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EXAMINATION OF URBAN HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS WITH HIGH SELF-  
EFFICACY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the graduate faculty of The University of Alabama at Birmingham,  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

2012

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# EXAMINATION OF URBAN HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS WITH HIGH SELF-EFFICACY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

RONALD BAYLES

EDUCATION LEADERSHIP

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of urban students in Central Alabama with high self-efficacy who have dropped out of school to pursue a GED. This study: (a) provided a platform that gave voice to students to share their lived experience as they made the decision to drop out of high school, (b) identified the character traits of students with high self-efficacy, and (c) revealed the essence of what motivated students to move to resilience after appearing to give up. A qualitative research design was used. The phenomenological approach provided the opportunity for participants to express what they experienced during the process of dropping out of school. Students attending a GED class were chosen using purposeful sampling. Students were given a questionnaire to determine efficacy. Participants ages ranged from 17- 19. This age was selected for the purpose of utilizing students who had not been far removed from the high school experience. Students were interviewed for 45 minutes using semi-structured questions. The four themes that emerged from the study included: parental involvement, absenteeism, teacher influence, and early challenges. The research revealed the impact early challenges had on students' perceptions of their ability to negotiate school.

Keywords: dropout, self-efficacy, motivation, GED

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to all of my family and friends. To my mother and father who sacrificed their entire lives to provide my siblings and me with the opportunity to dream and to pursue any heights imaginable. I dedicate this work to my family who sacrificed resources and patience that allowed me to remain focused and faithful to this educational endeavor. Finally, this work is dedicated to my friends who always offered words of encouragement and support.

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Thanks to my family for being there for me. To my siblings who have never ceased in encouraging me to go further, I appreciate your continuous support throughout the process. To my dad Robert Bayles who is my true hero, I say thank you and much love for being the greatest father a son could want. Who I have become stems from my vision of who you are. I love you for the example of greatness you have exemplified over the years.

Thanks to my church family that has always prayed for me and encouraged me to pursue the greatness that exists on the inside. Thanks to my pastors, Bishop Demetries

and Pauline Roscoe for creating an atmosphere of brotherhood from which my extended family emerged.

Finally, to the memory of my mother Gladys Bayles, my oldest brother Arthur L. Bayles, and my nephew Benjamin (Bennie) Bayles, I salute their honor in this accomplishment in the sense of unity the Bayles family believes in and lives by.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In 2009, 31.2% of students who started public high school in the U.S. failed to graduate (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). While this figure is lower than it was in the 1990s, the high school dropout rate has remained constant at approximately 31% (Barton, 2006). Critics of public education have long argued that high school dropout rates have been underreported, and the public debate regarding how to accurately report these figures has only intensified since the policy of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was implemented in 2001 (National Governors Association 2005; Swanson 2004; Warren 2005).

Historically, researchers have shown that students who fail to graduate from high school face a future with fewer opportunities, reduced income potential, and greater risks of being incarcerated (Data Analysis Systems, 2003; Shu-Ru Ou, 2008). According to the experts, students who drop out of school and work until the age of 65 can expect to earn approximately \$333,000 less than their peers who received a high school diploma (Chaplin, 1999; Murnane, Willett, & Tyler, 2000; Song & Hsu, 2008; U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Over the course of their lifetime, students who did not graduate in 2004 will account for \$325 billion in lost wages, taxes, and productivity. Furthermore, these individuals are 3.5 times more likely than their peers to be imprisoned at some point in their life (Anne E. Casey Foundation, 2010; National Center for Education Statistics, 2009).

Based on the research literature, there are many factors that contribute to a student's risk for dropping out of school, including (a) socioeconomic status (Heckman & Krueger, 2003; Orfield, 2004), (b) behavior problems (Hickman & Garvey, 2006), and (c) absenteeism and retention (Hickman, 2008). The dropout rate is particularly acute within specific geographic areas. According to Maralani (2006), students from families with low socio-economic status struggle academically due to the many stresses associated with financial issues at home. Additionally, students from low-income families currently dropout of high school at four times the rate of students from high-income families in grades 10 through 12 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). Researchers have also discovered that minority students are highly susceptible for dropping out of high school prior to graduation (ACE, 2008; Maralani, 2006; Reder, 1999; Tyler, 2003). In 2006, the status dropout rate was 22% for Hispanics, 11% for Blacks, 6% for Whites, and 4% for Asians (Princotta & Reyna, 2009). Experts have noted that students enrolled in the nation's urban schools are at an increased risk for dropping out with average rates of 35% (Patterson, Hale, & Stessman, 2007).

Based on data from the U.S. Census Bureau (2003), the high dropout rate in urban schools is an alarming problem in the southeast U.S., especially since this region includes both underrepresented minorities and groups with low income at significantly higher rates than the national averages. In the state of Alabama, at least 40% of students fail to graduate from high school each year, according to the National Dropout Prevention Center at Clemson University (2009). Based on projections from the National Center for Educational Statistics (2009), the problem of students dropping out prior to graduation will become even more complex as this population continues to grow increasingly more

diverse. While researchers have identified the students who are most likely to drop out of high school, questions of why continue to persist (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009).

For more than half a century, educators have looked for solutions to deter students' early exodus from school. One option that educators have identified is offering students an alternative curriculum through the General Educational Development (GED) program. In order for students to complete a GED, they are required to engage in the rigor of academics in a more autonomous setting. Many GED programs are held in nontraditional classrooms and are often facilitated by paraprofessionals (persons in education trained to assist professionals but do not themselves have professional license).

The environments in which GED courses are offered differ in a number of ways from classroom settings in traditional schools. Students who participate in the GED program are required to participate in self-diagnostics and remediation. Additionally, the student composition of GED courses tends to be more diverse than a traditional classroom with individuals from low socio-economic backgrounds and individuals with behavioral issues as well as the more recent addition of gifted students and students from high socio-economic backgrounds (Snyder, 2003).

Ries and Morales-Taylor (2010) attributed this shift in GED participation to the lack of attention available to gifted students in urban schools. In their study, the authors argued that the efforts expended to raise the performance of struggling students have overshadowed or diminished gifted programs in urban schools. More specifically, gifted students from low-income families were less apt to be monitored by a parent and reported a greater sense of disconnect than their gifted classmates who decided to remain in school (Gifted Child Today, 2007; Reis & Colbert, 2005).

There is increasing evidence that dropping out occurs even among students who report a high sense of self-efficacy, the extent to which an individual perceives that he or she possesses the ability necessary to manage a given set of circumstances (Bandura, 1977, 1994). As described in the literature, self-efficacious students are individuals who feel that they have the ability to meet or exceed the criteria established as requirements to graduate high school (Scholz, Gutierrez-Dona, Sud, & Schwarzer, 2002).

Using multiple regression analysis, researchers have demonstrated that the constructs of self-efficacy and scholastic achievement are closely related (Wang, Y., Peng, Huang, Hou, & Wang, J., 2008). Mori and Uchida (2009) reported that self-efficacy ratings in reading and writing achievement scores among fourth grade, seventh grade, and high school students were highly correlated. Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, and Pastorelli (1996), showed that self-efficacy beliefs of children, including academic self-efficacy, social self-efficacy, and self-regulatory efficacy, were related to academic achievement both directly and as expressed through other variables including parental academic aspirations and pro-social behaviors by children (Mori & Uchida, 2009).

### **Statement of the Problem**

According to the Southern Education Foundation (2009), approximately one million students in the United States begin ninth grade each year but only 70% of them graduate four years later. Each year, nearly one-third of all public high school students, almost half of them being of African-American, Hispanic, or Native American descent, fail to graduate from school with their starting classes (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009; State of Alabama Bridge Program, 2010).

While socio-economic status remains an influential factor in determining students' academic success (Furrer & Skinner, 2003), other researchers have focused on student-centered cognitive–motivational factors as the chief determinants of success. These factors including the following: (a) self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986, 1994; Schunk, 1989), (b) achievement goals (Ames, 1992; Ames & Archer, 1988; Urdan, 1997), and (c) perceived instrumentality (Miller, DeBacker, & Greene, 1999). According to Walker and Greene (2009), these lines of investigation shed light on students' perceptions of their academic competency, their attitudes toward the academic material, and the ways in which students' understandings of personal abilities and interests guide their behavior and decision-making. Further, administrators are now seeing students who are dropping out of school who no longer conform to the established profiles of past underachievers (Snyder, 2003). In many urban cities in America, academically talented students are now joining the ranks of those who leave school without completing their degree (Renzulli & Park, 2002). The research literature is replete with studies based on factors that influence student dropout rates; however, there is a paucity of research on the circumstances that place students with a high sense of self-efficacy at risk for failing to graduate from high school (Jansen & Toso, 2007).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of students with high self-efficacy who have voluntarily chosen to leave high school to complete their credentials by means of a GED. The intent of the study was to focus on the lived experiences of four students who are currently enrolled in a GED program. Participants had the opportunity to describe their educational experiences and the issues that led to their

decision to seek an alternative route towards graduation. The goal of this qualitative investigation was to give a voice to students who have experienced situations that have placed them at risk for dropping out of school. According to DeMarie (2010), understanding students' perceptions of their educational experiences and the ways in which they view the learning process is vital to planning for alternative educational strategies (DeMarie, 2010).

### **Central Question**

The central question used to guide this study was: What are the lived experiences of urban students with high self-efficacy who are pursuing their GED after dropping out of a traditional public school program.

### **Sub-Questions**

1. Are there distinguishing characteristics of students with high self-efficacy who dropped out of school but later received a GED?
2. What factors most influenced students' decision to dropout of school?
3. Are there implications for teachers and administrators in traditional education settings?

### **Significance of the Study**

The goal of this study was to gain an appreciable understanding of the lived experiences of urban students with high self-efficacy who have dropped out of school. The results of this study could provide educational leaders with information necessary to develop strategies to help urban students with high self-efficacy complete high school through traditional means rather than through a GED program. Specifically, qualitative findings will prompt urban educators to re-examine school culture and help them identify current



deficits in the social environment for at-risk students with high self-efficacy. Further, findings from this study may provide administrators with insights of curricular subject matter to see if it sufficiently challenges these students. Finally, findings may challenge administrators to scrutinize instructional strategies to see if they are differentiated enough to meet the needs of this bright, yet discontented, population of students.

### **Definition of Terms**

1. Self-efficacy: The extent to which an individual perceives that he or she possesses the ability necessary to manage a given set of circumstances (Bandura, 1977, 1994). Self-efficacy is a person's perception of his or her ability to successfully complete a task.
2. Dropouts: A student who was enrolled at any time during the previous school year who is not enrolled at the beginning of the current school year and who has not successfully completed school. Students who have transferred to another school, died, moved to another country, or who are out of school due to illness are not considered to be dropouts (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010).
3. Graduates: Students who are reported as diploma recipients. Graduates are individuals who have been awarded a regular high school diploma or a diploma that recognizes some higher level of academic achievement. These students are individuals who meet or exceed the coursework and performance standards for high school completion established by the state or other relevant authority (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010).
4. Urban: A large or mid-sized city or a suburb of a large city in which at least 40% of students are eligible for free or reduced-price school lunch (FRSL) and at least

40% represent minority populations (National Center for Educational Statistics Common Core of Data, 2010)

5. GED (General Education Development):An alternative mechanism for individuals to complete the requirements of a high school diploma. The GED consists of five subject tests which, when passed, certify that the individual has achieved an American-level academic skills equivalent to that of a high school graduate.
6. AFGR (Average Freshman Graduation Rate):An estimate of the percentage of high school students who graduate on time based on an incoming freshman class and aggregate counts of the number of diplomas awarded within a four year time span.

### **Delimitations and Limitations of the Study**

There are several potential limitations for this study, including the following:

1. This study is limited to the lived experiences of 4 students who have dropped out of school.
2. The information collected from participants is based on their lived experiences and was analyzed using qualitative methods. Unlike quantitative studies in which findings can be generalized to the population, the findings from this investigation can only be generalized to the students in the study. Consistent with qualitative investigations, every effort was made to ensure the transferability of the data.
3. Information provided by the participants is only as accurate as their desire and understanding of the need for being honest and candid about their lived experiences.

## **Role of the Researcher**

Qualitative research is interpretative in nature and requires the researcher to maintain an intensive relationship with the participant (Creswell, 2009). In order for these relationships to be fostered, strategic, ethical, and personal, issues were addressed as part of the research process (Locke et al., 2007). As the researcher, I am a formal teacher and administrator and have worked in adult education for the past three years. My experiences in teaching have provided me with several unique opportunities to observe the phenomenon of student dropouts. While these experiences should provide me with helpful insights, bracketing was used to establish a fresh perspective on the phenomenon of the study (Moustakas, 1994). Bracketing suspended any preconceptions and misconceptions that could hinder a full understanding of the phenomenon as experienced by the participants (Moustakas, 1994).

## **Organization of the Study**

This study was organized in five chapters. Chapter one includes an overview of the investigation including: (a) a statement of the problem, (b) the purpose of the study, (c) central research question, (d) sub-questions, (e) significance of the study, (f) definition of terms, (g) delimitations and limitations, and (h) summary. Chapter two includes a review of relevant literature regarding the topic. Chapter three provides the methodological framework for the study including: (a) research design, (b) design elements, (c) theoretical framework, (d) data collection and analysis processes, (e) assurances of trustworthiness, and (f) ethical considerations. Chapter four presents the findings of the research, and chapter five discusses conclusions and directions for future research.

## Summary

This study is seated in the theoretical framework of Bandura's theory of self-efficacy and Maslow's theory of motivation. These theories provide different vantage points within the school setting to view the lived experiences of students. How students perceive school and its social environment plays an important role on their degree of success (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). When this perception is altered, the at-risk factor increases (Osterman, 2000). A support system is included among the things necessary to move students forward in making a decision to achieve (Steele, 1997). Nonetheless, students are opting to leave the structure institution of learning, with all that it offers, to pursue their education without a supporting cast.

The sense of efficacy is defined as the extent to which an individual perceives that he or she possesses the ability necessary to manage a given set of circumstances (Bandura, 1977). Bandura contends that beliefs about one's self efficacy reflect how one thinks, acts, and motivates him or herself for the task at hand.

Researchers have reported findings concerning what place students at risk of dropping out. Most agree that these factors include socio-economic status, high retention, excess absenteeism, behavior issues, and many more. These factors have been viewed quantitatively and qualitatively to determine the effects they have on students and to determine means of providing solutions for students identified by these factors. In this endeavor, more current research has attempted to glean insights regarding turning risk into resilience. These studies sought to determine what truly characterize risk and resilience (Boon, 2008). Identifying these character traits also revealed another quality in

a group of students choosing to leave school. Contrary to past studies, students with high self-efficacy are joining the ranks of those who choose to drop out of school.

