once. The remaining four had truancy issues; three had truancy charges pending when they turned 18 years old. Upon them reaching of the age of majority, the legal charges were dropped. The graduates reported they did incur some legal charges, but those did not change their mind about graduating.

Fifth, 18 of the 21 graduates stated the educational values in their homes were positive. The participants stated that their parents, friends, and others encouraged them to complete their high school education so they could be successful in life. Three of the dropout participants agreed that at least one person in their lives had encouraged them to graduate.

Sixth, both graduate and dropout groups identified student-educator relationships as an important factor in their education. Of the six that dropped out, four of them said they had negative relationships with teachers and/or administrators These results confirm the findings of Danielson (2014), Nanney (2016), and Wallace (2016) that student-teacher relationships are crucial to a student's success in completing his/her high school education.

Conclusions

Although there were limitations regarding the sample size, the study enabled the researcher to gain insight about both groups. The researcher learned why the dropouts chose employment over an education; what kind of educational/remediation services were most effective for those who participated in the study; which group had the most critical attendance issues and why the respondents had those issues; which group had disciplinary and/or legal problems and how the respondents coped with them; how negative and positive student-teacher relationships affected each respondent in the school setting; and what educational values each respondent had in their family units and cluster of friends.

The barriers discussed in this study are not exclusive to any one theme. They often overlapped with one another in the different circumstances described in the focus groups. For example, a respondent's attendance issues may be rated as an institutional barrier due to the schedules and rules; however, it could be classified as situational as well because of an illness or injury. Attendance could also be categorized as a dispositional barrier if a respondent hated school and refused to go because of his feelings about a certain teacher or the school.

Implications

The results of this research have several implications. Students identified several variables that influenced their attitudes toward their education. They include positive student-teacher relationships as well as positive relationships with parents and friends, purposefully developing an effective classroom/school management program to avoid discipline and/or legal actions including attendance, and differentiating instruction and strategies including job shadowing, paid internships (which could lead to employment), smaller classroom size, and placement in an alternative setting.

The first implication is that student-educator relationships are vitally important to the overall success of all students as suggested in Chapter 2 by Danielson (2014). Students who have positive and supportive relationships with their teachers and administrators seem to attain higher levels of achievement than students who have more conflict in their relationships as mentioned in Chapter 2 by Maslow (1954) and Furrer and Skinner (2003). With this information, teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders can develop relationship building programs to improve the culture and climate of the schools. One suggestion for a program would be to develop a character and manner building initiative within a school or school district. This program would target all grade levels in regular and special education services. Teachers would be expected to participate in professional development and be held accountable to colleagues in their building.

In addition to this, schools should have procedures in place for identifying at-risk students at the preschool level and provide academic, social/emotional, psychological, physical, and economical interventions based on the needs, family, school, and

community culture. Interventions should include requirements for every student to be involved in extracurricular activities that strengthen the relationship between the school, family, and community.

Another implication of this study is that schools and all stakeholders become proactive and develop positive, effective classroom/school management plans that will help ensure students having fewer discipline problems and subsequently being referred to the court system. To do this, schools must be proactive, not reactive in their implementation and dissemination of school discipline. A well-developed plan could be one that is purchased from a reliable vendor or one that is research-based.

Below is a list of suggestions for achieving the implications:

1. To address behavior, continuously gather data on individual student behaviors and academic performance from preschool through high school and propose interventions when dropout indicators first appear. Those indicators are compiled in the Early Warning System designed by the Kentucky Department of Education.

2. Begin a program in every school where each student has an adult mentor who will help build trust and serve as an advocate for the child throughout their educational career

3. Provide and sponsor activities for as many students and their families to strengthen the connections between students, families, schools, and the community to form a network of support. In addition, develop strategies to provide students and families the opportunities to build relationships with one another within those non-academic settings.

4. Provide transition services from elementary to middle to high school with school programs and peripheral programs including professional and community organizations such a municipalities and churches, outside counseling services, and families to build positive, supportive partnerships.

5. Provide content-specific classes for at-risk and adult students in a non-punitive setting with blended instruction and content-specific teachers as well as wrap-around services. Students would benefit from being in classes designed to meet their academic needs.

6. Make graduation and success of at-risk and adult high school students a priority. To do so schools must provide top-quality education to at-risk and adult students to increase the success rate for students and to increase the graduation rate of the program for the district's overall success. To achieve this target, implement strategies to assist students in their academic, social/emotional, economic, and psychological progress.

Recommendations for Future Research

Further research could be done on the student-teacher relationship component of this study including a more in-depth case study of professional development and training on building positive student-teacher relationships. This study could be used as a reference in such future studies. Learning how to use professional development and other training on building strong, positive student-teacher relationships could benefit not only students, but also their families and the community by building trust, support, and commitment across the populations.

A second recommendation for future research is the effectiveness of the non-punitive alternative schools/programs on the overall graduation rate and successful

transition rate to college across a state or the country. In this study, participants referenced the non-punitive alternative school numerous times. A study like this would add to the knowledge based on how to effectively increase the success of at-risk and/or adult students.

