CLAIMING THE DREAM: A STUDY OF PUSHED OUT STUDENTS BECOMING REENGAGED IN SCHOOL WORK

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Abstract

Many educators consider engaging the disengaged student to be one of the biggest challenges currently facing public schools in the United States. Last year 8,300 students dropped out of school every day. The dropout rate of 30% has a deep and wide-ranging impact on the long-term economic outlook for the United States. The dropout dilemma in this country costs billions of dollars due to the loss of productive workers, the loss of earnings, the loss of generated revenue, the costs to health care, social services, drug abuse, and the high cost associated with increased incarceration. This trend cannot continue as these losses continue to grow generation after generation. This crisis requires immediate attention from all areas of the education community.

To alleviate this problem we must keep the students in school and recover those who have become disengaged and dropped out. Much research has been done addressing the causes for students to become disengaged. Little has been researched to address the reasons students reengage in school. The purpose of the study was to determine the factors influencing students to return to school and pursue their high school diploma.

This study followed qualitative methodologies by allowing disengaged students to give voice to determine what affected the student’s eventual reengagement in school.
Teachers of disengaged students participated in this study by lending voice in sharing their philosophies and techniques proven to be effective with these students.

The participants of this study shared experiences and insights into the factors leading to disengagement and reengagement. This research credited adults, particularly teachers, as being essential to the recovery of disengaged students. The information gathered by this research will be helpful in the design of workshops for all teachers, especially those working with the disengaged. The findings would be useful when considering the design of programs directed at preventing disengagement and encouraging reengagement of high school students.
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION.............................................................................................1
  Statement of the Problem..........................................................................................1
  Disengagement.........................................................................................................3
  Student Engagement...............................................................................................8
  Need for the Study..................................................................................................9
  Purpose of the Study..............................................................................................13

Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW...............................................................................15
  Historical Overview of the Disengaged Student and the Dropout Problem..........16
  Consequences of Disengagement and the Impact on Students and Society.........17
  A Profile of Disengagement....................................................................................19
  Disengagement Prevention Programs.....................................................................27
  Impact of the Teachers and Leaders......................................................................31
  Theoretical Framework...........................................................................................33
  Voice......................................................................................................................34
  Resilience...............................................................................................................36

Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY........................................................................................41
  Conceptual Framework..........................................................................................41
  Design of the Study...............................................................................................42
  Setting of the Study..............................................................................................45
  Participants of the Study.......................................................................................47
  Student Profiles.....................................................................................................47
Chapter 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

Student Participant Findings

Parents and Family as Core Factors

Not Wanting Child to Repeat Their Mistakes

Wanting a Better Life for Their Child

Mutual Respect Between Parent and Child

Input from Siblings, Family Friends, and Relatives

Influence of Teachers: Teachers Reaching Out

Students Describe Good Teachers

Students Want the Teacher to Know Them

Show an Interest in the Students

Students Need Interesting, Relevant, and Varied Presentations

Students Want Personal Attention

Teachers Need to Show Enthusiasm for the Subject

Teacher Participant Findings
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Frequency Factor of Student Participants…………………………57
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Many educators consider engaging the disengaged student as one of the biggest challenges currently facing public schools in the United States (Willms, 2003). What was once described as a problem with dropouts in the 1970s and 1980s is today described as a major issue of disengagement among student populations (Dunleavy, Milton, & Crawford, 2010). Given the many negative consequences for young people who do not get their high school diploma, disengagement is one of the most important challenges for schools to address.

Research has indicated that dropping out of school is a result of disengagement. A growing body of research has suggested that dropping out is, indeed, the final stage in a dynamic and cumulative process of disengagement (Appleton, Christenson, Kim, & Reschley, 2006; Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006; Neild, Balfanz, & Herzog, 2007; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). There is a strong correlation between disengagement and dropping out (Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr, & Goldber, 2001). Students on the dropout trajectory become disengaged from the educational dimensions over time, so that dropping out is merely the final act in a long process of alienation (Hayes, 1999).

Statement of the Problem

Nationally only 78.2% of students graduate from high school, which has resulted in a dropout rate of 21.8%. The American Health Rankings, United States Foundation (2013) Annual Report noted that last year 8,300 students dropped out of high school every day which totals 3,030,000 students. In California 23.7% of the class of 2012-2013
failed to graduate resulting in 72,320 public high school students not receiving a high school diploma (California Department of Education, 2013). In East Side Union High School District in East San Jose, California, where over 24,000 high school students grade 9-12 are enrolled, 870 students dropped out of high school during the 2011-2012 school year. This reveals that 14.8% of the class did not graduate (California Department of Education, 2013).

The consequences of not engaging students in learning are significant. The first serious consequence is persistent non-attendance. If a student is not in class he or she is not learning and earning credits. This puts him or her in danger of leaving school early before graduation. This event may have long-term effects that can disadvantage a person for life (Independent Schools Queensland, 2011). This is due to the reality that it is practically impossible for someone without a high school diploma to earn a living or participate meaningfully in society (Neild et al., 2007). Doland (2001) estimated a dropout would earn $9,200 less each year than a high school graduate.

Second, the fact that 30% of our students never complete high school has a deep and wide-ranging impact on the United States’ long-term economic outlook. The U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2011) reported that the median income of persons ages 18 through 67 who had not completed high school was roughly $25,000 in 2009. Not only does a decision to drop out of school impact the individual student, but also the rest of America is negatively impacted (Martin & Halpern, 2006). It is reported that 75% of the crimes committed in the United States are done by high school dropouts (Juvenile Violent Crimes and Statistics, 2013). Eighty
two percent of America’s prisoners are high school dropouts (United states Department of Education, 2012). At current rates, a significant segment of the population will remain entrenched in poverty; while on a global scale, the competitiveness of the American labor force will continue to lag behind that of countries such as Finland, South Korea, Hong Kong, or Japan who have a better educated labor force (American Psychological Association, 2012).

A four-year study in San Francisco, California found that 94% of young murder victims were high school dropouts (Tough Solutions for High School Truancy Rates, 2013). If the students who dropped out of the class of 2011 had graduated, the nation’s economy would likely benefit from nearly $154 billion in additional income over the course of their lifetimes (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011). Levin (2005) reported that if only one-third of all Americans without a high school education went on to get a high school education, the saving would range from $3.8 billion to $6.7 billion for food stamps, housing assistance, and temporary assistance for the needy. Levin further reported that high school dropouts have higher cardiovascular illnesses, diabetes, and other ailments that require an average of $35,000 per individual in annual healthcare costs subsidized by the public (Levin, 2005). Indeed, overall, high school dropouts live an average of nine fewer years than a graduate (Levin, 2005).

**Disengagement**

Disengaged students can easily be identified in the classroom. Black (2004) reported that disengaged students are highly visible and their numbers are disconcerting. She noted that researchers have no trouble spotting the disengaged student, the ones who
lack motivation to study and learn and spend their time watching the clock to escape from what one tenth grader called “my private prison” (Black, 2004, p. 9). Black noted that students came into their rooms and demonstrated no concern for the tardy bell and tuned out the lesson preferring to stare out the window. Further, they listened to music on their personal i-Pods, snoozed, or got caught up on news from friends (Black, 2004).

Furthermore, Esquith (2007) stated a disengaged student was one who did not see the relevance of school. Disengagement is evidenced when the student is disaffected, detached, indifferent, alienated, resentful, and/or hostile. They do not read assigned books and fail to participate in class discussions, yet they expect good grades with little or no work and resent attendance requirements (Wright, 2013). The disengaged student may be missing classes, getting low grades, or getting suspended (Morse, Christenson, & Lehr, 2004). The students who are at risk of dropping out of school show signs of disengagement such as missing classes, not completing schoolwork, and earning low grades. For the at-risk student, dropping out of school constitutes the ultimate form of physical and mental separation from the school environment (Balfanz, Herzog, & Maclver, 2007). Baines and Stanley (2003) reported that overwhelmingly the majority of disengaged students in their study characterized schoolwork as irrelevant, boring, sterile, and worthless. In a study three years later Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison (2006) reported that the disengaged students felt the classes were not relevant. Their study revealed that 45% of students said they were poorly prepared by their earlier schooling. Further, the students in this study said they needed better teachers who were interesting, smaller classes, and more individualized instruction. Additionally, the students reported
that parents needed to have better communication with the schools, that parents needed to make them go to school, and that schools needed to have better supervision to ensure safety and organization. Thus far disengaged students have been described and the problem and consequences of disengagement outlined, both for the student and the impact on society. What needs to be clearly defined, nonetheless, are the different factors that influence disengagement such as socioeconomic status, social, and cultural dynamics.

A strong link certainly exists between poverty and dropping out of school. Students from low-income families drop out of high school five times more than students from high-income families (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). Research indicates that students, particularly those attending high poverty urban schools with student bodies primarily made up of minority students, continue to be the underperformers of U.S. schools (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2006; Hanushek & Rivkin, 2006) and concluded that the conditions of living in high-poverty areas can push students off the path to high school graduation (Balfanz, Ruby, & MacIver, 2002). It is estimated that half of the pushed out students are from 12% of the schools located in areas of economic poverty (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). Also, poverty can have devastating effects on young children that impacts them for life. Early childhood is a period when children are most vulnerable to environmental risk factors such as poverty, malnutrition, trauma/abuse, or maternal depression (National Center for Children in Poverty, 1999). Research indicates that when the gap between low achievers and high achievers emerges in the elementary grades, many students begin to disengage from school (Luke, Elkin, Weir, Land, & Carrington, 2003). Children with
poor reading skills are more likely to repeat a grade, setting the pattern of failure in school (National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, 2009). A direct link between high poverty areas and violence that impacts the performance of students in those areas seems quite present. Certainly, high poverty areas with a significant amount of instability tend to experience a high level of violence, drug related crime, and overcrowding conditions (Catalano & Hawkins, 1996). Berliner (2006) stated that neighborhood effects on student engagement in school are strong. He suggests that parents too frequently lose their children to the streets. Poverty traps people in neighborhoods that affect their children separately from the effects of home and school. Many of these schools embody the crisis themselves.

Under-resourced schools additionally contribute to student disengagement and the nation’s graduation crisis. These underfunded institutions tend too often to be chaotic and disorganized (Balfanz et al., 2007). Tyler and Lofstrom (2009) found that spending per pupil, school location, and student composition affect the student disengagement probability. Teacher quality in general, and in underfunded schools in particular, compounds the problem. Researchers Clotfelter, Ladd, and Vigdor (2007) have observed that undoubtedly students in the high-poverty schools were served by lower qualified school personnel, a finding they confirmed one year later.

In addition to funding and teacher quality, it is important to consider a cultural force - peer pressure. Peer pressure cannot be over emphasized as a factor aiding student disengagement. Meier (1999) reported that adolescent friendships were among the most likely to influence outcomes for students. For example, belonging to a peer group that is
involved in self-destructive behavior may assist the individual in self-destruction (Meier, 1999). Negative peer pressure or social disapproval toward schoolwork leads some students to drop out of school. Students who fail to support each other in school and school-related activities lead to low self-esteem and lack of confidence in their ability to succeed academically (Stewart, 2008).

An external reason contributing to a student becoming disengaged and dropping out of school may include real life events such as becoming a parent, getting a job to help their family, and being a family caregiver as noted by Bridegland et al. (2006). These real life examples will dramatically alter a students’ ability to function and perform in school.

In summary, numerous factors raise the probability of youth leaving high school before graduation (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). Thus far this paper has shown how dropout rates correlate with high poverty rates, poor school attendance, and the ramifications of low school funding. The paper has also argued that dropping out must be considered as a process of disengagement from school (Hammond, Linton, Smink, & Drew, 2007; Savrock, 2008) and not as a single action. While extremely important, disengagement is but one side of the whole issue. The other central factor is the issue of engagement. In other words, to have a clear picture of who and how a student became disengaged bounces back and becomes engaged is central to the present study. In the next section the profiles of the engaged student and the impact leaders and teachers have on these students are discussed.
**Student Engagement**

Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) described engagement as consisting of three types. First, behavioral engagement is defined as doing schoolwork and following rules as evidenced by being punctual, effort, persistence, concentration, and asking questions. Also the engaged student is contributing to the class discussion, studying, completing homework, and participating in school-related activities. In addition, behavioral engagement is described as absence of disruptive behavior such as not skipping school and not getting into trouble. The engaged student works well with others and shares ideas. Second, cognitive engagement is evidenced by motivation, effort, flexibility, and strategy use. This is illustrated by the students’ willingness and ability to attempt various problem solving techniques, preference to hard work, mental effort, relish challenges, and the desire to master a task. Third, emotional engagement includes interests, values, and emotions as evidenced by students’ reactions in the classroom and attitudes toward school and teachers. The engaged students also identify with school, demonstrate positive feelings of belonging, and show an appreciation of success in school. The demeanor of an emotionally engaged student would be described as positive. Further, positive interactions with the staff have an influence on a student’s involvement in school (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004).