The literature on self-efficacy and its relationship to dropping out of school is centered on how high self-efficacy is essential in motivating students to continue in school. However, there are few studies that address why students with high self-efficacy dropout of school. This study extends the literature on the role that self-efficacy plays in students' choice to leave school to complete their education through alternative means.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

#### **Introduction**

Forty years ago the U.S. led the world in the number of high school graduates. Today, America's high school graduation rate ranks 19<sup>th</sup> in the world (Common Core, 2008). Only 70% of students who start high school earn traditional high school diplomas (Landsberg, 2006). According to Bridgeland, DiJulio, and Morison, (2006), the causes of high dropout rates are both historic and complex, while educational interventions are often as problematic as successful. The purpose of this literature review is to outline the historic background of the dropout problem, including its causes, the role of the GED as an attempted solution, and the special concern for dropouts in urban schools today. Special attention will be given to academic achievement literature as related to the concept of self-efficacy as well as findings from previous studies regarding dropping out by students with high self-efficacy.

#### **The Dropout Problem: From a War-time Deficit to a "Silent Epidemic"**

The dropout problem in the U.S. first came to light during World War II, when the military attempted to draft men as young as 18 for service and discovered that many of them had not completed high school degrees (GED Testing Service, 2010). While not considered to be high school dropouts, many other students interrupted their studies in order to fight in the war and therefore never completed a high school degree. According to Smith (2003), the U.S. government implemented the General Education Development

(GED) program in 1943 to allow these servicemen an opportunity to complete their high school credentials in an alternative format. To accommodate the needs of this special population of students, GED programs were offered as either night or correspondence courses.

In addition to providing U.S. servicemen with an opportunity to complete their studies, the GED program also paved the way for students to take advantage of a new and valuable educational benefit, the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944, more commonly referred to as the GI Bill (Cruz, 2009). While the GED program was initially designed to meet the needs of exiting veterans from WWII, it has gradually become a staple of the American educational system (Rachal & Bingham, 2004). According to recent reports (GED Testing Service, 2010), the GED is second only to the awarding of traditional high school diplomas with an estimated 17 million adults having earned a GED since its implementation. People from all walks of life have earned their GED diplomas; including United States Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell of Colorado; comedian Bill Cosby; actor Michael J Fox; and musicians Waylon Jennings and John Michael Montgomery (Meeker, Edmonson, & Fisher, 2008).

A half a century after America's high school dropout problem was first identified it became a hot button issue again in the late 1990s. Robert Balfanz of Johns Hopkins University labeled the dropout phenomena a "silent epidemic" which referred to dropouts among students in urban schools (Balfanz & Bridgeland, 2010; Bridgeland, Diulio & Morrison, 2006). Using national data from the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk (CRESPAR) (U.S. Department of Education, 2010), researchers described America's urban high schools as "dropout factories" (Balfanz & Legters, 2004,

p. 6). Considered to be controversial by others, Balfanz's label referred to high schools in which only 60% of the freshman class had graduated as seniors (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009). Balfanz's research and subsequent attention to the dropout rate revealed accountability issues as well as discrepancies among states in how they recorded dropouts and defined an "early leaver" (Stillwell, 2010, p.7).

With the implementation of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation in 2001, policy makers saw the need to address these discrepancies in order to determine a more accurate count of high school dropouts (Balfanz & Legters, 2004, National Center for Educational Statistics, 2008). The result of this legislation was the development of the Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate (AFGR), a measure that was derived from the Common Core of Data (CCD) and provided a degree of uniformity across states (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2008). The AFGR is an estimate of the percentage of an entering freshman class that will graduate in four years (Stillwell, 2010). For 2007-2008, Stillwell reported the AFGR for schools in Alabama as 69%. Stated another way, 31% of Alabama students did not graduate from high school through a traditional educational track for this academic year. Based on these data, the ability of administrators to develop a greater understanding of the factors that influence students' decision to drop out of traditional public schools is of paramount concern.

### **Characteristics of the Dropout Problem in Urban Schools**

In response to critics, Balfanz justified his use of the term dropout factories for the purposes of research. In 2011, Balfanz stated:

We acknowledge that some people may view the term 'dropout factories' as a harsh and unfair term. We use it to describe a harsh and unfair situation, under-



resourced and over-challenged high schools which educate primarily low-income and minority students, and year after year, are unable to graduate the majority or near majority of students who enter the school. (p. 2)

Understanding the potential harm that could come from labeling children, Balfanz and his research team made several important changes to the language and metrics they had developed. First, instead of reporting the percentage of students who failed to graduate, the researchers reported the graduation rate, which they called “promoting power” of a school (p. 1). Second, in a joint effort to explore the characteristics of schools, Neild and Balfanz (2006) referred to schools in urban cities as “neighborhood schools”(p. 13). While the use of the term “neighborhood schools” still referred to large urban schools with high dropout rates, the researchers suggested that this new, more positive concept was one that principals and superintendents could embrace. This new language was introduced and adopted by large cities to restructure and reform practices that were thought to be contributing factors to high dropout rates (Balfanz & Legters, 2004).

Based on the literature, urban schools, like the ones depicted by Balfanz, typically share a set of common characteristics, such as high rates of poverty, high proportion of students of color (minorities), and high proportion of students who are Limited English Proficient (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009; Neild & Balfanz, 2006). Additionally, these schools are designated as “high-risk” or “high needs” by state or city agencies. In one study, Neild and Balfanz (2006) attempted to illustrate the challenges facing neighborhood schools by examining key academic characteristics of 9<sup>th</sup> graders. The researchers discovered that there were multiple risk factors among 9<sup>th</sup> graders that contributed to the problem of high dropout rates in urban schools including students who:

entered high school over-aged, were two or more years below grade level in reading and math, and posted poor attendance records in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Additionally, the researchers noted that many of these incoming freshman spent two years in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade.

Research by Neild and Balfanz (2006) is consistent with previous studies in which urban students who attend neighborhood schools are characterized by chronic absenteeism, high dropout rates, widespread course failures, and low academic achievement (Fine, 1994). Peterson (2008) argued that the conditions of urban neighborhood schools were largely the outcome of broader social changes that transformed urban America in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These changes included increased poverty rates and shifts in housing patterns based on self-imposed separation by social class, including the exodus of middle to upper class Whites away from urban settings and towards the suburbs, a phenomenon commonly referred to as *white flight* (Hassell, 1999; Kane, 2000; White, 2001).

One of the most far-reaching implications from these studies was the need for future researchers to avoid over-generalizing in order to develop a more accurate picture of why students were dropping out of school early. Prior to 2001, abstract data published by states through school report cards, typically included just a few key accountability measures rather than a detailed analysis of the characteristics of students attending each school (Neild & Balfanz, 2006). Notably, researchers observed that school image and labels played a significant role in how students viewed themselves and their ability to be successful. According to De Marie, (2010), terms like “dropout factory”, “failing school” and “not meeting the standards” labeled not only the schools but also the students who attended them.

## **Factors Contributing to the Dropout Problem**

To respond to prejudicial labeling, many schools began to add language to their mission statements to communicate how they wanted to be known as educational institutions. DeMarie (2010) conducted qualitative research to differentiate various labels in order to determine how students viewed the schools they were attending. DeMarie's study was conducted with students in grades K-5 who attended schools in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods. Interviews, auto photography (qualitative data collection that allows child participants to photograph objects that express their views), and pictures were used to provide students with an opportunity to express their perceptions of the school they attended. According to the author, all three data sources suggested key differences in students' perceptions about their schools, especially between schools that were identified as passing schools (A) and failing schools (F). At first glance, overall findings from this study seemed contradictory to what one might expect. Students from the failing (F) institutions viewed their schools as being academically strict with regards to their educational pursuits, while students from the passing (A) institutions viewed their schools as playful and less strict about academics. Paradoxically, schools that were perceived as more academically strict by students in the early grades produced students who were less academically successful in the later grades. According to DeMarie (2010), this finding suggested that the ways in which schools were perceived by students strongly influenced the school's ability to successfully meet the needs of its students.

Patterson, Hale, and Stressman, (2007) conducted a case study of a single school to explore cultural contradictions that could be important factors in influencing the

dropout rate of students in urban schools. The purpose of their study was to examine how the culture and structure of schools influenced teachers' instructional practices. The site for this investigation was a large high school that had graduated only 53.6% of their seniors. The student body of this school reflected a high minority population, mostly Latino, who received free and reduced lunches. The faculty and staff of this school expressed a belief that the reason for the high dropout rate was based on the culture of the students and their families. The researchers, however, uncovered evidence that negative stereotypes about Latino students and their families were being reflected by the faculty and staff and influenced the school's culture and structure. The authors surmised that negative perceptions of students hindered teachers' ability to incorporate appropriate instructional strategies to meet the growing needs of an increasingly diverse study body. For this school, faculty biases led many students, including high achieving students, to leave school prematurely. The authors concluded that the factors that placed these students at risk had more to do with the culture of the school than students' ethnicity or socio-economic status. The culture of the institution had not adjusted to the multicultural population it was entrusted to serve.

In 2008, Suh, S., Suh, J., and Houston examined factors that contributed to student dropout rates to see if at-risk behavior variables could be categorized and prioritized in more meaningful ways. The authors determined that most research models using multiple variables lead to results that were too broad to guide the development of effective interventions. Using data collected from previously published empirical studies, the researchers identified 135 variables as possible contributing factors that place a student at-risk. Based on these factors, Suh et al. (2008) placed at-risk students into three distinct

groups: (a) students with low grade point averages, (b) students who had been suspended, and (c) students from low socio-economic status households. The authors determined that students dropped out for different reasons depending on the combination of variables that placed them at-risk. These researchers drew attention to the aspect of individuality and the need to embrace diversity in planning solutions. Categorizing students into groups showed promise for helping individuals develop intervention strategies; however, the authors still had questions about which students were at higher levels of risk and why.

In follow-up research, Suh, S., and Suh, J. (2008) attempted to identify three levels of risk that would help individuals to develop possible prevention strategies. Using the same data and premise of the previous study, the authors employed low grade point average (GPA), behavioral problems, and low socio-economic status (SES), as the primary categories for dropout risk. Once again, the authors' findings validated the diversity that exists among influences on students at-risk for dropping out. One significant predictor was identified, a student's expectation to attend school the next year. This finding underscored the important role of student engagement with the school and successful school completion. Based on the results of this study, the researchers suggested that schools should focus more attention on students' educational aspirations and plans for the coming years. Rotermund (2008) has suggested that high school seniors who disengage from school activities are more likely to drop out of school before graduation. Inasmuch as the decision to dropout starts as early as the freshman year, the highest dropout rate is among seniors; this pattern holds true for 24 states in the U.S. (Stillwell, 2011). Despite the extensive research on dropout rates among students, investigators remain perplexed

regarding the reasons that student resilience seems to diminish the closer they get to graduation (Boon, 2008).

### **The GED: An Outdated and Overused Response?**

While one group of researchers was examining dropout rates within urban and neighborhood schools, another group was studying the traditional response to the dropout problem: the GED. A review of the literature on the value or legitimacy of the GED, as compared to the traditional diploma, has revealed a great deal of inconsistency and contradiction (Chaplin, 1999; Dynarsky & Gleason, 2002). According to Hewitt (2002), most educators agree that a GED is not as good as a high school diploma but better than nothing at all.

At the same time, studies have shown that GED recipients are virtually indistinguishable from dropouts in terms of labor market outcomes (Boesel, Alsalam, & Smith, 1998). Some experts believe that the presence of high school equivalency programs, like the GED, actually increases the dropout rate, while others have accused schools of pushing minority students out of high school and into GED programs (Chaplin, 1999; Hardy, 2002).

When the GED was first introduced, an age limit of 18 was established to discourage students from choosing this alternative educational method over the traditional means of completing school. Currently, students as young as 16 can participate in the GED program. This lower age limit is one of the many reasons that experts like Rachal and Bingham (2004) have suggested that the GED has been *hijacked* by adolescents. Using data retrieved from the GED Testing Service, Rachal and Bingham (2004) demonstrated that the perception of the GED as primarily an instrument of

*adult education* has been increasingly undermined by the demographics of the students enrolled in the program. According to their research, the mean age for students enrolling in the program and taking the test is 17. Meanwhile, the mean age for students who successfully complete the GED is 24.5. Based on these data, the researchers concluded that younger students were enrolling in the GED program in high numbers but not passing the equivalency exam. Only 2.9% of high school credentials were issued to young adults age 16 (GED Testing Service, 2002).

Researchers Rachal and Bingham (2004) have posited that the failure rate of teens in completing the GED is due to their lack of exposure to the high school curriculum. Others have suggested that the root cause for failure may reside much further beneath the surface. According to Perin, Flugman, and Spigel (2006), many students entering Adult Education Facilities are unable to read, and GED sites are neither designed nor prepared to provide this level of remediation. The researchers conducted a case study of four urban adult basic education programs in a northeastern state to explore the success of GED programs among students who exhibited a variety of at-risk factors. The major themes presented in this study were (a) the growing presence of 16-20 year old students in these programs, (b) the severe challenges (financial, emotional, learning, etc.) in the lives of these students, (c) low levels of reading and math skills among students, (d) stresses created by the increased presence of a troubled population in an already under-resourced program, and (e) lower rates of completion by younger students. Based on these findings, the researchers emphasized the need for more intervention to occur in the lives of students before they decide to drop out.

While research has shown that students enrolled in urban schools are at risk for dropping out, other environmental factors, such as educational and GED policy changes, may also affect students' dropout decisions. For example, as a result of a federal mandate (No Child Left Behind), students now have to pass State Exit Exams before receiving a diploma (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Afraid that they cannot pass these exams, some students elect to drop out of high school to pursue their GED, which requires them to pass an equivalency exam that is equally difficult (Tyler, Murnane, & Willett, 2003).

The authors of one qualitative study used the GED to address an issue that many states are now faced with in determining the appropriate protocol for high school exit exams. Specifically, the researchers examined the lack of systematic information on the impact of alternative options and how students' choices influence their quality of life. The authors determined that the GED was "validated for use" because of its similarities to most exit exams created for high school graduates.

Regardless, Shu-Ru (2008) still wanted to know whether or not GED recipients differed from high school graduates and high school dropouts. To answer these questions, Shu-Ru (2008) conducted a quantitative study to investigate the following five indicators of adult well-being: (a) income, (b) crime, (c) health, (d) mental health, and (e) substance use. The researcher hypothesized that earning a GED credential benefits dropouts just as higher education offers better outcomes for those with a high school diploma or GED. Significance tests were used to examine the differences in the five domains among dropouts, GED recipients, and high school graduates. Shu-Ru determined that GED recipients are associated with positive outcomes in addition to the anticipated benefits of greater economic earning potential.