Further research could be done on the institutional, situational, and dispositional barriers affecting teachers' and administrators' attitudes toward at-risk students. Students are often labeled early in their educational career, even as early as preschool. With a study such as this, educators and lawmakers could implement programs that would address the barriers earlier so that fewer students would become at-risk in their academic tenure. Some programs do exist; however, students are continuing to drop out of school across the United States. More effective programs should be implemented using research such as providing a wrap-around program with all the services that not only help provide basic needs, but psychological counseling, life coaching, job search skills, and community networking skills.

To expand on this research, a study with no coding scheme could be performed to find factors that influence students' decision either to drop out or graduate from school. This type of research would not limit the possible outcomes as using Danielson's framework for teaching did in this study.

Summary

Graduates and dropouts have many things in common. Both groups experienced barriers in their lives that can be institutional, situational, and/or dispositional; however, the ultimate reason or reasons why students decide to either drop out of school or remain in school and graduate was unique to individual students. Based on the results of this

study, it is not just one factor, but a combination of factors that influence students'

decisions to graduate from or to drop out of high school. These factors/themes that often

overlap include employment, educational/remediation programs, attendance, discipline

and/legal problems, educational values, and student-educator relationships.

This study provides a snapshot of why the participants of the focus groups made

their choices regarding completing or not completing school. In addition, the results of

this study provided some insight on possible interventions to prevent students from

making the choice to drop out of school.

REFERENCES

Alaimo, K., Olson., C.M., & Frongillo, E.A., Jr. (2001). Food insufficiency and American school-aged children's cognitive, academic, and psychosocial development. *Pediatrics.* (n.d.). Retrieved from http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/108/1/44.short

Alliance for Excellent Education. (2011). *The high cost of high school dropouts: What the nation pays for inadequate high schools.* Washington, D.C.: Author. Retrieved from Alliance for Excellence Education website: http://www.all4ed.org/files/HighCost.pdf

Azzam, A. M. (2007). Special report: Why students drop out. *Educational Leadership*, *64*(7), 91-93. Retrieved from http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/apr07/vol64/num07/Why-Students-Drop-Out.aspx

Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York, NY: W.H. Freeman.

Bandura, A., & Walters, R. H. (1963). *Social learning and personality development*. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Baum, S., & Ma, J. (2010). *Education pays, 2010: The benefits of higher education for individuals and society.* New York, NY: College Board Advocacy & Policy Center.

Becker, B. E., & Luthar, S. S. (2002). Social-emotional factors affecting achievement outcomes among disadvantaged students: Closing the achievement gap. *Educational Psychologist*, *37*(4), 197-214. doi:10.1207/s15326985ep3704_1

Berezow, A. (2017). *High school grades linked to healthy, unhealthy behaviors*.

    Retrieved from American Council on Science and Health website:

    https://www.acsh.org/news/2017/09/07/high-school-grades-linked-healthy-

    unhealthy-behaviors-11795

Best Practices in Raising High School Graduation Rates. (2014). Retrieved from

    Hanover Research website: http://gssaweb.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Best-

    Practices-in-Raising-High-School-Graduation-Rates-1.pdf

Bowers, M. E. (2017). *Why are 21st century students dropping out of high school? An*

    examination of causes, effects, and prevention (Order No. 10618513). Available

    from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (1964284798). Retrieved from

    http://libsrv.wku.edu:2048/login?url=https://search-proquest-

    com.libsrv.wku.edu/docview/1964284798?accountid=15150

Bridgeland, J. M., Dilulio, J. J., & Morison, K.B. (2006). *The silent epidemic:*

    Perspectives of high school dropouts. Washington, D.C.: Civic Enterprises, LLC.

Cash, T. (2004). Alternative schooling. In J. Smink & F. P. Schargel. (Eds.). *Helping*

    students graduate: A strategic approach to dropout prevention (pp. 168-170).

    Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education.

Chapman, C., Laird, J., & Kewal-Ramani, A. (2010). *Trends in high school dropout and*

    completion rates in the United States: 1972–2008 (NCES 2011-012).

    Washington, D.C. Retrieved from National Center for Education Statistics,

    Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education website:

    http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch

Crain-Dorough, M. L. (2003). *A study of dropout characteristics and school-level effects on dropout prevention*. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from Louisiana State University website: http://etd.lsu.edu/docs/available/etd-0710103-021510/unrestricted/Crain-Dorough_dis.pdf

Cross, K. P. (1981). *Adults as learners: Increasing participation and facilitating learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Danielson, C. (1996). *Enhancing professional practice: A framework for teaching*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Danielson, C. (2002). *Enhancing student achievement: A framework for school improvement*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Danielson, C. (2008). *The handbook for enhancing professional practice: Using the framework for teaching in your school*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Danielson, C. (2014). *The framework for teaching: Evaluation instrument*. Princeton, NJ. Danielson Group.

Danielson, C. F., Cleland, B., Mckay, C., Wright, K. F., Axtell, D. H., Bevan, P. M., & Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. (2009). *Implementing the Framework for Teaching in Enhancing Professional Practice: An ASCD Action Tool*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

David, J. L. (2008). *Educational leadership: Teaching students to think: Project-based learning*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. Retrieved from http://www.ascd.org/publications/ educational_leadership/feb08/vol65/num05/Project-Based_Learning.aspx

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The "what" and "why" of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry, 11*(4), 227-268.

