An Analysis of a High School Dropout Reduction Program: Student and Teacher Perception of its Effectiveness

by

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Abstract

This study examines student and teacher perception of the effectiveness of a teacher-mentoring program designed to improve the graduation rate a rural Alabama high school. The extensiveness of the dropout problem threatens the nation's productivity and represents a terrible waste of young lives (Lehr, Clapper, & Thurlow, 2005). Students are expected to graduate from high school with a diploma. Yet hundreds of thousands of students in the United States leave school early without successfully completing school (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2002).

Although literature pertaining to dropouts is voluminous (Bridgeland, Dululio, & Wulsin 2008; Dynarski 2009), there is less research on strategies that evaluate the effectiveness of dropout prevention programs. Because dropouts are a problem for society and themselves, it is important to identify effective dropout prevention programs.

Program evaluations are necessary to close the gap between what we know about dropout programs and what we can do to improve them (Losen, 2004). McPartland (1994) stated it is critical to conduct evaluations of dropout intervention programs' effectiveness and make program modifications as necessary.

This study was designed to evaluate a mentoring program created to improve the graduation rate at a rural Alabama high school. The key findings of this evaluation adds to the literature related to dropout intervention programs and identifies suggestions that may useful to others designing or refining dropout intervention strategies.

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Philippians 4:6–7

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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION OF THE STUDY

This study investigates student and teacher perceptions of a mentoring program's impact on the dropout rate at a rural Alabama high school. This chapter provides background information about the study and the study's theoretical framework. The significance of the study, its purpose, and research questions are described. A brief description of the methodology used in this study, its limitations, and a list of working definitions are also presented.

Background of the Study

School dropout issues have been a concern among educators for over 100 years. W.T. Harris initiated a public discussion of why students left school prematurely in an 1872 address to the National Education Association (Rumberger, 1987). This discussion addressed many issues that we still face today, such as lack of interest and students who need to work to support their families. Since this public discussion began in 1872, studies have been conducted to assess and address the dropout rate in the United States (Curan & Reyna, 2009; Pinckus, 2008).

In 1990, President George H.W. Bush adopted six national goals to be achieved by the year 2000, which were later adopted by the nation's governors (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). The number two goal was increasing the high school graduation rate to 90% (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). In an effort to help school systems achieve this goal, Congress passed the Educate America Act. This act gave approximately $1.5 billion to participating states to aid schools in developing and implementing programs that would help to achieve the national goal of raising the graduation rate (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Since then, numerous

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school districts have developed programs and special initiatives to target students who are at risk of dropping out of school.

Data presented in a report published in 2000 by the Southern Education Foundation (SEF), "High School Completion in Southern Education States 1970–2000," reported that the Southern states posted the lowest high school graduation rates in the country. The SEF (2000) study found that nearly 20% of persons age 25 and over in the South had not completed high school or earned an equivalency diploma. This SEF (2000) research also revealed that even though the Southern states had not met the U.S. average in the last three decades prior to this report, the graduation rate decreased in every Southern state except Florida.

In 2009, America still faced the challenge of lowering the dropout rate. According to the report "Raising Their Voices," President Barack Obama challenged all Americans to become actively engaged in reforms for K–12 education. These changes focused on America's low graduation rates. The report emphasized that nearly one-third of all public high school students, and nearly one-half of minority students, failed to graduate with their class (March, 2010).

Efforts to lower graduation rates in states across America are ongoing. According to an SEF (2000) study, the state of Alabama had one of the lowest graduation rates, averaging seven or more percentage points below the highest performing states in the South. However, due to recently launched efforts to improve the dropout rate, Alabama is among the twelve states that have made the most progress in raising the graduation rate (Balfanz & West, 2008). According to the Every Child a Graduate Executive Report (2009), one effort to address Alabama's dropout problem is the Alabama Select Commission on High School Graduation and Student Dropouts committee that was appointed by the Governor, Lt. Governor, Speaker of the House of

Representatives, and Chief Justice of the Alabama Supreme Court in July of 2009. The

Executive Report (2009) explained the purpose of this commission is to identify factors that

contribute to Alabama's dropout rate and to develop recommendations that will have a

significant impact in ensuring that every student graduates high school. This commission's goal

is to reduce the dropout rate by 25% by 2015, using the dropout rate from 2008–2009 as a

baseline.

Reducing the number of students dropping out of school is not a simple issue, and the

solutions are complex. Two keys to addressing the complexity of this phenomenon are to

identify students who are at risk for dropping out and the causes of students dropping out

(Heppen & Therrialt, 2008). However, identifying what causes students to dropout is difficult

because there is no single reason. Therefore, creating a variety of supports within the school

environment may improve the likelihood that at-risk students will remain in school (Bridgeland,

DiIulio, & Morison, 2006).

Despite the many national, state, and local initiatives since the enactment of the national

educational goals in 1990, dropout rates have not improved as much as many would expect. The

U.S. Department of Education (2003) revealed that in school year 2000–2001, the nation's

graduation rate was only 68%. It has been estimated in recent years that the overall graduation

rate in the United States ranges between 66 to 88%, and the range for minorities is only 50 to

85% (James 2008).

Reasons Why the Dropout Problem Should be Taken Seriously

A number of consequences have been associated with dropping out of school. These include high unemployment, poverty, and high crime and delinquency rates (Kronick & Hargis, 1998). Schargel and Smink (2004) revealed that low self-esteem, marrying someone at-risk, raising at-risk children, and not being able to thrive in the twenty-first century due to the lack of a high school diploma are other negative effects of dropping out of school. In the report "Raising Their Voice" (2010), President Barack Obama suggested that three main reasons why Americans should take dropout rates seriously are the negative consequences for dropouts, our economy, and the civic fabric of our communities.

Cost to Individual

The costs associated with the incidence of dropout for the individual are immense (Barton, 2005; Thornburgh, 2006). Dropouts are more likely to experience negative outcomes such as unemployment, underemployment, or incarceration (Wise, 2006). Some research has revealed that employment opportunities offering decent living wages and benefits have virtually disappeared for youth who have not completed their high school education (Lehr, Hansen, Sinclair, & Christenson, 2003; Wise, 2006). Students who drop out of school are 72% more likely to be unemployed compared to high school graduates (U.S. Department of Labor, 2003). A recent study, "The Silent Epidemic," funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, demonstrated that dropouts are more likely become a member of the low sector of the economy, where most low-wage jobs either have moved overseas or are filled by even lower-wage immigrants (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006).

Cost to Economy

Wise's (2006) research suggested that high school dropouts constitute a serious strain on the U.S. economy in the form of lost wages, lower tax revenue, and social costs related to welfare and prison. Some claim it is the cost to society that drives the need for federal and state programs to decrease dropout rates (Kemp, 2006). Research revealed that dropouts are less likely to find or hold a job that pays enough to keep them off public assistance (Rumberger, 2001). Rumberger further suggested that even if they do find a job, dropouts earn substantially less than high school graduates do.

Dropouts cost the nation in other ways. The U.S. Department of Labor (2003) research revealed that dropouts are more likely to have health problems, experience high criminal activity and delinquency rates, and depend on government assistance programs than high school graduates. Keeping children in school is a cost-effective method for keeping them out of correction facilities, mental health wards, and welfare programs as adults (Kronick & Hargis, 1998).

Cost to the Civic Fabric of our Community

The extensiveness of the dropout problem threatens the nation's productivity and represents a terrible waste of young lives (Lehr et al., 2005). Today, nearly all students are expected to graduate from high school with a diploma. Yet according to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2002) data, hundreds of thousands of students in the United States leave school before graduating. According to the Alliance for Excellent Education (2009), dropouts in 2008 alone will contribute to a $319 billion wage loss over their lifetime. If the graduation rates of Hispanic, African American, and Native American students were raised to that of White

students, it would add an estimated $310 billion to the U.S. economy due to increases in personal income (Lehr et al., 2005).

Why Students Drop Out

The U.S. Department of Education (2005) concluded that identifying the reasons why students drop out of school is essential when addressing the dropout problem in America. According to recent research, the main reasons students drop out of school are becoming pregnant, failing in school, poor attendance, having to work, or poor discipline issues (Bridgeland, Balfanz, Moore, & Friant, 2010). However, this same research reported school structure, high stake standards, irrelevant curriculum, lack of student engagement, and lack of sense of belonging also contribute to students' decisions to drop out.

School Structure

As stated above, some research identified school structure as a contributing factor to why some students are prone to dropping out of school (Rumberger, 2001). Most high schools are designed to treat all students in a similar way. Typically, students receive the same number of classes a day and all are required to take the same types of academic programs (Allen, 2010). In many schools across the nation, classes are overcrowded and many students lack the individualized instruction needed for their educational success (Balfanz, 2007). Mann (1987) claimed that forcing everyone into the same academic program might accelerate the dropout problem more then we realize. Schools have also raised standards over the years and consequently, the number of students retained in current grade level has increased (Balfanz & Letgers, 2004). Students retained by one level grade have a 40%−50% increased risk of dropping out of high school (Mann, 1987).

One in five high schools in the United States have weak promoting power, which indicates unacceptably low graduation rates and high dropout rates (Balfanz & Letgers, 2004). In the nation, there are currently between 900–1000 high schools in which students have a 50/50 chance of graduating. These schools represent 8% of all regular and vocational high schools with an enrollment of 300 or more students (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2004) and have been labeled as "dropout factories" (Neild, Balfanz, & Herzog, 2007).

High Stakes Standards

Another factor pushing students out of school is the high stakes accountability of graduation examinations (Clarke, Haney, & Madaus, 2001). To meet the rigorous academic standards set nationally, many states have adopted graduation exams as an accountability measure to complete high school. If the student does not pass the exam, the student will not graduate from high school. Some research revealed that mandatory high school graduation exams increase the probability that low-achieving students will drop out of school (Jacob, 2001). This same research showed that students in states using mandatory graduation exams are 25% more likely to drop out of high school than peers in states with non-mandatory graduation exams.

Irrelevant Curriculum

Curriculum components related to dropout rate reduction are identified in the work of Kronick (1998). Kronick wrote that most dropout cases should be considered curriculum casualties rather than personal, family, or financial problems. Curriculum casualty is often a by-product of the attempt to fit a student into a rigid curriculum structure. For example, soon after students start school, they find themselves moving along in separate portions of the school curricula path, or engaged in "tracking." Higher-achieving students follow one side of the path

and the lower achieving students follow another. The part of the path traveled by the lower achieving student is often full of barriers that disrupt progress for the student along the way (Wise, 2006).