Additionally, the researcher observed that a GED, in many cases, was not equivalent to a high school diploma as related to other life issues. After controlling for socio-demographic factors, early cognitive skills, and participation in postsecondary education, Shu-Ru concluded that there were significant differences between dropouts and GED recipients and between GED recipients and high school graduates in the five indicators, including: (a) quarterly income equal to or above average, (b) life satisfaction, (c) future optimism, (d) symptoms of severe depression, and (e) substance use.

### **Transforming Risk into Resilience: A New Solution to the Dropout Problem?**

Knesting (2008) attempted to gain a greater understanding of at-risk students by studying students' experiences prior to making the decision to drop out of school and the factors that influenced students' decision to persist in school. The study was designed with the intention of observing both at-risk students and the teachers who worked with them. Among the participants were students who were retained in elementary school and students who had previously dropped out but later returned to school. Data analysis yielded information regarding persistence for students who struggled with academic success. Based on this research, Knesting demonstrated that persistence had less to do with faculty members' willingness to offer academic assistance and more to do with their willingness to listen to and understand the other factors that lead to students giving up. Student participants consistently stated that it was teachers' and administrators' support of students' life issues that resulted in students' willingness and ability to persist. According to Worrell (1996), it is this *risk-resilience paradigm* that must be embraced by the researcher if he or she is to truly understand the essence of dropping out. How students process events in their lives has proven to be an important consideration in understanding

their decision to leave or remain in school(Worrell, 1996).Knesting's (2008) work does not diminishthe value of studies conducted to identify factors that leadto students having to make this difficult decision about continuing in school. Understanding factors that place students at risk cuts to the very heart of the issue.

Boon (2008) explored the possibility of transforming risk into resilience by studying the conditions that place students at-risk as well as those that characterize resilience. Students in 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, and 10<sup>th</sup> grades were included in this quantitativestudy to test the hypothesis that there is a greater tendency for students to become at-risk and therefore dropout in the later years of high school. Data were collected using questionnaires from 1,050 students ages 12-15.Boon discovered that there were corresponding resiliency factors, such as positive family involvement, behavior, and cultural context that, if put into place, would offset the factors that place students at-risk. Of all the factors, family structure was the factor that contributed most significantly to students' decision to remain in school. Based on this study, Boon concluded that students from intact biological families were the most likely group to complete school. The researcher noted that students' resiliency resulted from a culture that transcended school, which is consistent with leading researchers who suggest that educational strategies can compensate for what students do not get at home(Schoon, Parsons, & Sacker, 2004).While Boon's research addressed issues regarding why individuals stay in school it also raised an important question of why resilient students choose to leave school. Rumberger and Rodriquez (2002) suggested thatone reason academically talented students choose to leave may be that they are often overlooked in urban schools because of the labels and locations of the schools they attend. More specifically, the value of

gifted programs is overshadowed by the needs of underachieving students in urban schools (Reis & Morales-Taylor, 2010). According to Reis and Morales-Taylor (2010), officials in the city of Hartford, Connecticut, realized that they had gone a full decade without a gifted program in their urban schools. Teachers and administrators all agreed that many gifted students and students with high academic potential were being underserved. Reis and Morales-Taylor (2010), conducted an intervention study to determine what it would take to enable gifted students to transition from mediocre to high performance. The researchers selected 60 gifted/high potential students from grades 4-6. All of the students were from high-poverty families with 95% from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Reis and Morales-Taylor used a “school-within-a-school” concept to keep students in the same school setting as their peers. The sample students, however, were offered services that provided teachers with specific information about how the students learned as well as feedback regarding students’ unique strengths and weaknesses. Individual student profiles were developed through collaboration between students, parents, teachers and administrators. These profiles provided the basis for compacts to be drawn between all stakeholders for differentiated student instruction. According to the researchers, students who had previously exhibited discipline problems had become model students, and students who had previously posted mediocre academic performance started to excel in all subject areas. Reis and Morales-Taylor concluded that with the appropriate student-specific interventions, students could rise to the challenge of higher expectations.

Research by Reis and Morales-Taylor, as well as other prominent researchers, highlights the important role that respect for individuality plays in educating at-risk

students. In a survey of 18-year-old dropouts from urban schools, students indicated that both their personal and school lives were “very difficult” (Schwartz, 2009). Twenty percent of students self-identified as being either married or divorced, and nearly 25% of students indicated that they had changed schools two or more times. Among these students, 11% had been arrested while 8% had spent time in a juvenile home or shelter. Despite these conditions, students said that they understood the importance of school and opted to pursue their GED. The findings from this study corroborate those by Boon (2008) who identified students who were able to transform risk into resilience. Based on these studies, researchers have agreed that a sense of self-efficacy exists among students who leave school to pursue their high school credentials through other means.

### **Motivation, Belonging,& Self-Efficacy**

Self-efficacy is a concept that lies at the center of Albert Bandura’s social cognitive theory. According to Bandura (1998), a person’s attitudes, abilities, and cognitive skills comprise their “self-system” (p. 4). As stated by Bandura, how one behaves, responds to, and perceives different situations is greatly influenced by this system. Through the lens of social cognitive theory, perceived self-efficacy affects all aspects of an individual’s life, including educational experiences (Bandura, 1993). Since Bandura’s seminal work in 1977, self-efficacy has become a focal point for psychologists and educators and instrumental in helping people reach the highest levels of success (Sternberg, 1996).

Perceived self-efficacy is a person’s belief in his or her ability to perform or exercise influence over events that affect his or her life (Bandura, 1981). As noted by Bandura, self-efficacy beliefs determine how people feel, think, motivate themselves and

behave. According to the experts, self-efficacy beliefs begin to develop in early childhood as children manage a wide variety of experiences, tasks, and situations (Pajares & Schunk, 2001). It is widely accepted that self-efficacy continues throughout a person's life as he or she encounters new experiences, acquires new skills, and obtains greater understanding (Bandura, 1992).

Perceived self-efficacious beliefs produce diverse effects through four major processes, including: cognitive, motivational, affective, and selection processes (Bandura, 1994). According to Bandura (1996), a strong sense of efficacy enhances human accomplishment as well as a person's sense of well-being. People who are confident in their abilities are empowered to approach difficult tasks with the attitude of completing them rather than being conquered by them (Friedman, 1998).

Researchers have noted students' perceptions of school and their social environment play an important role in their degree of success (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). Teachers and administrators must be aware of what motivates students to be successful (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Walker and Green (2009) have argued that it is important to understand where the line is drawn between students' motivational beliefs and their cognitive engagement. In ground-breaking research, Bandura (1986, 1994) focused on student-centered cognitive motivational factors such as self-efficacy.

Subsequent to Bandura's studies, researchers have looked at other variables, such as achievement goals and perceived instrumentality, as distinct facets of students' motivation (Miller, DeBacker, & Greene, 1999). Walker and Greene (2009) expanded upon previous research by exploring how students' perceptions of belonging encouraged their sense of motivation. In a quantitative study, Walker and Green (2009) defined

belonging as the extent to which students felt personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school's social environment (Goodenow, 1993). The results of Walker and Greene's work supported and extended previous studies by suggesting that high school students who reported a sense of belonging were more likely to focus on understanding coursework and using cognitive strategies (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Osterman, 2000). Based on the results of this study, the authors suggested that the quality of instruction, including teacher support, is a major factor in predicting students' perceptions of belonging. These findings were consistent with Osterman's (2000) contention that "students who experience acceptance are more highly motivated and engaged in learning and more committed to school" (p.359).

A sense of belonging is situated on the third level of Maslow's hierarchy of motivation and needs (Maslow, 1943). Based on Maslow's theory, when a person's needs are met on one level, the person will aspire to the next level. Steele (1997) has identified a strong support system as critical in moving students forward in their decision to achieve (Steele, 1997). In a recent gender study of 374 African American students, Kerpelman, Eryigit, and Stephens (2007) explored the concepts of parental support, self-efficacy, and ethnic identity as related to a student's future education orientation (FEO). In this quantitative research and statistical analysis, the important roles of teachers, administrators, and parents were positively associated with shaping students' self-conceptions at early ages. Researchers noted that while FEO was lower for males, the factors that predicted FEO were virtually the same for all students. More specifically, stronger self-efficacy, ethnic identity, and perceived maternal support for achievement predicted higher FEO for both males and females. Conversely, researchers noted that negative treatment in school was

one of the factors that hindered academic performance among AfricanAmerican males (Noguera, 2003). In a similar study, Roderick (2003) discovered that even when African American male adolescents have strong academic skills, they may lack the self-efficacy and sense of the future that is necessary to cope with the stress of school and peer environment. These findings were consistent with other current studies that have demonstrated a positive outcome and educational benefit when students had the support of parents and a sense of identity in the school setting (Hansen,Toso, & Johnston, 2007).

Wang et al. (2008) conducted quantitative research to model the relationship between the variables of learning motivation, learning strategy, self-efficacy, attribution and learning results in distance learners. The researchers detected a relationship between psychological characteristics and learning, with motivation being the most dominant factor producing results among distance learners. Based on the findings of this study, researchers may have identified the rationale for why students leave the traditional school setting with the idea of completing a GED in a program that historically provides fewer resources and less instructional assistance.

### **Summary**

This proposed study was rooted in a theoretical framework based on self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977) and motivation (Maslow, 1943). These theories provide complementary vantage points to view the lived experiences of students within the school setting. As previously stated, how students perceive school and the social environment of school may play an important role in students' degree of success (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). When perceptions are altered, at-risk factors for dropping out tend to increase (Osterman,

2000). As stated by Steele (1997), a strong support system may be an important element in helping students move towards making a decision to achieve.

Currently, students are choosing to leave the structured format of institutions of learning, with all that it offers, to pursue their education without a supporting cast. This sense of efficacy is defined as the extent to which an individual perceives that he or she possesses the ability necessary to manage a given set of circumstances (Bandura, 1977). Bandura contends that beliefs about one's self-efficacy reflect how one thinks, acts, and motivates him or herself for the task at hand.

Researchers have identified factors that place students at-risk for dropping out, including: (a) socioeconomic status, (b) poor retention, (c) excessive absenteeism, (d) behavior issues, and more. These factors have been used in both quantitative and qualitative studies to frame both the problem and potential solutions for reducing the number of students who are dropping out of school. Current research efforts have focused on ways in which risk can be turned into resilience among student populations (Boon, 2008). In the process of identifying these character traits, researchers uncovered another quality in a group of students choosing to leave school. Contrary to previous studies, students with high self-efficacy have now joined the ranks of those who choose to drop out of school.

The literature on self-efficacy and its relationship to dropping out of school is based on the premise that high self-efficacy is essential in motivating students to continue in school. However, there are few studies that address why students with high self-efficacy drop out of school. The goal of this study is to extend the literature on the role



that self-efficacy plays in students' decision to leave school and complete their education through alternative means.

## **CHAPTER3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of students with high self-efficacy who have voluntarily chosen to leave high school to complete their credentials by means of a GED. A phenomenological approach provided the researcher with an opportunity to: (a) talk with students who exhibit high self-efficacy to share what they experienced during the decision-making process which culminated in their leaving high school, (b) identify the character traits common to students who demonstrate self-efficacy, and (c) develop insights regarding the factors that motivated students to pursue a GED.

#### **Purpose and Research Questions**

Each year, students across the U.S. make the decision to drop out of school. This personal decision has created a phenomenon among a diverse group of students that is difficult to understand. There is consensus among researchers in the field of Educational Psychology that socio-economic status, gender, and race are no longer the casual determinants of students' academic success and failure (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Suh, S. & Suh, J., 2008; Suh, et al., 2008). Therefore, alternative factors might exist to explain the variety of students who choose to drop out of school. Interviews were used to explore the lived experience of four students who previously dropped out of school and are

currently enrolled in an adult learning program. Despite equivocal findings in the literature, researchers have suggested that pursuing an alternative route to a high school diploma may not be in the best interest of the student (Shu-Ru &Ou, 2008). It was anticipated that the phenomenological approach would aid in exploring the complexity that exists in the phenomenon of dropping out. Participants were able to share their perceptions of the educational experience and the process that led to their decision to leave school.

### **Central Question**

The central question used to guide this study was: What are the lived experiences of urban students with high self-efficacy who are pursuing their GED after dropping out of a traditional public school program.

### **Sub-Questions**

1. Are there distinguishing characteristics of students with high self-efficacy who dropped out of school but later received a GED?
2. What factors most influenced students' decision to drop out of school?
3. Are there implications for teachers and administrators in traditional education settings?

It is anticipated that this line of inquiry will shed light on students' perceptions of academic competency, their attitudes toward the academic material, and the ways in which perceptions of personal abilities and interests guided their behavior and decision-making (Walker & Greene, 2009). According to DeMarie (2010), understanding students' perceptions of their previous schools and the ways in which they view the learning process may help shed light on various aspects of school effectiveness.

## **Research Design**

According to Corbin and Strauss (2008), a qualitative research design is chosen for the purpose of giving voice to the participants so that their lived experiences are better understood. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that qualitative methods are more adaptable to dealing with multiple and less aggregatable realities. Creswell (2007) referred to qualitative research metaphorically as “an intricate fabric composed of minute threads, many colors, different textures, and various blends of material” (p. 35). Just as it is difficult to explain the intricacy of fabric, it is similarly difficult to uncover the layers of lived experiences. Qualitative designs also more directly expose the nature of the transaction between the investigator and the respondents hence making easier assessment of “the extent to which the phenomenon is described in terms of the investigator’s own posture” (Creswell, 2007, p.40).

Creswell (2009) identified several characteristics of qualitative research which must be considered in determining the methodological design for the study. Accordingly, Creswell (2007) described qualitative research as “one that begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 37). An ontological assumption (ontology represents the fundamental categories of reality) in this study will provide the lens needed to allow both participants and researcher to look at the multiple perspectives of the phenomenon (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Each participant had the opportunity to present a view of his or her experience in a

way that yielded rich data for the purposes of analysis. This research is based on a theoretical framework that provided a foundation as well as a social and historical view of the problem.

The phenomenon of dropping out, when viewed from the perspective of self-efficacy, requires the use of theory to: (a) shape the type of questions asked, (b) inform how data are to be collected and analyzed, and (c) provide for a call to action or change (Creswell, 2007). The chosen design allowed the researcher to serve a vital role in the process of collecting data. Interviews, observations, questionnaires as well as other artifacts were used to paint a canvas of all collected information from the participants. An inductive reasoning approach guided this phenomenological investigation. According to Creswell (2007), inductive data analysis is a process in which an individual can build patterns, categories, and themes from the bottom up and organize the data into increasingly more abstract units of information. This process worked its way back and forth between themes and database until there was an established set of themes (Creswell, 2007). The qualitative design provided the means of addressing the social problem of dropping out by deriving meaning from the collective experiences of the participants in the study.