Desautels, L. (2014). Addressing our needs: Maslow comes to life for educators and students. Retrieved from https://www.edutopia.org/blog/addressing-our-needs-maslow-hierarchy-lori-desautels

Dorn, S. (1996). *Creating the dropout: An institutional and social history of school failure*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

Dunkin, M.J., & Biddle, B.J. (1974). *The study of teaching*. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.

Faubert, B. (2012). *A Literature Review of School Practices to Overcome School Failure*. OECD Education Working Papers. OECD Publishing. http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5k9flcwwv9tk-en. (No. 68).

Fowler, F. J. (2009). *Survey research methods*. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications.

Friedman, M., & Friedman, R. (1979). What's wrong with our schools? *Free to choose: A personal statement.* Indianapolis, IN: The Friedman Foundation on Educational Choice. Retrieved from http://www.edchoice.org/The-Friedmans/The-Friedmans-on-School-Choice/What-s-Wrong-with-Our-Schools-.aspx

Furrer, C., & Skinner, E. (2003). Sense of relatedness as a factor in children's academic

    engagement and performance. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *95*(1), 148-

    162. doi:10.1037//0022-0663.95.1.148

Gomperts, J., & Nagaoka, J. (2017, March 27). Six Ways to Improve High School

    Graduation Rates. Retrieved from https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/

    2017/03/24/six-ways-to-improve-high-school-graduation.html

Guerra Perez, G. J. (2009). *Social, cultural, and institutional factors affecting the*

    transition from high school to postsecondary education for Latino students in the

    state of Kentucky. (Doctoral dissertation, University of Louisville). *ProQuest*

    Dissertations, and Theses. 377. Retrieved from

    http://search.proquest.com/docview/304917611?accountid=15150. (304917611)

Haley, S. A. (2007). *Dropping out of high school: A focus group approach to examining*

    why students leave and return. The University of Texas at Austin. *ProQuest*

    Dissertations and Theses. 184. Retrieved from

    http://search.proquest.com/docview/304793155?accountid=15150. (304793155).

    (Order No. 3285870)

Hanushek, E.A., Woessmann, L., Jamison, E.A., & Jamison, D.T. (2008). Education and

    economic growth: It's not just going to school, but learning something while

    there. *Education Next*, *8*(2). Retrieved from http://educationnext.org/education-

    and-economic-growth/

Holdren, J. P., & Lander, E. (2012). *Engage to excel: Producing one million additional college graduates with degrees in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics*. Retrieved from President's Council of Advisors on science and technology website: https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/microsites/ostp/pcast-engage-to-excel-final_2-25-12.pdf

Institutional Review Board. (n.d.). Human subjects' compliance/IRB. *WKU – A Leading American University with International Reach*. Retrieved from http://www.wku.edu/compliance/irb.php

Jordan, M. H., & Schraeder, M. (2011). Enhancing education through service learning: A project overview. *Development and Learning in Organizations, 25*(5), 21-23. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/14777281111159401

Kamenetz, A. (2015). High School Graduation Rates: The good, the bad and the ambiguous. *NPR Ed*. Retrieved from https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2015/06/09/412939852/high-school-graduation-rates-the-good-the-bad-and-the-ambiguous

Kena, G., Hussar, W., McFarland, J., de Brey, C., Musu-Gillette, L., Wang, X.,… Dunlop-Velez, E. (2016). *The condition of education 2016 (NCES 2016-144)*. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC. Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch.

Kentucky Department of Education. (2011). *Graves County school report card 2010-11*. Retrieved from Kentucky Department of Education website: http://applications.education.ky.gov/SRC/Profile.aspx

Kentucky Department of Education. (2014-15). *Graves County Schools school report card 2014-15*. Retrieved from Kentucky Department of Education website: http://applications.education.ky.gov/schoolreportcardarchive/Default.asp

Kentucky Department of Education school scores. (2017). *Graves County school report card 2016-17*. Retrieved from Kentucky Department of Education website: http://applications.education.ky.gov/SRC/Profile.aspx

Kentucky Department of Education. (2015). *Adjusted cohort graduation rate calculation formula for 2015 and 2016*. Retrieved from http://education.ky.gov/AA/Reports/Documents/Adjusted%20Cohort%20Graduat ion%20Rate%20Calculation%20Formula%20for%202015%20and%202016.pdf

Kentucky Revised Statutes. (2013). *School employees*. Retrieved from http://www.lrc.ky.gov/Statutes/statute.aspx?id=40245

Kiernan, J. S. (2016). *2016's most & least federally dependent states*. WalletHub Retrieved from https://wallethub.com/edu/states-most-least-dependent-on-the-federal-government/2700/

KPREP 2017: Kentucky Department of Education school scores. (2017). *The Courier Journal*. Retrieved from https://interactives.courier-journal.com/projects/kprep-scores-2017/

Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2009). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Leek, M. S. (2009). *Contributions of student characteristics that lead to success in alternative learning settings in American public schools.* (Western Carolina University). *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses*, 239-n/a. Retrieved from http://search.proquest.com/docview/305161137?accountid=15150. (305161137).

Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (2011). *Designing qualitative research*. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE.

Maslow, A. H. (1954). *Motivation and Personality* (1st ed.). New York, NY: Harper.