Sometimes the curriculum path is similar for both students, and this also presents a problem. Some students find the curricula easy, some difficult, and for both groups it may result in academic failure (Wise, 2006; Balfanz, 2007). When students fall within this lock-step curriculum, the problem is typically thought to be the student's and not the curriculum's. Rigid curricular structures must be addressed if we are to make significant headway in lowering dropout rates (Kronick & Hargis, 1998).

Lack of Engagement

According to research by Rumberger (2004), lack of student engagement is a predictor for dropping out of school. Christenson's (2002) definition of engagement has four aspects: academic engagement, which refers to time on task, academically engaged time, or credit accrual; behavioral engagement, which includes attendance, suspension, classroom participation, and involvement in extracurricular activities; cognitive engagement, which involves internal indicators such as processing academic information or becoming a self-regulated learner; and psychological engagement, which includes identification with school or a sense of belonging. Recent studies have highlighted the complex connection among these aspects of student engagement in shaping students' paths toward early school withdrawal or successful school completion (Hess & Copeland, 2001; Velez & Saenz, 2001; Worrell & Hale, 2001).

Indiana University's High School Survey of Student Engagement (2007) showed that two out of three students are disengaged in class every day. According to this study, students often reported that their disengagement from class was due to boredom because of a lack of teacher

interaction and dislike of the material. Other key findings from this report include: fewer than 2% of students say they are never bored in high school; 75% of students surveyed say they are bored in class because the "material wasn't interesting"; and nearly 40% felt bored because the material "wasn't relevant to me."

Research has also indicated that connecting to and engaging with others is essential for at-risk students to complete school (Yazzie-Mintz, 2010). Positive student engagement could promote better student behavior, build a sense of value for education, and decrease the number of students dropping out of school (Goldenberg, Kunz, Hamburger, & Stevenson, 2003). Yazzie-Mintz (2010) suggested that schools must dig deeper when creating a path from engagement to achievement by looking at relationships, teaching and learning, the roles of adults, and the ways in which the various aspects of the school experience affect students.

Statement of the Problem

Although literature pertaining to dropouts is voluminous, there is less research that evaluates effectiveness of dropout programming (Kemp, 2006). Because dropouts are a problem for society and themselves, it is important to identify effective dropout prevention programs (Belfield & Levin, 2007). This study evaluated the perceived effectiveness of a dropout program designed for a rural high school setting.

Program evaluations are necessary to close the gap between what we know about dropout programs and what we can do to improve them (Losen, 2004). McPartland (1994) stated it is critical to conduct evaluations of dropout intervention programs and to make modifications as necessary. This study evaluated the effectiveness of a mentoring program designed to improve graduation rates. This evaluation not only adds to literature related to dropout intervention programs, but also reveals modifications for a more effective program in one school.

Research Questions

The goals of the mentoring program evaluated in this study were to change at-risk students' views about school and to decrease the dropout rate. To find out if the goals were achieved, three areas were explored in this study. The first area of research explored changes, if any, in student perceptions about school. Secondly, this research explored each participant's likelihood of graduation from school as a result of participating in the program. Lastly, this research explored possible areas for improving effectiveness based on student and teacher perceptions of the mentoring program. Three questions were posed to explore these areas:

1. In what ways, if any, did the views of the students involved in the program change regarding school?

2. What aspects of the program helped to change at-risk students' perceptions of their potential for graduation?

3. What recommendations are offered by students and teachers for improving the program's effectiveness?

Setting

This study was conducted at a rural high school in Alabama. During this study, this high school was the largest high school in the school district, which had five other high schools. The school offers a traditional curriculum, which houses both the middle school and high school, encompassing grades 5 to 12. The student population in school year 2006–2007 was 1,062 with a ratio of 86% White, 12% Black, and 2% other. The majority of the students spoke English. According to school data, 46% of the student body was eligible for free and reduced priced lunch, indicating a moderate poverty level.

Methodology

Much of the literature on dropout prevention has suggested there is no one solution to preventing students from dropping out of school (Rumberger, 2001; Thornburgh, 2006). Many dropout prevention campaigns have been implemented at the national, state, and district levels. Some were successful, but many were unable to meet their targets or to show positive effects (Thornburg, 2006). Still, new programs and policies are being developed to decrease dropout rates (Brian 2002). Because so many solutions are available, it is difficult to prescribe a specific solution for all of the cases. Therefore, the program developer who conducted this study determined that a comprehensive approach that included identifying at-risk students early, seeking strategies that work to lower dropout rates, and involving teachers as mentors might be a low-cost and effective strategy for the school.

One targeted group of students served as the population from which data were collected. Students in the age group of 15–18 years were selected for participation because this was the average age of students attending high school. It was determined that research questions would be best addressed by use of qualitative research methods. These methods included surveying mentors to gain their perspectives on the desired effects of the program, areas of program improvement, and interviewing students. A student counselor was arranged to interview students; this helped to lessen the risk of coercion because the researcher served as assistant principal at the time of this study and dealt with many of the students in the program for disciplinary reasons. Further details on the research methods used in this study are presented in Chapter III.

<center>**Significance of the Study**</center>

Schools across the nation still grapple with how best to address issues related to dropout rates. There is increasing pressure on local schools to enact changes that will decrease the number of students dropping out of school. However, literature on evaluations of programs to help decrease school dropout rates is lacking. Thus, this study, which evaluates the effectiveness of a school-based mentoring program, may add to the body of literature on dropout prevention.

This study may also contribute to the existing literature on dropout prevention programs. A richer literature base may aid other dropout prevention designers in creating a program for their school districts, enabling them to use the information that was helpful in this program and avoid strategies that may be ineffective.

<center>**Limitations of the Study**</center>

- Some at-risk students and teachers decided not to participate in the study so findings may not represent the perceptions of all program participants.

- This study presents findings for one school. Therefore, results are no generalizable.

- The mentoring program had been in place for nine months when the study was conducted. Therefore, findings represent only nine months of participation.

<center>**Operational Definitions**</center>

The following statements are working definitions for terms related to school dropout as used in this study.

Alabama High School Graduation Exam (AHSGE): Every student must pass the Alabama High School Graduation Exam to complete high school in the state of Alabama. This exam is an assessment of students' knowledge in academic areas taught. The components of the

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exam include science, math, reading, and social studies. At the time of this study, students were required to pass all components of the exam to be considered for graduation.

At-Risk: This term, as defined by the state of Alabama, includes the following:

1. Two years behind grade level

2. Older than peers

3. Lack essential skills

4. Have adjustment and behavioral problems

5. Long-term suspension

6. Pregnant

7. In jeopardy of not graduating high school

8. Low socioeconomic status

9. Poor school attendance

10. Poor academics

Dropout: This term has been used to demonstrate a variety of early school leavers (Rumberger, 1987). States have constructed many ways to identify dropouts. At the time of this study, a dropout was defined as a student enrolled in school during the previous year but not enrolled at the beginning of the current school year. These students have not graduated or completed a graduation program, nor have these students transferred to another program, were suspended, ill, or attending church functions.

High School Graduation Rate: Rumberger (1987) defined this term as the proportion of adults who have successfully completed twelve years of school.

Retained: This term refers to those students who have repeated a current grade because of a failure to obtain the necessary skills or scores to move on to the next grade level.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore the effectiveness of a mentoring program for students at risk of dropping out of school. An overview of issues related to the national dropout problem, followed by a description of the background and purpose for the study were provided in Chapter I. Chapter II provides an in-depth look at the literature framing issues surrounding this study. Specifically, Chapter II elaborates on the general dropout problem, offers more in-depth discussion about why students drop out, and reviews programs designed for dropout prevention.

CHAPTER II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a review of literature that examines the national dropout problem while exploring various factors associated with students leaving school before graduation and strategies used to prevent students from dropping out. This chapter is not an exhaustive examination of the literature related to this study. The literature reviewed in this chapter is intended to illustrate examples of literature guiding the research design and interpretation of key findings.

This chapter is organized into four sections. The first section addresses the theoretical foundation for this study. The second section provides a general overview of the dropout problem. Section three examines various researchers' explanations of the reasons dropouts leave school early. The final section examines dropout prevention strategies, as well as dropout prevention programs that have been deemed effective by researchers.

Theoretical Framework for the Study

There are three underlying assumptions framing this study. The first of these is that school dropout rates can be attributed to curriculum and instructional factors, which are found within the institutional structure of schools and are not controlled by the student. A second assumption is that identifying at-risk students early and attending to their needs is a key to addressing the drop out problem. The third assumption is the lack of positive relationships and sense of belongingness for students who drop out. Each of these assumptions helps to explain

why young people drop out of school, an issue of dire importance for our communities. The following elaborates on each of these issues.

General Overview of the Dropout Problem

Americans view graduation day as the successful end of twelve or thirteen years of schooling for many students. However, it was estimated that 1.3 million students who entered the ninth grade in the year 2002 did not reach their graduation day. The reason, according to Wise (2006), is the rising number of students dropping out of school. Many students leave school with only two years or less left to graduate (Bridgeland, 2006). The problem of students leaving school before graduation has been a national concern for many decades. Even though education reform has been listed as a national priority over the last decade, the dropout rate has steadily increased (Thornburgh, 2006). The severity of this problem received national attention in 1990 when the nation's governors and President George H.W. Bush adopted a goal to increase the high school graduation rate to 90% by 2000 (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). However, in 2001–2002, the graduation rate was only 68% (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Additionally, the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) raised expectations by adding more accountability to improve the graduation rate for at-risk students.

Studies have shown a decrease in high school graduation rates over the last decade for more than 900 schools in the United States (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). A study by Balfanz and Legters (2004) comparing the class of 2002 to the classes of 1993, 1996, and 1999 revealed that the graduation rate significantly decreased during the 1990s. During school year 2002–2003, the National Center for Educational Statistics (2004) calculated the national graduation rate as 73%. There were 27,819,000 18–24-year-olds in the United States. In 2004, 21,542,000

graduated, earned a General Education Diploma, or went on to some form of college (The Dropout Problem in Numbers, 2006).