### **Phenomenological Approach**

According to Creswell (2007), a phenomenological study is an investigative approach that can be used to describe the meaning of an occurrence by several individuals through the use of their lived experiences. The basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence or “a grasp of the very nature of a thing” (Van Manen, 1990).

This process involves the collection of data from persons who have experienced the phenomenon and a composite description of the essence of the experience for all of the individuals. The description of the phenomenon consists of what they experienced and how they experienced it (Creswell, 2007). Understanding the lived experiences of others marks phenomenology as both a philosophy and a method. Procedurally, phenomenology involves studying a small number of participants through a means that allows the researcher to identify patterns and relationships among meanings gathered throughout the process (Creswell, 2009).

Phenomenology has a rich philosophical history that was heavily influenced by the writings of German mathematician, Edmund Husserl (Anderson, 2005; Creswell, 1998). Phenomenology is a popular research method within the social and health sciences and education. However, as recently as 1945, Merleau-Ponty (1962) posed the question, “What is phenomenology?” According to Natanson (1973), Husserl was known to call any work-in-process a phenomenology. It was the abstract thinking of Husserl that led his followers to embrace different philosophical arguments for the use of phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994; Stewart & Mickunas, 1990; Van Manen, 1990). The differences among scholars are what lead to phenomenology being considered both a philosophical stance as well as a methodological approach to design and conduct research (Creswell, 2007).

The intent of this study was to explore the lives of students with high self-efficacy who have dropped out of high school. Since the phenomenon of dropping out is usually influenced by many factors, the approach chosen had to be broad enough to account for the lived experience of participants. As a methodological approach, phenomenology provides the researcher and participants the ability to connect with one another in a

unique way; they become co-collaborators in assigning meaning to their lived experiences through the use of interviews and other data collection techniques (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Use of broadly stated open-ended questions about the human experience generates rich, descriptive data to help the reader understand the uniqueness of their experiences and attitudes. A qualitative design gives voice to the participants in such a way that their experiences are captured by words rather than statistics (Patton 1990). The aim of qualitative research is to uncover participants' feelings and points of view. According to Creswell (1994), qualitative inquiry has a sense of trustworthiness in that it is a holistic approach to research that does not reduce participants to functioning parts. This approach should allow students who have dropped out of school the freedom to state their opinions and views of school culture, parent participation, administrators, teachers, and peers. It was anticipated that both negative and positive issues would be drawn out as participants answer the research questions. As stated by Creswell (2007), the goal of a qualitative approach is not to collate numbers, but rather to understand how the different factors listed above affected students' decision to leave school. Participants were asked to talk about their lived experiences by participating in semi-structured interviews; the primary tool that was used to extract the essence of the experience.

As a method, phenomenological research involves studying a small number of participants through extensive engagement to develop and recognize patterns and relationships in the data (Creswell, 2005). Ashworth (1996) argued that one of the primary methodological principles of any research is that the researcher brackets or sets aside prior assumptions about the nature of the experience being studied. Throughout the

research study, bracketing was used to avoid a bias that would overshadow or muddle the information from the participants.

### **Axiological Assumption**

Researchers have suggested that qualitative research is value-laden (Creswell, 2003). This study was designed to give participants the opportunity to share their experiences through an interview. The interviews were semi-structured and consisted of open-ended questions that were utilized to assure the authenticity of the data (Bamberger et al., 2006). The following techniques were used to minimize bias within the various stages of research, including: data collection, data analysis, and interpretation. As the researcher, I used bracketing to allow the experiences of the participants to come forth without the influences of my worldview and experiences.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Maslow's Theory of Motivation-Hierarchy of Needs (1954) and Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory (1986) served as the theoretical framework for this study. These two theories were instrumental in shaping the study and providing the essence of the lived experiences revealed in the findings.

In 1954, Maslow published *Motivation and Personality*, which introduced his theory about how people satisfy various personal needs in the context of their work. Maslow postulated that there is a general pattern of needs recognition and satisfaction that people follow in generally the same sequence. Further, he suggested that a person could not recognize or pursue the next higher need in the hierarchy until his or her currently recognized need was substantially or completely satisfied, a concept called

prepotency (Gawel, 1997). Maslow's first three levels of needs included: (a) physical security, (b) social security, and (c) a need to belong.

The at-risk factors revealed in the literature on high school dropouts speak to a deficiency in the basic needs of the participants. Social economic depravity, lack of resources, and a sense of not belonging becomes an issue early in the educational process. According to Walker and Greene, 2009, students who drop out of school appear to lose all sense of motivation to continue the learning process. Nonetheless, many find themselves identifying another means of finishing their high school credentials. Despite these apparent obstacles, researchers (Boon, 2008) still wonder what creates this sense of resilience among some high school dropouts and whether or not they can be successful after previously dropping out of high school.

As stated by Bandura (1986), "Perceived self-efficacy is defined as people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance" (p.391). Self-efficacy beliefs determine how people feel, think, motivate themselves, and behave. Such beliefs produce these diverse effects through the following four major processes including: cognitive, motivational, and affective, and selection (Bandura, 1986). Self-efficacy lies at the center of Bandura's social cognitive theory which emphasizes the role of observational learning and social experience. According to Bandura, people with high self-efficacy, those who believe they can perform well, are more likely to view difficult tasks as something to be mastered rather than something to be avoided (Bandura, 2007). Despite the extent to which participants in this study have been labeled as being "at-risk", their pursuit of an alternative certification may indicate that a sense of resilience has emerged.



The contrast in the two theories establishes a dichotomous foundation for this study. Participants in this study are individuals who have left school presumably because of a deficiency in having their needs met, yet simultaneously they are exploring an alternative educational option which would move them beyond this initial limitation.

### **Participants and Site Selection**

According to Creswell (2005), the number of people and sites sampled may vary from one qualitative study to another. This research was conducted in one of the largest cities in Alabama. Participants included students from surrounding school districts within the city and the county. A community college, Wilson State Community College, (pseudonym) responsible for handling adult education in the state served as the site for data collection. The college campus is divided into two sections; one side serves the needs of students seeking more traditional undergraduate courses while the other side serves students enrolled in the GED program. This second section of campus also houses a large number of the technical and trade programs. The college capacity for accommodating GED students is exceeded annually. Therefore, the college partners with non-profit organizations that help provide services at other sites around the city.

Historically, students who have participated in the adult education program have been African American. The adult education program is designed to assist individuals in improving their reading, writing, and mathematical skills. Additionally, services are provided to individuals who are interested in learning English as a second language and to those who are pursuing their GED credential. In order to participate in this study,

students had to be between 17-19 years of age and prove to be both efficacious and willing to voluntarily serve as participants in the research. Students scoring high on questionnaires used to determine general high self-efficacy and academic achievement as self-regulated learners met the criteria of the purposeful sampling. Students were also given a pre-test to determine their academic abilities and propensity to pass the program.

### **Description of Program**

Students enrolled in the GED program are provided an opportunity to engage the curriculum at a pace that matches their academic ability. The program design included a self-help, self-diagnostic protocol initiated by pre-testing students to determine their academic potential. Students are provided study materials needed to progress through the levels of mastery needed to pass the required test. GED students have access to instructors, but the student-to-teacher ratio is usually higher than 17:1 as recommended by the State of Alabama (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2010). The age range of students enrolled in the GED program varies but is typically between 17 and 35.

Student success is based solely on students' willingness and ability to attend classes and negotiate the curriculum in order to pass the GED exit exam. Students who frequently miss class are dismissed from the program and may have to start over. Due to the rigor of the program and the number of students who are not prepared to meet the challenges of an adult education curriculum, the GED program experiences a high turnover rate (the number of students that continue with the program compared to the number that enrolls). For this study, many of the participants will have attempted the program at least once and been unsuccessful. Additionally, students may have previously

attended the GED program at one of the many satellite programs run by a partner organization.

Wilson State Community College provides access to the largest population of students, which made it a suitable setting for purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2003). Participants in this research were chosen from the greater Birmingham Metropolitan Area. Birmingham is an urban city with a population of 212,237 people, according to the 2010 U.S. Census Bureau. Approximately 15% of the population is between the ages of 15-24 and African Americans comprise 73.46% of the population. In 2009, 6% of Alabama's 216,941 high school students dropped out of school (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Birmingham City Schools experienced a dropout rate of nearly 16% for the same year.

Undoubtedly, some of the students who were counted towards this figure opted to complete their high school credentials through one of the local GED programs. Wilson State Community College is one of the state's designated sites responsible for facilitating and overseeing GED programs.

As stated by Creswell (2005), gaining access to the research site and potential participants requires that permission be granted by the proper authorities. Access to the facility, participants, and database were obtained through communication with the director of the adult education program. Due to a long-term friendship, I was able to discuss the intended study with the director. After a few meetings, she agreed to grant access to the facility and assist with the sampling. Leedy and Ormrod (2005) suggested that to gain access to a site, the researcher must communicate successfully with the

person who can provide access. The relationship with the director of the program proved to be vital to the sampling process.

### **Selective Process and Criteria**

Following the protocol established under the guidelines of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), participants were selected as a result of responding to a recruitment letter soliciting their willingness to participate in the research. Information in the letter contained language similar to the consent form. This information was provided to ensure that potential participants understood that they were being asked to participate in a research study, the expectations in terms of time and effort, and that participation was completely voluntary. Selection of participants was limited to individuals who dropped out of high school within the previous year prior to the study. Recruitment letters were distributed and collected by the facilitator of the GED program. Students opting to participate were given an instrument to determine their degree of self-efficacy. The questionnaire consisted of 20 questions: 10 questions to rate participants' overall sense of self-efficacy and 10 questions to determine participants' sense of academic self-efficacy. Response options were based on a four-point Likert scale (Jerusalem & Schwarzer, 1992) and rated accordingly: 1 = Not true; 2 = Hardly true; 3 = Moderately true; 4 = Exactly true. Participants were given five minutes to complete the questionnaire. Each questionnaire had the potential of yielding a final composite score of between 10 and 40. Students whose answers revealed high self-efficacy were selected to participate in two interviews each. This type of sampling has the potential to yield information necessary to answer the research question (Patton, 1990). The goal was to identify study participants

who ranged in ages of 17-19 since these ages are not far removed from the lived experience of dropping out of high school. Seventeen is the earliest year a student can drop out of school without special permission from parents and the superintendent of the school district (ALSDE, 2009). Nineteen is the last year that schools are obligated to allow students to enter school in their senior year unless they are receiving services under IDEA or 504 statutes (<http://www.alsde.edu/home/Default.aspx>). Following the protocol of IRB, parental permission was obtained for students 17 years old. Four students whose scores ranged between 70-80 (indicating high self-efficacy and high academic self-efficacy), were invited to participate in the study. Initial appointments were established for the purpose of completing demographic information. Additionally, parents of minors were contacted in order to obtain permission and their signatures on consent forms.

### **Sample Size**

Purposive sampling was utilized to identify a minimum of 35 potential participants. According to Creswell (2007), purposeful sampling provides the researcher with an opportunity to select individuals and a site for the study that purposefully informs an understanding of the research problem and the phenomenon being studied. As the researcher, my goal was to conduct this study with 10 participants chosen from the potential 35 participants in the sample. With respect to phenomenological studies, sample size recommendations range from six to 10 (Creswell, 1998; Morse, 1994). Criteria for sampling included age and time removed from the lived experience, scores of three and above on the questionnaire and students who scored 25 or better on the locator test. Participation was not restricted by race or gender.

### **Data Collection**

Questionnaires and interviews, both commonly associated with qualitative research, were used in the data collection process (Creswell, 2002). Participants in this study completed two questionnaires to assist in the sampling process. Questionnaire responses were utilized to determine students' perceptions of general self-efficacy as well as self-efficacy as it related to academic achievement and self-regulated learning. Responses also assisted in establishing students' intent for entering the GED program. Face-to-face interviews were conducted and used as one of the major data sources. Based on sound methodological principles, face-to-face interviews have a distinct advantage of enabling the researcher to establish rapport with potential participants and thereby gain their cooperation. Additionally, face-to-face interviews typically yield rich information and allow the researcher to clarify ambiguous answers or seek follow-up information (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001). Semi-structured interviews were used to allow the respondents the flexibility needed to share their lived experiences (Creswell, 2002). Interviews were conducted one-on-one to protect the anonymity of participants; all questions asked in the interview process were open-ended. Probing questions were used in addition to the predetermined interview protocol for the purpose of expanding upon participants' lived experiences. Open-ended questions reduce the possibility of the researcher influencing or biasing participants' recall of their lived experience. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes to one hour.

Participants were given the questions ahead of time so that they were familiar with the type of questions being asked. This provided the researcher additional time in the interviews to become acquainted with the participants and ensure that participants provide thoughtful recollections of their experiences (Creswell, 2007). Interviews were

held in a room separate from where students received instruction. A digital recorder was used to capture the interviews for later transcription. Notes were taken during the interview process for the purpose of capturing tone, inflection and non-verbal communication. Additionally, the researcher bracketed thoughts, feelings, and impressions at the time of the interview.

In accordance with qualitative research, I used an interview protocol to help me organize my thoughts regarding headings, opening statements to begin the interview, and closing remarks to thank the respondents for their participation upon completion of the data collection process (Creswell, 2007). Follow-up interviews were scheduled for the purpose of clarifying answers and probing further; follow-up interviews lasted no more than 15 minutes. Prior to the follow-up interviews, participants were given an opportunity to review the transcription from the previous interview and clarify, modify, and add to initial information.

### **In-depth Interviews**

Interviews were held in a room that provided an atmosphere conducive for a candid one-on-one conversation. Prior to the interviews, the researcher explained to each participant, the instrumentation and procedures used, as well as an overview of the interview protocol. The interview protocol was comprised of the central research question and sub-questions that will be asked of all interviewees. A general interview guide was used to ensure that the same general areas of information were collected from each interviewee; this approach provided more focus while still allowing a degree of freedom and adaptability in obtaining information from the interviewees (Creswell, 2007). The overall preparation for the interview process included the following steps: (a) choosing a

setting with the least distraction, (b) explaining the purpose of the interview, (c) addressing the terms of confidentiality, (d) explaining the format of the interview, (e) indicating how long the interview usually takes, (f) providing the interviewee with contact information of the interviewer, (g) allowing the interviewee to clarify any details about the interview, and (h) preparing a method for recording data. Interview preparation ensures consistency in data collection and adherence to established protocols and standards of IRB. Strategies that were employed in preparing for the interview included: (a) being familiar with the topic; (b) structuring and outlining the procedure of the interviews; (c) using clear, simple, easy and short questions that can be communicated clearly and understood by the participants; (d) being tolerant, sensitive and patient to provocative or controversial opinions; (e) remembering and retaining the subject information from the interviewee; (f) involving the respondents in the interview as quickly as possible; (g) asking one question at a time; (h) remaining as neutral as possible; (i) giving each participant a chance to contribute information free from interpretation; and (j) allowing time for the interviewee to provide additional information and their impressions of the interview.