Maslow, A. H. (1968). *Toward a psychology of being* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Van Nostrand.

Maslow, A. H. (1993). Education and peak experiences. In J. Fadiman (Ed.), *The farther reaches of human nature* (pp. 162-172). New York, NY: Arkana.

Maslow, A. H. (2013). *A theory of human motivation*. Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing.

McFadden, E. J. (2010). *Changes in student outcomes following participation in an alternative school setting: A case study.* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Louisville). *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.* 253. Retrieved from http://search.proquest.com/docview/613830263?accountid=15150.

Meyer, J. U., & Holliday, T. (2012, April). Graduate Kentucky State Steering Committee. *Graduate KY - Home*. Retrieved from http://www.graduate.ky.gov/NR/ rdonlyres/90F78494-D608-41EB-A23F-2A71D3F3ED38/0/ GraduateKentuckyReport.pdf

Miller, K. K. (2006). *Demographic and economic profile of Kentucky 2007*. Columbia, MO. Retrieved from University of Missouri-Columbia Truman School of Public Affairs, Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI) website: http://www.rupri.org/Forms/Kentucky.pdf

Model Code Working Group. (2012). *A model code on education and dignity* (Policy Brief). Retrieved from Dignity in Schools. http://www.dignityinschools.org/files/DSC_Model_Code.pdf

Murphy, J., & Meyers, C. (2008). *Turning around failing schools*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, SAGE Publications Company.

Musgrave, B., & Warren, J. (2013, January 10). Kentucky ranks 10th in national education survey. *The Lexington Herald-Leader.* Lexington, KY. Retrieved from http://www.kentucky.com/news/local/education/article44396814.html

Nanney, L. A. D. (2016). *Perceptions of high school graduates and high school dropouts regarding early education experiences* (Order No. 10191177). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (1853452832). Retrieved from http://libsrv.wku.edu:2048/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.libsrv.wku.edu/docview/1853452832?accountid=15150

National Dropout Prevention Center. (2014). *Alternative schooling*. Retrieved from http://www.dropoutprevention.org/effective-strategies/alternative-schooling

Noble, T., & McGrath, H. (2016). The PROSPER Framework for student wellbeing. In V. Godewijckstraat (Ed.), *The PROSPER school pathways or student wellbeing: Policy and practices* (1st ed., pp. 25-82). Heidelberg, NY: Springer.

Partnership for 21st Century Skills. (2009). *P21 Framework definitions*. Retrieved from

    http://www.p21.org/storage/documents/P21_Framework_Definitions.pdf

Pletka, B. (2007). *Educating the next generation: How to engage students in the 21st

    Century*. Santa Monica, CA: Santa Monica Press.

Polis, J. (2013). Tune in and prevent dropout. *National Dropout Prevention

    Center/Network Newsletter*, *23*(3), 7.

Polit, D. F., Beck, C. T., & Owen, S. V. (2007). Is the CVI an acceptable indicator of

    content validity? Appraisal and recommendations. *Research in Nursing &

    Health*, *30*(4), 459-467. doi:10.1002/nur.20199

Powell, W., & Powell, O., (2011). *How to teach now: Five keys to personalized learning

    in the global classroom.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision &

    Curriculum Development.

Saldaña, J. (2015). *Thinking qualitatively: Methods of mind*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Schoeneberger, J.A. (2012). Longitudinal attendance patterns: Developing high school

    dropouts. *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and

    Ideas*, *85*(1), 7-14.

Seidman, I. (2006). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in

    education and the social sciences*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Slavin, R. E. (2007). *Educational research in an age of accountability*. Boston, MA:

    Pearson.

Smink, J., & Schargel, F.P. (2004). *Helping students graduate: A strategic approach to

    dropout prevention.* Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education.

Spalding, A. (2015). *Facing challenges with the new GED test in Kentucky*. Retrieved

   from Kentucky Center for Economic Policy website: http://kypolicy.org/dash/wp-

   content/uploads/2015/12/2015-KY-GED-Report3.pdf

Steigleder, S., & Soares, L. (2012, June 12). *Let's get serious about our nation's human*

   capital. Center for American Progress. Washington, D.C. Retrieved from

   http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/higher-education/report/2012/06/19/

   11721/ lets-get-serious-about-our-nations-human-capital/

United States Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2015). *Regional and state employment and*

   unemployment - November 2015 (USDL-15-2394). Retrieved from

   http://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/laus_12182015.pdf

United States Census Bureau. (2015). *Quick facts.* Retrieved from

   http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/21083

United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. (2016).

   Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Number of persons participating.

   http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/pd/29SNAPcurrPP.pdf

United States Department of Education & National Center for Education Statistics.

   (2012). *The condition of education 2012* (NCES 2012-045). Retrieved from

   http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=16

United States Department of Health and Human Services. (2016). *TANF caseload data*

   2015. Office of Family Assistance. Administration for Children and Families.

   Retrieved from http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/resource/tanf-caseload-data-

   2015

United States Department of Numbers. (2015). *American Community Survey*. Retrieved

    from http://www.deptofnumbers.com/income/kentucky/

United States Office of Educational Research and Improvement. (1998). *Students' peer*

    groups in high school: The pattern and relationship to educational outcomes.