Cost to Society

When young people drop out of school, American society suffers many negative consequences. The cost of high school dropouts to American society is one of the factors that drives the need for federal and state programs to decrease the dropout rate (Rumberger, 2001). According the U.S. Department of Education (1998) research, the economic consequences for a dropout are severe because many entry-level jobs require at least a high school diploma. The Dropout Problem in Number (2006) suggested dropouts are more likely than high school graduates to be unemployed and rely on public assistance, costing the nation an estimated $260 billion. According to the Alliance for Excellent Education (2002), national figures indicated that the U.S. economy would have created an additional $319 million in income over the lifetimes of the nation's 1.2 million dropouts in 2007. Research also revealed that for those dropouts who find a job, it rarely pays enough money to keep them off public assistance (Rumberger, 2001). Thornburgh's (2006) article in *Time Magazine* stated,

> If their grandparents' generation could find a blue collar job and prosper, the latest group is immediately relegated to the most punishing sector of the economy, where whatever low-wage paying jobs haven't moved overseas are increasingly filled by even lower-wage immigrants. (p. 32)

The U.S. Department of Education (1998) revealed that dropouts represent almost half of the heads of households that are on welfare. This same study also found that the increased reliance on public assistance was likely due to the fact that most young women who drop out of school have children at young ages and are more likely to be single parents than high school

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graduates.   The U.S. Census Bureau (2002) data revealed those who have a diploma earn

$270,000 more over their lifetime than those who drop out.

Research reveals the consequences of high crime and delinquency among dropouts.

Dropouts are 3.5 times more likely to be incarcerated than high school graduates (U.S.

Department of Education, 1998). The National Dropout Prevention Center (2006) reports that

dropouts are a large percentage of those in prison and on death row. Another study revealed that

three- quarters of the state prison inmates are dropouts. Thornburgh (2006) stated:

> Dropping out of high school today is to your societal health what smoking is to your
>
> physical health, an indicator of a host of poor outcomes to follow, from low lifetime
>
> earnings to high incarceration rates to a high likelihood that your child will drop out of
>
> high school and start the cycle anew. (p. 32)

 Other consequences dropping out include unemployment, high incidence of health problems,

and high crime and delinquency rates (Kronick & Hargis, 1998). Therefore, addressing the

dropout crisis should be viewed as an avenue to keep young adults off public assistance, out of

mental health wards, and out of incarceration facilities (Kronick & Hargis, 1998).

Sub-Groups

It is an unfortunate fact that some sub-groups are at greater risk than others of dropping

out. However, the NCES (2002) stated that when looking at the dropout rate it is important to

look at these sub-groups to determine how numbers are collected. For example, when looking at

race and ethnic background, some research has found that the school completion rates for

Hispanics and African Americans are lower than other groups. The NCES (2002) study revealed

that 64% of Hispanic and 78% of African American students compared to 82% of White students

graduated from high school. Rumberger (2001) explained the differences in the dropout rates

across ethnic and racial lines using a method used by the National Research Council Panel on High Risk Youth (1993). This approach suggested differences in resources and social frameworks are to blame for the differences in the dropout rate among ethnic sub-groups. Related research also reveals that much of the differences in the dropout rate among ethnic and racial lines can be attributed to differences in family and community characteristics (Rumberger, 2001). For example, the U.S. Department of Education (2000) data showed that African American and Hispanic child poverty rates are higher than those for Whites. Because of this high child poverty rate, minority students are more likely to live in high-poverty communities and attend high-poverty schools with fewer resources.

Institutionalized racism has also been identified as a factor in decision-making for African-American males and other minority groups when identifying reasons for dropping out of school (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). African-American male students have the highest numbers of school dropout rates when compared to other ethnicities (Gibbs, 1998). Some researchers suggest that school tracking is a form of institutionalized racism that may attribute to school dropout, because African Americans and Latino students are disproportionately placed into the lowest tracks and given fewer educational opportunities (Oakes, 1995). Research also indicated that African-American male students have lower test scores and higher suspension and expulsion rates, which heightens their risk of dropping out of school (Kluger, 1976; Stack, 1974).

Other sub-groups include students with disabilities, gender, and low socio-economic status. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2002), only 57% of students with disabilities graduated with a regular diploma in school year 1999–2000. The graduation rates of students with disabilities s were taken into account in 1990 when the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) required states to report on how many of these students were leaving school

prior to graduation (Thompson-Hoffman & Hayward, 1990 as cited in Kemp, 2006). It was noted that the overall dropout rate for students without disabilities is lower than that of students with disabilities. For example, students with disabilities have a dropout rate between 50% and 59%, while students without learning disabilities have a dropout rate of between 32% and 36% (Sinclair, 1994; Wagner, 1991).

Gender is another area dropout rates differ. Research revealed that in 2001, the rate for girls completing high school was 72%, while the male completion rate was 64% (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Research concluded that the top reason given by girls who leave school before graduation is that they became pregnant. The increasing pressure to take care of a new baby and keep up with schoolwork became too much to handle (Bridgeland et al., 2006). The reasons for male students dropping out of school were varied, but typically included having to work to support the family or discipline problems at school.

Socio-economic status is another area impacting school completion rates. Research by the Child Defense Fund (2001) claimed that the dropout rate for students with low socio-economic status 10% was compared to 5% for students with middle socio-economic status and 2% for students with high socio-economic status. The differences in the graduation rate along socio-economic status lines may be attributed to the fact that most low socio-economic students live and attend schools in areas with few resources compared to middle and high socio-economic students, who are more likely to live and attend school in areas with medium to high resources (Rumberger, 2001).

The effect of high school dropouts effects the economy as well. Students failing to obtain a high school diploma reduce economic growth and productivity. The societal costs of dropouts

include lower tax revenues, greater public spending on public assistance and health care, and higher crime rates (Kemp, 2006).

Dropout Calculations

Even though the dropout rate has reached alarming levels nationally, there are researchers who dispute the accuracy of the dropout numbers. They suggest the numbers are inaccurate because of the various methods for calculating graduation rates among school districts. Disputing researchers' claims that the various definitions and methods of counting dropouts leads to unreliable aggregated national dropout figures (NCES, 2002). Through two decades of educational reform, the issue of dropout calculations has been largely ignored until recently (Thornburgh, 2006). The National Governors Association (NGA) (Bridgeland et al., 2006) agreed upon one method of calculating the dropout rate. An accurate and consistent method of calculating the dropout rate may help educators more adequately address the dropout crisis (Orfield, 2004).

Areas that contribute to confusion about the dropout rate are the various methods for counting dropouts. An example of the confusion is the variation in the grade and age levels of students who consider dropping out. Some systems count students in tenth through twelfth grade, while others count ninth through twelfth grade (NCES, 2002). Bridgeland et al. (2006) suggested that many school personnel have no idea what has happened to students who have left school, so they guess, which also results in inaccurate calculations. Exclusions of certain sub-groups may also cause an inaccurate dropout rate count. For example, NCES (2002), revealed those who receive special educational services may be considered dropouts once they reach the age of twenty-one and are counseled out of school. Christenson et al. (2002) wrote that failure to

keep accurate entrance and exit data for students also results in inaccurate calculation of graduation rates.

Prior to the NGA definition, most school districts in the United States generally adopted one of three ways to calculate the dropout rate. These methods are called the event, annual, and cohort rates (Christenson et al., 2002). The event rate method of calculation measured the number of students in one year who drop out of high school. This method of calculation yields the smallest rate. The annual method of calculation falls between the event and the cohort rate in terms of percentage of dropouts identified. The annual rate measures the number of students, regardless of when they dropped out, who have not completed school and are not enrolled in a completion program. The cohort rate, which typically yields the largest number of dropouts, measures the outcomes of a group of students over a period of time.

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act defined the calculation of the graduation rate as the percentage of students measured from the beginning of the school year who graduate in a standard number of years with a diploma (Joftus & Maddox, 2003). Any state deviating from this definition must provide extensive explanation in their accountability plans. Based on NCES (2002) research, the NCLB, GED, and other similar completion programs are not equivalent to graduating from high school. NCLB also requires states to report their dropout rates annually with the goal of being at a proficient level, which is set by individual state standards, by 2014 (Joftus & Maddox, 2003).

The nation's recent effort to create a common graduation calculation rate may be needed to paint an accurate picture of the dropout problem according to Bridgeland et al. (2006). Researchers agree that no matter how we count dropouts, the fact remains that far too many

students are dropping out of school, and they, and the country, are the poorer for it (Green, Swanson, & Mishel as cited in Wise, 2006)

Why Students Drop Out

Rumberger (2001) examined the underlying causes of student dropout issues through two conceptual lenses: Individual perspective and institutional perspectives focuses on the individual factors associated with dropping out of school. Variables such as values, behaviors, and how the relationship between these contributed to a decision to leave school were examined. This lens used a multi-dimensional framework consisting of several components. One component of Rumberger's individual perspective lens was student engagement. Finn's (1993) research on student engagement described engagement as active participation in school, which resulted in a feeling of identification with school. Additional research on student engagement performed by Christenson (2002) suggested that engagement was a multi-dimensional construct involving four types of engagement:

- Academic engagement – Academically engaged time in school assignments.
- Behavioral engagement – Participation in class, extra-curricular activities, and attendance.
- Cognitive engagement – Ability to process information or become a self-regulated learner.
- Psychological engagement – Sense of belonging and identification with peers.

Finn's (1993) engagement theory stated that for students to remain in school and graduate, they must participate in and identify with the school. This theory also suggested that a student's successful participation in school activities is linked to successful school performance,

which promotes identification with school. Various researchers found that addressing student engagement issues is a promising approach to take when addressing the problem of school dropout rates (Christenson et al., 2002; Finn, 1993; Rumberger, 2001).

Another dimension of Rumberger's (2001) individual perspective framework is that of student mobility. Residential and school mobility increases the risk of students dropping out of school (Keeping Kids in School, 2006). For example, one study found that the majority of high school dropouts changed schools at least once before withdrawing (Rumberger, 1993). The majority of students who change schools often do so because of discipline problems (Bridgeland et al., 2006). For example, when students are expelled or suspended from one school, students often withdraw and enroll in another school. This process is often repeated until the student eventually drops out of school (Rumberger, 1993).

A third dimension of the individual perspective is employment while in high school. A study by Warren and Lee (2003) found that students who worked more than 20 hours a week were at greater risk of dropping out of school. The Silent Epidemic (2006) revealed that 32% of students surveyed reported they had to get a job. The reasons for having to work varied from helping with household finances to becoming a new parent.