In summary, this paper has argued that the high rate of students pushed out of school prior to graduation has a deep and wide-ranging impact, both on the student and on society. Factors contributing to disengagement, which leads to dropping out, were presented and a profile of the disengaged and engaged student was discussed. The next
section outlines the need for this study in determining the factors leading to reengagement.

**Need for the Study**

With a graduation rate of 91.4% at the research site it is evident that the school experiences a high level of student engagement, however the disengaged students cannot be ignored. Disengagement is the first step leading down the dropout path. Recognizing the disengaged student can lead to taking action to reengage. There were 82 seniors who had insufficient credits to walk the stage at graduation and receive their diplomas, however 47 of these students met the requirements by the end of summer and graduated in a special service. There is a need to identify the disengaged student and understand the factors leading to their reengagement. Of the students’ who were identified as disengaged, over 50% reengaged and successfully earned their diploma. When the reasons for a student to become reengaged in school is recognized and understood then the resources, contacts, and strategies can be established to assist in the reengagement and pursuit of their high school diploma.

A concerted effort is made by the district to encourage those who do not reengage in school. When a student is determined to be a habitual truant, three or more unexcused absences during a nine-week period, they are referred to SARB (School Attendance Recovery Board). SARB invites the parents, along with their child, to attend a meeting with the Assistant District Attorney. This meeting is usually held at the school board central office. At this conference the parents and student are offered counseling, placed on an agreement or contract, and/or referred to an appropriate agency for assistance. If
this is a repeat performance the parent and child may be given a date to appear before a judge for more severe consequences. Only after all options have been offered and proven futile, including being transferred to an alternative recovery program, will a student be classified as a dropout.

The site selected for this study reportedly had a dropout rate of 5.4% (35 students) for the 2012-2013 school year, a number far below the district average of 14.8%, which includes 14 high schools. The ethnicity of the 35 students that dropped out surprisingly closely aligned with the demographics of the site with one African American, 21 Asian, three Filipino, one mixed race, six Hispanic or Latino, and three Whites. The district did not compile the gender of these students. The suspension rate at this site was 2.82% and the expulsion rate was 0.11%. There were 26 students with disabilities and 105 classified as socio-economically disadvantaged, 18.7% and 5.1% respectively. In summary, with a program aggressively implemented to track truant students, the dropout rate is relatively low at this site. However, teachers are the front-line defense in the reengagement of disengaged students.

Teachers are the single most influential school-based factor in student success (Goe, 2007; Schumacher, Vesey, & Grigsby, 2012; Sweetland & Fogarty, 2008), yet studies revealed that teachers felt inadequately prepared to work with the population of disengaged students (Sass, Seal, & Martin, 2011). With teachers lacking these skills, McCall (2003) has argued schools will continue to let students slip through the cracks.

Research indicates that we need to explore what will allow teachers to engage the disengaged students. Duncan-Andrade (2008) stated we should be spending more time
determining the teachers who are successful with the disengaged student and study not only what teachers do, but also what programs teachers might participate in to mentor their efforts in teaching this population of students. Colker (2008) reinforced these points by suggesting that future research could compare findings and identify characteristics of successful teachers of the disengaged student. Harris (2008) echoed Pope and Simon (2001) who noted research on teacher understanding of student engagement is absent from academic literature. Marzano (2013) further suggested that teachers were called upon and expected to find ways to engage students, even the most disengaged, yet the researcher stated research has not questioned the teachers who are successful with the disengaged student to determine what it is they do that works.

Adelman and Taylor (2012) discussed that teachers reported that they were taught about engaging students but very little about how to prevent students from disengaging and how to reengage a student who has become disconnected. The researchers further emphasized that a prominent focus of school improvement efforts should be on how to motivate the many students who are hard to engage and how to reengage those who have disengaged from classroom learning. Of particular concern is what teachers should do when they encounter a student who has disengaged and is having behavior issues. They concluded that providing teachers with strategies such as mentoring, utilizing community resources, and developing personal skills to reengage the disengaged student was the core of enhancing students’ academic success (Adelman & Taylor, 2012). Teachers do not identify engaging students as a key issue. Baines and Stanley (2003) suggested that responding to the question posed to teachers, “How do you know you have had a positive
effect on a student?” not a single teacher mentioned engaging student interest. Past and current teaching practices and measures, Claxton (2007) posits that there is little definitive research regarding what enhances student engagement and their capacity to learn.

There is a need to identify the characteristics of those teachers who are successful in engaging the disengaged student (Weisberg, Sexton, Mulhorn, & Keeting, 2009). What does it take to make curriculum engaging and meaningful and how do we change to better engage our students were questions teachers asked of researchers (Willms, Friesen, & Milton, 2009). In search for strategies to engage the disengaged student they discovered that teachers were asking for help. The researchers stated that expecting students to sit still and be attentive for five hours a day, listening to content they deem unimportant, was a recipe for failure for most students and teachers. Taylor and Parsons (2011) noted that clearly student engagement was a rich area for research and educators must continue to seek understanding and apply specific, well-considered strategies such as mentoring and/or intervention programs that support student engagement in learning both in and beyond the classroom. Noell and Gansle (2009) recognized it was much easier to talk about behavior change than it was to accomplish it. Thus, teacher education institutions should provide teachers with the strategies, interventions, and programs needed to initiate the behavioral changes needed to engage the disengaged student. Some teachers are capable of generating exceptional growth in students while others are not, and a small group actually hinders student progress.
Purpose of the Study

The U.S. graduation rate crisis is not fueled by students who lack the potential, or is it by administrators and teachers who possess the skills to prevent students from falling off the path to graduation and to intervene when they do (Neild et al., 2007). Without question there are financial costs associated with intervening with students who are on the path to dropping out, but the price of not intervening - in terms of individual lives that do not reach their potential and the broader social cost of having a class of citizens who lack a basic academic credential - is incalculably greater (Neild et al., 2007).

Teachers rely heavily on the observable characteristics, behaviors, and outcomes of the disengaged students. Teachers know quite a bit about the characteristics of students who leave school, but much less about the causal factors that lead to what influenced their decision to reengage and return to school (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

The student who drops out of school is often the silent victim of the school and the teachers’ failure to meet their needs. Student voices should be heard (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Many students feel a sense of disengagement with their school, where they feel isolated and alienated (Savrock, 2008). When students perceive they have no voice, that they are not treated as equals, they feel powerless and inferior. When a conflict arises, regardless of the student’s explanation, the administrator controls the outcome. Students want to have a voice and be treated as equals (Seher, 2011). Harris (2008) noted the need for further research into student’s perspective about what gets them and will keep them engaged in learning. The insights revealed by voices of the students in this study are invaluable in providing leaders, teachers, and parents with information needed to address
the cause, not the symptoms, of disengagement and dropping out. If the disengagement and dropout issue is to be effectively addressed, the voices of the subjects need to be given serious consideration. The information gleaned from this research provided insights as to potential components that should be included in dropout prevention programs. Students revealed what teaching strategies and techniques implemented by teachers would be most effective in initiating a turnaround in their behavior and attitude regarding school and working toward a high school diploma. Findings are crucial to add to the body of knowledge in designing support systems and, in particular, assisting the teachers in their development of skills needed to reengage the disengaged student.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Our national responsibility is to educate every child to reach his or her fullest potential. This responsibility should be shared by teachers, students, parents, administrators, elected officials, and all those concerned with having our next generation well-prepared for the future and engaged in our democracy.

Quote by R. Weingarten (2014, July 11)

The educational system needs to meet the challenge of educating every student. With one third of the students becoming disengaged and dropping out prior to graduating from public high school there is abundant evidence the educational system is in need of a systemic change to prepare children and youth for the challenges they encounter. Although “educating every child,” (Weingarten, 2014) as the quote above states, may be a lofty, however worthy goal, this chapter reveals the challenges and promises the country faces in pursuit of such a grand vision.

It is necessary to know what motivates students to learn. The problem educator’s encounter consists of identifying what motivates students to want to learn and how to keep them engaged. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1959) stated that children have the right to an education that develops personality, talents, and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential. Educators need to confront the question of what it is they do that causes students to disengage (Marks, 2000). Student disengagement and dropping out of school is not a recent phenomenon. The following is an overview of this problem dating back to the turn of the century.
Historical Overview of the Disengaged Student and the Dropout Problem

The factory school model was used to train students primarily for jobs. Darling-Hammond and Friedlander (2008) stated that factory model schools were designed to process a great number of students efficiently, selecting and supporting only a few for thinking work while tracking others into a basic skills curriculum aimed at preparation for the routine manufacturing jobs of the time. According to the authors, these schools favored size and specialization with thousands of students assigned to a single building, sending them to a different teacher for each 50-minute class period. Moreover, every teacher had 150 to 200 students where the teaching was an isolated activity with little time for teachers to plan and work together in supporting students or collaboration (Darling-Hammond & Friedlander, 2008).

At the turn of the century, the idea of using schools to train youth for work energized a major movement to reform American education (Kantor, 1986). Reformers became convinced that the central task of the school was to train youth for jobs and to integrate them into the occupational structure, thereby institutionalizing the idea that preparation for work was the primary function of American education (Kantor, 1986). As the United States moved from an agrarian society to an industrial society, increased education levels became a necessity for a skilled labor force (Dorn, 1993; Richardson, 1980).

Societal turmoil after World War I created a need for consistency in educational expectations and reinforced the need for compulsory education (Richardson, 1980). States that relied on farming enacted compulsory education laws later than those that
relied upon manufacturing. An example is Virginia, a state dependent upon the tobacco industry in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that did not enact a compulsory education law until 1908 (Richardson, 1980).

The dropout problem in the United States did not begin until the late 1800s and early 1900s, long after compulsory education laws came into being (Dorn, 1993). The dropout problem became identified in the 1940s and 1950s. After World War II, completing high school was expected and dropping out of school became unacceptable to society in general (Dorn, 1993). In the 1950s the Federal Bureau of Investigation linked a rise in high school dropouts to an increase in crime (Dorn, 1993). The dropout problem became connected to an increase in the unemployment rate and the term drop out became commonplace (Dorn, 1993).

**Consequences of Disengagement and the Impact on Students and Society**

There are economic consequences for the individual and society as a result of disengagement. Rumberger (2011) stated that education is the major tool for people to become empowered and that economic, social, and educational benefits help to ensure personal well-being and adds social and cultural capital for all citizens. A high dropout rate has diminished the pool of qualified people from diverse backgrounds who will enter the professional and political ranks that make public policy decisions (Greenberg, Weissberg, O’Brien, Zins, Fredericks, Resnik, & Elias, 2003). The high school dropout has not experienced that which gives him social and cultural capital (Morin, 2012). As Rumberger (2011) stated, this phenomenon robs the students and the economy of skills needed to fuel the economic growth and enhance U.S. competitiveness in the global
economy. The Alliance for Excellent Education reported in 2011 that the societal and economic impact of a high dropout rate for the U.S. is a cause for concern. It estimated that approximately 12 million students will fail to graduate over the next decade costing the U.S. about $3 trillion (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011).

Neild, Balfanz, and Herzog (2007) stated that what makes the current dropout rate so alarming is the reality of the new United States economy: It is practically impossible for individuals lacking a high school diploma to earn a living or participate meaningfully in civic life (Neild et al., 2007).

Snyder and Sickmund (1999) stated that the decision to drop out of high school was a dangerous one for the student, particularly in this age in which workers need at least a high school diploma to compete in the workforce. Dropouts with little economic and social capital are much more likely than their peers who graduate to be unemployed, living in poverty, receiving public assistance, incarcerated, and on death row. They concluded by stating that studies showed that the lifetime cost to the nation for each student who drops out of high school and later moves into a life of crime and drugs ranged from $1.7 to $2.5 million (Snyder & Sickmund, 1999). On average Doland (2001) and the Digest of Education Statistics (NCES, 2004a) have shown that with reduced economic capital high school dropouts earn $9,200 less annually than high school graduates and about $1 million less over a lifetime than college graduates. Students who drop out of high school are often unable to support themselves. High school dropouts were over three times more likely than college graduates to be unemployed in 2004 (NCES, 2005). They are twice as likely as high school graduates to slip into poverty from
one year to the next (Iceland, 2003). At every age, the more education a person has, the healthier the individual and the greater his stake in economic and social capital (Rumberger, 2001). Harlow (2003) stated that failure to graduate not only imperils individual futures but also profoundly impacts communities and the nation due to the loss of productive workers, the loss of earnings and revenues they would have generated, and the high cost associated with increased incarceration, health care, and social services. The authors found a dropout was more than eight times as likely to be in jail compared to a person with a high school diploma.

So far, this review has shown that when a student becomes disengaged and drops out of school prior to earning a diploma the student becomes severely limited in his ability to secure sustainable employment and participate and contribute to society often resulting in unemployment, drug abuse, and a life involving crime. This profoundly impacts communities and the nation as a whole. The individual becomes a burden on society costing the economy billions of dollars each year. The next section describes the disengaged student and discusses several factors leading to disengagement from school.