    Statistics in brief. U.S. Department of Education. ED410518. Place of publication

    not identified: publisher not identified.

Vaughan, C. S. (2008). *Comparing the professional practices of teachers working in a*

    positive behavior support high school with practices of teachers in a traditional

    high school. Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. Retrieved

    from http://libsrv.wku.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/

    docview/1033587665?accountid=15150. (Order No. DP20075)

Wallace, C. M. (2016). *A high school dropout prevention program for at-risk students*

    (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses

    database.

Wayman, J. C. (2000). *Educational resilience in dropouts who return to gain high school*

    degrees. Colorado State University. *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.* p. 113-

    113. Retrieved from http://search.proquest.com/docview/

    304598747?accountid=15150. (Order No. 9981374)

What is the GED test? (2015). Retrieved from http://www.gedtestingservice.com/

    testers/about-ged-test

Wiersma, W., & Jurs, S. G. (2009). *Research methods in education: An introduction*.

    Boston, MA: Pearson.

WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY

Institutional Review Board
Continuing Review Report

If this is your third year for your Continuing Review Request, please complete a new application.
Otherwise; DO NOT include the complete application in describing
modifications and requests for additional time to collect data.

Name of Project: Factors influencing students' decisions to drop out or graduate from high schools in western Kentucky school district
Name of Researcher: Donna Crouch
Department: Educational Leadership

How many total subjects have participated in the study since its inception? # 16

How many subjects have participated in the project since the last review? #16

Is your data collection with human subjects complete? ☐ Yes   ☒ No

1. Has there been any change in the level of risks to human subjects? (If "Yes", please explain changes on a separate page). ☐ Yes ☒ No
2. Have informed consent procedures changed so as to put subjects above minimal risk? (If "Yes", please describe on a separate page). ☐ Yes ☒ No
3. Have any subjects withdrawn from the research due to adverse events or any unanticipated risks/problems? (If "Yes", please describe on a separate page). ☐ Yes ☒ No
4. Have there been any changes to the source(s) of subjects and the Selection criteria? (If "Yes", please describe on a separate page). ☒ Yes ☐ No
5. Have there been any changes to your research design that were not specified in your application, including the frequency, duration and location of each procedure. (If "Yes", please describe on a separate page). ☒ Yes ☐ No
6. Has there been any change to the way in which confidentiality of the Data is maintained? (If "Yes", please describe on a separate page). ☐ Yes ☒ No
7. Is there desire to extend the time line of the project? ☒ Yes ☐ No
    On what date do you anticipate data collection with human subjects to be completed?
5/1/2018

#5 Explanation - On the initial application, I am conducting focus groups to gather the data for my study. After attempting to schedule and conduct the focus groups, participants would not show up. This happened on numerous occasions. Also, due to 13 of the randomly chosen participants from the original pool being incarcerated, 11 locally and 2 in state facilities, I will not be selecting any of them for the study. Another two of the participants will not be selected to participate because one student has moved to Louisville and another cannot be located per his family, who shared that they do not have any contact or location on him.

As a result, I am requesting to conduct small focus group sessions where the participants would cross graduation or dropout years. The location of the interviews will be conducted in the same location as the initially proposed focus groups. I also ask for permission to go back to the original pool and randomly additional participants.

WKU IRB# 18-002
Approval - 10/26/2017
End Date - 5/1/2018
Expedited
Original - 7/10/2017

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Project Title: Factors that influence students' decisions to drop out of or graduate
from traditional and alternative schools in a Western Kentucky school district

Investigator: Donna Crouch, Educational Leadership P-12 doctoral program,
donna.crouch@graves.kyschools.us   270-970-7445

You are being asked to participate in a project conducted through Western Kentucky University.
The University requires that you give your signed agreement to participate in this project.
You must be 18 years old or older to participate in this research study.

The investigator will explain to you in detail the purpose of the project, the procedures to be
used, and the potential benefits and possible risks of participation. You may ask any questions
you have to help you understand the project. A basic explanation of the project is written below.
Please read this explanation and discuss with the researcher any questions you may have.

If you then decide to participate in the project, please sign this form in the presence of the person
who explained the project to you. You should be given a copy of this form to keep.

1.   Nature and Purpose of the Project: This project will explore how and why former
students of Graves County High School and/or Gateway Academy High School decided to either
stay in school and graduate or to drop out of school. The purpose of this project is twofold. It is
to help the school district understand areas of strength and weakness in its secondary schools so
it can make needed changes to benefit current and future students. Another purpose is that it is
for partial fulfillment of a doctoral program requirements for this researcher.

2.   Explanation of Procedures:

- Amount of time to expect at this activity – 90 minutes; light refreshments will be served
  prior to session starting.
- When answering a question in your pilot or focus group, please say your number first and
  then answer the question to ensure that your response is audio recorded accurately and
  your identity will be kept confidential in the recordings and report.
- Each participant will be given a copy of the questions to review prior to the start of the
  session.
- Participants will be given opportunity to use the bathroom upon the individual needs;
  however, a short break (less than 5 minutes) will be given every 30 minutes.
- The moderator and/or note-taker (assistant moderator) will read all documents aloud to
  the participants to ensure understanding and trustworthiness of questionnaire.
- All information gathered in this focus group will be transcribed and coded to produce a
  final report describing the themes, patterns, and characteristics of students who graduated
  or dropped out of the two schools.