### **Questionnaires**

According to Robson (2002), qualitative questionnaires are used to gather facts about peoples' beliefs, feelings, and experiences in certain jobs, service offered, activities and more. When using questionnaires, validity and reliability can be accomplished through using pre-existing questionnaires that have construct validity, internal consistency, and reliability pre-established by its designers (Yu, 2001). The questionnaire for this study was designed to provide participants opportunities to express their views without influence or



judgment from the interviewer. Questionnaires reduce interviewer bias because they contained no verbal or visual clues that could influence a participant in a specific way (Creswell, 1998). Two variations of the same questionnaire were administered to determine the self-efficacy of potential participants. Respondents were given five minutes to complete the questionnaire. Participants whose results revealed a high degree of general self-efficacy, self-efficacy for academic achievement and self-regulated learning were considered as participants in the study.

### **Data Analysis**

Data collection and analysis followed protocol approved by IRB. Data collected in the research included a two-part questionnaire and two interviews. Information gathered in the second interview provided additional insight in the data analysis process (Creswell, 2007). Data for this research was collected from four participants, who were invited to participate in a 45-60 minute first-round interview and a 15 minute follow-up interview; all interviews were audio recorded. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and read in their entirety to check for consistency and clarity in the question-answer process. Questions for the second interview were derived from reading over the original interviews. This data source was reviewed to identify statements about how the participants experienced the phenomenon of dropping out. Lists of non-repetitive, non-overlapping statements were identified for their significance to the topic. These statements were grouped into themes. In keeping with descriptive analysis, a textual description of what the participants experienced was written down verbatim and accompanied by examples. The next step included a structural description created to reveal how the

experience happened within the confines of the setting. Finally, a composite description of the phenomenon was written incorporating both the textural and structural descriptions (Creswell, 2007). Themes were developed for the purpose of identifying and interpreting the emerging information concerning the lived experience of each of the participants. Thematic analysis involves: (1) viewing the data several times as a whole (e.g., reading and re-reading the manuscripts), (2) identifying patterns and themes (e.g., finding common statements or ideas that appear repeatedly); and (3) reorganizing the data (e.g., coding the data according to the themes identified) (Corbin & Strauss 2008; Creswell 2007). Flow charts were used to better view information from the individual perspective. This process provided a unique perspective on the phenomenon of dropout. Bogdan and Bilken (1982) suggested examining the setting and context, the perspectives of the informants, and informants' ways of thinking about people, objects, processes, activities, events, and relationships.

**Trustworthiness.** "Trustworthiness" is a common term in qualitative research and is closely related to the term "validity" in quantitative research (Marshall & Rossman 2011). This term refers to the credibility, transferability, dependability, and objectivity of the research (Marshall & Rossman 2011; Schwandt 2007). Qualitative research provides the researcher with an opportunity to look into the life experiences of participants to reveal the essence of these experiences. It has been defined as the process of "making sense" of data gathered from interviews, on-site observations, documents, etc., then "responsibly presenting what the data reveal" (Caudle, 2004, p. 417). Such interpretation must be done in a way that yields an untainted product. Guba (1981) proposed the use of certain operational techniques that the naturalist (constructionist) can use to establish

credibility, transferability, and dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These techniques are reflective of the eight primary strategies described by Creswell as the means for establishing validity and credibility. Creswell (2009) further stated that validations of findings occur throughout the steps in the process of qualitative research.

In this research, I employed five strategies in an effort to establish the credibility of this qualitative research, including: (a) member checking, (b) thick, rich description, (c) clarifying researcher bias, (d) peer debriefing, and (e) triangulation. For member checking, interview transcripts were given to the participants to verify the accuracy of the information. This follow-up was part of the second interview and was used to give participants an opportunity to comment on the findings (Creswell, 2007). Thick, rich description to convey the shared experience of participants was utilized to expound on the settings and the themes that emerged from the interviews. The purpose of this strategy was to paint a more vivid picture that allowed entry into the lived experience (Creswell, 2003). Clarifying biases allowed me, as the researcher, to engage in self-reflection and develop a narrative that not only revealed my background in secondary and adult education but also separated my thoughts and feelings from those of the participants. Peer debriefing sessions were used to gain a new perspective on the research. Peer debriefing can be used to explore other perspectives, challenge assumptions and identify biases that may have been overlooked (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation in data collection also assisted in creating credibility and transferability of the results. Triangulation reduces the potential systematic bias that can occur with using only one data source, method, or procedure (Maxwell 2008). In this study, two interviews were utilized to gain greater

insight into the meaning of what the participants stated. Teachers who worked directly with the participants were also interviewed as a mean of comparing and validating data.

**Reliability of the Questionnaire.**Reliability refers to the extent to which a scale produces consistent results if the measurements are repeated a number of times. The testing of reliability is called reliability analysis. Reliability analysis is determined by obtaining the proportion of systematic variation in a scale, which can be done by determining the association between the scores obtained from different administrations of the scale. Thus, if the association in reliability analysis is high, the scale yields consistent results and is therefore reliable (Graham, 2006).

The General Self-Efficacy Scale was created to assess perceived self-efficacy regarding coping and adaptation abilities in both daily activities and isolated stressful events. It has been widely used for the past two decades, both nationally and internationally, and was designed for individuals aged 12 or higher. The questionnaire was developed by Bandura to determine an individual's sense of self-efficacy. In samples from 23 nations, Cronbach's alpha scores ranged from .76 to .90, with the majority in the high .80s. Cronbach's alpha is a coefficient of reliability. It is commonly used as a measure of the internal consistency or reliability of a psychometric test score for a sample of examinees (Yu, 2001).The scale is uni-dimensional (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1993).

**Validity of the Questionnaire.**The questionnaire was designed and tested in several studies to determine its ability to determine self-efficacy. Criterion-related validity is documented in numerous correlation studies in which positive coefficients were associated with favorable emotions, dispositional optimism, and work satisfaction. Negative coefficients were associated with depression, anxiety, stress, burnout, and

health complaints. In studies with cardiac patients, individual recovery time over a six month period of time could be predicted by pre-surgery scores of self-efficacy (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1993).

**Strength of the Questionnaire.** This measure for self-efficacy has been successfully used for the past two decades at national and international levels. It has proven to be suitable for a broad range of applications. (Scholz, Gutiérrez-Doña, Sud, & Schwarzer, 2001; Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1993).

**Weakness of the Questionnaire.** As a general measure, the questionnaire does not identify specific behavior changes. Therefore, it was necessary to add multiple items to address the particular content of this study, specifically academic achievement and self-regulated learning (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1993).

## **Summary**

The issue of students dropping out of high school continues to be a challenge in the United States (Balfanz, 2008). Students are leaving schools daily without receiving their diploma. Forty years ago, the United States was number one in graduating students from high school. Today, the U.S. ranks 19<sup>th</sup> in the world (KidSource Online, Inc., 2009).

Educators and researchers are hard pressed for answers to this rapid and dramatic decline. While there is consensus regarding the factors that place students at risk for dropping out, little has been done to remedy the problem. Dropout rates in America continue to soar (Patterson, Hale, & Stessman, 2008). In the past, most of the high school dropouts were associated with urban school districts in which the majority of students most affected were African Americans and Hispanics (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009). However, the demographics for students who drop out of school have changed.

Gifted students are joining the ranks of those who choose to leave without a diploma (Hansen & Toso, 2007). Increasingly, students of all stripes are electing to complete their high school credential through alternative means.

The purpose of this study was to look at the lived experiences of students with high self-efficacy who drop out of school to pursue a GED. This phenomenological study was conducted to give a voice to students between the ages of 17-19 in order to better understand the factors that influenced their decision making. This qualitative research design provided the necessary degree of interaction between participant and researcher to collect information needed to describe the phenomenon being studied. A theoretical framework provided this study with a solid qualitative foundation. Maslow's Theory of Motivation-Hierarchy of Needs (1954) and Albert Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory (1986) served as the foundational underpinnings of the theoretical framework. These two theories were instrumental in shaping the study and drawing out the essence of the lived experiences of the participants.

Research participants were chosen using purposeful sampling. A local community college designated by the state to facilitate the GED Program served as the research site. Following the appropriate IRB guidelines (Creswell, 2005), participants were selected from a pool of students who responded to an initial recruitment letter and expressed willingness to participate in the research. Twelve students were given two questionnaires to determine their degree of self-efficacy. Students whose results identified them as having high self-efficacy through their questionnaire responses were asked to participate in two interviews. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. A second interview was conducted as needed to seek clarifying information and to probe further

into the lived experience of participants. Multiple methods were used to establish credibility and trustworthiness of the data, including: (a) member checking, (b) rich, thick description, (c) peer debriefing, (d) clarifying biases, and (e) triangulation.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **RESULTS**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of students with high self-efficacy who have voluntarily chosen to leave high school to complete their credentials by means of a GED. The central question that guided this study was: What is the lived experience of urban students with high self-efficacy who are pursuing their GED after dropping out of a traditional public school program? Sub-questions included the following:

1. Are there distinguishing characteristics of students with high self-efficacy who dropped out of school but later received a GED?
2. What factors most influenced students' decision to drop out of school?
3. Are there implications for teachers and administrators in traditional education settings?

#### **Setting**

This research was conducted in one of the largest cities in Alabama. Participants were comprised of students from surrounding school districts within the city and the county. The chosen site for the research was a community college responsible for providing adult education in the state. The executive director of the GED Program was instrumental in providing access to the program and with recruiting participants. Four students were purposefully selected to participate in this study. These individuals exhibited high self-efficacy, dropped out of high school, and were attending the GED



program to receive their high school graduation credentials. Participation in this research study allowed students to: (a) share their lived experience during the process of dropping out of school; (b) provide insight regarding their perceptions of various stakeholders in the educational process; and (c) discuss how challenges in life can impact a student's ability to perform well in the traditional high school setting.

### **Participants**

Four African American participants were purposefully selected for this study, three African American males and one African American female. Consistent with qualitative research design, all of the participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities. Narrative descriptions below provide additional information about each of the interviewees.

**Participant A: Jim.** Jim is a 17-year-old African American male who was classified as a 10th grader at the time he left high school. Based on his academic record, reading and science are Jim's academic strengths. Math, however, has always given him trouble. Despite this challenge, Jim said that he believes he can master the material needed to pass the GED testing requirements for math. He has been enrolled in the GED program for nine months and lives with his mother and two siblings. Jim was expelled from high school for participating in a fight that was classified as a major disruption of the academic process. Jim's mother described him as being a model student in grades 1 - 7. According to his mother, Jim appeared to lose focus while in middle school. Even though Jim was expelled, he was provided an opportunity to complete his degree requirements at another school within the district. Jim described his refusal to return to

school as being a protest of his individuality. This rationale arose from being compared to his older brother who finished high school and now attends college.

**Participant B: Gwen.** Gwen is a 17-year-old African American female. Due to illness, she has only completed enough credits to be classified as a ninth grader. Gwen said that she believes she has the academic ability to complete the GED program successfully. She attributed her academic deficiencies to the lack of time spent in school due to chronic illness. According to teachers of the GED program, Gwen's academic performance is exceptional especially when compared to her lack of schooling. Absenteeism has plagued her educational efforts since elementary school. Her current age and the number of Carnegie Units place her in a position to complete school with a traditional high school diploma; nevertheless, she has opted to pursue the GED instead. When asked about missing the prom and other extracurricular activities associated with high school Gwen replied that she would miss them but did not feel like school would understand of her situation. Gwen's father is the primary caregiver due to the death of her mother which occurred when Gwen was 15 years old. According to Gwen, her illness still hinders her class attendance. She has been in the GED program for 10 months but attributes the length of time in the program to absenteeism due to her chronic illness. Gwen's future aspiration is to attend nursing school.

**Participant C: Anthony.** Anthony is an 18-year-old African American male. He identified reading and English as his academic strengths and math as his academic weakness. Anthony currently lives with his mother due to divorce but had previously moved around the country while living with his father, who is in the military. Anthony's GED teachers described him as being academically savvy. He works well independently

and said that he feels as though he will be ready to test soon. Anthony said that he no longer felt like high school was an option for him, but his desire is to move forward with his education. Upon leaving high school Anthony was classified as a 10th grader. Anthony has been enrolled in the GED program for six months, and his future goal is to attend a university. He has not yet decided on a course of study.

**Participant D: Edward.** Edward is a 19-year-old African American male. Edward left high school at the age of 16. At the time he left school he was classified as a 10th grader. Edward lived with his grandmother until he was 14. After her death, he moved from home to home with other relatives and foster care. Edward said that his academic weakness is math. He regarded the subjects of science and social studies as his strengths. When asked to describe himself Edward identified his strength in being able to “maintain in lieu of his current situation”. Since Edward aged out of foster care, he is currently homeless and has to support himself. Edward recognizes the need to complete his high school credential in order to be competitive but noted that other “life issues” currently demand more of his time.

All of the participants listed math as an academic weakness. Teachers who facilitate the GED program attribute this deficiency to students’ lack of exposure to higher levels of math due to leaving school early. Of the four participants, two are only children. Participants acknowledged the importance of a high school education and have committed to staying in the program until they have obtained their diploma.

### **Themes**

Based on an analysis of the interviews, the following four themes emerged: (a) early challenges, (b) teacher influence, (c) parental involvement, and (d)

absenteeism. Several techniques were used in the data analysis process to derive these themes. The researcher began with observing word repetition. This is a qualitative data analysis process that focuses mainly on the use of identifying words or phrases that are used repetitively (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). According to D'Andrade (1992), "perhaps the simplest and most direct indication of schematic organization in naturalistic discourse is the repetition of associative linkages" (p. 294). Further, D'Andrade (1991) stated, "indeed, anyone who has listened to long stretches of talk, whether generated by a friend, spouse, workmate, informant, or patient, knows how frequently people circle through the same network of ideas" (p. 287).

Comparing and contrasting themes is the approach used to demonstrate the ways in which texts are either similar or different from each other. Glazer and Strauss (1967) referred to this approach as the "constant comparison method" (p. 101). Bogdan and Biklen (1982) recommended reading through passages of text and asking "What does this remind me of?" (p. 153). Like a good journalist, investigators compare answers to questions across people, space, and time. This approach helped the researcher in investigating the lived experience of participants in this study. Concept maps helped the researcher focus on participants' meaning as well as the connections that participants discussed across concepts or bodies of knowledge (Novak & Gowin, 1984).