A Profile of Disengagement

Students are at risk of dropping out when education is not relevant. Research studies have determined that many students reject rote-and-drill education approaches and the limited choices offered in the curriculum (e.g., Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Students reject the “banking model” as described by Freire (1993, p. 72) where they are regarded as being empty vessels and knowing nothing of value. This response comes in the extreme form of dropping out, stepping in and out of class, classroom
disruption, or simply glazed over eyes as a student “checks out.” This rejection, according to Freire (1993), stems from a curriculum that rewarded students for being quiet and not critically questioning lessons, despite the fact that they most often see their lessons as irrelevant in their lives. As Freire (1993) stated, the teacher led the students to memorize the lessons. Further, he described banking education as being depressive, as the teacher talked and the students meekly listened, the teacher disciplined and the students are disciplined; the teacher chose and enforced his choice and the students complied (Freire, 1993). The student often has no opportunity to develop social capital giving them ownership in their education (Goddard, 2003). As students increasingly fail to perform efficiently on tests used to measure No Child Left Behind the student is provided with increased tutorial support with hours spent with tutors who are well intentioned but not adequately trained to give students the opportunity to become partners in their education (Jennings & Rentner, 2006; Knaus, 2007; Lynch, 2006).

The atmosphere of violence, turmoil, and stress students are exposed to at home and the community makes it difficult, if not impossible, to arrive at the classroom door with a positive attitude (American Psychological Association, 2012). The narrowed curriculum with the main emphasis on math and English with limited electives has been demonstrated to promote increased dropout rates and further disengagement, particularly among those students who have a history of absenteeism (McMurrer, 2007). Morse, Christenson, and Lehr (2004) found that disengaged students may be missing classes, not completing assignments, getting bad grades or no grades, and/or getting themselves
suspended. The researchers stated that disengaged students often express a lack of interest in school and have low expectations for completing school (Morse et al., 2004).

Students are often disciplined for reacting to the personal violence that the school curriculum ignores. Indeed, students that cause in-class disturbances are often sent out of the classroom and kept from the lessons they will later be tested on (Knaus, 2009). In many ways, schools urge students to forget the very circumstances that shape what students react to, telling them to leave their personal problems at home. This constant pressure to deny the social context of violence in their lives is what leads many students to regard school as irrelevant, dismissive, and disrespectful (Knaus, 2009).

Studies have confirmed that many factors play into a student’s disengagement leading to dropping out. These have been identified and researched (Greenberg et al., 2003; Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe, & Carlson, 2000; Rumberger, 2001). These factors can be classified into four areas: individual, family, school, and community factors. However, no single risk factor can be used accurately to predict who is at risk of leaving school (Hammond et al., 2007). Rogers (2005) found that not liking school, failing school, and not getting along with their teachers are the most frequently cited reasons for disengagement from the academic scene.

There are multiple individual factors for leaving school including race/ethnicity (Battin-Pearson, Newcomb, Abbott, Hill, Catalano, & Hawkins, 2000), gender (Rumberger, 2001), limited English proficiency and having limited cognitive abilities (Lehr, Johnson, Bremer, Casio, & Thompson, 2004). Other factors include when students are forced to take on adult responsibilities such as becoming a parent (Gleason &
Dynarski, 2002), having to take a job to help out the family (Jordan, Lara, & McPortland, 1994), and having to care for siblings (Rosenthal, 1998). Antisocial behavior, such as violence, substance abuse, and breaking the law are factors leading to leaving school (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). Single parents with children often leave high school (Orfield, 2004; Pietrowiak & Novak, 2002).

Another significant risk factor that may lead a student to leave school is poor academic performance, i.e., poor grades stemming from low literacy or verbal ability (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001; Balfanz, 2007). Torgeson (1998) found that one of the most compelling findings was that children who got off to a poor start in reading rarely were able to catch up. For the majority of students who drop out of high school, the major cause is school failure, that is, not succeeding in earning passing grades resulting in lack of credits to progress toward graduation (Burrus & Roberts, 2012). In reviewing studies and reports on the disengaged and dropouts, students who are in a pattern of failure as evidenced by failure in two or more core academic classes, are at a high risk of leaving school (Roderick, 1992; Shannon & Bylsma, 2003). Lack of credits became the tipping point for many students to leave school and not return (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). Bridgeland et al. (2006) concluded that it was clear that many students leave school because of significant academic challenges. The students simply could not keep up with the schoolwork. The students who were alienated and disengaged from school were much more likely to fail to graduate.

Absenteeism has proven to be a major risk factor. Researchers (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Rumberger, 2001) found that disengagement manifested by a
student’s absenteeism was the most common indicator of overall student disengagement. Further, a significant factor in predicting leaving school was a student’s refusal to wake up, missing school, and skipping class. Each absence made him fall further behind and become less willing to go back to school. The students with long periods of absences were referred to the truant officer and brought back to the same environment that led them to disengagement (Rumberger, 2001).

It other studies it was found that peer pressure also has a profound impact on a student being unsuccessful in school. Stewart (2008) and Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe, and Carlson (2000) concluded that peer associations have an important effect on academic outcomes. Further, they found that positive relationships with peers that promoted psychological and life skills may promote academic achievement and motivation; however, negative peer pressure or social disapproval toward school work led some students to leave school, while students failing to support each other and their activities led to low self-esteem and lack of confidence in their ability to succeed academically. Further, it was found that disengagement leading to dropping out was affected by the lack of involvement with peers in extracurricular activities at school, such as clubs, sports, science fairs, or community clubs (Ingles, Curtin, Kaufman, Alt, & Chen, 2002; Willms, 2003; Willms et al., 2009).

Another factor having a significant impact on a student’s disengagement was family influence. A consistent family background factor found to impact dropout rates is socioeconomic status (SES) (Alexander et al., 2001; Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Rumberger, 2001). A strong link exists between poverty and not finishing school. A point
worth mentioning is that, while such correlation has been established, by no means does it signify causality.

Students from low-income families fail to finish high school five times more than students from high-income families (American Psychological Association, 2012; Balfanz & Legters, 2004). Children of poor single parent families are more inclined to leave school before graduation and boys are more likely than girls to drop out (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2004).

Researchers Barro and Kolstad (1987), Lehr, Johnson, Bremer, Casio, and Thompson (2004), and Rumberger (1995) stated that concentrated poverty, overcrowding, and under-funded urban schools limit the ability to improve educational opportunities. Further, large school size, particularly for students with a low social economic status (SES), was linked to higher dropout rates. Evidence showed that school size was a more important issue for students from disadvantaged social backgrounds, both directly in terms of learning and indirectly in terms of environments that seldom favor minority and low-income students. Minority and low-income students were actually more likely to be educated in the larger schools (Berliner, 2006; Laguardia & Pearl, 2009). Also, high student-teacher ratios were found to be linked to dropout rates in low SES schools. Schools with high concentrations of low-income and minority students had higher dropout rates (Goldsmith & Wang, 1999; Rumberger, 1995). Schools identified as having high rates of absenteeism or high rates of misbehavior were linked to higher dropout rates (Lehr et al., 2004; Rumberger, 2001).
The chronically tardy, absent, or failing student, often categorized as disengaged, was often placed with the new teacher or the teacher considered ineffective (Peske & Haycock, 2006; Weisberg et al., 2009). Research provided evidence that low-income students were likely exposed to less effective teachers (Nye, Konstantopoulos, & Hedges, 2004). Low quality teachers are most acute in the highest-need schools, those located in socio-disadvantaged areas and underfunded. Research showed that disadvantaged students typically got the worst teachers, the least trained, and the rejects from the good schools (Duncan-Andrade, 2009). Also, research was consistent in showing multiple districts with poor and minority children, that students with the greatest need for effective teachers were the least likely to get them (Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Weisberg et al., 2009).

Knaus (2009) stated that students who attended under-resourced urban schools were increasingly provided with young teachers with little prior experience, no dedication to the community, and any real training or tools to address the academically disengaged student. Further, Knaus (2009) observed that many teachers of students located in low-income areas were aware of general student apathy, yet were unaware of how to meaningfully engage students. Researchers who study the impact of under qualified teachers and the failure of schools to serve immigrant and other disadvantaged students cite a number of reasons for poor performance and attrition, including the lack of student engagement, higher absenteeism, boredom, lack of relevancy, and lack of cultural capital (Career & Technical Education Report, 2008; Rumberger & Lin, 2008).

Failure to graduate deepens and continues the cycle of poverty into future generations (American Psychological Association, 2012). Community also impacts the
dropout rate. Students were more likely to quit school in the western and southern states (Lehr et al., 2004). Balfanz and Legters (2004) stated that strong links exist between poverty and high school dropouts, particularly in poverty areas of the north, west, and southern United States. Some of the schools located in these poverty areas represented only 12% of the nation’s schools, yet they were estimated to produce about half of the nation’s dropouts overall (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). Nearly half of the nation’s African American and Latino students attend high schools in these low-income areas with dropout rates that hover in the 40-50 percent range (Balfanz & Legters, 2006; Children’s Defense Fund, 2008). Dropout rates were higher in impoverished communities, particularly where high unemployment is found (Rumberger, 2001).

High dropout rates occur in communities with a significant amount of instability and mobility and in high poverty areas which experience high levels of violence, drug-related crime, and overcrowding conditions (Catalano & Hawkins, 1996; Rosenthal, 1998). Berliner (2006) stated that neighborhood effects on retention are strong. Parents too frequently lose their children to the streets. Poverty traps people in neighborhoods that affect their children separately from the effects of home and school.

As was highlighted by the American Psychological Association (2012), becoming disengaged and dropping out continues the cycle of poverty into future generations. Nearly half of African American and Latino students attend high schools in low-income areas where the dropout rates are between 40% and 50% (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). Wilson-Simmons (2012) observed that many students living in poverty felt that education was not meaningful. He continued that many have developed a view on the basis of their
perception of how the world works, that even if they do graduate from high school they will not get a job, so why bother to study.

To facilitate a clear understanding of the disengaged student a profile, along with the factors that contribute to disengagement, have been presented. A review of disengagement prevention programs will follow.

**Disengagement Prevention Programs**

Researchers found that many dropout prevention programs were ineffective. Kumpfer and Alvarado (2003) stated educational leaders, including teachers, principals, and other administrators turned to dropout prevention programs as an intervention practice with the hope of student reengagement. They explored the debate over the effectiveness of programs designed to reduce the dropout rate and described many programs used around the country with little or no knowledge about their development or actual program effects. Some argued that evidence indicated most prevention programs were ineffective and sometimes even harmful or counterproductive (Kumpfer & Alvarado, 2003; Office of the Surgeon General, 2001). The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (2009) lists hundreds of dropout prevention programs in its online database. Tyler and Lofstrom (2009) found that relatively few of these programs had been rigorously evaluated for effectiveness. They stated that even fewer have proved to be effective in achieving the goal of reducing dropping out of school (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

Dynarski and Gleason (2009) compiled a report on dropout prevention programs and found, “Dropping out is as hard to prevent as it is easy to do” (p. 15). They added
that it was equally hard to identify the programs that were effective. In the late 1900s the U.S. Department of Education’s School Dropout Demonstration Assistance Program (SDDAP) conducted rigorous evaluations of 21 programs. The key finding from the SDDAP evaluations was that most programs made almost no difference in preventing dropping out.

The United State Department of Education’s What Works Clearing House (2008) identified three models, which demonstrated a modicum of success. The first of these models was labeled “Check & Connect.” The key feature of Check & Connect is assigning each student in the program a monitor and caseworker (Check & Connect, 2008). A second model which showed evidence in lowering dropout rates is “School-within-a-School.” This model incorporated three key features. One was organizing the students in a smaller and more personalized atmosphere with the students having the same teachers over a three or four year period. A second included both academic and vocational components. The third used partnerships between the school and local employers to build links between school and work and provide the students with career exploration and hands-on work-related learning opportunities (Kemble, 2008). The third model “Talent Development High School” was developed at John Hopkins University. This model reorganized the school into smaller learning communities and designed the curriculum to prepare all students for high level English and math courses. A key component of this program was to increase the participation of parents and the community (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).
Big Picture Learning (BPL), founded in Providence, Rhode Island in 1996, features close mentoring and monitoring. Big Picture Learning cultivates engagement rather than demanding compliance. Their students are at risk, low-income, and minority, yet 95% will graduate and continue their education. They are taught the basics and then acquire other skills by doing real work in the community under the close monitoring and tutelage of an experienced adult (Pink, 2009, pp. 193-194). Puget Sound Community School in Seattle, Washington, assigns each student an advisor who acts as the student’s personal coach, helping to come up with their own learning goals. The student receives constant feedback from advisors, teachers, and peers to provide support and reassurance (Pink, 2009, p. 194). Friedlander, Reid, Shupak, and Cribbie (2007) studied five California schools that have proven to be successful for low-income students of color. The common elements attributed to the success of these schools included small learning environments fostering continuous, long-term relationships between adults and students, and an advisory system that continually provides counseling, academic support, and family connections. Each school has an advisory group that meets with a group of 15 to 20 students several times each week.