A final dimension of Rumberger's (2001) individual perspective is background characteristics. The characteristics in this perspective include ethnicity, socio-economic status, neighborhood and family background. The dropout rate for some ethnicity sub-groups is higher than other groups. This may be attributed to an assumption that most ethnic and racial minorities' neighborhoods, schools, and family circumstances are worse than other students (Rumberger, 2001). There is some evidence that differences in neighborhoods can contribute to

a student's decision to leave school (Clark. 1992). For example, poor communities often do not

possess the resources to support after-school programs and

recreational facilities for students (Halliana & Williams, 1990). It is also likely for students living in poor neighborhoods to have friends who have dropped out of school, which could influence their likelihood of dropping out (Cabonaro, 1998). Family background can also affect a student's decision to drop out of school. At least one study suggested that students from single-parent households were more likely to drop out of school than students from two-parent households (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999).

The second component of Rumberger's (2001) framework of causes related to school dropout is the institutional perspective. The institutional perspective examines dropouts according to their institutional settings. For example, a number of factors within a student's family, school, and community predict the likelihood of that student dropping out.

Low parental involvement is one dimension of the institutional perspective that research has found likely to affect a student's decision to drop out of school (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Astnone and McLanahan (1991) found that students whose parents were involved in their education, encouraged independent decision-making, monitored their child's activities, and provided emotional support were more likely to graduate than students without this type of support. Low parental income is another family factor adding to the risk of students dropping out of school (Rumberger, 2001). For example, parents who have the financial resources to support their child's education through access to better schools and after-school programs or tutoring are less likely to drop out of school. Research has also found that students whose parents are school dropouts are more likely to be at risk of dropping out (Thornburgh, 2006).

When examining the school factors involved in the institutional perspective, Rumberger (2001) noted four types of school characteristics that influence student performance. The first of these characteristics is student composition. Gamoran (1992) suggested the social composition

of students in a particular school might affect student achievement. For example, a school located in a neighborhood with few resources is more likely to have students with a low socioeconomic status. As mentioned earlier, research demonstrated that students of low socio-economic status were at higher risk of dropping out than those of higher socio-economic status (Child Relief Fund, 2000). Schools with a high percentage of low socio-economic students are more likely to have a higher dropout rate than those in neighborhoods with greater resources. Studies have also found school resources to be an underlying cause of school dropout issues (Rumberger, 2001). Factors like lower pupil/student ratio, better equipment and academic resources, and higher quality teachers lower the dropout rate (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

The size of a school can also contribute to a student's decision to drop out (Rumberger, 2001). In some large schools, students become lost among the many students so the risk of disengagement is higher (Finn, 1993). According to Rumberger and Thomas (2000), school size affected the dropout rate mostly in low socio-economic schools.

In an effort to better understand why students drop out of school, a study was performed by researchers at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (2006). This study examined dropout issues from the perspective of students. The study consisted of focus groups and a survey conducted with young people ages 16–25 who identified themselves as high school dropouts. This study was conducted in twenty-five locations throughout the United States (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Even though some research suggested that high school dropout rates are likely the result of poor academic performance, this study revealed that 88% of students surveyed had passing grades, with 62% earning C's or above. This Gates Foundation research revealed a variety of reasons for dropping out, including academic environment, life events, a lack of motivation, and lack of external sources of motivation and guidance.

Various researchers (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Legters et al., 2005; Rumberger, 2001) offered evidence that there is no single reason for school dropout problems. However, 47% of students surveyed in the Gates Foundation study said the reason they dropped out was boring classes. Another 42% stated being around uninteresting people as the reason for leaving school early. Many responses mirrored one another in that respondents repeatedly reported school as being boring and uninteresting (Bridgeland et al., 2006). For example, two respondents stated that teachers stood in front of the class teaching lessons and did not involve the students. They also stated, "They make you take classes that you are never going to use in real life" (p. 8). Sixty-nine percent of respondents cited not feeling motivated or inspired to work hard as another factor that added to their decision to leave school before graduation.

The amount of homework a student completed was directly correlated to whether that student would drop out of school. The study indicated that 26% of students surveyed did no homework while 80% did one hour or less of homework a day. This finding supported Christenson's (2002) model of academic engagement. The Christenson's model suggests that the time spent on schoolwork is associated with a student's disengagement from school. Bridgeland et al. (2006) speculated that the alarming rate of students who did not do homework or did less than one hour of homework a day could be a result of low student motivation or low expectations their teachers and other school personnel had for them. Many respondents to the Gate's Foundation research felt if they had teachers who reached out to assist and inspire them, they would have stayed in high school and graduated.

Life events were another area examined in the study. Many respondents suggested that areas other than school prevented them from graduating. For example, the study revealed that 32% of respondents said they left school to get a job and make money; 26% left schools because

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they became a parent; and 22% said they had to care for a family member (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Many of the respondents who suggested life-related reasons for leaving school reported doing fairly well in school. However, for a teenage parent, the pressures of balancing school and caring for a child often became too much. Several respondents stated they left because their personal circumstances forced them to take care of a sibling or other family member while their parents worked (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

The Bridgeland et al. (2006) study also examined the area of academic challenges for students. One of the top five reasons for leaving school, offered by 35% of the respondents, was failing in school. The students' reasons for failing varied from missing too many days of school and not being able to catch up to the work being too difficult. Related research revealed that many students fall behind academically in the elementary and middle grades and are unable to make up for what has been lost (Rumberger, 2001). Of the students polled, many thought that previous schooling had not prepared them for high school and passing from one grade to the next was simply too hard. They also reported that the difficulty of high school was a combination of testing being difficult, teachers not being available to give extra help, and classes being uninteresting (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

Finn's (1993) research suggested dropping out was not a sudden act, but a slow process of disengagement. This slow process was clearly identified by attendance patterns. The Silent Epidemic (2006) revealed absenteeism as another top indicator of students who were at risk of dropping out of school. Fifty-nine to 65% of students polled in this study missed school often the year they dropped out, and 33% to 45% missed class often the year before they dropped out (Bridgeland et al., 2006). This study demonstrated a pattern where each absence made the students less likely to go back to school. In most cases, a truancy officer was involved with

bringing the student back to the place where he or she were previously disengaged (Bridegland et al., 2006). Kronick (1998) noted that truant students did not want to attend school because of uninteresting curriculums, discipline problems, and failing grades; however, they were also penalized for not coming to school.

Lastly, The Silent Epidemic (2006) revealed that parental involvement levels were low for students who dropped out of school. The study polled parents to find out their level of involvement. Fifty-nine percent of parents were involved, with over half of them being involved only because of discipline reasons. The majority of these parents were not aware of their child's grades prior to their dropping out of school (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

Reasons for Dropping Out

There is not a single reason for dropping out of school. Bridgeland et al. (2006) state: While there are no simple solutions to the dropout crisis, there are clearly 'supports' that could be provided to improve students' chances of staying in school. While most dropouts blame themselves for failing to graduate, there are things they say schools can do to help them finish. (p. 11)

Many of the students surveyed in The Silent Epidemic (2006) felt that dropping out of school was their fault, although they felt that the school could have done some things to help them finish high school. The most common area that students thought would have helped them stay in school was the area of classroom instruction and curriculum. Students responded that having a curriculum that was more relevant to their lives, having teachers present interesting lessons, and having smaller class sizes for more one-on-one help would have affected their perception about school and helped them to stay in school.

Kronick (1998) suggested that most dropouts are casualties of a "lock-step curriculum." This is a one-size-fits-all curriculum developed for all students. To effectively address the dropout problem, the curriculum will need to be tailor-made for the students, and not a curriculum that is created for all students (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Barton (2005) noted that a curriculum that creates a clear connection between school and getting a job is likely to decrease the dropout rate. For example, 81% of students surveyed in the Silent Epidemic (2006) stated that if they were provided opportunities for real-world learning, such as internships, service learning projects, and other similar opportunities, it might have increased their chances of graduating from high school.

Boyles (2000) stated that dropout is subjected by three dimensions:

- Academic variables

- Environmental variables

- Background and defining variables

Boyles' model is based on the Bean and Metzner (1985) pathway model, but includes additional variables, such as an institutional dimension (Napoli Liu, Gomez, Khan, & Yen, 2007). Gate's Foundation research also reflected a need for smaller classes with more one-on-one instruction time. Even though low student/teacher ratio has been shown as a positive strategy for addressing the dropout problem, in many low socio-economic areas where the dropout rate is the highest, the teacher/student ratio is higher (Rumberger, 2001). Eighty-one percent of respondents to the Gate's Foundation study reported that they needed smaller class sizes and more individualized instruction. These respondents believed smaller classes would have aided teachers in maintaining order and providing individual instruction. There are several studies supporting the idea that smaller class sizes may help to decrease the dropout problem (Lehr et al., 2005). There

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is also research suggesting that small learning communities and interdisciplinary teaming are associated with lower dropout rates (Kerr & Legters, 2004). Students from the Gate's Foundation study stated, "more needed to be done to help students with problems learning" (Bridgeland, 2006, p. 12). After-school programs and tutoring were other areas that students felt would have strongly affected their chances of staying in school.

School climate is another essential part of addressing the dropout problem. Several studies have shown that students are more prone to stay in school if they feel safe in the school environment (Rumberger, 2001). Sixty-two percent of respondents surveyed for The Silent Epidemic report (2006) said stricter classroom discipline was needed in their schools. They indicated their schools did very little to help them feel safe from violence. A safe school environment can help to address the truancy problem many at-risk students experience (Rumberger, 2001) before they dropout.

Rumberger (1995) suggested that parents who are engaged in monitoring student activities, talk about problems, encourage individual decision making and become more involved in school would more likely decrease the student's decision to drop out of school. Seventy-one percent of students surveyed for the Silent Epidemic (2006) reported that better communication between parent and school and increased parental involvement were important areas when addressing the dropout problem. It is alarming that less than half of the students surveyed reported that the school contacted their parents if they missed school or when they dropped out (Bridgeland, 2006). Respondents also believed that increased parental involvement could ensure that students came to school every day and attended their classes.