### **Early Challenges**

Researchers suggest that students' academic outcomes in high school are built on the educational foundations they developed prior to high school and may be compounded by demographic, familial, and behavioral factors (Astone & McLanahan, 1994; Barnett, 1995; Campbell & Ramey, 1994). Early challenges surfaced as a foundational theme in

the analysis process. Each participant identified a specific circumstance that contributed to his/her decision for dropping out of school. These challenges surfaced from the question: what life experience most influenced your decision to drop out of school? Additionally, these challenges appeared to be the platform from which students responded to all school experiences. Gwen stated:

Mostly it was my medical health. I had, I guess I have full blown diabetes and I was getting ill from it. And it...I kind of struggled day to day, to make it to school...I would always, if I always skip school, then I would've come back with a note from a doctor, but alternately I guess the school had a set number of days you're supposed to miss and if you missed them even with a doctor's note, you still fail.

Gwen viewed this challenge as something that was out of her control. She regarded her illness as insurmountable. This challenge became the frame of reference she used to determine her educational success. Jim experienced the pressure of walking in the footsteps of his older brother as his biggest challenge. When asked: what life experiences influenced his decision to drop out of school? Jim took a long pause, cleared his throat, and said:

My Mom.....pressuring me....all the time to try to be like my older brother. Like, if I wasn't like him in every way, then she'll get mad....so....I made my own choices....and I dropped- well actually I got kicked out. So-but I wasn't going back to another school. I wouldn't wait, I'll just gone head get my GED. That made me different.

Jim viewed the ambition his mother had for him as hostile. This resulted in him becoming withdrawn academically and choosing a behavior that conflicted with success. He stated that although his desire was to complete school, he did not want to be compared to his older brother.

Anthony and Edward also expressed particular challenges in life that they had to negotiate as they pursued their education. These challenges did not exist as a direct result of school, but rather were viewed by the participants as life issues that hindered them from completing their educational pursuits. Edward was removed from his mother's care when he was in elementary school. This became a challenge that changed his focus. Edward said, "When I moved away from my mom things kind of went downhill." Further, he described the death of his grandmother as being the "final straw." For Edward, school represented the sense of being alone. He admitted that he has always needed someone to keep him on track; therefore, the loss of these two significant individuals in his life has been a tremendous hardship for him. Edward further described the challenge of losing his parents and support as a time when he felt less empowered. Although this happen when he was in elementary school he stated:

I pretty much didn't have no say so and it was like everybody word was against mine no matter what. So I didn't have too much say so over my educational experience and that would make me want to leave too.

Anthony noted that moving from school to school left him confused and at a disadvantage to his peers. He mentioned living in Germany during his elementary school years and then moving to the United States beginning in sixth grade. According to Anthony, moving from state to state and school district to school district caused him to

lose interest in attending school. When asked about the life experience that most influenced his decision to leave school he replied:

I wouldn't say it was an experience, but in my childhood we moved a lot...like a lot. I - it's so many schools, it's ridiculous. And just... like every time we would move, I would either be behind or ahead and it's like I would have to re- retract, you know what I'm sayin'.... And sometimes I would just "ok forget it. I'm where I'm at, where I'm at" and I would try to go with the flow, but nine times out of ten, I was like "whatever".

According to the experts, students who experience multiple transitional moves during their academic tenure appear less attached and engaged in school than do their counterparts who do not experience such moves (Astone & McClanahan, 1994; Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Sampson & Laub, 1993; Swanson & Schneider, 1999).

Researchers have demonstrated that problematic adolescents tend to be identified early by teachers, parents, peers, and therapists as students with a propensity to drop out of high school (Hickman & Garvey, 2006; Kazdin, 1995). During early adolescence, rejected children begin to congregate with each other for support, forming delinquent peer groups. As this developmental progression unfolds, adolescents develop the propensity to drop out of high school (Patterson et al., 1989). Participants in this study expressed the need for assistance from teachers and parents to help overcome what they described as the life experience that most influenced their decision to leave prior to completing their degree.

### **Teacher Influence**

As noted in the research literature, teacher influence is the most powerful component in moving students through the educational process (Patterson et al., 2007). Teachers are the gatekeepers of the curriculum (Thornton, 1989). They are responsible for facilitating the educational process of each student. This process includes assessing students' progress, which is more than a mark placed on paper. Student assessment happens with each word and action expressed when teachers engage students. Each participant in this study expressed ways in which teachers impacted their lives either negatively or positively. Gwen applauded the efforts of a teacher who took the time to work with her after school and on weekends when the teacher felt as if she was "seeping through the cracks". Gwen described this relationship as an effort that resulted from a teacher who correctly assessed her situation. Conversely, when asked what things could have been done to change her outlook on school in lieu of her challenges, she replied, "Probably, ...I guess if the teachers were a little bit more, ...I guess if they at least reached out to say that they...that they can help in whatever way." Gwen said that "teachers acted as if they did not care." She expressed this sentiment regarding the school administrators as well. In the interviews she further stated, "They just thought of it as I didn't want to come to school. I had tried on several accounts to talk to the counselor and none of them would be cooperative with me." As an advocate, Gwen's father pleaded her case to principals and central office staff to no avail. Therefore, Gwen viewed the role of teacher through a negative lens.

Jim noted that he had a lot of "bad teachers". He mentioned a time when he felt that refusing to play on the football team resulted in him not receiving the same favor



enjoyed by an actual team member. He expressed his regret in not following the recommendation of the teacher to play football. Jim said:

Cause every teacher like[s] a football player. They (*sic*) doing something for the school. They win the games. The teachers give- players (pause) some football players are not smart, so...teacher[s] give them extra grades, extra stuff...for being on the football team. I think that would've helped me a lot...in my grades.

In contrast, Jim described a situation in which a teacher reached out to help him. He said, "she ...she knew I was doing bad in class so she allowed me to stay for tutoring so she could help me out. She gave me . . . like extra credit work so I could boost my grade up."

Participants expressed how their interactions with teachers became major factors in their daily decision-making process. Anthony expressed an admiration for his band teacher who refused to allow him to cut class to practice drums. He appreciated the teachers who said and did things that he described as motivational. When asked about the role of teachers, Anthony described them as follows, they:

motivate me a little harder, like just... I'm a...I'm more of a motivational guy.

Like if you can motivate me and I actually feel like, you know, ok, I can get through this then I'm busting my butt to make sure that I try to get it done.

At the same time, Anthony admonished the behaviors of teachers whose actions seemed to say, "I got mine, you are trying to get yours".

Edward expressed the need to have one-on-one interactions with teachers. When questioned about the role of teachers, Edward noted:

everybody don't have the same mind frame everybody don't catch on quick and fast like everyone else does. So if you talk to everyone individually and then get them as a whole and talk to them they may do better.

Edward expressed his feelings about teachers not caring about students and provided this example:

When a teacher, always you know, downing you saying, you not gonna be anything. You know. Make[s] you feel like you nothing. And when a teacher walks out in the middle of teaching and stay 30 minutes outside. You really don't get too much and you don't know that much. And you can't do anything cause you failed that class cause you not been taught.

Collectively, participants noted that both positive and negative teachers existed within their schools. However, individually they expressed how they were impacted by these teachers based on what they were experiencing at the time. What they viewed as positive or negative seemed to reflect the challenges they experienced or the impact the challenge was having on their schooling. For instance, Gwen's view of teachers being positive was reflective of how they empathized with her due to her illness. Anthony's loss of motivation due to constantly moving became his platform for determining teachers' effectiveness in being a positive influence. Similarly, Edward viewed positive influence from teachers based on their willingness to give him individual attention. As Edward stated earlier, the loss of his grandmother meant that he had nobody to help him stay focused or avoid "fall[ing] through the cracks".

### **Parental Involvement**

Typically, parents and caregivers are a child's first and most interested teacher (Larocque, Kleiman, & Darling, 2011). Researchers have found that parental involvement is the missing link in ensuring that students experience educational equity in turns of academic achievement (Colombo, 2006). Participants in this study referred to parental involvement as a factor that influenced their decision to drop out of high school before completing a degree. This theme emerged from students' experiences and was coded from several different perspectives. Parents were described as life anchors by some participants and stumbling blocks by others. Anthony heralded his mother as a hero but described his father's influence as lackluster. With regards to parental involvement, Anthony said that his father was in the military and was never around. Anthony dropped his head, and with a sad expression, said of his father's absence, "that was--that wasn't cool. (Pause)...Like for real". Gwen, who lived with her father, stated that he was her "number one cheerleader". Gwen described her father this positive way with regards to him advocating for her as she experienced the challenge of missing school due to illness. All of the participants said that they had talked to their parents about leaving school. Further, two of the four noted that leaving school was even suggested by their parent. Edward, who was removed from his mother's home in elementary school, stated that afterwards:

I pretty much didn't have no say so and it was like everybody word was against mine no matter what. So I didn't have too much say so over my educational experience and that would make me want to leave too.

Edward said that no one had a real interest in his education after the death of his grandmother. He suggested that because of this situation he alone assessed school and his

need to continue. Edward lived with a foster parent which made the idea of dropping out of school difficult since breaking DHR protocol resulted in him becoming homeless.

Jim regarded his act of rebellion as being the catalyst for his mom to allow him to get a GED. After a long pause and clearing his throat, Jim said:

my mom.....pressuring me....all the time to try to be like my older brother. Like, if I wasn't like him in every way, then she'll get mad....so....I made my own choices....and I dropped- well actually I got kicked out. So-but I wasn't going back to another school. I wouldn't wait, I'll just gone head get my GED. She wanted me to be like him, but I wasn't like him.

Each of the participants lived with only one parent. Jim and Anthony both lived with their mothers, who were single parents. Gwen lived with her father, who was also a single parent. Edward lived with a single foster parent. Gwen recalled efforts between the school and her father in his attempt to get teachers to understand her situations. She stated:

Yeah, I felt like the teachers and the administrators were very impersonal. They didn't really, like they really didn't care. And I understand..., not putting down anyone; I mean, there are some students that really are insubordinate and sometimes it's hard to tell; but with my situation I actually really did want to finish, but it was just that I was trying to do all I could. But it seemed like it wasn't getting through to them; it was almost like I got to get my Dad to try to explain my absences or try to just...be on my side or just try to make up excuses for me not being there. And that wasn't really it, and it, after a while, got too frustrating.

When asked about her father's response to her decision to dropout, Gwen said:

Well he had talked to me. He sat me down one day, and he said-he was like, "Listen, I know this is what you want,-you wanna finish high school. And get your education, and I understand that, but seeing as though the school and the school board is just not, I guess, hearing us at all and it...would it be ok if I did try to get my GED...and at first I was a little disappointed...just the simple fact was I really had my heart set out on actually walking across the stage, getting, you know, my high school diploma, but, ...at the same time, I was like ok...still, it's- and I asked him, what would be different, and basically he said, well, if you talk to- if you have a relationship with the teachers and tell them your -tell them basically your story then they'll be a little bit understanding and they can work around you- your doctors' appointments and everything else health-related".

As defined by Larocque et al. (2011), parental involvement is the parents' or caregivers' investment in the education of their children. However, participants in this study appeared to stand independent of this investment. Very little time was spent describing parents as having made an investment into students' school experience. Each participant suggested that they chose an age when the decision to dropout did not require parental approval.

### **Absenteeism**

All of the participants in this study acknowledged the role that absenteeism played in the process of dropping out of school. They noted that the number of days they continuously missed from school narrowed their options when trying to complete their degree requirements. Jim, Anthony, and Edward said that they had gotten to a place

where they refused to attend school on a regular basis, although each provided a different reason for his decision. Anthony mentioned that the sense of confusion associated with constantly changing schools made him feel inadequate in class. He described the experience as something that started early in his education. Anthony stated, “I didn’t even grasp, you know third grade, so like I was behind. It was like I was trying to play catch – up. And every grade level, I’m really just playing catch-up instead of saying oh, ok, I got this”. Edward said that after the eighth grade he felt like he had gotten everything the teachers could teach him. This sentiment was not due to him knowing everything he needed to know. Rather, it was based on his perceptions of the teachers. When asked about teachers’ role with students, Edward replied, “It’s different cause everybody don’t have the same mind frame everybody don’t catch on quick and fast like everyone else does. So if you talk to everyone individually and then get them as a whole and talk to them.” With regards to attendance, Jim reflected on the number of days he missed due to fighting. He said that he moved in with his aunt so that he would not have to follow her rules. In an attempt to make sure he attended school regularly Jim’s aunt told the school resource officer to look out for him. Jim stated, “My Momma called the police on me and told them what-my-name-was. She would tell me that they gone get me. They brought me to school a couple of times.” Jim described his reason for leaving home to live with his aunt as becoming his one legal guardian. He stated that leaving home and turning 17 empowered him to make the decision about attending school.

Gwen, who missed excessive days because of illness, petitioned teachers and administrators to forgive her days and allow her to make up missed assignments. She argued that her absences were due to issues beyond her control. Gwen stated:

It was just that when the school wouldn't understand and then when the board of education wouldn't understand it was, it was just then that I just figured well....what's the use? If they can't understand then I need to find some other form of...I guess take some other form of action that moved when I - that was flexible enough for me.

Gwen expressed her concerns about the consequence of her excessive absenteeism, but felt there was little concern from educators. Gwen recalled:

I guess instead of calling my Dad everyday telling him that I missed school and if a teacher did ever call directly to.... I guess find out why I've not been to school then they pretty much say well she's been out of school for a while. What's wrong with her? Is she ok? But they don't offer any... they really didn't offer any type of, I guess, services or programs or tutoring at all.

Each participant was aware of attendance policies and understood what was expected of students to be successful in school. Further, each one of them assumed responsibility for missing school. However, when asked for an explanation of their behavior, participants reflected back to the challenges in life that had had the most devastating effect on them.

### **Essence of Experience**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experience of students with high self-efficacy who dropped out of school to complete their high school credentials through the GED Program. Data analysis resulted in the following four themes: (a) early challenges, (b) teacher influence, (c) parental involvement, and (d) absenteeism. These themes were common among all participants; however, they were expressed by participants in multiple and differing ways.

Among these four participants, the researcher was able to discover how life experiences influenced their decision to drop out of school to pursue their GED. The findings revealed how challenges experienced by students influenced their views of the educational process as well as those responsible for facilitating it. Further, it was noted that participants' attitudes may not have been targeted exclusively against school but rather toward the challenges experienced early in life. Of the common themes that emerged, teacher influence, parental involvement, and absenteeism appeared to be viewed by the students through the lens of a personal challenge. This challenge was the common thread that connected individual responses and the filter through which students interpreted their educational experiences. In various ways, participants expressed the feeling that school was over for them long before they had even gotten to high school. The grade level of students was not reflective of their timetable for leaving, but rather the time it took for multiple stakeholders to reach consensus regarding students' behaviors. Each participant regarded the GED program as a form of redemption. The sense of efficacy that students demonstrated with regards to completing the GED program appeared to be in response to the challenges they experienced in their early childhood, specifically: (a) being compared to an older sibling, (b) being sick and unable to get the cooperation of schools, (c) losing focus of academic strengths due to constantly changing schools, and (d) losing family members and the support needed to keep focused and stay on track. These themes expressed the voices of students with high-self efficacy who dropped out of school to pursue a GED.



## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

#### **Major Findings**

The purpose of the study was to explore the lived experience of students with high self-efficacy who left school early to pursue a GED. The first three themes that emerged from this investigation were consistent with research literature on students who voluntarily drop out of school, including: absenteeism, parental involvement, and teacher influence. However, when these themes were viewed through the lens of the fourth theme, early challenges, the dynamics of the investigation changed. Teacher influence was referred to as either positive or negative and was dependent upon how the participant responded to a dilemma (early challenge) in his/her life. Parents were referred to as heroes and greatest cheerleaders when they helped champion the cause (personal challenge). Conversely, when parents were absent or non-supportive, they were seen as villains. This was the case for Jim, who hated that his mother compared him to his older and more successful brother. The four themes that were captured in this study described situations that participants had not resolved in their former schools. Additionally, these issues may have had less to do with school than with life in general.

#### **Addressing Research Questions**

The central research question for this study was: What is the lived experience of urban students with high self-efficacy who are pursuing their GED after dropping out of a traditional public school program. Sub-questions included: (1) Are there distinguishing

characteristics of students with high self-efficacy who dropped out of school but later received a GED?, (2) What factors most influenced students' decision to drop-out of school?, and (3) Are there implications for teachers and administrators in urban school settings?

A review of the literature identified multiple factors that place student at risk for dropping out. Further, researchers have demonstrated that not all students succumb to these factors. The research does not, however, provide insights regarding the *mindset* of students who are most at risk for dropping out. The purpose of this study was to give voice to the participants by exploring their lived experience. Findings indicated that personal challenges in students' lives shaped their views of their previous school settings. In addressing the research questions, the researcher concluded that there were indeed distinguishing characteristics of students with high self-efficacy who leave school.

The results suggested that students with unresolved challenges early in their school careers lost focus. Edward mentioned repeatedly that after being taken from his mother in elementary school he needed someone to help him stay on track. Gwen stated that she just needed someone to listen and to help her catch up because she missed excessive days due to her illness. In both instances, the issue was not based on teacher pedagogy. Rather, it was the individual student asking for help to negotiate school in light of personal issues. Therefore, the success of the teacher was measured by participants based on the teacher's ability to help them manage academic success despite personal dilemmas and challenges.

Participants in this study all appeared to have a great need for nurturing. Although they expressed confidence in their ability to succeed academically, they all alluded to the

absence of an environment or culture that would allow them to do so. Gwen stated that no matter how many days she missed out of school, there was never a meeting with teachers and administrators to address what could be done in lieu of her consistent absences due to illness. Although Anthony was transferred to schools in the middle of the year, it was never considered a factor in how he performed academically. He believed that teachers, administrators, and counselors should have made note of the many schools he had attended; many of which he did not complete the same year.

The second research question was: What factors most influenced students' decision to drop out of school? Several factors came to light which seemed consistent with findings from previous studies (Kazdin, 1995; Hickman & Garvey, 2006; Rumberger & Lim, 2008). On closer inspection, however, participants' responses reflected unique conditions. All of the participants in this study stated that excessive absences were one of the major factors that led to their decision to leave school. However, these absences were the result of unresolved challenges experienced in elementary school. Jim struggled with meeting his mother's expectations for him to be more like his older brother, who did excellent in school. This caused Jim to be so defiant that the police were called to make him go to school during his middle and high school years. In his interview Jim stated, "I wasn't going to another school. I wouldn't wait, I'll just gone head and get my GED. That made me different." Anthony said that he was so distraught about moving so much during his elementary years that he just got tired of trying to determine whether he was behind or ahead. Anthony's family continued to move until he was in high school at which point he just stopped going to school because it no longer made sense to him. Even though absenteeism could be listed as a culprit, the

challenge of being moved from school-to-school was the mitigating factor that led to Anthony dropping out of school prior to completing his degree.

Gwen missed excessive days from school due to her illness. She described her entire school experience in terms of how she perceived she was viewed by her teachers, administrators, and fellow students based on her absenteeism. When asked what life experience influenced her decision to leave school, she said:

It was just that when the school wouldn't understand and then when the board of education wouldn't understand it was, it was just then that I just figured well....what's the use? If they can't understand then I need to find some other form of...I guess take some other form of action that moved when I - that was flexible enough for me.

Finally, Edward's loss of his support system through the deaths of his mother and grandmother left him feeling as if he was constantly falling through the cracks. Edward viewed the lack of support he received from his teachers and administrators as another type of loss, this perception resulted in him not attending school regularly.

In response to the third sub-question, Are there implications for teachers and administrators in urban school setting?, the challenges experienced by the study participants were similar to the challenges faced by students across the country under similar circumstances (Balfanz, 2008; Balfanz&Legters, 2004; Balfanz&Legters, 2007; Balfanz&Neild, 2006). In 2009, 31.2% of students who started public high school in the U.S. failed to graduate (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). The challenge for teachers and administrators is to find ways to create a culture that allows these students to succeed despite conditions or personal challenges. One of the themes that surfaced in this study

was teacher influence. Participants expressed the need for encouragement from teachers. Edward said that he expected one-on-one interactions with teachers and administrators, both when he was doing well and when he was doing poorly. In describing his exchanges with teachers and administrators, Edward said:

No. Not just when you get in trouble because that just looks like an excuse to get out of trouble. You should be wanting to talk to your principal daily. Teachers too. To let them know that you are focused and you want to do something.

The themes that emerged suggested that dropping out was in response to challenges participants experienced at an early age and perceived to be insurmountable. According to the participants, teachers, parents, and administrators should have a responsibility for encouraging students, helping them stay on track, affirming and supporting them, and keeping them safe throughout the educational process.

For these four participants, dropping out of school was a fully formed idea as early as elementary school due to the lack of support and encouragement from teachers, administrators, and family. Participants reflected that by the eighth grade school was already over for them. Participants described teachers and administrators as being ineffective in identifying resources to help them overcome their personal challenges. Several times throughout the interviews participants said that all they needed from teachers was additional work or tutoring to get back on track. For participants in this study, the GED program provided a common solution for completing their high school credential when they could not get the help they needed to navigate the traditional educational path.

## **Limitations**

This study provides important insights to begin to address many of the existing gaps in the research literature. More research is needed to support the findings in this study and to answer the questions that emerged throughout the process. In addition to time, this study was limited by the following considerations:

1. This study represents the lived experience of four students who dropped out of school. The number of participants may not be the best representation of the overall population of students who drop out of school prior to completing a high school degree;
2. The information collected from the participants was based on their lived experience; therefore, it cannot be quantified. The findings can only be generalized to the four individuals who participated in the study;
3. Information provided by the participants is only as accurate as their desire and understanding of the need for being honest and candid about their lived experience.
4. As an educator, the researcher has specific biases that influenced the data collection and data analysis processes.

## **Implications for Practice**

Current research literature identifies deficiencies in students' behavior, class attendance, and social-economic status as the primary reasons for students dropping out of school. However, it fails to capture the lived experiences of individuals who drop out of traditional programs before completing a high school degree. Further, researchers

rarely address the need to change instructional and administrative practices based on student's individual needs. As students' needs change, educators must re-assess how they are responding to these needs. Exploring the lived experience of at-risk students may provide important insights regarding how students view instructional institutions and experience the educational process. While some students thrive in the current educational environment, only about 60% of Alabama students finish high school (Southern Education Foundation, 2008). Among the 40% of students who do not finish, there are a number of students who exhibit high self-efficacy.

The students who participated in this study were individuals who experienced challenges that shifted their focus away from traditional educational pursuits. These students did not opt out of a traditional high school curriculum as much as they determined that school did not offer them the tools and resources they needed to address the current challenges in their lives. Not unlike soldiers, whose educations have been interrupted by serving their country in war, students with various challenges have turned to the GED program to complete their educational degree requirements. This may be a sign that students are not dropping out of school, but rather seeking alternative approaches to address life's challenges. Teachers, administrators, policymakers, and other stakeholders may need to further examine how specific segments of the study population may be affected by an increasingly diverse array of risk factors.

A number of states have made important strides in reducing class-size, raising academic standards, increasing accountability, and improving teacher preparation (Center on Educational Policy, 2003). What may be missing among these initiatives, however, is the inclusion of school counselors and other student support services, such as school

psychologists, school socialworkers, and school nurses, to assist students with the myriad of problems and issues they bring with them to school. Previous researchers have demonstrated the effectiveness of counseling in helping students address the various academic and social problems they encounter. School counselors can provide multifaceted approaches to help students resolve emotional, social, and behavioral problems as well as develop a clear sense of academic or vocational interest. Effective counseling programs can positively affect the school climate and contribute to student achievement (Mosconi & Emmett, 2003; Schlossberg, Morris, & Lieberman, 2001).

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study focused on the lived experience of students with high self-efficacy who left school early to pursue a GED. Study participants said that they believed they possessed the academic ability to complete the educational program set before them. However, each participant described challenges that led him or her to seek a high school credential through an alternative GED program. The contrast between dropping out of school and still believing that completing school was important and pursuing a GED may suggest the depth to which these students were impacted by challenges they experienced at an early age. Participants' decision to attend a GED program suggests that students had not abandoned the idea of education, but perhaps had re-conceptualized how education could work for them despite their circumstances. Participants indicated that teachers failed to address the conditions that placed them at risk for completing a traditional high school degree program. Study participants noted that teachers' practices did not account for students' various backgrounds, knowledge, experiences, personal situations, and environment. Moreover, each participant expressed a latent desire to play a greater role in



goal-setting with their former teachers and assume more accountability for meeting their personal and academic goals.

Recommendations for future research may include studies related to the following: (1) the impact of therapeutic counseling programs for elementary school students, (2) counseling programs that teach students self-advocacy skills, and (3) the use of more comprehensive counseling programs in primary and secondary schooling. The focus of these studies could include the roles that school counselors play in facilitating collaborative efforts to implement both systemic and programmatic changes in schools and communities to prevent students from dropping out of school.

Educators are now faced with challenges that exceed the cognitive barriers of students. The factors that place students at risk are now manifold. This variation is due to how students perceive their situations. Students in this study made decisions about school based on how they perceived the situation with which they were faced. The irony that exists in this study is found in the sense that participants were students who perceived that they had the ability to be successful in school. However, perception also magnified challenges as insurmountable, leading them to dropping out of school.

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APPENDIX A

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL FORM



Institutional Review Board for Human Use

Form 4: IRB Approval Form  
Identification and Certification of Research  
Projects Involving Human Subjects

UAB's Institutional Review Boards for Human Use (IRBs) have an approved Federalwide Assurance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP). The Assurance number is FWA00005960 and it expires on January 24, 2017. The UAB IRBs are also in compliance with 21 CFR Parts 50 and 56.

Principal Investigator: BAYLES, RONALD

Co-Investigator(s):

Protocol Number: **X100414002**

Protocol Title: *Examination of Urban High School Dropouts with High Self-Efficacy: A Phenomenological Study*

The IRB reviewed and approved the above named project on 4-27-12. The review was conducted in accordance with UAB's Assurance of Compliance approved by the Department of Health and Human Services. This Project will be subject to Annual continuing review as provided in that Assurance.

This project received EXPEDITED review.

IRB Approval Date: 4-27-12

Date IRB Approval Issued: 4-27-12

Marilyn Doss, M.A.

Vice Chair of the Institutional Review  
Board for Human Use (IRB)

Investigators please note:

The IRB approved consent form used in the study must contain the IRB approval date and expiration date.

IRB approval is given for one year unless otherwise noted. For projects subject to annual review research activities may not continue past the one year anniversary of the IRB approval date.

Any modifications in the study methodology, protocol and/or consent form must be submitted for review and approval to the IRB prior to implementation.

Adverse Events and/or unanticipated risks to subjects or others at UAB or other participating institutions must be reported promptly to the IRB.

470 Administration Building  
701 20th Street South  
205.934.3789  
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The University of  
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APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORM SAMPLE



## Consent Form



**TITLE OF RESEARCH:** Examination of urban high school dropouts with High Self-Efficacy: A Phenomenological Study.

**IRB PROTOCOL:** X100414002

**INVESTIGATOR:** Ronald Bayles

**SPONSOR:** The University of Alabama at Birmingham  
Department of Human Studies

### Explanation of Procedures

You are being asked to participate in a pilot research study. The purpose of this study is to explore the lived Experience of students with high self-efficacy who have dropped out of school. Your participation will include completing a questionnaire to help determine your efficacy level ( the perception that you posses the abilities necessary to complete school successfully). The study will include 5-15 students who are revealed as having high self-efficacy. Students scoring high on the survey will be asked to participate in two interviews that will last 45 minutes to an hour each. These two interviews will be audio-recorded and will take place at different times. Prior to the interviews you will receive an outline of questions I will ask in order to give you time to think about your responses. Throughout these interviews you may also be asked some clarifying questions to elicit additional details and examples from your responses. I will take all precautions to ensure your confidentiality. You will have the options to withdraw from the study at anytime should you choose to do so. The data from the research will be used in partial fulfillment of the Investigator's doctoral degree in Educational Leadership at the University of Alabama Birmingham.

### Risks and Discomforts

The risks and discomforts involved in this study are no greater than the risks and discomforts of day-to-day living.

### Benefits

You may not benefit directly from taking part in this study. However, this study may help educators understand the influence school culture have in students' decision to complete school.

Participant Initials \_\_\_\_\_

UAB IRB

Date of Approval 4-27-12  
Not Valid On 4-27-13

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT SAMPLE

Interviewer: Researcher

Interviewee: **Anthony:**

**Researcher:** Ok...this is the interview with **Anthony:** and the interviewer is Researcher for Ron Bayles. Um, we have a series of eleven questions we will be asking **Anthony:** and he has looked over the questions and familiarized himself so – are you ready **Anthony:**?

**Anthony::** Yes, ma'am.

**Researcher:** Alright. Alright the first question is what life experiences do you believe influenced your decision to drop out of school?

**Anthony::** Aaahh...just like...not, not getting anywhere in school....you know, like not – not paying attention when I know I could have. Just like – not the want to do it, if that makes sense.

**Researcher:** Ok....it does. Was there something that...what would you-would you say there was an experience that caused you to....

**Anthony::** Like care less?

**Researcher:** Mm-hm.

**Anthony::**Ahhh, mm...ah, I wouldn't say it was an experience, but like, like in my childhood we moved a lot...like a lot. I - it's so many schools, it's ridiculous. And just... like every time we would move, I would either be behind or ahead and it's like I would have to re- retract, you know what I'm sayin'.... And sometimes I would just "ok forget it. I'm where I'm at, where I'm at" and I would try to go with the flow, but nine times out of ten, I was like "whatever".