This group arranges academic and family support for each student. Also, the schools connect students to the communities through community service, internships, and partnerships with community groups and local colleges. These schools succeeded because of their ability to recruit high quality teachers (Friedlander, Reid, Shupak, & Cribbie, 2007). Becker and Luther (2004) stated that if dropout prevention was to be successful, attention must be paid to social and emotional factors that supported academic
achievement, school attachment, peer values, overall mental health, and above all else teacher support.

In summary, Tyler and Lofstrom (2009) found, after a review of disengagement prevention programs, that there were practices that have demonstrated encouraging results. These included organizing the students in a smaller and more personalized atmosphere, which has proven to be effective in an effort to engage those who are in danger of dropping out. Students having the same teacher over a longer period of time, such as two or three years, have also proven to have a positive effect on students struggling academically (Friedlander et al., 2007).

Another practice consists of assigning teachers and/or aides as coaches and monitors to meet individually with each student frequently, some times daily, to provide feedback and tutelage (Pink, 2009). Adding a vocational exploration component to the curriculum assists in stimulating the student’s interest in learning. When given the opportunity to interact with community members, the student is provided a link between school and work. Hands-on experience gives the student a work-related experience (Kemble, 2008).

The literature thus far reviewed suggests the United States has a serious dropout problem with one third of the students not graduating from high school (American Health Rankings, United States Foundation 2013; American Psychological Association, 2012). This further informs the need for changes in the education delivery system.

What follows is a review of what teachers and leaders can do to reengage the disengaged student.
Impact of the Teacher and Leaders

Carter (2000) stated one of the nation’s highest priorities is to learn from the best practices of high-performing teachers and insist that those serving low-income children aspire to standards of excellence. Duncan-Andrade (2008) noted that it is important for leaders to identify the teachers who have been successful with the disengaged student and study what it is they do. Colker (2008) suggested that future research should also concentrate on finding and identifying the characteristics of successful teachers with the disengaged student. There is a deficit in research on teacher’s understanding of student engagement. Further, successful teachers with the disengaged have not been questioned enough to determine what it is they do that works (Beaton, 2010; Harris, 2008; Pope & Simon, 2001).

The single most influential school-based factor in students having academic success is teachers (Goe, 2007; Schumacher et al., 2012; Smith & O’Day, 1991; Sweetland & Fogarty, 2008; Taylor, 2006). Some teachers induce students to achieve exceptional academic growth. There are other teachers who have little success promoting student growth, while some actually stymie their student’s progress. According to Weisberg, Sexton, Mulhorn, and Keeting (2009) there is a need to identify the characteristics of successful teachers with disengaged students. The goal should be to eliminate the losers, those who do not have success with the disengaged, and strengthen the winners. Knaus (2009) found that most of the full-time teachers who presented their curriculum were aware of general student apathy, yet unaware of how to meaningfully
engage the students. The researcher stated that the teachers in his study acknowledged needing help in working to reengage the disengaged student.

Larabee (2007) stated that most reforms are blocked at the door of the classroom teacher. He continued by noting that reform success depended entirely on the capability and willingness of the teachers because teaching and learning in the classroom are what really matter in education reform efforts. Research reveals that reform movements fail because of the failure to reach down to the classroom level where the instructional core exists, the only place that change will make a difference (Larabee, 2007).

According to Kotter and Schlesinger (2008) most reforms do not reach the classroom level, thus leaders need to tailor strategies to counter the resistance to change by providing skills training to teachers and other school staff. Strong administration can legitimately use its influence and authority by putting attention and resources towards priorities to assist teachers to be more effective with disengaged students (Rorrer, Skrla, & Scheurick, 2008). Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) stated that leadership is a key factor in accounting for differences in the success schools have in fostering the learning of their students. Also, leadership is developed by hiring the best teachers and providing systems to offer them training and support. Improving student learning is unlikely unless leaders appreciate that a good teacher is required to make it work (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). It is also time for educators to systematically study the characteristics of disengaged students, regardless of their race, income level, or family background to determine how to improve their academic performance (Carter, 2000). This author further emphasized that one strategy to stimulate
school improvement, develop trust among the stakeholders, and encourage collaboration is through the inclusion of student and teacher voice in the development and design of training and curriculum programs.

In the review of literature thus far examined studies have confirmed that many factors play into a student’s becoming disengaged and dropping out of school. However, there is a dearth of information regarding what motivates a student to reengage in school and pursue their diploma. It appears that students’ own perspectives on the experience of schooling have not been sufficiently studied. Students have shown capacity to bounce back from adverse situations. While resiliency has been studied abundantly from the perspective of social psychology, research needs to explore how schools, classroom, and teachers can foster resiliency, particularly with disengaged students struggling to overcome challenges and reengage in school.

Given the limited understanding of how and what works to bring disengaged students to the successful completion of the high school diploma this study will provide first-hand accounts of students lived experiences as they move from being at risk of not graduating to progressing toward their goal of graduating. Equally important is the resiliency factor that becomes evident as the student reengages and seeks their diploma.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework used to interpret the data for this study was based upon two theories. The first is the notion of voice and the second is the notion of resiliency.
Voice

Young people have unique perspectives on learning, teaching, and schooling: their insights warrant not only attention, but also responses of adults (Cook-Sather, 2006). The significance of the insights, beliefs, prejudices, and self-interpretations of life events can be evaluated and documented by giving students the opportunity to voice their beliefs and express their view of reality as it applies to them. Indeed, educational leaders increasingly recognize students and teachers’ voices as an important component of decision making in secondary schools (Harris, 2008). O’Connor (2010) suggested that students and teachers receive consideration by giving them voice and providing a space for them to narrate the things that are important and work for them in achieving their goals (Claxton, 2007).

Willms, Friesen, and Milton (2009), Dunleavy and Milton (2009), and Friesen (2008) stated there was need for deeper research into students’ perspectives about what motivates and keeps them engaged in learning. Nieto (1999) stated that educators should actively seek student voices to facilitate work on student engagement. Student voice can serve as a bridge to a changed role, relationship, and outcome for students (Nieto, 1999). Henze and Arriaza (2006) stated that when students are not given the opportunity to express themselves and their voices are not heard they feel disenfranchised from the school. School is the place where voice is to be encouraged and respected.

Student voice can move the student from having low engagement and a pattern of failure to becoming active, successful, and involved in learning, the school, and the community (Nieto, 1999). Wilson and Corbett (2001) stated that for reform to be
successful it has to touch students’ classroom lives noticeably - and students are in the best position to know this has occurred. The literature on student voice (e.g., MacBeath, Demetriou, Rudduck, & Meyers, 2003; Rudduck, Chapman, & Wallace, 1996; Wasley, Hempel, & Clark, 1997; Wilson & Corbett, 2001) reflects the idea that students have something to say about school. Student voice allows the students to express their opinions and give teachers information to assist in decisions regarding planning, implementation, and evaluation of the students’ learning experience. Giving students ownership and allowing them to build social capital may serve as a means to reengage students in their learning (MacBeath et al., 2003).

Cook-Sather (2002) and Oldfather and West (1999) concurred that what students have to say deserves respect. As leaders give students the opportunity to speak they develop a meaningful role and involvement in the leadership and planning of the school. The benefits are threefold: to promote an understanding of who is academically failing in school, to engage students more actively in the learning and improvement process, and to discover instructional approaches that could be more effective at involving and engaging the students at risk. By giving students voice, learning can become a shared experience between teachers and learners (MacBeath, 2002). Fuhrman (2002) explained that this practice promotes feelings of belonging, trust of others, and safety for students. The results of student involvement serves to capture their attention, get them to expend energy in a learning experience, and engage them in activities over time that add to their understanding and increase their engagement and academic success (Gosling, 2002; Willms, 2003). Teacher voices are rarely heard regarding their perspectives on student
engagement (Harris, 2008). The author suggested that many teachers were unclear or inconsistent about their understanding of student engagement and how important engagement was to their classroom environment and teaching practices. Beaton (2010) stated research has not questioned teachers who are successful with the disengaged students. The focus seems to be primarily on behavior and not learning. Dunleavy and Milton (2009) stated there is a need to engage teachers in studying and applying concepts of student engagement as collaborative knowledge building process as a bridge to understanding and cultivating practices to improve the educational experience of all students.

In this study, the students who were disengaged were provided a forum to narrate their stories regarding the factors influencing them to become disengaged and then reengaged so they could pursue their high school diploma. This information, directly from the students, was analyzed and documented. Further, teachers identified as having a positive impact on the disengaged student were included in this study to determine what it is they do that works. This information provided the researcher with new truths, fresher understanding, and more insight regarding factors that move students to reengage in their personal education and work toward high school graduation. This information is of value and will be added to the body of knowledge used in the design of programs to train teachers and assist them in reengaging the disengaged students.

Resilience
While voice sits central in the construction of identity and democratic involvement, to explain how some students survive within the school system and even succeed using another theoretical lens may help. Since the beginning of psychiatric practice there has been recognition that negative life experiences and stressful happenings may serve to precipitate depression and other disorders obscuring the focus on pursuing ones dreams (Rutter, 1985). Howard, Dryden, and Johnson (1999) stated that recent research conducted into child resilience suggests that a phenomenon exists providing some individuals the capacity for successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances.

Resilience can be defined as the ability to persist in the face of adversity or the ability to bounce back after a challenging situation (American Psychological Association, 2012). Some reengaged students have the inner strength, the resiliency, to overcome the conflicts and tensions that are part of their lives, while others lack this ability. Sagor (1996) defined resilience as the set of attributes that provides people with the strength to overcome obstacles they are bound to face in life. The descriptors he used to set resilient children apart include social, optimistic, energetic, cooperative, inquisitive, helpful, punctual, and on task. Bernard (1991) stated that resilience is not a constant for anyone. Everyone has times in their lives when things are tough. The resilient person is the one who can come back, learn, and thrive through the tough times (Bernard, 1991).

Schools function as a vitally important context for child development while at the same time a classroom or school may be viewed as a system that may be threatened by adversaries. The resilience of adults who work in schools is important because these
individuals often play a central role in school resilience while also serving as protective adults or resources in the lives of children (Masten & Obridovi, 2006). The authors continued by stating that school context affords opportunities to facilitate resilience among children who are at risk for poor outcomes due to adversity ranging from exposure, divorce, family violence, homelessness, illness, maltreatment due to war, natural disasters, or religious persecution. School is the place where teachers help children develop the emotional skills necessary to meet adversity and grow beyond it with strength, confidence, courage, tenacity, and grit (Berkowicz & Myers, 2013). When a community, such as a school community, work together to foster resiliency, a large number of our children can overcome great adversity and achieve bright futures (Krovetz, 1999). When the community cares deeply about someone, has high expectations of them, offers purposeful support, and values that persons presence in the group, that person will maintain a faith in the future that can overcome almost any adversity (Krovetz, 1999). By infusing the classroom and curriculum with resiliency building experiences the school will have profound impact on the student’s self-image (Sagor, 1996). Krovetz (1999) posited that schools need to take a proactive position on building capabilities, skills, and resiliency. He emphasized strengthening the environment, not fixing the kids.

It is important that teachers make personal connections with students. Teachers can help struggling students become more resilient (Ginsburg, 2011). Werner and Smith (1992) emphasized that personal relationships and connections are the foundation for teaching resiliency to students. Through stories, examples, and role models the students can learn that with the right work ethic and commitment they can be successful (Jensen,
Kohn (1999) stated that schools need to promote positive connections between students and teachers, among students, and between schools and home. Further, he stated that because school can be cold and impersonal, teachers need to take time to make personal connections with the students, laugh with them, and share stories to make school warm, fun, and personal. This will help the student develop resiliency and belief in his self-worth, abilities, and competencies.

Caring classrooms can foster resilience. Classrooms that organize themselves as caring, inclusive, and socially centered communities can operate as protective and competence-enhancing contexts for all students. Further, an optimal learning environment includes caring relationships, active engagements, inclusion, collaboration, positive beliefs, and high expectations for all. Resilience is an inborn capacity we all have. Resilience may derive from three sets of factors. The first is the attributes of the children themselves. Second is the aspect of their families, and third are the characteristics of their wider social environment including the school community (Luther, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). Resilience is not a genetic trait that only a few “super-kids” possess. Rather, it is our inborn capacity for self-righting and for transformation and change (Werner & Smith, 1992).