WKU IRB# 18-002
Approval - 10/26/2017
End Date - 5/1/2018
Expedited
Original - 7/10/2017

3. **Discomfort and Risks:** There are no risks or anticipated discomfort expected throughout the pilot or focus groups.

4. **Benefits:** The information gathered in this study can benefit future students in Graves County. In addition, if you choose to participate your name will be entered into a drawing for a $50 Walmart gift card. Two cards will be awarded, one for each group of participants.

5. **Confidentiality:**
    *   Participants will complete a brief demographic questionnaire and be given an individual number that will be used as their identifier ensure accuracy of coding during the transcription.
    *   The researcher will transcribe and analyze the focus group session responses. The note-taker will sign a confidential agreement. She will also be given a copy of the signed agreement for her records. Only the researcher and the note-taker will know the identity of the participants.

6. **Refusal/Withdrawal:** Refusal to participate in this study will have no effect on any future services you may be entitled to from the University. Anyone who agrees to participate in this study is free to withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty.

You understand also that it is not possible to identify all potential risks in an experimental procedure, and you believe that reasonable safeguards have been taken to minimize both the known and potential but unknown risks.

_____   _____
Signature of Participant   Date

_____   _____
Witness   Date

*   I agree to the audio recording of the research. *(Initial here)* _____

THE DATED APPROVAL ON THIS CONSENT FORM INDICATES THAT
THIS PROJECT HAS BEEN REVIEWED AND APPROVED BY
THE WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
Paul Mooney, Human Protections Administrator
TELEPHONE: (270) 745-2129

WKU IRB# 18-002
Approval - 10/26/2017
End Date - 5/1/2018
Expedited
Original - 7/10/2017

INTERVIEW GUIDES

Interview Guide for Students Who Dropped Out of School

1. What school did you attend?

2. How long did you attend that school?

3. What year did you drop out?

4. Many times, students who drop out have truancy issues, what was the average number of days you were absent in the last three years you attended school?

5. What were some of the reasons you decided to drop out of school?

6. Were you working a job at the time you dropped out?

7. Did you drop out to work or to work more hours?

8. To what extent did your employment status (employed, unemployed) influence your decision to drop out of school?

9. How did the need or desire to work figure into your decision to drop out?

10. How did grades influence your decision to drop out of school?

11. Did you have any discipline issues?

12. If so, what kind of discipline issues did you experience in school?

13. Did these discipline issues influence your decision to drop out of school?

14. Think about whether the school met your needs and expectations at the time. How did it meet your expectations and needs at the time?

15. Share with us the types of academic help you received when you struggled with a concept or a class (tutoring, remediation, etc.).

16. What types of remediation services (tutoring, special education services, etc.,) did you participate in during your time in school? (When we talk about remediation

services let's include special education services or 504 services you received during your high school career.)

17. What seemed to work, and what did not?

18. If it did not meet your expectations, why or how did it not?

19. How much of an emphasis is placed on high school graduation in your home setting (by a parent, guardian, or important family member)?

Interview Guide for Student Participants Who Graduated from School

1. What school did you attend?

2. How long did you attend that school?

3. What year did you graduate?

4. Many times, students who drop out have truancy issues, what was the average number of days you were absent in the last three years you attended school?

5. Did you have any discipline issues?

6. If so, what kind of discipline issues did you experience in school?

7. Think about whether the school met your needs and expectations at the time. How did it meet your expectations and needs at the time?

8. Share with us the types of academic help you received when you struggled with a concept or a class (tutoring, remediation, etc.).

9. What types of remediation services (tutoring, special education services, etc.,) did you participate in during your time in school? (When we talk about remediation services let's include special education services or 504 services you received during your high school career.)

10. What seemed to work, and what did not?

11. If it did not meet your expectations, why or how did it not?

12. How much of an emphasis is placed on high school graduation in your home setting (by a parent, guardian, or important family member)?

APPENDIX D: INITIAL LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS

From: Donna Crouch, WKU educational leadership doctoral candidate

To: Former Graves County High School or Gateway Academy High School student

Regarding: Your potential participation in an in-depth study of high school graduates and dropouts from Graves County Schools

Hello _____:

I am sending you this letter in hopes that you will participate in a study of Graves County High School and Gateway Academy High School graduates and dropouts. My name is Donna Crouch, a 15-year employee of Graves County Schools and 10-year principal of Gateway Academy High School.

I will be holding focus-group sessions with 6 to 8 former students in each group. Each group will meet in the conference room at Gateway Academy High School, 100 East Lockridge Street, Mayfield, KY 42066. The session will be held at a date and time to be determined by the researcher and convenient for the participants. I plan to complete this process during the months of April, May, and June 2017.

Focus groups will be scheduled Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday evenings from 5:30-8:30 until pilot and all focus groups have been conducted. You will be asked just to attend one focus group session which will be approximately 90 minutes in length.

I have enclosed an informed consent form for your review. More details regarding the study are included in that letter.

I will be the only one with access to your contact information. All information gathered will be kept confidential and secure.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please return the enclosed informed consent form along with this letter with your updated contact information.

In addition, your name will be entered into a drawing for a $50 Walmart gift card. Two cards will be awarded, one for each group of participants.