Interventions

According to an article from Big IDEAs (2005), a review of programs implemented to decrease the dropout rate all emphasized that focusing on the individual needs of the student was key. A report issued by The National Center on Secondary Education and Transition (2006) suggested addressing alterable variables such as increasing attendance, support services, and identification with school. These strategies have proven to be more effective than looking at variables that are difficult to change like socio-economics, disabilities, and family structure (Lehr et al., 2005). The school in the study interventions focused on addressing alterable factors, such as increasing students' sense of belonging in school, providing skill-building opportunities, improving academic success, addressing personal problems, and fostering the development of positive student/teacher relationships. The National Center for School Engagement has designed a simple framework for increasing graduation rates called the three A's: Attendance, Attachment, and Achievement. National High School Center (Silverstein et al., 2007) follows the same approach.

Attachment of students to school can be promoted by:

- Designing curriculum that has significance in the real world,

- Forming small learning communities,

- Having teachers give personal attention to students, and

- Organizing service learning programs to interest and engage students.

Attendance of students can be improved by:

- Offering classes for average and weak students who require extended learning time,

- Intervening when students do not meet a minimum attendance criterion,

- Conducting parent-teacher meetings at regular intervals to make the parents aware of attendance issues, and

- Introducing high-interest, light work periods, such as games and art and crafts, into the schedule. These can motivate students to come to school.

Achievement of the student can be determined by:

- Developing the learning skills of students. The teacher should understand how to help students polish skills.

- Providing professional and vocational education to students according to their learning needs and interests.

- Teaching students in their native language, which enables them to understand more while simultaneously promoting learning English.

> Christenson et al. (2000) wrote that developers of at-risk programs should design intervention strategies that enhance school completion and target alienation and student disengagement from school. Much of this research emphasized the idea that dropout prevention programs must have a broader view than simply encouraging students not to drop out of school (Thornburgh, 2006). Some research also concluded that prevention programs should focus on individual students and not utilize a one-size-fits-all approach (Lehr et al., 2006).

Related research on intervention strategies also suggested that smaller classes, vocational opportunities, behavioral and academic assistance, open communication, and a caring and nurturing environment are all effective tools to use in an intervention program (Christenson et al., 2000; Dynarski, 2002; Lehr et al., 2005). Dividing interventions into levels based on needs has also proven to be an effective approach. Walker and Sprague (1999) suggested categorizing

interventions based on the needs of the student. The first of their suggested levels is the

Universal level. The Universal level targets students who exemplify characteristics of being at

risk of dropping out of school. The Selected Intervention level focuses on providing students

with specific assistance in areas, such as problem solving, anger control, and interpersonal

communication. The last level is the Indicated level, which focuses on specific behavior plans

that address each student's individual needs.

McPartland (1994) found that implementing proven models, programs, or strategies for

dropout prevention is not simple. Further, Orfield (2004) stated that those implementing

mentoring programs should consider the degree to which the basic tenets of the program are

compatible with the underlying philosophy, needs, and resources in the school or district where

the program will be implemented.

As Rumberger (2001) stated, many dropout prevention programs should contain

programmatic strategies that provide at-risk students with additional resources and supports.

Other research suggested that addressing dropout prevention is best done through a focus on

alterable variables. Rumberger (2001) stated "… because dropping out is associated with both

academic and social problems, effective prevention strategies must focus on both areas (p.27)."

This means that if a prevention program is to be effective, it must address all areas of the

student's life.

There have been few evaluations of dropout intervention programs. The research of

Fortune, Bruce, Williams, and Jones (1991) revealed there is a need to evaluate dropout

prevention programs. Evaluation findings are useful guides to further program development and

testing (Dynarski & Gleason, 1998). Through program evaluations, programmers can identify

successful and unsuccessful elements of their programs. Some programs have been evaluated

and identified as effective program strategies for addressing the dropout problem. For example, the NCES' (2006) research on effective dropout prevention programs found four programs that had been evaluated and proven effective. The first of these programs was ALAS or Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success. This program was a collaborative approach implemented and evaluated as a pilot program to serve predominantly Latino middle school students in the Los Angeles area from 1990–1995 (Rumberger, 2001).

The program targeted strategies including a collaborative approach involving the family, school, student and community. Students were counseled, taught problem-solving skills, and recognized for their achievements. The family component consisted of training to help parents become more involved with their child's academic affairs by participating in school activities, making more contact with the school, and supporting the student's academic improvement. Through the school component, the students received frequent teacher feedback, recognition and bonding activities, and intensive attendance monitoring. A community component provided job services, social services, and other services to help bridge school and home needs.

A premise of the ALAS program was that the family, community, school, and the youth must be addressed collectively for dropout prevention to be successful (Rumberger, 2001). The ALAS program provided the following interventions:

1. Remediation of the student's ineffective problem-solving skills regarding social interactions and task performance through 10 weeks of problem-solving instruction and two years of follow-up problem-solving training.

2. Personal recognition and bonding activities, such as praise, recognition ceremonies, certificates, and positive phone calls to parents for meeting goals or

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improving behavior to increase self-esteem, affiliation, and a sense of belonging with the school.

3. Intensive attendance monitoring, including period-by-period attendance monitoring, and daily follow-ups with parents to communicate a personal interest in their attendance.

4. Frequent teacher feedback to parents and students regarding classroom deportment, missed assignments, and missing homework.

5. Direct instruction and modeling for parents on how to reduce their child's inappropriate or undesirable behavior and how to increase desirable behavior.

6. Integration of school and home needs with community services.

(Rumberger, 2001, p. 24)

The program's key outcomes were proven to be statistically significant. For instance, at the end of the ninth grade, only 3% of ALAS students had dropped out compared to 18% of the highest-risk control group (Big IDEAS, 2005). After two years of evaluation, findings include that the dropout rate decreased, students involved in the program were on track to graduate, and absenteeism had gone down (NCES, 2006). The effects of the program were promising while students received the intervention, but the evaluation also revealed the effects were not sustained long after the program's termination (Rumberger, 2001).

A second program deemed successful was Career Academies, which employed a combination of career and academic aid for students considered at risk. Career Academies was created in Philadelphia in 1969 for at-risk students at Thomas Edison High School (Building a School within a School, 2003). This program operated as a school within a school. Students participated in career-themed classes, but the career focus varied among participants. Students

were enrolled into the program their freshman year and stayed in the program until graduation. The elements of the program included smaller classes, focus on academic and technical skills, collaboration among teachers, increased parental involvement, and the building of relationships with employer and community partnerships (NCES, 2006). During the third year of this program, students were paired with mentors from local employers. This program focused on all students considered at risk of dropping out of high school.

The key outcomes of this program were proven to be statistically significant. The outcomes included:

- Higher grade point averages,

- Better attendance, and

- Low retention rates.

Check and Connect, which is the program that the high school in this study mirrors most closely, was an intervention program developed to promote student engagement through mentoring. The program was designed to create personal bonds and opportunities by building a trusting relationship with a teacher mentor. A primary responsibility of the mentors was to keep education a salient issue for disengaged students (NCES, 2006). Mentors were also responsible for providing ongoing contact with students, teachers, and parents. Students who were referred to this program usually had low attendance, frequent tardiness, or issues with skipping classes.

Check and Connect was divided into two components. The Check component was a monthly assessment made by the mentor. This assessment was made by determining the students' level of engagement through attendance, discipline, and involvement in school activities (NCES, 2006). Engagement was monitored through alterable variables, which were

within the power of parents and educators to change. The Connect component was divided into the Basic and Intensive levels.

The Basic level, which used limited resources, was the same for all participants. This level focused on teaching the five steps of cognitive behavioral problem solving:

1. "Stop. Think about the problem.

2. What are the choices?

3. Choose one

4. Do it, and

5. How did it work?" (p. 5)

The intensive level was more individualized. The needs of each student were determined by an assessment of student engagement. The Intensive strategies included:

- Identification — Encourages participation by parents and students in planning transitional goals for the student.

- Social/Behavioral Competence — Role-plays problem solving steps.

- School Support for Learning — Includes negotiation with school administrators for discipline alternatives.

- Persistence Building — Reiterates that education is important to each student future.

Students received basic or intensive intervention based on the monitoring risk factors (NCES, 2006). Check and Connect intervention program was conducted at urban and suburban elementary, middle, junior high, and high school settings. Involved students were considered at risk, and students with learning disabilities were serviced through this program.

Evaluation of the program identified a variety of benefits, including:

1. Students maintained their enrollment status,

2. Students were engaged in school,

3. Truancy decreased,

4. Literacy improved,

5. Students had a high report of assignment completion,

6. Students were on track to graduate. (NCES, 2006)

Lastly, the Coca Cola Valued Youth Program was also evaluated for its effectiveness as a dropout prevention program. The program was recognized in 1992 for its effectiveness and for meeting the national goal of increasing the graduation rate to at least 90% (NDN, 1993). This cross-age tutoring program serviced students with limited English proficiency at risk of leaving school early. The goal of this program, according to NCES (2002), was two-fold. First, the program's aim is to build confidence and self-esteem in at-risk youth by allowing them to serve as mentors to younger children. Second, a goal of the program was to teach tutors the value of an education while increasing their bonding with school. Strategies included coordination of family involvement through involving teachers, students, and parents in setting goals, making decisions, monitoring progress, and evaluating outcomes. This program has three levels of operation. The underlying philosophy was the first level, which emphasized the ideas that all students can learn, and commitment to educational excellence included the students, parents, and educators in making decisions and creating goals. The second level was the Support level. This level included curriculum training, coordination, staff enrichment, family involvement, and evaluation of activities.

The Instruction component has five levels. According to NCES (2002), these levels include tutoring classes, tutoring sessions, field trips, role modeling, and student recognition. Tutoring classes were designed for the tutors to meet with a secondary teacher to develop

tutoring skills. The tutoring session allowed the participant to tutor a student who has at least a

four-year grade difference for four hours a week. The tutors earned minimum wage for their

services. Field trips were taken two to three times a year with the focus on economic and

cultural events in the community. According to Big IDEAs (2005), these trips were also focused

on increasing student awareness of professions by exposing them to different professions. Role

modeling consisted of visits from five guest speakers with the same ethnic background who had

overcome serious barriers. Student were recognized throughout the year by earning certificates

and through media attention and recognition luncheons. The setting for this program included

urban/suburban middle, junior high, and high school settings.