With the right support students can be resilient. Sagor (1996) stated that when students leave school with feelings of failure, alienation, uselessness, and impotence reinforced by their school experience most students cannot cope and will lose the initiative to try to succeed in school. It was emphasized that schools should and can provide positive experiences and outcomes to reinforce students’ belief in their self-
worth, their abilities, usefulness, and competence. Ginsburg (2011) found that all children
are capable of great things given the appropriate support. He stated that students would
develop adaptation skills, giving them resilience to bounce back, if teachers and
administrators recognized their needs and made a positive connection to assist them in
overcoming their barriers.

Some students participate in school experiences that support resilience while
others do not. Berkowicz and Myers (2013) stated that some students are active in clubs
and activities, while some are not. Some students find learning challenging, while others
are more capable and seem to progress with relative ease. Some complete their
homework and others do little if any. Some students feel their teachers like them while
others feel they are disliked. What the student brings to school only compounds the
problem. The authors continued by stating that teachers and leaders need to be equipped
to help these children and remember that resiliency is an essential skill that not only
supports learning but also supports a healthy life.
CHAPTER 3  
METHODOLOGY

**Conceptual Framework**

The primary focus of this research proposal was to examine the lived experiences of students who were disengaged and determine the reasons and underlying motivation for reengaging and working toward graduation. All students are capable of high-level performance when given support and tend to live up to the expectations set for them (Ginsburg, 2011). This study documented student voice as the guiding motivation and inquiry tool in determining what affected the students’ eventual reengagement in school. Guidelines of Creswell (2009), McNamara (1999), and Solarzano and Yosso (2002) were followed, allowing the participants to share their stories of personal educational challenges and obstacles.

As a long time educator this researcher became aware that little research has been conducted that has given students and teachers the space to share their experience concerning reengagement. The role of teachers and educational leadership in the reengagement of students was examined for the purpose of determining strategies and techniques to assist in reengaging students. Capturing roots of student resilience and motivation to reengage in school was the challenge of this study. Data was collected and analyzed to further the understanding of real-world problems reengaged students must confront.

This study allowed reengaged students the opportunity to add their voice by sharing their perceptions of school. They narrated their stories, thus providing
ethnographic material needed to find new truths and fresher understanding on the issue of reengaging in school and work toward graduation. The personal process employed in this study allowed the students to talk about engagement and the impetus for reengagement in their own words, free of constraints that may be imposed by fixed response questions (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Additionally, teachers identified as being effective with disengaged students were included in this study.

This study addressed students and teachers perception of the classroom experience. The study located the classroom as the environment for analysis, given that it provided the actual space where the interaction between the student and teacher primarily took place. Further, the students’ attitude towards school, learning, and the relationship with the teacher were considered by this study as contributing factors of disengagement from school, which in turn may lead to leaving school.

**Design of the Study**

This study followed qualitative methodologies as these methods help to increase understanding the details of a problem, with the intent of collecting evidence, strong enough to facilitate possible solutions of the problem (Bickman & Rog, 2009, p. x; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). Merriam (2009) has noted that qualitative research helps to determine the meaning students have constructed as to how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have lived.

The central qualitative research method utilized for this study was in-depth interviews to map out the narrative of the participants’ educational experiences (Parkinson & Drislane, 2001). The interview format is a personal form of research and
particularly useful for obtaining the story behind a participant’s experiences, for example, their voice. Qualitative research employing the in-depth interview format begins with open-ended questions and conversational inquiry, thus making it more conducive for the respondents to express their opinions or describe experiences (Kvale, 1996). This method is useful in questioning the participants to gain further clarification and add deeper meaning to the participant’s responses (McNamara, 1999).

Polkinghorne (2005) stated the primary advantage of phenomenological interviewing is that it permits an explicit focus on the interviewers personal experience combined with those of the participants. Marshall and Rossman (1999, p. 113) suggested the participants would have the opportunity to express their frustration in facing personal challenges and obstacles, both at home and at school, while the researcher would gain insight and be sensitive in interpreting the responses. This study was centered on the student’s culture and more specifically explored the factors that may have the greatest impact on their decision to reengage in school.

Hein and Austin (2001) stated that to understand a particular phenomenon, the researcher must make every effort to withhold or set aside presuppositions, biases, and knowledge of the phenomenon they obtained from personal and scholarly sources. This approach allows the essence of the stories of the student and teacher to emerge. Krathwohl (2004) noted that at times, a phenomenon quite different from the original focus of the study might emerge as research progresses causing a refocus of the problem. The researcher must be prepared for such an eventuality.
In order to conduct this study, a memo was sent to every teacher, counselor, and administrator of the high school asking for assistance in identifying any student who appeared to have dropped out of school for a period of time, resumed attending school on a regular basis, and was currently working toward graduation. The names of six students were returned to the researcher. Having access to “Infinite Campus”, an electronic program utilized by the school to store students demographics, attendance, academic progress, discipline referrals, and state test results, the researcher made a query of these students to confirm each one had experienced a period of poor or non-attendance, low grades or no grades, and insufficient credits to be considered on track to graduate. This information, coupled with the second criteria, that is, the student is currently working toward graduation as evidenced by regular attendance, passing grades, earning credits, and a reduction or elimination of discipline referrals, confirmed these students were previously disengaged but now reengaged and working toward graduation.

The researcher had previously met the students in the capacity of student advisor. After identifying him or her as potential participants for this study, the researcher met with each student individually and introduced the purpose of the research project. Every student expressed enthusiasm at the invitation of being part of the study. A consent form was signed by the students and parents, anonymity was assured, and a time and place established for the interviews. Participants were invited to choose an alternative setting for the interview to assure their comfort. All agreed to meet in an office at the school.

The researcher requested the administration and counselors to recommend teachers regarded as having a positive impact in helping disengaged students to reengage
in school. The researcher, having spent time in various classrooms substituting during emergencies, assisting teachers in developing teaching strategies, and based on feedback from students, had insight as to the effectiveness of some teachers. Four teachers were invited to participate in the study. Each expressed sincere interest in the study and agreed to participate by signing the consent form.

The administrative team at the high school consists of a principal and two associate principals. The administrative team accepted the invitation to be a part of this research project and each signed the consent form. Their participation provided data regarding their philosophy on the disengagement and reengagement of students.

The interviews were audio recorded, field notes taken, and the transcripts reviewed by a third party for accuracy. The audiotapes and transcripts were stored at the home of the researcher under lock and key and will be incinerated at the conclusion of this study.

**Setting for this Study**

The site selected for this study is Valley High School (pseudonym). Valley High School is a comprehensive four-year public high school located in the Valley Area of Northern California. The high school is one of 14 high schools in this district. Approximately 24,000 students are enrolled in the district with 2,700 students enrolled at Valley High School. Of the students enrolled at Valley High School, 65% are of Asian descent, 22% are Hispanic, 9% Caucasian/White, 3% African American/Black, and 1% reported as being Hawaiian Native/Pacific Islanders. The students enrolled at Valley
High School who are eligible for free or reduced lunch totals 13% while 6% are considered English Language Learners.

The average class size at Valley High School is 30 students. With 110 teachers the average years teaching is 12 years. Eighty-eight percent of the teacher staff holds full teaching credentials while the balance of the teachers hold emergency credentials or a waiver. The state goal for the Academic Performance Index (API) is 800. The API test results for Valley High School for the 2012-2013 school year was 866, which represented an increase of 5% over the previous school year.

The suspension rates were significantly reduced over the past three school years from 5.01% to 2.82%. The expulsion rate was also decreased from 0.19% to 0.11%. The reduction in these areas is attributed to the increased utilization of the Multi Services Team (MST), which consists of in-house social workers and outreach workers who visit the students and parents at their homes. When it becomes evident that personal issues are impacting students’ performance, they are referred to the MST team for evaluation and counseling.

The graduation rate at Valley High School is 91.04% with a dropout rate of 5.4% (35 students for the 2012-2013 school year). The ethnicity of the 35 students that dropped out closely aligned with the demographics at this site with one African American, 21 Asian, three Filipino, one mixed race, six Hispanic or Latino, and three Whites.

The suspension rate at this site was 2.8% and expulsion rate was 0.11%. There were 26 students with disabilities and 105 classified as socio-economically
disadvantaged. It is estimated that just over 3% of the students are enrolled in adult
school or a continuation program.

Participants of the Study

The following is a short profile of all participants of this study. Pseudonyms were
used to protect the participants’ identity.

Student Profiles

Cienna is an eleventh grade Hispanic/Latino. She is the middle child of nine.
During her mother’s illness she fell behind and is deficient in credits. She attended
summer school this year and will attend next summer along with being enrolled in
correspondence classes through both her eleventh and twelfth grades.

George is a Hispanic/Latino senior and trying hard to graduate this year. He went
to summer school and is enrolled in evening classes at a local junior college. He is
fortunate to have an older brother who is a good example and George has been successful
in making friends with supportive peers.

Shane, an Asian Indian, is in the eleventh grade and has an older brother helping
him with his studies and a teacher he respects advising him. Shane is determined to do
what is necessary to graduate. By attending summer school and earning extra credit
through correspondence classes he will graduate with his class.

Anthony, a White twelfth grader, admitted to being just plain lazy. He lives alone
with his father who works long hours at a job he hates. Anthony went back home after his
father left for work and hung out, played video games, and slept. He is currently paying
the price by doing double time at school through correspondence classes and night school. He is determined to make his father proud by graduating this year.

Angel is an eleventh grade Hispanic/Latino and is convinced he does not have to be a loser. He is working hard to recover credits. His goal is to graduate with his class next year and prove that he can do it. He will enroll in an alternative school the first half of his senior year where an accelerated program will give him the opportunity to earn the necessary credits.

Jenny is Vietnamese and in the eleventh grade. She is the most fiercely determined person the researcher has met. No one needs to tell her she really messed up bad. She realizes she will not graduate with her class but this does not damper her determination. Jenny exudes confidence and is willing to pay the price to earn her diploma and make a good life for herself.

It is recognized that student disengagement from school is largely viewed as an issue affecting primarily students from socioeconomic disadvantaged backgrounds. While the socioeconomic level of families of the participants included in this study cannot be determined, based on their neighborhoods, homes, automobiles, and dress the researcher assumed they were affluent. This would indicate the disengagement issue affects students from all socioeconomic levels.

**Teacher Profiles**

Mr. Boone is White and began his academic career with the goal of becoming an attorney. An assignment took him to a local high school. The rest is history as he was smitten with the students. This is his eighth year in education and is unabashed when
describing his satisfaction in witnessing the transformation of students as they develop an interest and love for learning.

Mrs. Hansen is Hispanic/Latino and raised two boys before going to school to become a certified teacher. She admits being a tough taskmaster but the students love her. Her classroom is overflowing with students but they are always on task. She employs the support of parents and invites them to her classes to not only observe but participate and serve as volunteers. In observing her class a person’s first impression is to witness a teacher who enjoys doing what she is doing. After ten years in the classroom Mrs. Hansen says she cannot imagine doing anything else, other than teach high school students.

Ms. Cookson is White and in her seventh year as a history teacher. She said the first two years were tough because she did not relate to the students on their level. She admits to talking down to them as though she was the expert and the student’s privilege was to listen to her. Now her students are the center of her world and she lets them know they are the only reason she comes to work.

Mrs. West is Asian and teaches students classified as special education, however her students perform well, not only in her classes but also in mainstream classes. She exudes love and compassion for her students and makes time to work with them one on one. Mrs. West described her stressful youth as preparation for working with the students she has in her classes. She expects a high level of work from the students in her classes and they work hard in her classes producing the level of work she knows they are capable of.
Administrator Profiles

Ms. Lory, Principal, is White and in her second year as administrator for a public school. She was an administrator of a church school for 11 years and admits the challenges facing her at a comprehensive high school can be daunting. Her expectations are high for both students and teachers. Her tolerance for incompetence among staff is nonexistent.

Mrs. Stanley, Associate Principal and African/American, has over 20 years of experience in various administrative positions. She is realistic and has a practical approach to problem solving. The teaching staff has no hesitation going to her for assistance and somehow she seems to have time to meet with them as needed. While out on campus during lunch or brunch she stops to talk with the students, usually calling them by name.

Mr. King, the Associate Principal, is White and just beginning his career as a high school administrator. He has no pretentions of having all the solutions. He has gained the respect of the staff because of his willingness to listen before passing judgment or making important decisions.

Research Question

What factors influence the disengaged student to reengage in school and work toward a high school diploma? Each question was carefully constructed to reveal the factors eventually leading to the students’ reengagement in school. The first four questions were for warm-up to assist the participant to relax and begin talking about themselves and school.
The research questions were itemized as follows

1. Tell me about your impressions of school during your ninth and tenth grades.
2. Describe the pressures you experienced that pulled you away from working toward graduation.
3. In your own words tell me how you felt when you realized things were not going well in your pursuit of a diploma.
4. What caused you to realize that if you were going to graduate changes would have to take place?
5. Share with me something that caused you to return to school and work toward earning your high school diploma.
6. How will graduating from high school help you in the future?
7. What types of support or influence did you receive from others (family, friends, teachers) who may have influenced you to work toward your diploma?
8. In your opinion what makes for a good teacher?
9. Now that you are working hard to earn your diploma how do you feel about yourself, school, and the future?