Thank you for your cooperation in this important study!

Donna Crouch

116 Lakewood Drive

Mayfield, KY 42066

(270)970-7445

The enclosed sheet is for your contact information. I have also enclosed a self-addressed stamped envelope for you to return.

Please return this form and the informed consent form in the enclosed self-stamped envelope.

Your name:

_____

Address:

_____

_____

Email:

_____

Phone:

_____

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study on former students of Graves County High School and Gateway Academy High School. Your participation is crucial to a successful study!

Donna Crouch
WKU Educational Leadership Doctoral Candidate

APPENDIX E: CONTENT VALIDITY INDEX QUESTIONNAIRE

Rater name: _____

Rater job title: _____

Place of employment: _____

Rater's years of experience as administrator: _____

Content Validity Index for the focus group study on graduates and dropouts in Graves County and Mayfield

Please rate each of the following questions as to the extent each is relevant to the understanding why students decided to graduate or drop out of Graves County/Mayfield traditional high schools and the shared alternative school. Rate each question using this scale. Select only ONE rating per question. Please write suggestions of other relevant questions for this study in the space(s) provided at the bottom of this document.

1 = Not Relevant   2 = Somewhat Relevant   3 = Quite Relevant   4 = Highly Relevant

Questions	1 Not Relevant	2 Somewhat Relevant	3 Quite Relevant	4 Highly Relevant
Q1 What school did you attend?				
Q2 How long did you attend that school?				
Q3 What year did you drop out?				
Q4 Many times, students who drop out have truancy issues, what was the average number of days you were absent in the last three years you attended school?				
Q5 What were some of the reasons you decided to drop out of school?				
Q6 Were you working a job at the time you dropped out?				
Q7 Did you drop out to work or to work more hours?				

Q8 To what extent did your employment status (employed, unemployed) influence your decision to drop out of school?				
Q9 How did the need or desire to work figure into your decision to drop out?				
Q10 How did grades influence your decision to drop out of school?				
Q11 Did you have any discipline issues?				
Q12 If so, what kind of discipline issues did you experience in school?				
Q13 Did these discipline issues influence your decision to drop out of school?				
Q14 What year did you graduate?				
Q15 Think about whether the school met your needs and expectations at the time. How did it meet your expectations and needs at the time?				
Q16 Share with us the types of academic help you received when you struggled with a concept or a class (tutoring, remediation, etc.).				
Q17 What types of remediation services (tutoring, special education services, etc.,) did you participate in during your time in school? (When we talk about remediation services let's include special education services or 504 services you received during your high school career.)				
Q18 What seemed to work, and what did not?				
Q19 If it did not meet your expectations, why or how did it not?				
Q20 How much of an emphasis is placed on high school graduation in your home setting				

(by a parent, guardian, or important family member)?				
Question suggestion 1:				
Question suggestion 2:				
Question suggestion 3:				
Comments:				

Please note that after the initial survey/rating of questions, additional questions may be added upon suggestions of all raters. As a result, another survey/rating instrument may be sent you for your participation.

Thank you for all your help in this important study!!!
Donna Crouch
WKU doctoral student
270-970-7445
donna.crouch@graves.kyschools.us

APPENDIX F: CVI ANALYSIS DATA SET

Content Validity Index Analysis Data Set

RATER	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Q11	Q12	Q13	Q14	Q15	Q16	Q17	Q18	Q19	Q20
1	2	2	3	4	4	3	3	3	3	4	4	4	4	3	3	3	3	3	3	4
2	2	2	3	4	2	2	2	3	3	4	4	4	3	2	2	2	2	3	3	4
3	2	3	4	4	4	3	3	3	3	4	4	4	4	3	4	4	4	4	4	4
4	1	1	1	3	4	3	3	3	3	2	3	2	3	1	3	2	2	3	3	4
5	3	2	4	4	4	2	2	3	2	4	4	4	4	3	3	3	3	3	3	4
6	2	3	4	4	4	3	3	3	3	4	4	4	4	3	4	4	4	4	4	4
7	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	3	4	4	4	4	4	4
8	2	3	4	4	4	3	3	3	3	4	4	4	4	3	4	4	4	4	4	4

APPENDIX G: CVI PARAMETERS IN EFFECT

CVI Parameters in Effect

Number of Items to Evaluate	Number of Ratings/Raters	Minimum Data Value to Rate
20	8	2