The outcomes of this program included:

1.   Increased reading grades

2.   Increased self-esteem

3.   Better attitude toward school

4.   Improved self-concept

5.   Improved perception of school completion. (NCES, 2006)

Understanding the reasons why students drop out of school is difficult because like other

forms of educational achievement, it is influenced by an array of individual and institutional

factors (Rumberger, 2001). Some research has found that to effectively address this problem,

prevention programs must recognize the value of each student and his or her family and hold the

unwavering view that every child can learn (Roble, Montecil, Cortez, & Cortez, 2004).

Teacher Mentoring Programs

Studies have shown that students often cite a lack of social and academic support as

primary reasons that they dropped out of school (Croninger & Lee, 2001). The Silent Epidemic

(2006) reported that 65% of those surveyed felt there was a teacher who they could go to for

school problems, but only 41% felt they had someone to go to for personal problems. The report

found that more than 62% of respondents surveyed felt their school needed to do more to provide

someone to help with their personal problems. This finding is consistent with Finn's (1986)

study, which revealed that students who dropped out felt as if no one cared about them, no one

was willing to help with personal problems, and no one was interested in their academic success.

Positive teacher/student relationships have been proven to reduce dropout rates (Orfield,

2004). However, for this relationship to be effective for at-risk students, teachers must serve as

caring role models, carefully guiding the students in academic, discipline, and personal matters

(Barton, 2005). Research by Croninger and Lee (2001) states, "Positive social interactions with

teachers can serve as incentives for students to come to school" (p.556) This research also

indicates that teacher and student mentor relationships may serve as a safe place for students

when they need emotional support, encouragement, or help with personal issues that may be

overwhelming for them to deal with. Teacher and student mentor relationships may also

strengthen students' ability and confidence to graduate high school (Wehlage et al., 1989).

A report published by the National Mentoring Partnership (2001) emphasized that a well-

designed teacher-mentoring program is a low-cost, effective strategy for keeping at-risk students

in school. The Commonwealth Fund Survey of Adults Who Mentor Young People (1998, cited

in Schargel & Smink, 2001) found eight out of ten students in a mentoring relationship have one

or more problems that put their health, development, or success at school at risk. The benefits of

teacher/student mentor relationships include improvement in academic achievement, social

behavior, discipline problems, school attendance, improved self-esteem, and graduation rates.

To identify academic and personal crises earlier, the National Association of Secondary School

Principals recommended that every high school student have a mentor to help personalize their education because the two-parent families, close-by grandparents, and community supports are not as prevalent today as in years past. Student and teacher mentor relationships can provide valuable resources that may help students solve problems and become successful in school (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). In addition, this research supported the idea that teachers can provide students with a caring relationship that may not be present in most student homes.

Croninger and Lee's (2001) research argued that one explanation of why some students complete high school rather than others is because some students have more resources based on their relationship with teachers in the school. The same research found that teachers provide a form of social capital for at-risk students that these students do not have at home. Social capital, as defined by Croninger and Lee (2001), refers to the social institutions that young people rely on for interpersonal assistance. These social institutions can be found in families, community groups, religious organizations, and educational organizations. Croninger and Lee (2001) noted that differences in the likelihood of students dropping out can be explained by the quality of these social networks comprising the teacher and student interactions. These interactions may be found in the form of tutoring sessions, counseling, or simply encouragement.

According to Croninger and Lee (2001), students at risk of dropping out of school have two fewer forms of social capital than students who completed high school. Their research also indicated that dropouts had less interaction with their teachers outside of class than those who eventually graduated. The research further supported the notion that when at-risk adolescents have trusting mentor relationships with their teachers, they are more likely to graduate. Still, further research is needed to assess the effectiveness of these mentoring programs.

Summary

This chapter described the national dropout problem while exploring different factors linked with students who exit school before graduation. A review of the literature explored the dropout problem, the cost of dropouts, and dropout rate calculation discrepancies. The chapter also examined dropout prevention strategies, as well as dropout prevention programs that have been evaluated and deemed effective. Chapter III delineates the research methods used to conduct a study of one dropout prevention program.

CHAPTER III. METHODS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore perceptions about the effectiveness of a mentoring program designed to improve the graduation rate at a rural Alabama High School. The findings from this research may allow program designers to enhance student services offered in the future. Additionally, the findings may contribute to the development of deeper understandings about which aspects of mentoring programs are at-risk youth value most.

This chapter presents an overview of the research methods used in this study. The first section offers a brief overview of the setting for the study and a discussion of the ethical issues addressed while designing and conducting the study. The second section presents the research design. The theoretical framework guiding the study is presented in the third section of this chapter. The final sections of this chapter discuss participants, data collection procedures, and data analysis.

Research Settings and Ethical Issues

All participants in this study were either high school students or faculty members at a rural high school. The research population included 31 ninth- through twelfth-grade teachers who served as mentors in the program and 86 ninth- through twelfth-grade students who participated in the mentoring program for at-risk youth. A sample of 35 students and all 31 teachers were invited to participate in the study. The sample of students was selected by a simple random selection. The researcher was an assistant principal at the school when the study was conducted. Additionally, she helped design the mentoring program that is the subject of this

study. Therefore, to lessen the risk of coercion, the school counselor conducted student interviews.

Participation in the study was strictly on a voluntary basis. A Human Subject Research Protocol was approved by Auburn University (See Appendix A). Following this protocol, teacher and student recruitment was handled through the distribution of consent forms explaining the research and asking for signed participant and parental consent forms to be returned to the researcher's mailbox. It was made clear in the letter that participation was on a voluntary basis and there would be no compensation for participation, nor would lack of participation in the study be detrimental to them in any way. The letter also explained that each participant's identity would remain confidential.

The researcher realized that confidentiality was important to the validity of this research because if the participants were identified this may have altered mentor/mentee relationships, influenced the answers provided, and violated ethical standards for conducting research. The principal of the school also expressed concerns that students may not want to participate in this study if they had negative feedback for fear it may get back to the mentor teacher. Therefore, it was important to guarantee the confidentiality of all participants. Prior to beginning data collection, issues related to confidentiality were discussed with the principal. The need to link participants to collected information to compare interview information with academic and attendance record was addressed. To ensure ethical treatment of the student and teacher participants, pseudonyms were used to protect their confidentiality. A coded list of student and teacher participants, audiocassettes, and hard copy information were stored in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's office at home. The researcher was the only person with access to this file cabinet.

To further address confidentiality issues, each participant received an informed consent/assent form approved by Auburn University's Office of Human Subjects Research (see Appendix B). This form ensured all the participants that the information they provided, as well as their identity, would remain confidential. The participants were told that the information they provided would not be used for any other purpose without their consent. Identities of the participants were kept confidential during the entire research process.

The researcher was aware of the risk of perceived coercion for participants. This risk was reduced by the fact that the researcher did not directly supervise the targeted population for this study. The researcher's duties included supervision of teachers and students in the fifth through the eighth grades. The study involved teachers and students in ninth through twelfth grade. Coercion was also lessened because the researcher was leaving the district, and the study findings would be left with future administration, further ensuring the confidentiality of participants' responses. Still, additional efforts were needed to protect the identity of participants to minimize the potential for a coercive environment.

To reduce the risk of a potentially coercive environment for the one-on-one interviews for student participants, the school's fifth- through eighth-grade counselor conducted interviews. The counselor was required to sign a confidentiality agreement (see Appendix C) before conducting the interviews. Interviews were conducted before or after school in a secluded area of the building to conceal participants' identities. Interviews were audio taped and transcribed by the researcher. The counselor also recorded academic information and attached it to the coded interview transcript documentation so that participants' identities were not identifiable by the researcher. There was no use of identifiers in the report or presentation that could disclose the identities of the respondents.

Research Design

This study investigated student and teacher perceptions of a dropout prevention-mentoring program in a rural Alabama high school. Specifically, this study sought to develop an understanding of participants' experiences in a mentoring program and to determine whether changes in dropout rates were a result of implementation of the mentoring program. The school where this study was conducted was suffering from an increasing dropout rate prior to the implementation of the mentoring program in which teachers served as mentors to at-risk youth. Target groups of teachers and students served as the population from which data were collected.

The phenomenological qualitative framework used in this research helped the researcher to study the experiences and attitudes of participants by learning their experiences while participating in the mentoring program (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2002). According to Husserl (1931), phenomenology is the study of the lived experience of phenomena. Giorgi (1997) stated, "Phenomenology schematizes the phenomenon of consciousness, and, in its most comprehensive sense, it refers to the totality of lived experiences that belong to a single person" (p. 2). By using a phenomenological approach, this research attempts to better explain the lived experiences of program participants and what they perceived to be outcomes from their involvement with the mentoring program. The researcher was aware of the importance of not allowing personal bias to interfere with the research and took additional steps to eliminate her bias.   These steps included having someone else conduct the interviews, using two research instruments—a survey and interview protocol—and keeping a research journal. The researcher's reflective journaling helped in addressing the research questions and eliminating or lessening researcher bias by identifying instances of agreement or disagreement with emerging findings throughout the research process.

Additionally, four types of data were collected from multiple sources during one school term to allow for data triangulation (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2002). These data sources included students' journal entries, semi-structured interviews, a review of student records, and open-ended questionnaires, which were administered to teacher participants. Each of these research strategies is described on the following pages.

Reflective Journals

Reflective journal entries were used in the first phase of this research to examine students' perceptions of graduation, mentoring relationships, and the effectiveness of the mentoring program. The journal consisted of an open-ended prompt, created by the researcher (see Appendix D) and students' written responses. The journal was created to allow students an opportunity to freely express their views of the mentoring program in their own words. A small sample of teachers, who taught at the school and created practice prompts for the writing assessment, reviewed each prompt and commented on any "ambiguities, misunderstandings, or other inadequacies" (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2002, p. 402). The researcher then revised the prompts and the process was repeated to ensure each prompt was free of ambiguities before it was distributed to students.

Each prompt was designed to guide the respondents' responses to specific aspects of the program while allowing respondents to express their perspectives in their own words. The researcher wanted more in-depth information that the semi-structured interviews alone could not provide. Therefore, each prompt was constructed to gain additional feedback from participants on their views of the program and of their plans related to graduation.

During April 2006, student participants were given the journal prompts to complete. Participants were given one week to complete and return journal entries. Utilizing the responses from the journal, the researcher revised and developed interview questions for areas needing further investigation. Prompt responses were also coded and categorized so they could be cross-referenced with interview responses.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews allowed more in-depth conversation about student perspectives of the program. A protocol containing eleven questions was developed to gain further insight and to clarify participants' perceptions about the mentoring program and their current and future plans (see Appendix D). The researcher developed questions to elicit the essence of the experience from participation in the program (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2002).