The items asked of teachers included

1. What do you find to be the most rewarding aspect of teaching?
2. What indicators alert you that a student is disengaged and off-track to graduate?
3. Describe strategies you have found to be effective in working with disengaged students.

4. How do you feel when you become aware that a disengaged student is attempting to get back on track and pursue a diploma?

5. Have you had the opportunity to discuss with the administration your concerns about the disengaged students you work with?

6. Have you had the opportunity to collaborate with other teachers concerning working with the disengaged students?

The items asked of administrators included

1. What do you think about teachers’ need of specific training to work with disengaged students?

2. Where would the teachers receive that training?

3. What specific training does the school or district provide for teachers working with disengaged students?

4. How do you identify teachers who work well with disengaged students?

5. What efforts should be made to place a disengaged student with a particular teacher?

Limitations

Because of the researchers’ position at the school, some of the students were familiar with the researcher. This relationship may have advantages, but may also pose some limitations. The participant may be inclined to provide responses that would be
perceived as pleasing to the researcher. The researcher must be cognizant of personal emotions and remain unbiased in the interview and interpretation stage of this research.

The researcher’s responsibilities at the school have included assisting teachers with discipline challenges, providing teaching strategies to enhance their presentations, and helping to solve personal issues. The researchers challenge was to remain unbiased in conducting and interpretation of the teacher interviews.

This study was conducted at one high school in a district that includes 14 high schools. The school is an anomaly in that the student demographics are not representative of the district. The students of Asian descent are 65% while 70% of the students in the district of 24,000 students are Hispanic. This study was meant to represent this school, however factors influencing students to reengage in school and the challenges encountered may be applicable to students in other schools.

Following is an explanation of the categories that emerged from the study of the literature. The principles used to analyze the data and understand the meanings from the data sets will be presented.

Data Analysis

Capturing the underlying motivation for reengaging in school requires the voice of the reengaged student be heard and analyzed to find meaning to be communicated to others (Hatch, 2002). In-depth interviews were the research tool utilized to capture the life experiences of the participants (Parkinson & Drislane, 2001). Giving voice to the student participants was initially the central focus of this study but it became apparent that resilience was also a theme having a powerful impact on students
As the in-depth interviews unfolded the researcher was required to be cognizant of underlying themes and constantly prepared to revise the questions, however slight, to elicit open and candid responses (Creswell, 2009). A qualitative study using in-depth interviews produces a large volume of rich data. The audiotapes of the interviews were transcribed in a timely fashion. These transcripts were compared with field notes and reviewed by a third party for accuracy. The first step was to compare the transcripts with the audiotapes and field notes by listening to them several times, thus becoming immersed in the data.

As predominant themes emerged from the participants’ interviews they were coded and placed into labeled files for the qualitative analysis that followed. As the analysis progressed it became clear that some codes could be combined and eventually organized under headings of categories readily identifiable.

Conclusion

Chapter 3 provided a detailed discussion of the methodology and research design for this qualitative study. The participants included six students, four teachers, and three administrators. The data analysis for the study involved coding and categorizing the themes that emerged from the participants’ interviews. The findings of these interviews will be presented in Chapter 4.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to give voice to the high school student who was disengaged from school by illuminating factors influencing them to reengage and actively pursue a high school diploma. This study also sought the voice of successful teachers with disengaged students; the study looked for their descriptions of what they do to reengage this student population. High school administrators participated in the study and shared their perceptions on the subject of disengagement and reengagement.

Six students, four teachers, and three high school administrators, the principal and both associate principals, were interviewed. The interviews required 16 hours including follow up interviews of one student and one teacher. The students revealed their reasons for reengaging in school. Teachers shared their philosophies and effective techniques as they worked to reengage the disengaged students in their classes. The school administrative team accepted the invitation to communicate their views pertaining to school efforts to accommodate the disengaged students.

All interviews were conducted in a private and comfortable administrative office at the school. At times emotions were near the surface, and the researcher was taken by the candid and forthright responses of the participants. All interviews were audio-recorded and the researcher kept field notes during the interview. An assessment of the data was made to ensure accuracy. This was accomplished by a timely transcription, compared with field notes, and read by a third party to assure accuracy.
This study was designed to answer the question, “What factors influenced disengaged high school students to reengage in school and pursue a high school diploma?” Open-ended questions prepared in advance were utilized to guide the interview. The questions were formulated to place the student participant at ease and reflect on what influenced them to reengage and return to school. The in-depth interviews provided an opportunity for the participants to discuss lived experiences in identifying the factors influencing their reengagement with school and pursue their high school diploma.

The analysis began as the rich descriptions of the participants’ experiences were collected and reviewed. Predominant themes emerged as the transcripts were analyzed. The raw data from the interviews were organized into file folders for the qualitative analysis. The folders were labeled as to the themes and patterns that emerged as characterized by the responses of the participants.

The findings of this study will be presented in three sections labeled as follows (a) Student Participant Findings (b) Teacher Participant Findings, and (c) Administrator Participant Findings.

**Student Participant Findings**

Three of the nine questions elicited responses specific to the research question. These questions were

1. Share with me something that caused you to return to school and work toward earning your high school diploma.
2. What type of support or influence did you receive from others (family, friends, and teachers) who may have influenced you to work toward your diploma?

3. How will graduating from high school help you in the future?

When reviewing the transcripts the researcher combined several codes under the umbrella of “Parents, Family, and Teacher as Core Factors”.

For clarity this researcher consolidated and organized these into five readily identifiable categories. The categories included

1. Not wanting their child to repeat their mistakes.
2. Wanting a better life for their child than they had experienced.
3. Mutual respect between parent and child.
4. Input from siblings, family friends, and relatives.
5. Influence of teachers.

Table #1

*Frequency Factor of Student Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parents, Family, Teachers as Core Factors</th>
<th>Cienna</th>
<th>George</th>
<th>Shane</th>
<th>Antony</th>
<th>Angel</th>
<th>Jenny</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not wanting child to repeat their mistakes</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanting a better life for their child</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual respect between parent and child</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Input from siblings, family friends, relatives</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers influence</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This section is organized in a format highlighting the factors leading to the student’s decision to reengage in school. Each factor is listed and discussed according to the degree of importance that was determined based on frequency as such factors appeared in the data, as well as how participants emphasized them through the interview.

**Parents and Family as Core Factors**

**Not Wanting Child to Repeat Their Mistakes**

This was a reoccurring theme in the data collection. Data suggested the parents to be the entity most emphatic about students doing better than they did when growing up. Parents were adamant about making sure their children did not repeat their parents’ mistakes. Furthermore, these parents tended to shield their children from harm and to encourage them to make more informed and sound decisions. Cienna exemplified this when she stated, “My mother didn’t graduate because she was pregnant with me. She doesn’t want the same thing to happen to me” (Cienna, personal communication, November 4, 2014).

**Wanting a Better Life for Their Child**

Another theme included parents wanting a better life for their children than they had had. Parents wanted their children to break out of the cycle of poverty and despair. While at no point did these parents express shame for living in poverty, they, nevertheless, insisted that they wanted a better life for their sons and daughters. As George was talking about his family he explained

A long-time family friend came from Mexico to live with us. He had to work really hard since he was a little kid. He is old now and not in very good health. He
couldn’t go to school and he tells me how important it is to get my education. My parents finished high school in Mexico and came here so we could have a better life. When they got here they both got jobs and worked hard to have a home and raise my brother and me. They both work really hard and they want us to have a chance to do well. I don’t want to disappoint them anymore. (George, personal communication, November 3, 2014)

**Mutual Respect Between Parent and Child**

Parents also function as a source of respect. When students interviewed perceived respect from adults, the lines of communication opened. Speaking of his father Anthony captured this element clearly by stating

I live alone with my dad. He works long hours at a job he hates and wants me to do better than he is doing. We talk sometimes and he doesn’t ride my ass but I know he would be happy if I graduate and went to college. I guess I’m doing it mostly for him. I know that what he says is true and he is just trying to help me. I’m going to make him proud. (Anthony, personal communication, November 11, 2014)

Cienna further emphasized this when she shared

My mom and I had a long talk one night. She said to look at your older brothers and cousins and all the trouble they are having. Some are in jail and the others have been there. She helped me to see where I was headed. They are going through some really hard stuff because they did not graduate from high school. If nothing else I will do it for her so I can help her someday. She has worked like a
dog for us so we need to make her happy. (Cienna, personal communication, November 4, 2014)

Some students recognized the sacrifices and struggles that their parents endured and they showed respect for their parents by their desire to honor them and give back. Angel stated

I’m going to graduate and get a job so I can help my dad. He works hard and doesn’t make enough to pay everything. Mom is sick and can’t do very much. I will get a job after I graduate and that will help the family. (Angel, personal communication, November 5, 2014)

When students realized that their actions have brought hurt, shame, or embarrassment upon their loved ones, they wished to show respect to their parents by changing their behavior. As George stated, “My mom was really sad and shed lots of tears. I’m not going to put her through this anymore” (George, personal communication, November 3, 2014).

Input from Siblings, Family Friends, and Relatives

Siblings, relatives, and family influence a young person by example or direct communication on daily, ordinary encounters. Shane revealed the importance of listening to a sibling and not repeating their mistakes when he stated

My brother missed graduating with his class because he was short on credits. He had to go to continuation school to finish. He is now in college and doing really good. He said he was so embarrassed when he could not graduate with his class. (Shane, personal communication, November 6, 2014)
A relative, such as an aunt or uncle, through expressions of sincere interest and support have a profound influence on students. Cienna revealed her respect for Nina, her mother’s sister, who is in law enforcement. “She talks to me a lot and gives me ideas about what I can do with my life. She says she knows I can do it if I try” (Cienna, personal communication, November 4, 2014).

**Influence of Teachers: Teachers Reaching Out**

Teacher’s impact on students’ decision to reengage in school was a factor in reengagement. Four of the six students stated a teacher was a factor in their reengagement in school. As Anthony revealed, a teacher who reaches out to the disengaged student may exert the influence needed to compel the student to keep trying, knowing that someone at the school really cares. Anthony related

> I had a teacher who came to my house one night. He said he had not seen me in school for a while and hoped I was OK. He told my dad he believed in me and I had a lot of ability. He offered to stop by and pick me up if I needed a ride to school. I started to work really hard in his class and he helped me with other classes. He told me he will be at my graduation. (Anthony, personal communication, November 11, 2014)

This is an example of a teacher who demonstrated a personal interest in a student and the impact was so profound the student reengaged in school and is pursuing his diploma.

It is important for a student when a teacher reaches out to them and tries to get to know them and understand their problems. George experienced this when a teacher
revealed a personal interest in him by inviting him to his room to talk about his progress and needs. As George commented

I’ve had one teacher that encouraged me. He took the time to get to know a little about my life and what I want to do. He asked me to come to his room during lunch or after school to talk. He has looked at my grades and helps me with stuff I don’t understand. I think he is interested in me and he is someone I can go to talk to. I want to show him he has not wasted his time. (George, personal communication, November 3, 2014)

Trust develops between the student and teacher when the teacher reveals something of themselves. When a teacher shared his personal history with Shane it was evidence to Shane the teacher trusted him with something personal and conveyed to him that he had faith and trust in him. Shane stated

I had a math teacher who took me aside and told me he thought I was capable of doing the work. He had me come to his room during lunch and he helped me. Sometimes he will stay until way after school to help me. He told me of the hard time he had in school when he came from China and he said he believes in me. I’m not going to let him down. Even though math is boring he works hard to make it interesting to where you almost like it. (Shane, personal communication, November 6, 2014)

When Shane said that he was not going to let this teacher down he was revealing the bond of trust and confidence that was being built between the student and the teacher.
Shane realized this teacher cared enough about him to share information, make time for him to meet and receive help, and offer encouragement.

Jenny mentions two teachers who are offering her support in her heroic effort to earn her diploma. She stated

I hung out with a crowd that did not go to school. We would just go to someone’s home and hang out. We would get high and party, sometimes for two or three days. Two of the girls had kids they would leave with their moms so they could party. When they got their checks they would buy drugs and booze and we partied. One morning I woke up and had no idea where I was or who I had been with. I looked around and got really scared. I’ve had one abortion and I don’t want to get knocked up again. The place was a filthy dump and the people looked even worse. Everyone was still sleeping and I just stared. They looked old and used. I gathered up my clothes and left. I was a long way from home but I walked home in the rain. I think I matured a lot that night. After seeing the people I was with I decided I did not want to end up looking like that. That was not the life I wanted. I was a long ways behind in my school work but I decided I was not going to be a fuck up. It is really hard now and I know this is the price I have to pay. A couple of my teachers seem to believe in me and are helping me. I just keep telling myself that I am going to graduate even though no one believes I will. I’m going to make something of myself. You don’t have to believe in me because I believe in me. (Jenny, personal communication, November 6, 2014)
These students know and appreciate the teacher who cares enough about them to become involved in their lives and attempt to make a difference.