APPENDIX H: CONTENT VALIDITY INDEX EVALUATION

Evaluation of Individual Items and Overall CVI Ratings

Rated Item	Number Experts	Ratings >=2	I-CVI	Pc	K*	Evaluation Of Kappa
CVI 1	8	7.0	0.88	0.031	0.871	Excellent
CVI 2	8	7.0	0.88	0.031	0.871	Excellent
CVI 3	8	7.0	0.88	0.031	0.871	Excellent
CVI 4	8	8.0	1.00	0.004	1.00	Excellent
CVI 5	8	8.0	1.00	0.004	1.00	Excellent
CVI 6	8	8.0	1.00	0.004	1.00	Excellent
CVI 7	8	8.0	1.00	0.004	1.00	Excellent
CVI 8	8	8.0	1.00	0.004	1.00	Excellent
CVI 9	8	8.0	1.00	0.004	1.00	Excellent
CVI 10	8	8.0	1.00	0.004	1.00	Excellent
CVI 11	8	8.0	1.00	0.004	1.00	Excellent
CVI 12	8	8.0	1.00	0.004	1.00	Excellent
CVI 13	8	8.0	1.00	0.004	1.00	Excellent
CVI 14	8	7.0	0.88	0.031	0.871	Excellent
CVI 15	8	8.0	1.00	0.004	1.00	Excellent
CVI 16	8	8.0	1.00	0.004	1.00	Excellent
CVI 17	8	8.0	1.00	0.004	1.00	Excellent
CVI 18	8	8.0	1.00	0.004	1.00	Excellent
CVI 19	8	8.0	1.00	0.004	1.00	Excellent
CVI 20	8	8.0	1.00	0.004	1.00	Excellent
Overall	8	7.8	0.98	0.009	0.974	Excellent

Polit, Beck, & Owen (2007). Research In Nursing & Health. 30, 459-467.

APPENDIX I: CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT FOR NOTE-TAKER

CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

THIS CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT (the "Agreement") dated
_____ day of _____ 2017.

Donna Crouch of 116 Lakewood Drive, Mayfield, Kentucky
(individually and collectively the "Information Provider")
AND

Gina Smith of 5258 SR 564, Mayfield, Kentucky
(the "Recipient")

I, _____, agree to serve as the co-moderator/notetaker for Donna Crouch's doctoral research study titled "Factors that influence students' decisions to graduate from or drop out of traditional high school and an alternative school in a Western Kentucky school district."

As co-moderator, I agree to assist Donna Crouch in conducting focus group sessions (i.e., registration of participants, audio and/or video recording session, etc.,).

Furthermore, as co-moderator I agree not to divulge the names of focus group participants, demographic information related to the participants, nor any information shared during the focus group sessions with any third party, verbally or in written form.

_____
Gina Smith, co-moderator/note-taker   Date

_____
Donna Crouch, moderator/information provider   Date

APPENDIX J: LETTERS OF SUPPORT

GRAVES COUNTY BOARD OF EDUCATION

Kim Dublin, Superintendent

2290 State Route 121 North · Mayfield, KY 42066

Phone: (270) 328/674-2656 · Fax: (270) 328/674-1561

July 5, 2017

Dear Western Kentucky University Dissertation Committee:

Why does one student choose to drop out of school and another chooses to stay until graduation? That is an important question. Answers to it often are elusive. As superintendent of the Graves County Schools, I am greatly interested in answers to such questions from a variety of students.

Now, my colleague, Donna Crouch, seeks these very answers from students in Gateway Academy High School, that she administers, and from Graves County High School. I am quite interested in finding answers to these questions myself. Therefore, when she invited me to participate, I agreed. Now, I ask for your approval for that same project.

I am confident I can provide assistance in several ways for this project because of my interest, experience, and background. I previously served as an elementary school principal and elementary instructional supervisor in this district. I am honored at the opportunity to learn from this project and will provide any help I can.

Thank you very much for your consideration.

In the best interest of students and educators,

Kim Dublin
Superintendent
Graves County Schools

GRAVES COUNTY BOARD OF EDUCATION

Kim Dublin, Superintendent

2290 State Route 121 North · Mayfield, KY 42066

Phone: (270) 328/674-2656 · Fax: (270) 328/674-1561

July 5, 2017

Dear Institutional Review Board:

I'm writing to inform you that I will be happy to assist Donna Crouch in her doctoral dissertation project! Specifically, I will participate in choosing individuals for focus groups among both graduates and dropouts of Graves County High School and Gateway Academy High School between 2010 and 2016.

As the Graves County School District's assistant superintendent and secondary instructional supervisor and as former assistant principal at Graves County High School, I am vitally interested in this topic myself. I believe I can bring to this project assistance in choosing participants who can and will provide genuine insight. I do not want to skew data; therefore, I will seek a broad and varied assortment of graduates. My main concern and contribution center on involving students whose feedback offer incisive stories and other data.

Thank you for this opportunity for Donna, our school district, and me.

Sincerely,

Carla Whitis

Carla Whitis
Assistant Superintendent
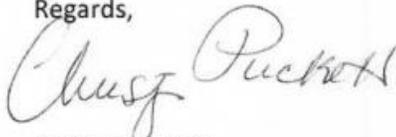Graves County Schools

July 5, 2017

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Christy Puckett and I serve as the Director of Pupil Personnel in the Graves County Schools. I am pleased, honored, and excited that my fellow administrator, Donna Crouch, has asked me to help with the research project in her pursuit of a doctorate.

In both my current role and previous role as an assistant principal at Graves County High School, I share Ms. Crouch's interest in this subject. Additionally, I believe that since I left the high school for my current position a few short years ago, that I can provide informed and interested assistance in selecting students for this project. Of course, I fully understand that we want to avoid skewing the data. I am happy to help to locate and involve students to provide suitable and worthwhile feedback through this project.

If you have any questions of me, please feel free to contact me. Again, thank you for this opportunity to help a valuable friend and colleague as well as our school district.

Regards,

Christy Puckett
Director of Pupil Personnel
Graves County Schools