To design the interview protocol, the researcher first examined the journals for responses that needed further investigation and developed questions accordingly. The researcher and the researcher's committee chair checked the questions for clarity and face validity. Three questions were deleted for lack of clarity. The remaining questions were distributed to a small sample of teachers who were familiar with the mentoring program to further check for clarity.

As stated previously, to reduce the risk of perceived coercion due to the position of the researcher at the school, the school counselor conducted the interviews. The researcher was aware of the importance of training the interviewer before conducting interviews. Fowler's (1993) research suggested that a good number of poorly trained interviewers can reduce the effective sample size by 20 or 30%. With this in mind, the researcher met with the interviewer to go over the interview protocol (see Appendix A) and to make sure she understood her role. The interviewer

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expressed that she was comfortable with interviewing because she had successfully conducted interviews for research at another time.

Interviews were held in late May of 2006. Once permission letters had been returned, the researcher informed the counselor and individual interviews were scheduled. Interviews were scheduled before school, after school, or during lunch, depending on each student's availability and preference. The interviews were held in a secluded location in the school building. Each interview was audio taped and later transcribed by the researcher.

The researcher analyzed the interview data in two phases. The first phase consisted of the researcher listening and recording thoughts and ideas during and after listening to the interviews. Interviews were also timed to examine the length of each interview. Each interview lasted between twenty and thirty minutes. The second phase included the researcher transcribing each interview, then examining and coding the responses into categories and themes. Artifacts from both phases of analysis for the interview were used as data along with the interview transcriptions.

Academic and Attendance Documents

Students' academic and attendance records were examined for areas of improvement since the initiation of the program. The researcher examined each document and recorded any improvement for each participant. These data were considered and improvement patterns were examined in the final analysis.

Teacher Surveys

Lastly, teachers were provided with open-ended surveys (see Appendix E), which were designed to solicit their perceptions of the mentoring program and to identify areas for program improvement. The survey questions were based on reflections from the researcher's journaling

conversations with various faculty members throughout the year. The researcher wanted to gain

a better understanding of teacher perspectives as they related to the mentor experiences.

Questions were also designed to elicit responses that would offer recommendations for the

program director to improve the program. Once the researcher developed the questions, the

questions were reviewed by the researcher's committee chair for clarity and face validity. A

small group of teachers also reviewed the questions to assess face validity. All of the questions

that were designed and developed were used in this study.

Three open-ended questions were distributed to all teachers participating in the mentoring

program. Teachers were asked to elaborate on the strengths and weaknesses of the program.

Teachers were also asked to provide specific examples where improvement was needed.

Twelve questionnaires were returned and used in this research. The questions were

returned to the researcher's mailbox in a sealed envelope. The responses remained anonymous.

The questions were designed so that the researcher received no identifying information from any

participant. Names of the participants were not requested, and the researcher had no way to

identify which teachers participated and which ones did not.

Researcher Journal

The researcher recorded field notes in a journal while conducting this research. The

researcher kept field notes by journaling observations and identifying potential emerging themes.

For example, the researcher wrote observation notes when the program was first introduced to

the teachers. Questions, ideas, and personal biases that emerged from this meeting were logged

and revisited throughout the research process. Field notes also included observations and

informal conversations with participants and administrators about the program.

The researcher used the journal as a way to reflect on her own biases throughout the study.

Data analysis was performed using Qualrus Qualitative Software. This software program, created by Idea Works Inc. in 2002, allows the researcher to organize, code, and analyze data. Once the data for this research were downloaded, the researcher used the program's tools to code and explore the data, and then to identify themes and patterns. For example, when interview data were added in rich text format, the researcher segmented data based on a coding system. Once the researcher completed segmenting and coding data into categories, the researcher reviewed the coded information and searched for recurring themes. Using the constant comparative method (Glasser & Strauss, 1967), all segmented data with the same coding categories were linked together. These data were then examined for similar units of meanings. Through this process, new categories were generated and initial categories were changed, merged, or omitted (Goertz & Le Compte, 1993).

Six categories emerged from the data. These categories included academic performance, perceptions about graduation, perceptions about school, attendance, program improvement, and mentoring relationships. Each category was subdivided to allow for further analysis. For example, students' perception about school was divided into two sub-categories: perceptions prior to the mentoring program and present perceptions.

The researcher also wanted to explore the connection between participation in the program and academic and attendance improvement. Data to address this was pulled from the school's data management system and recorded by hand. Using a coded list for participants, the researcher recorded academic achievement. Attendance from the previous year and the current year was recorded, analyzed, and compared for improvement since the initiation of the program.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework grounding this study is informed by Croninger and Lee's (2001) research, which indicated that at-risk students with trusting mentoring relationships with their teachers are more likely to graduate from high school. Studies showed that students who left school early often cited a lack of social and academic support as a reason for doing so (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Rumberger, 2001). The Silent Epidemic (2006) reported that 65% of the students surveyed as part of their study said there was a teacher who they could go to for school problems, but only 41% felt they had someone to go to for personal problems. In The Silent Epidemic, the authors reported that more than 62% of respondents to their survey felt their school needed to do more to provide someone to help with their personal problems. This statistic is consistent with the findings from Finn's (1986) study, which revealed that students who dropped out felt as if no one cared about them, was willing to help with personal problems, or was interested in their academic success.

Finn's (1986) research also supported the idea that at-risk students with trusting mentoring relationships who attend school are more likely to graduate from high school. Fostering positive teacher/student relationships has proven to be an effective strategy for dropout prevention (Orfield, 2004). However, according to other research (Entwisel & Alexander, 1988; Hamme & Pianta, 2001; Hill et al., 2004; Kohl, Weissberg, Reynolds & Kasprow, 1994; Ladd et al., 1999), positive teacher/student relationships appeared to be less common among low-income and racial minority students than for higher-income Caucasian students. For relationships to be effective for low-income or minority at-risk students, teachers must serve as caring role models, carefully guiding the student in academic, disciplinary, and personal matters (Barton, 2005). The research of Wehlage, Rutters, Smith, Lesko, and Fernandez (1989) suggested that positive social

interactions with teachers can also serve as incentives for students to come to school. The same

research indicated that teacher and student mentor relationships may provide students a safe

place when they need emotional support, encouragement, or help with personal issues that may

be overwhelming for them to deal with on their own. Teacher and student mentoring

relationships may also strengthen students' ability and confidence to acquire a high school

diploma (Wehlage et al., 1989). The mentoring program studied was created to address these

needs. Because a mentoring program can address multiple needs, this research sought to assess

the quality and outcomes of the program at-risk youth.

Participants

Creswell (2005) stated that data collection in qualitative research should be done with a

smaller sample using general questions answered with narratives. He stated that participants

should be selected based on their understanding of the central phenomenon of interest.

Therefore, the participants in this study have been included because of their unique perspectives.

The fifteen students represented in this study have all been identified as at-risk students who

participated in the mentoring program. They represent different races, ethnicities, grade levels,

and levels of parental involvement. The participants ranged from the ninth through the twelfth

grade levels. The ages of the participants varied from fourteen to nineteen years. The second

group of participants consisted of twelve teachers who served as mentors in this program.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

	Caucasian	African American	Total
Students:			
Female	3	3	6
Male	4	5	9
Total	7	8	15
Teachers:			
Female	8	1	9
Male	3	0	3
Total	11	1	12

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected throughout one academic school year. The process began in August

of 2005 when the principal and superintendent in this school district gave permission to the

researcher to conduct the study (see Appendix F). The study was introduced to the faculty by the

researcher in a faculty meeting where the mentoring program was introduced.

The researcher selected a simple random sample of thirty-five students from the

mentoring program, which began in August. An IRB-approved informed consent/assent form

(see Appendix B) was given to each participant in the program. If a student wanted to participate

in the research, the form was signed by the student and his/her parent or guardian and returned to

a specified locked mailbox in the main office. The researcher was the only person with the key

to this mailbox. Fifteen forms were returned granting permission to participate in the program.

The researcher

collected the forms and scheduled interviews for each participant with the school counselor. The interviews were audio taped and later transcribed by the researcher. Data were collected on the experiences, views, and attitudes of students regarding various aspects of the dropout prevention mentoring program and their experience with their mentors. The twelve teacher participants were given open-ended questionnaires to gain perspectives on their views of the program.

Student participants were also given a brown envelope that contained questions to be answered during reflective journaling. This was completed independently by the respondents and turned in by a designated date. The respondents were asked to return the journal in a sealed envelope to protect their identity. The researcher coded each envelope to match the journal responses with the interview responses, but because pseudonyms were used, participants' identity was protected. Participants returned the journal to the same locked box in the main office after completing the prompts.

The students were asked a set of eleven questions in a semi-structured interview. The school counselor conducted most of the interviews after school. Two students were not able to meet after school, and their interviews were scheduled before school and during lunch. Interviews were conducted in a secluded area in the school. Respondents were encouraged to share information regarding their experience as participants, their experiences of schooling and education, thoughts about dropping out, and views regarding mentoring relationships. Respondents were also encouraged to be as open as they wanted. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed.

The researcher recorded field notes throughout all aspects of this research process. The researcher kept field notes by journaling observations and identifying emerging themes. The

observations included notes based on informal conversation with teachers, students, and administration about the program.

The mentoring program began in August of the academic school year and ended in May. Data were collected with data collection instruments designed by the researcher, which consisted of open-ended journals and a set of eleven interview questions. At the time of data collection, students and teachers had participated in the program for one academic school year. Attendance/academic records were accessed from the school's records. The school counselor conducted the interviews to lessen the risk of coercion because the researcher served as assistant principal at the school. The school counselor collected interview data on a one-on-one basis with the respondents. The interviews were audio taped and later transcribed by the researcher. The information was loaded into the qualitative software Qualrus to identify themes.

The researcher wanted to gain perspectives from both sides of the mentor relationship to improve the program. To accomplish this, open-ended surveys were given to all participating teacher mentors. Mentors were asked to elaborate on their thoughts about the program and to suggest ways to improve the program. Mentors were also asked to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the program.

Twelve teachers returned completed surveys to the same locked box in the main office. Identities were not requested and the questions were designed so that the researcher would not have knowledge of participant's identities. The responses from the surveys were loaded into the qualitative software Qualrus and analyzed for emergent themes.