**Students Describe Good Teachers**

The students participating in this study expressed, in passionate, urgent tones of voice, their opinions concerning the characteristics of good teachers. Several themes emerged as illustrated by the following.

**Students Want the Teachers to Know Them**

Jenny stated this point by saying, “The teacher needs to talk to me and find out what I think and what I’m concerned about. I need to know that they really care about me and want the best for me” (Jenny, personal communication, November 6, 2014). Anthony echoed this sentiment when he stated, “I think a good teacher should get to know a little what is going on in your life and what your concerns are. They should know about our goals and give us some ideas on how we can reach our goals” (Anthony, personal communication, November 11, 2014). Cienna followed with

A good teacher will say Hi when you come to class and Goodbye at the end of class. They will know your name and actually use your name. If you think a teacher knows you and cares a little you want to work harder in that class and not let them down. (Cienna, personal communication, November 4, 2014)

**Show an Interest in the Students**

The students revealed they want teachers to show an interest in them, to know something about them personally, to talk to them, and even use their name. Students attempt to appear cool and aloof, yet they enjoy the human touch.
Students Need Interesting, Relevant, and Varied Presentations

An effective technique a teacher can use to connect with the students and show they care about the students is in the preparation of interesting, informative, and relevant lessons. The students would like a variation in the way materials are presented. Shane expressed this sentiment when he said

Like in English, instead of just sit and read about a story if they have us role-play it makes it a thousand times more interesting and fun and we will always remember it. A teacher can role play with us and be involved with us and show he is interested in the subject and cares that we understand it. Teachers need to know that we all don’t learn the same way. (Shane, personal communication, November 6, 2014)

A teacher can demonstrate that they care about the students by structuring the lessons in a variety of ways to appeal to various learning modes. George explained that everyone does not learn the same way when he shared

Sometimes they need to teach us in different ways so we understand it. Some of us just can’t read it. I need hands-on so I can see it and it makes sense to me. I think a good teacher will try different ways to break the subject down into small parts that we can understand. After a quiz they find out what we missed and re-teach it to us individually to make sure we understand it. I think a good teacher will meet with us before school, during lunch, or after school to help us understand. Sometimes they need to teach us in different ways so we understand
Some of us just can’t read it. I need hands-on so I can see it and it makes sense to me. (George, personal communication, November 3, 2014)

**Students Want Personal Attention**

Angel articulated the concept of the teacher being concerned about their learning and being there to help them. He related

A good teacher will let you work with someone else to do your work or give a presentation. Sometimes other students can explain it better than the teacher and when we work in small groups we share ideas and help each other understand. A student will say this is what works for me and sometimes it’s really a good idea. When you stand up before a group and present something that you have done alone you’re scared and mess up because you are nervous. When you have prepared something as a group and give a presentation you have each other to lean on and support each other. You want your group to be the best so you really work hard together and when you get up there to make your presentation you kick some serious ass and have a lot of fun doing it. I like the teacher who will ask the students what they think and try to be fair and consider what the students say. A good teacher will have small study sessions for some of us who are slow or don’t understand and are struggling. The teacher shows he is concerned and is there to help us understand so we can do better. They are willing to work with us individually if we need a little extra help. (Angel, personal communication, November 5, 2014)
Teacher Needs to Show Enthusiasm for the Subject

When the teacher is enthusiastic about his/her subject the student senses the teacher has something precious they want to share with the class. The excitement is infectious and the student knows the teacher cares about them. Shane said

“Come to class and be excited and very energetic about what they have prepared for us. They act like they are interested in us and are there to help us understand and then explain why it is important that we know this stuff.” (Shane, personal communication, November 6, 2014)

Shane made three very important points. First, he said the teacher was excited about his/her class and lesson. Second, the teacher was interested in the class, and third, he/she explained why the lesson was important.

Anthony agreed and then continued with his thoughts about what constitutes a good teacher. He stated

A good teacher should show some excitement about what they are teaching and try to make it interesting and fun to be in class. I think a good teacher should get to know a little about what is going on in your life and what your concerns are. They should know about our goals and give us some ideas on how we can reach our goals. A good teacher should show some excitement about what they are teaching and try to make it interesting and fun to be in class. A good teacher comes to class on time and is prepared. We should not have to hear about their problems and sorry assed excuses for not getting our tests back. A good teacher should stay in class the whole period and not stand outside the room to talk to
another teacher for half the period or sit at their desk and pretend they have so much to do on the computer. I don’t think a good teacher will talk bad about the school leaders or other teachers. They should take care of their own class and be there to help the students. (Anthony, personal communication, November 11, 2014)

Students spend a considerable part of their lives with teachers. They could provide a good informational source regarding teacher evaluations.

Teacher Participant Findings

The teachers invited to participate in this study were selected because of their unique ability to engage even the most recalcitrant students. Their philosophies and techniques are as follows.

Let the Students Know You Care

Every teacher participant stressed the importance of letting the students know you care about them. The teachers, in his or her unique style, stressed the importance of conveying to the students that they care about them personally. Mr. Boone said, “It is important that they know that you care and you are there for them” (Mr. Boone, personal communication, November 10, 2014). Mrs. Hansen tells her students “You are too intelligent to go down the wrong path and I won’t let you go there” (Mrs. Hansen, personal communication, November 12, 2014). Ms. Cookson stated, “They need to know they are the only reason I am at school today” (Ms. Cookson, personal communication, November 11, 2014). Mrs. West summed up this concept as follows
They are not throw-a-ways. I care about their grades but I care more about them. Every student needs to be acknowledged and to know someone is watching them and cares about them. I want them to know that regardless of their past, here is someone who is on their side and will always be here to help them and defend them when necessary. I realize that if I cannot reach them I cannot teach them. (Mrs. West, personal communication, November 10, 2014)

**Getting to Know Them**

The teachers emphasized how important it is to get to know each student and try to understand them, their concerns, and their dreams. Mr. Boone, a regular education teacher of language arts, sets aside time to get to know his students. He stated

I spend most of the first month getting to know them and find out about them personally. It’s important to know their names and use their names. We play games to get to know each other and I give them group time and one on one time. I give them writing assignments and have them write about themselves, their problems, and their dreams. This also reveals their writing ability. (Mr. Boone, personal communication, November 10, 2014)

Ms. Cookson, a regular education social studies teacher, emphasized the priority of getting to know her students. As she pointed out, “The first few days of class are spent getting to know and understand the students and reach out to them individually. I try to be aware of those who are struggling and I give them individual attention” (Ms. Cookson, personal communication, November 11, 2014).
Willingness to Meet Anytime

These effective teachers gave special consideration to the importance of not limiting their availability exclusively to class time. Before school, during lunch, and after school can be crucial times to be available for their students. Ms. Cookson stated, “I invite them to come in for one on one help. Sometimes they don’t want others to know they are coming in for help or just to talk so I adjust my time to accommodate them” (Ms. Cookson, personal communication, November 11, 2014).

Mrs. West pointed out, “I invite them to stay after class, come in during lunch or after school and I try to create an environment that they feel comfortable in coming to me to discuss their concerns” (Mrs. West, personal communication, November 10, 2014).

Relief of Pressure

At times marginal students will feel overwhelmed by the pressure to earn a grade or credit. If they become too stressed they may feel hopeless and stop coming to class.

Mr. Boone is keenly aware of this phenomenon. His solution

I help them to understand that no one is going to fail my class. Regardless of where they are academically they will pass the class if they will let me help them. They all can do the work and I am here to help them. They need to know that I will give them credit for just coming to class and putting in some effort. They may not earn a high grade but they will not fail. (Mr. Boone, personal communication, November 10, 2014)

Mrs. West attributes her success with the disengaged students from a similar philosophy. She stated
They are so much more than their actions. They are all so capable. We have to make them believe this. I care about their grades but I care more about them. Before we can help them academically we need to help them sift through all the muck in their lives and help them dream about the future. The grades will come later. (Mr. West, personal communication, November 10, 2014)

Making Class Interesting

Some teachers are concerned for the students who become distracted and bored. Ms. Cookson said, “I’m constantly looking for new, different, exciting presentations to change the pace and try new things. It not only gives the students a break, it gives me a break” (Ms. Cookson, personal communication, November 11, 2014).

Contacting Parents

Teachers commented that making contact with parents is important. When parents are kept informed of what is taking place in class and they know teacher’s care about their student the parent will be supportive of the teacher. Mrs. Hansen calls the home of every student on a regular basis. She said

The calls are the highlight of her day, or night, as she calls many from home after the parents are home from work. I let the parent know what is taking place in the class and ask for their support. I let the parent know I see something very valuable in their son or daughter. I have never had a parent not stand behind me when they understand what I’m trying to do for their child. (Mrs. Hansen, personal communication, November 12, 2014)
Administrator Feedback

Training for Teachers of the Disengaged Student

The administration was invited to participate in this study to share their philosophy regarding the issue of disengaged and reengaging students. All three administrators were in agreement that specific training should be made available for those teaching disengaged students; however, it was unclear as to what training was available and who would provide the training. Ms. Lory stated

Yes, I think it is important for them to receive training; however, very little is provided. Some teachers will attend conferences on their own time and money, but I’m not aware of any organized program for teachers to receive this training.

(Ms. Lory, personal communication, November 18, 2014)

Mr. King followed with, “It is now on an individual or department level. The staff gets together and collaborates on the best way to reach the students and get the job done. The district does not provide any training for these teachers” (Mr. King, personal communication, November 19, 2014).

Identifying Effective Teachers with the Disengaged Student

To meet the best interest of the disengaged students they should be placed with teachers who possess the skills to meet their demands. When asked how these teachers were identified Mr. King responded, “Through classroom observations and knowing the skills of the individual teacher. It’s kind of hard to see on paper. You can’t just look at test scores or grades and say that teacher has the ability to teach these kids” (Mr. King, personal communication, November 19, 2014). Mrs. Stanley followed with, “Through
teacher observation, sitting in their classroom. You can also track the kids and see how well they are doing with certain teachers” (Mrs. Stanley, personal communication, November 18, 2014). Ms. Lory said, “I look for relationships. I look for teachers who care about students” (Ms. Lory, personal communication, November 18, 2014).

**Placing Disengaged Students With Specific Teachers**

When asked if effort should be made to place a disengaged student with a particular teacher Mr. King responded, “I think this is something we should look into. It would be pretty hard to work into our master schedule” (Mr. King, personal communication, November 19, 2014). Mrs. Stanley said, “Some teachers seem to have a heart for working with students at risk and have a particular knack for working with these kids. As an administrator, if I determined a student would do better with another teacher I will make that move” (Mrs. Stanley, personal communication, November 18, 2014). Ms. Lory stated, “I think if you are wise and you have a student who is having specific challenges you should hand pick the teachers. Not all students relate with every teacher” (Ms. Lory, personal communication, November 18, 2014).

**Teachers Perception of Administrative Support**

Notwithstanding, administrator’s perceptions and views of the disengaged students issue did not match that of the teachers. When the teachers were asked if they had the opportunity to discuss their concerns with administration regarding the disengaged students they worked with, the response was a unanimous “NO” from all four teachers.
Their response to the second question, “Have you had the opportunity to collaborate with other teachers concerning working with disengaged students?” - all four teachers said “no” but two elaborated. Mrs. Hansen stated, “I have tried to align my classes with the English program but have been told my students are not capable of doing the work” (Mrs. Hansen, personal communication, November 12, 2014). Ms. Cookson replied

No, not at staff meetings but we get together and bitch. We think that the social promotions through middle school are setting up the students for failure when they get to high school. They don’t know what is going on so they become disengaged, disruptive, and get into trouble. (Ms. Cookson, personal communication, November 11, 2014)

**Conclusion**

This chapter gave each student the opportunity to discuss why they decided to reengage in school and pursue their dream. They described their discussions with others, their observations, and the events that impacted this decision. Each one articulated the desire to make someone in their life proud and to not disappoint themselves or a loved one.

Four teachers shared what they do in the classroom that makes them effective with students struggling to engage in school. These teachers articulated their philosophy, frustrations, and elations as related to their teaching these students. Their frustration concerning the lack of support from the school or district was evident.
The administrator interviews gave the impression that the disengaged and reengaged students were not their priority. They also expressed little support for the teachers of the disengaged students.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The primary purpose of this study was to determine the factors that influenced students to reengage in school and pursue their high school diploma. Six disengaged students who reengaged in school were selected as participants for this study. The study followed qualitative methodologies where the participants were given the opportunity to share their perceptions and lived experiences. The theoretical lens this researcher applied was capturing students’ voice by revealing their resilience manifested in their refusal to become marginalized for the rest of their lives because of the lack of a high school diploma. The researcher was conscious of the importance of reflecting the participant’s authentic accounts. Four effective teachers and three high school administrators were also participants in this study.