**Researcher:** Ok....alright. Any other experiences you believe influenced your decision to drop out?

**Anthony::** (Sigh). Nahhh....not really. Like...not for real, not that I can think of. It was one summer I spent with my cousin and after that you know I could tell that stuff got different, like as far as my grades. But I'm not gone say he was the reason...you know. I could've – I could've did something about it. But after that I did see a different **Anthony:**.....so...

**Researcher:** So....was that like an influence, or...

**Anthony::** No, that was.....ahhh (laughter). Uhhhh...it wasn't a positive influence, if that's how you want to look at it.

**Researcher:** Ok.....alright. (Noisy interruption). Excuse me... let me move this over there. Ok...want to make sure I'm picking you up. Alright. Describe a time – this is question two – describe a time when the actions of a teacher positively impacted your outlook on the educational process.

**Anthony::** Uhhhh...when I got to Wenonah. Uh, Mr. Moore and Mr. Mason, my band directors – that – that was all the inspiration I needed like for real, 'cause I love music so much. Music is like my passion, so , so I was- “ok, I know I have to go in here and get through school in order to pursue my passion”. So those guys really played a major impact-

**Researcher:** Ok

**Anthony::** -on that part...

**Researcher:** Ok...so what- what actions, would you say... what did they actually do that caused you to be impacted positively?

**Anthony::** Just – just them being- just them doing their job as band directors- you know they....they didn't have to do much.

**Researcher:** Mm-hm.

**Anthony::** Mr. Mason was over the drum line. I'm a drummer, so of course I really was under him, you know, just trying to learn – learn the crafts. And – and when I would go down there when I should be in class he was like – “you know you're not supposed to be here”.

**Researcher:** Mm-hm.

**Anthony::** So I was “Ok, ok.” So I know, you know...he had a purpose. And so I was “ok”...those guys...that's who I want to be.

**Researcher:** Ok.

**Anthony::** And-

**Researcher:** Ok. Alright.

**Researcher:** What life event do you most equate with your decision to drop out of school?

**Anthony::**Umph. Ummm...I don't know for real-

**Researcher:** I'm sorry?

**Anthony::** Uh...I don't really..I don't- I can't really like pinpoint –ummm....(sigh)I don't know. I would have to-I would have to give that some other think- some other thought.

**Researcher:** Ok, you wanna come back to that one?



**Anthony::** Yea- let's come back to that one - yes, ma'am.

**Researcher:** Ok, we'll come back to that one. Let me put a ah.....alright, so our fourth question – why have you chosen to pursue a GED rather than completing the high school diploma?

**Anthony::** Well.....when I dropped out of high school, I-I chose to do GED just because, you know, I-I figured out I could still get into the college that I want to....and – I don't know, I-I could've stuck around and did the high school diploma thing. I could have.....once again, that's me. I didn't-I didn't want to, you know, 'cause it wasn't nobody pushing me, basically. So-so now I'm here trying to get my GED.

**Researcher:** Ok....so, expound on that a little more...why-why-what is it that.....prompted you to go ahead and pursue your GED.

**Anthony::** My grandma! Like for real- my grandma did. I hate to- I can't be no bum in her house, so...(laughter) so I had to do something...so a GED it was.

**Researcher:** Ok. Alright.

**Anthony::** Yes, ma'am.

Researcher. So, she...was it what she said or what she did? Or sh-what you thought?

**Anthony::** She...she was just, she was just like, "you know - hey, you should just gone get your GED. At least you could still get into a college"..and I was "ok, I'ma look into that"...and then I went to Virginia College with my brother Andre and the guy was like – "hey, if you're not in class, the best one to go to is Jeff State" – which I did and it was good. Like, I was really gettin' help up there, but it was the distance that , like stopped me from going....

**Researcher:** Ok.

**Anthony::** A lot of times.

**Researcher:** Ok. Alright. Ok, **Anthony:**, what time, or what grade in your educational experience did you feel you were in jeopardy of not completing school?

**Anthony::** Whew.....Uh...Round the.....the seventh or eighth grade? Actually...naw I won't even say that, I'ma say before then, like fourth grade. Like ,like when you, when you go up another grade level, it – they basically teaching you the stuff you know and then adding more onto it.

**Researcher:** Ok.

**Anthony::** But by that time I didn't even grasp, you know third grade, so like I was behind. It was like I was trying to play catch – up. And every grade level, I'm really just playing catch-up instead of playing "oh, ok, I got this".

**Researcher:** Um-hm.

**Anthony::** You know....let me get the rest.

**Researcher:** Ok.

**Anthony::** So...tha, that was a big problem, like – like even now when I’m looking at some of the work in

the GED books, I be, “Oh, ok. I remember it, but I’m not like quite up to speed with it, if that makes any

sense.

**Researcher:** It does (laughter). Ok. So, um you said that was basically fourth grade when you started

feeling you were in jeopardy?

**Anthony::** Yes, ma’am.

**Researcher:** Ok. Alright...um...so, the next question. What could teachers and administrators have done

differently to help you in completing school?

**Anthony::** (Pause).....Um.....motivated me a little harder, like just...um, I’m a....I’m more of a like motivational guy. Like if you can motivate me and I, and I actually feel like, you know, ok, I can get

through this, then I’m a bust my butt to make sure that I try to get it done. But like, I-I don’t...like at

Wenonah...it’s a dog eat dog world at that school, like for real. Some teachers care and then other

teachers be like....”if you ain’t got it, oh well”...and that’s - that’s exactly the type attitude they would have. If you don’t have it, ok, you know...so, so – I don’t care.

**Researcher:** Ok. What-what grade did you start Wenonah?

**Anthony::** Ninth.

**Researcher:** Ok, ninth.

**Anthony::** Yeah.....it was a couple of teachers that – they looked out for me, like for real, they really did look out for me. They were like “ok, **Anthony:**, you need to do some tutoring. I’ll tutor you...anything”, but then again, like I said, it’s those teachers that really was like “whatever....you know, I got mine, you trying to get yours”, basically.

**Researcher:** Ok. Ok. Alright....alright.Alright. (Long pause). What about the administrators? Was there something you felt like they could’ve done a little differently? To help you in completing school?

**Anthony::** Um...not really. Like...w-once again, I mean, I could’ve...I played a major part in me dropping out as well. It takes two as a how - that’s how I look at it. I played a major part in me dropping out...so like. I mean, they was doing they job as teachers and I was doing my job as a student.... I mean, well, I wasn’t doing my job as a student. But like....like I said, they could’ve motivated me more and I could’ve had the want to do it, you know? So it’s just a fifty-fifty thing, now.

**Researcher:** Ok...ok. Alright. Ok – our next question – what school experiences would you describe as being harmful to the learning process?

**Anthony::** Oh.....uhhhhh.....the time. The time limit...you would only have a certain amount of time to get what you need to get before you go on to your next class.

**Researcher:** Ok.

**Anthony::** And-and this year, from what I hear from some people who still go there, they really swapped it up. Like now you only got like forty-five minutes to a class and you really not getting nothing done. So now you got homework and you don't even understand it.

**Researcher:** Ok.

**Anthony::** So-and that's what it-I would have homework and wouldn't even understand it just because of time.....

**Researcher:** Ok.

**Anthony::** For real and then nine times out of ten I'm late from distance – you only got five minutes to get from point A to point B every day, so I'm late. And...it's just time, basically.

**Researcher:** Ok....so you're saying basically the time....um, the duration- time duration of the class-

**Anthony::** Right.

**Researcher:** As well as the time allowed to get from class to class?

**Anthony::** Right, cause like I said you only have five minutes and – and either I was in my right class going to my other right class or in my wrong class trying to go to a right class-

**Researcher:** Ok.

**Anthony::** And sometimes it would be the distance – sometimes you know it- once again just be times she couldn't get- the teacher can't get nothing done because of how the students acting in the class.

**Researcher:** Ok.

**Anthony::** It was – it's a lot of things when you think of time, you gotta think of everything...the students- teacher can't get her point across...a lot of different things...

**Researcher:** So....what was keeping her from getting the point across? Or him – the teacher?

**Anthony::** Uh.....the students – you know we played around....we-some-some students would actually, you know, get their work. But like I know, if you was on that back row or you was in that side of the room or anything you were being prevented from getting your education, just because of like whatever was going on.

**Researcher:** Ok. Ok. Alright. Any other experiences you can think of that were what you felt were harmful to the learning process?

**Anthony::** (Pause) Uh.....not for real....not- not really. I-I won't...I won't call my high school frat or my drum- line frat a-a harmful thing just because they had my attention, but- I don't think it could have distracted me that much, you know?

**Researcher:** Ok. Ok...alright. Alright, good. So the next question- how did parental involvement affect decisions you made in school?

**Anthony::** (Pause and laughter) Um.....(long pause). Um....parental.....uh...I don't know. My Mom, my Mom really wasn't...wasn't really at home, but she did the best she could. She had to raise three of us – me, my brother and my sister. She did the best she could, but she really wasn't at home. If anything, she was at work. But like I remember when I was...you know, growing up with her...I was pretty ok, like kindergarten through second grade you couldn't touch me. I was- I was bad with them grades for real, but then like, after moving a lot and she not being around and no one to help, you know, it-that's where I just started slacking. And then I moved in with my grandma after....like when I graduated the fifth grade I moved in with my grandma....and things was getting better, but still you- you saw a lot of – bad areas from...from

the past, you know what I'm saying? So that goes to me when I had to play catch-up a lot of times.

**Researcher:** Mm-hm.

**Anthony::** So like with my Mom not being there, that played a major factor. And my Dad – he was in the army. (Pause).

**Researcher:** Ok.

**Anthony::** And, and nine times out of ten he was in another country – off somewhere, so that was another thing....so...

**Researcher:** Ok.

**Anthony::** Yeah....that was-that wasn't cool. (Pause)...Like for real.

**Researcher:** Ok.... Alright.....so, ah the next question. What adjustment could you have made, if any, to help you be successful in the school environment?

**Anthony::** (Long pause) I could've...I could've tried to get more stable. I wasn't very stable. I could've got in- you know I could've been moved in with my grandma, you know. And I would've, I would've been stable – I would've been with her the whole time. I-I think I would've been pretty good as far as like...learning, you know. Like I – she would've – she would've did everything in her power to get me, like, help...like as far as tutoring or whatever I needed. So I would've been ok if I'd been with her my whole life. (Pause). That's how I think – that's how I look at it, like for real, as far as all the moving could've been avoided, you know....problems like that.

**Researcher:** Ok. Alright. Any other adjustments you feel you could've made....to help you be successful?

**Anthony::** No, no.....not for real. I wasn't no bad guy.

**Researcher:** (Chuckle)

**Anthony::** Not for real. I had my days, but I was pretty decent. So I really didn't need no major adjustments.

**Researcher:** Ok. Ok. What school experiences made you feel less empowered to succeed?

**Anthony::** (Long pause) I went to a Christian school one time – John B. Norman, Sr. Christian Academy.

**Researcher:** Mm, hm?

**Anthony::** And like how they had it set up, it was like K-3 to five years old, first grade to like third or fourth, and fifth grade to eighth grade and you only got so many teachers. And so they're trying to balance out all those kids, so like, you-you not getting nothing done up there, not for real. So like they wouldn't even – they would really just help us out only – they would only lie – well, I'm not gone say lie. But they would like help us out with a grade only because nine times out of ten they really didn't even get to us. From- from eight to three they got to balance out all those different other grade levels ...so like I'm-you can't really get no success done in there- not for real. Not as if you were to get in a public school...or-or a Christian school with the age levels that's, you know, separate where you can have that one-on-one time with your teacher in your grade level. That-that was my real down- that was another downfall, I think. No, no expansion.

**Researcher:** Ok.

**Anthony::** Yes, ma'am.

**Researcher:** Ok. Alright. Any other school experiences that made you feel less empowered-

**Anthony::** No.....

**Researcher:** For success?

**Anthony::** No, ma'am.

**Researcher:** Ok. Alright. Now what series of events, ah do you feel most influenced your decision to leave school? What things led up to you, ah, being influenced- what things, what series of events do you feel most influenced your decision to leave school?

**Anthony::** (Pause).Uh....my grades for one. My grades was horrible if it wasn't band or P.E. or R.O.T.C. – if it wasn't a extra class, it was bad- that was one. And another one – I had a lot of absentees and tardies- I would be there, but I wouldn't be there.

**Researcher:** Mm-hm.

**Anthony::** And ah....that-that's about it, like for real.....those things, I'm like well, ok....I'm not getting nothing done here, so why should I be here?

**Researcher:** Ok. Ok.

**Anthony::** Yeah.

**Researcher:** Alright. Alright, now we gotta go back to one last question-that was number three. What life event do you most equate with your decision to drop out of school?

**Anthony::** Elaborate on that word for me – equate.

**Researcher:** Um- I would- I guess I would-

**Anthony::** Ah, excuse me.

**Researcher:** Um, that's ok. What life event would you say ....pretty much determined or it helped you with your decision to drop out of school?

**Anthony::** Ok. Talking to my Grandma one day...that's bout it for real – just talking to her. Like, she was like “**Anthony:**, I know you don't like school...but you gotta do something” ...and I...I don't wanna say I don't like school...well yeah- I don't like school. But like, I know I need it for what I want.

**Researcher:** Mm-hm.

**Anthony::** So it's like I'm trying to like make myself use it – use that to my advantage. But it was just – it was just the talk that we had. I mean, she know I didn't like school. I wasn't gone fake it to her like I did like school. And so she was like “you just gotta make something happen – I want you to be successful.” I don't want to let her down, you know? And I don't want to let me down. So I was like, ok, I'll give it another shot, I'll do the G.E.D. thing and I – cause I really wanna go on to college. And Lord knows I feel like it's just gone get worse from there. But like....I-I wanna go on to college and I just want to make something out of myself. I want to let people know that- ok, I can really do this, you know what I'm saying?

**Researcher:** Mm-hm ,I do. That's good.

**Anthony::** That-that's the truth, like for real. Like, now that – not that you just got me thinking on it....yeah

**Researcher:** Ok. Good. Well, alright. You got anything else you wanna add?

**Anthony::** No, ma'am.

**Researcher:** Alright.

**Anthony::** Yougotta say my life is good enough. (Laughter)

**Researcher** (Laughter). Alright, **Anthony:** Well, thank you so much for taking your time out to share with the questions, **Anthony:**, about your life experiences.

**Anthony::** You're welcome.

**Researcher:** I wish you much success with your GED.

**Anthony::** Thank you.

**Researcher:** Thank you.

APPENDIX D

SAMPLE OF GRAPHIC ORGANIZER