This chapter is divided into three sections (a) Discussion, (b) Conclusions, and (c) Recommendations. This chapter contains subsections to provide emphasis, clarity, and precision.

Discussion

The literature review showed that over 30% of high school students in the United States became disengaged and dropped out of school. In many urban schools the dropout rate was as high as 50% (Belfanz & Legters, 2004). High school dropouts earn significantly less income during their lifetime than the students who graduate from high school. Further, students who dropout often lack the social and cultural capital to
compete and contribute to society. Not only does the decision to drop out of school impact the individual student but also the rest of the United States is negatively impacted. It is estimated that high school dropouts do 75% of the crimes committed in this country while 82% of all prisoners are high school dropouts (United State Department of Education, 2012).

The societal and economic impact of a high dropout rate for the United States is a cause for concern. It is estimated that approximately 12 million students will drop out over the next decade costing the United States about $3 billion dollars. The dropouts are more likely than their peers who graduate to be unemployed, living in poverty, receiving public assistance, incarcerated, and on death row. Dropouts are twice as likely as a high school graduate to slip into a life of poverty.

The literature further revealed that multiple reasons students become disengaged and drop out of school exist, including limited mental capacity, being forced to accept adult responsibilities, antisocial behavior, poor start in elementary school, substance abuse, and the list of reasons continue. Schools located in impoverished areas are often underfunded, over crowded, unsafe, and staffed with under qualified personnel. It becomes easy for students attending such schools to become alienated, disenchanted concerning their future prospects, and eventually drop out.

Multiple programs have been implemented aimed at reducing the dropout rate. Some of these programs have experienced a modicum of success while most of them have had no impact on the dropout rate. Programs designed to locate drop outs with the
The goal to entice the student to return and continue his or her education are rare and even less effective.

The literature reviewed provided little information concerning the factors that influence a disengaged student to reengage in school and pursue a high school diploma. This study’s purpose consisted of exploring some of the factors influencing students’ decision to reengage in school and attain their high school diploma. Six student participants were given the opportunity to add their voice to the discussion as to the reason they decided to reengage in school and pursue their high school diploma. They described their experiences, ideals, and knowledge which impacted their decision.

Four teachers shared what they do in the classroom that increases their effectiveness with students struggling to engage or reengage in school. These teachers articulated their philosophy, frustrations, and elation as related to their teaching the disengaged students. Further, they expressed frustration concerning the lack of support from school administration.

The administrators articulated a lack of consensus on key issues regarding the disengaged student issues. The researcher was left with the impression that the disengaged and reengaged students and their teachers were not receiving consideration regarding training and support.

**Conclusions**

The participants of this study shared their experiences and insights into the topic of reengaging in school. This is a topic which has received little research attention in the past. The responses of the participants were revealing and provided information that will
be beneficial in understanding the factors that influence a student to reengage in school. This knowledge could be utilized in the design of programs directed at reengagement and the training of teachers working with the disengaged student.

Every student identified factors that influenced him or her to reengage in school. The research findings revealed it was a combination of factors that caused the students to reengage in school and pursue their graduation dream. The factors included interactions with adults such as parents, relatives, family friends, and teachers. These factors were presented in order of frequency and urgency of the respondents. First, parents and adults played the most significant role as a central factor influencing reengagement. Second, the impact teachers had on students was a major factor in reengagement.

**Parents and Adults**

Data revealed that the adults in a student’s life: parents, relatives, adult family friends, and older siblings provided a direct and powerful influence on the student. Through example, discussion, and a display of love and concern adults attempted to persuade those they care about to stay in school and prepare for the future. Three of the participants credited their parents as being the prime motivating factor that provided the impetus to rededicate their efforts and pursue their high school diploma. One participant credited a sibling for providing the incentive to return to school. Their influence is a compelling factor influencing the student to reevaluate their situation and make the decision to reengage in school and pursue a diploma.
Teachers

Four students credited one or more teachers for providing the support they needed to turn their attention and efforts back to attaining their education. Researchers (Goe, 2007; Schumacher et al., 2012; Smith & O’Day, 1990; Sweetland & Fogarty, 2008; Taylor, 2006) have confirmed the single most influential school-based factor in students having academic success is teachers. For this reason the teacher stands out as the most significant school-based factor identified by the students. Thus, the teacher becomes the central source for initiating reengagement for the students. If the school is to have an effect on a student in an effort to impel them to continue their education the teacher is the single most important actor in the process. Therefore, it would behoove the school districts to provide all teachers with the training necessary to be cognizant of the disengaged, high-risk students, and develop the skills required to meet the students’ needs.

In describing a good teacher every student stated that they felt the teacher cared about them personally and the teacher conveyed to the student that they did care. Some teachers do not care for the students and choose to remain aloof to the difficulties facing some students. The school cannot legislate that a teacher care about the students nor can caring be taught to someone that does not care. During the hiring process it is also hard to determine if the candidate is a caring teacher.

Programs implemented at the school level need not be complicated. The skills required of the teachers to be successful are skills committed and dedicated teachers possess and put in use on a consistent basis.
Any change or improvement in the method the school approaches the student disengagement issue is incumbent upon the administration and must be introduced at that level. Administrators need to be made cognizant as to the magnitude of the costs of disengagement, both to the student and society. The costs not only involve financial consideration but the cost to human lives by way of productivity, health, happiness, and contributions to society. It is imperative the administrators appreciate the crisis our country is facing and are willing to commit resources, both time and financial, to the resolving of this problem. If any success is to be appreciated the buy in of this issue by administration is mandatory.

The administration and teachers must work in harmony. Teachers are the central figure in initiating a change to benefit the disengaged student. Without teacher buy in any proposed change can stop at the classroom door. If a program is to be designed and implemented, which helps solve the student disengagement challenge, a systemic change must take place. A systemic change will only occur under the academic leadership of a committed administration and the critical mass of teachers.

Teachers, being the central source for initiating reengagement, place the onus on the administration to provide them with the training of strategies they can employ in assisting the teacher in working with the disengaged student. The training would be mandatory for every teacher. The training should be specific, realistic, and relevant for all teachers.

**Recommendations**

Following are the recommendations emerging from the study, in order of priority.
In School Disengagement Prevention

All classroom teachers would attend well-organized workshops where teaching strategies and protocols are reviewed, demonstrated, and practiced. The areas for discussion and presentation in these workshops would come directly from the student participant interviews. The subjects would include, but not be limited to, the teacher being to class on time, know something about each student, know the students name, and call them by name. They need to be willing to meet students individually at times other than during class time. A top priority of discussion is to always be respectful to the student and never use sarcasm or putdowns. Having an interesting and relevant lesson prepared every day is crucial. Demonstrating a passion for the subject being taught, take the initiative to inform the student concerning the importance of the subject and explain how the subject will enrich the student’s life is an important subject to review as part of this workshop. This list is not all inclusive, however every teacher can benefit by being reminded and instructed as to cogent strategies to use in the classroom with their students.

No change will take place if no one is accountable. The administration should require the implementation of these strategies as part of the teachers’ ongoing evaluation process. No one knows what is going on in the classroom better than student. A student questionnaire, if properly designed and administered, would be very informative as to the extent the teacher is utilizing the skills. Those teachers using the strategies should be recognized and rewarded.
Out of School Recovery

This recommendation is to be implemented for the students no longer attending school. First period teachers would be provided a list of their students not attending school, including those already dropped from their class roll. This list would contain all available information concerning the student including names of parents or guardians, address, contact numbers, and a current transcript of credits and grades. This list would be labeled confidential and respected as such by the teacher and kept in a locked file.

This program necessitates a home contact to meet with the student and parent or guardian. The teacher should have a script in mind, prior to the initial contact, to facilitate a conversation informing the student they are missed and the teacher is willing to meet with them to discuss options to assist them in working toward a high school diploma. An invitation to the parent to accompany the student may be appreciated. Having received the student’s transcript the teacher is aware of the credit requirements and is prepared to discuss this with the student and be conversant concerning strategies to meet graduation requirements.

Student contacts could be attempted using the following protocol:

- Ask the class if anyone has any information regarding a student on the list. Perhaps the student has moved from the attendance area. If someone has contact with the student ask them to inform the student the teacher would appreciate the opportunity to talk to them. Convey to the student they are being missed.
Further, the teacher should know the address, the name of a contact person, and contact number for an alternative program, including Job Corp, should this be the only viable solution for continuing their education. Some districts provide public transportation to alternative sites. The teacher should have this information to relay to the student.

- A phone call would be a good starting point.
- A sincere handwritten note or card may be appropriate including an invitation to meet at the parent’s convenience to share information and discuss educational opportunities and available options. Include a self-addressed (school address) stamped envelope and a school telephone number to facilitate a reply.
- The teacher could attempt a home visit. If this is attempted use the following guidelines: (ABSOLUTELY NO EXCEPTIONS You know your area. Do not take any unnecessary risks in a dangerous area.
- Only make the visit if a contact has been made, you are expected, and a parent or legal guardian is to be present and it is daylight.
- Under no conditions should you go alone. Always be accompanied by an administrator or fellow teacher.

Home contacts to be made only by teachers trained to meet with students and/or parents, siblings, or others who may influence the student, for the purpose of explaining educational alternatives and options in providing a gateway to pursue their diploma. A teacher making a home contact for sincere inquiry as to the status of the student and
providing a current and relevant plan for the student to continue their education could have a significant impact on the student.

**Mentor**

It must be acknowledged that the transition from being out of school to returning to school can be a traumatic and high anxiety experience for the student. The student should be thoughtfully monitored during this period of transition to assure the student immediate assistance is available when needed. For this reason the administration should designate a teacher/mentor to every disengaged student. This teacher may be a home room teacher or a significant teacher who has developed rapport with the student. If no teacher has a relationship with the student, assign a likely candidate to assume this position. All mentors are to make frequent contacts with the student, one or more contacts per week, for the purpose of inquiring of the student’s welfare, discuss any problems the student may need assistance with, or to offer to help with homework or test preparation. It is important to convey to the student, in a sincere manner, here is an adult at the school who cares about them and is interested in their welfare and is available at any time; here is someone they can approach at any time for any reason and receive reassurance.

Early intervention will assist in preventing the student from becoming academically deficient and having to face the seemingly impossible challenge of making up lost credits. It is imperative the administration receive timely feedback from the mentors.
Parent Contacts

Educators can have little, if any, influence over the adults interacting with the students, with the exception of the teachers. What takes place between students and their parents, relatives, family friends, and siblings under everyday settings is not under the auspice of the educators. However, concerned parents looking for strategies, support, and encouragement may be willing to attend an informal evening of sharing with those who can provide relevant, current, and user friendly information to provide assistance in encouraging their disengaged student to reengage and pursue their diploma. Parents need to be made to feel comfortable and welcome at the school and know the administration and teachers exist only for the purpose of helping their child.

Recommendations for Further Study

The following are recommendations to be considered for further study.

- A study should be conducted to include schools representing a cross section of socioeconomic levels, ethnic representation, and varied dropout rates.

- This study was conducted with six students. A more comprehensive study could be conducted to include students representing more expanded backgrounds.

- The teachers included in this study were teachers from a comprehensive high school. A follow-up study could also include teachers from alternative settings.

- A study involving administrators dedicated to addressing the disengagement and dropout issue would be recommended.
• A study including parents of students reengaged may yield interesting and valuable results.

• Education leaders should concentrate their attention on a long-range solution for the disengagement dilemma by directing their efforts to the primary grades and carefully monitoring them for success and remediation where needed. The nurturing of the students at this level continuing through middle school and into high school may have a profound impact. A study addressing this perspective could become a high priority.

**Final Thoughts**

This study was both challenging and enlightening. With a career as a teacher and administrator of high-risk students in a variety of settings, including both comprehensive high schools and alternative high schools, this researcher found it revealing how little is documented concerning the factors that influence students to return to school and pursue their dream. This information should be clearly understood and utilized when designing programs to not only keep students in school but recover those who have lost out.

Strictly from a financial standpoint it behooves society to take drastic measures to reengage the disengaged student and create conditions, incentives, and a positive atmosphere leading to high school graduation. The dropout dilemma in the United States cost billions of dollars in lost wages, unemployment, health services, welfare, police, and incarceration. Life as we know it cannot continue as this loss continues to grow generation upon generation. Our economy will reach an unsustainable level leading to drastic consequences for all. It has been proven the cost to educate is much less than the
cost to incarcerate. This crisis begs for immediate attention from all areas of the education community to focus on the goal of keeping students in school and preparing them for a satisfying and productive future. We cannot keep picking them up. The cost is too great and the trauma of wrecked lives is overwhelming. We need to keep them from falling. We have expended time, energy, and resources placing the ambulance in the valley. Collectively we need to build a fence around the cliff to keep them from falling and work together to prepare our youth with the tools needed to pursue their dreams.
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