Table 2

Data Collection Timeline

	Students	Mentors	Researcher
April 2007	Journals		
May 2007	Interviews/Academic/ Attendance Records		
May 2007		Open-ended Surveys	
August 2006–May 2007			Field Notes

Data Analysis

A multi-phase approach was used for this research. The first phase consisted of journal entries submitted by the student participants in the program. The second phase consisted of semi-structured interviews. After listening to interviews and noting areas for questions and further discussion, the researcher transcribed each interview. Once the interviews were transcribed, each was analyzed separately to identify potential themes. The data were later combined to search for recurring categories and themes. The third step included adding the data in rich text format to the qualitative software program, Qualrus, for further analysis and added rigor.

This method of analysis is based on the descriptive phenomenological method as defined by Giorgi (1985). According to Giorgio (1985), "Phenomenology is the study of the lived experience of phenomena (p.47)". In the descriptive phenomenological method, Giorgi combined Husserl's phenomenological philosophy with the methodical, systematic, and critical

criteria of science. This produced a methodical analysis that assisted the researcher in identifying and understanding the psychological patterns, and structures of an experience.

The data from the interviews and journals were compared and examined so the researcher could identify themes. Using Qualrus Qualitative software, the researcher searched for groups of similar responses and overlapping themes in the interviews and journal entries (Giogi, 1985). Due to the variation of sentence length, the researcher focused on bracketing data and meanings. The general aspects of all the collected data were categorized and summarized in a tabular form. The tables helped group responses. An emergent theme approach was used with the responses to the opened-ended interview questions, the journal responses, the researcher's journal, and survey responses.

Interview data were collected through audio recordings and transcribed. Similar responses were identified and grouped (Glasser & Strauss, 1967). These data were analyzed and re-analyzed to explore answers to the research questions.

Five categories emerged from the data. These categories included academic performance, perceptions of graduation, perceptions of school, attendance, areas for program improvement, and perceptions of mentoring relationships. Each category was subdivided into themes. These themes included prior academic performance, present academic performance, prior perceptions about graduation, present perceptions about graduation, prior perceptions about school, present perceptions about school, attendance, trust, friends, time constraints, and positive mentor relationships.

Table 3

Data Analysis Process

Steps	Analysis Step	Challenge	Strategy to Deal with the Challenge
Step 1	Gathering the acquired knowledge about the phenomenon of drop out	Extensive information available on drop out and mentoring	Researcher focused on drop out interventions and role of mentor
Step 2 (Gestalt phenomenology)	Read response to get an idea of themes	Get sense of whole	Developing an understanding of different aspects of the program
Step 3 (Giorgi, 1989)	Identifying the groups of similar responses	This is a complex process due to variation of length	Approach should be focused on identifying the sentences and meaning
Step 4 (Giorgi, 1989)	Identifying "transformed meaning of units" for phenomenological analysis	Psychologically descriptive and common sense-based information without any theoretical explanation	Common sense method is used
Step 5 (Giorgi, 1989)	Review of the transformed meanings of the groups, understanding the patterns and common elements of different responses	Level of complexity goes down from previous, this is identification and grouping of similar responses	Focused and consistent approach is very crucial

Source: Based on Phenomenological Study conducted by Mastain (2006).

Summary

This study collected data from student and teacher participants in an at-risk mentoring program at a rural Alabama High School. These data were collected to assist the researcher in determining participants' perceptions about the effectiveness of a school-sponsored mentoring program. Findings from the data are presented in Chapter IV.

CHAPTER IV. FINDINGS

The results of this study are presented in this chapter. Each section in this chapter

addresses one of the three research questions. The first section presents the results of a

qualitative analysis of the semi-structured interviews regarding students' perceptions of school

and goals for graduation. The second section presents findings related to the perceived

effectiveness of the program. These data included student semi-structured interviews, student

open-ended journals, and teacher open-ended surveys. The last section offers a comparative

analysis (Merrian, 1998) of the views of students and teachers regarding how to improve the

effectiveness of the mentoring program.

Data types were analyzed individually using Qualrus software to answer the research

questions. For example, the researcher analyzed journal and interview data separately to look for

categories and themes. The data from journals, field notes, and interviews were cross-referenced

to check for reoccurring themes. The researcher also compared and cross-referenced teacher and

student recommendations. Because data saturation recurred, some answers could be grouped.

The researcher also analyzed data for student and teacher perceptions and opinions about their

experience in the mentoring program.

Perceptions Regarding School

This research explored the extent to which student views changed regarding school and

graduation due to participation in the mentoring program. A reflective journal prompt was

distributed to student participants in March 2006. The researcher wanted more in-depth

information about students' perceptions of the program that the interviews alone would not provide. The researcher analyzed the journals for comments needing further investigation during the interviews. These recorded comments were developed into interview questions used in the student interviews. Data collected from the reflective journal were added to the research findings.

Interviews were conducted in April 2006 at the high school. Fifteen students participated in the interviews. To lessen the risk of coercion, the school's counselor conducted interviews. The interview data revealed that a majority of the students involved in the program changed their views of school and graduation after being in the program. Interview data also suggest that the changes in perception may have been due to positive mentoring relationships.

Students' Prior School Perceptions

Students reported feeling disengaged from school because of boring curriculum, lack of belonging, and/or their inability to achieve academic success. When asked how students felt about school before the mentoring program, seven reported "not liking school at all" before the mentoring program. The reasons cited by these students varied from not having friends to not being academically successful. Tinto's (1975) research revealed that many students dropped out of school because they were not interested in school or found it boring. Similar to findings in Tinto's research, three participants in this research stated "school is boring" as the reason why they did not like school. One of these students commented that he often skipped classes because he was bored. Another student commented that she did not like school because she felt "pushed to the side" by teachers if they felt she did not "measure up" to the other students. Two students felt that not having friends and feeling "left out" were the reasons they did not like school. Another student responded:

"To be honest I didn't like school at all until I found someone to help me. I feel it's important for teachers to connect with the students because if they don't, kids won't like school."

The Alabama High School Exit Exam is challenging for some students to pass. Even though students are given several opportunities to pass the exam, many students struggle with passing. In the year this study was conducted, if students did not pass all portions of the exam, they could not graduate. Teachers and administrators blamed students struggling with this exam as one reason that they dropped out of school. While the majority of the participants had not passed all areas of the Alabama High School Exit Exam, only one student commented that not passing the exam was his reason for feeling unsuccessful in school. This student commented, "First, I didn't think I was going to make it because I couldn't pass the Algebra portion."

Although the majority of the students in the mentoring program reported "not liking" school prior to the mentoring program, only three reported that their views of school had not varied since participating in the program. Two of the students reported feeling "okay" or "normal" about school before the program. One student commented that the program has not "changed how I feel about school, I just have someone to talk to now." One student did not comment or respond to the question. After participating in the program, twelve students indicated that they shifted their views about school from not liking it to feeling it was okay or liking it.

Finn (1989) and Kerr's (2001) research supported the idea that attendance greatly affects academic successes. The attendance and academic data collected in this study revealed that the students in the program who struggled with attendance issues still missed school days. However, the average number of school days missed was decreased by three to seven days.

Two students had more absences in the second semester, but others showed some improvement. Students reported various reasons for why they missed school. Some students had to take care of siblings or their own children. One student admitted to skipping school because he did not "feel like going."

Academic Improvement

One student passed a portion of the graduation exam and attributed his success to his mentor's tutoring. This student commented:

He stays after school to help me out. I only passed two parts, I started tutoring with him, I passed two more, and now I only have one. So, he does a lot for me. I feel like if I need anything he will help me out.

Another student attributed his academic success to his mentor's classroom help. This student's mentor was his math teacher. The student mentioned that sleeping in class was a problem. Now, his teacher will go by his desk, wake him up, and encourage him to get started on his work. One student commented, "I like the way no one in the classroom knows that he is pushing me to be a better person." Students also commented on the extra academic help they received from their mentors. The additional help has proven to give them greater success in various classes.

Students' Changed Perceptions about School

Perhaps the most important aspect of the findings from this study was that many of the respondents developed the feeling that graduating from high school was more desirable and attainable after being in the program for one school year. They also felt better about attending school. Twelve of the fifteen respondents reported that their views about school had changed. When asked if their views changed as a result of being in the program, eight responded "Yes."

One student commented, "I was just going through the motions before I got into the program. Now I'm focused on what I have to do to graduate." Another student felt that the program helped her realize that dropping out was not best for her and that graduating and going to college could help her become a better person. Another student reported, "I'm more focused on school than I've ever been." Three students reported no change in their views on school or graduation. One student commented, "I knew I would graduate, although I didn't know how long it would take." Another student reported that even though his view had not changed regarding school, he felt a "higher level of confidence" because of the program.

Aspects of the Program that Changed Student Views

The data suggest that mentoring relationships were a major reason why students' views of school changed. Research has demonstrated that when students experienced a sense of belonging at school and supportive relationships with teachers and classmates, they were motivated to participate in the life of the classroom (Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Birch & Ladd, 1997; Skinner & Belmont, 1993), and this has proven true in this study. Students revealed that they looked forward to school when they felt like someone at school cared about them. One student commented, "I wasn't considering graduating or staying in school before I had my mentor." Another student reported, "I was not thinking about graduation before I had a mentor." Many of the respondents felt that their mentors were there to motivate them and were positive role models.

One student commented:

Before the mentoring program, I did not care about graduating. But since I have met my mentor, I have learned that graduating will give me the opportunity for a better life than if

I drop out of school. She told me that I need to get my education, go to college and be

the best person I can be.

Another student commented:

In a way, he has helped me become successful in school. I know more about math now

than before I had a mentor. He does not have to keep me after class. I like the way no

one knows about how he pushes me to be a better student.

Trust

Another major theme that surfaced when students were asked about mentor relationships

was trust. Students felt that trusting their mentor was important to the program. Many of the

students reported that trusting their mentors was important because they shared personal issues

with their mentors regularly. They felt that for them to feel comfortable with sharing personal

information, there must be a level of trust. One student commented that the mentor should be

able to keep confidential information between the teacher and the student. Another student

commented, "There should be trust in anything that you do together." Students felt that

information discussed should remain between the student and mentor and not shared with parents

and other teachers.

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Recommendations for Program Improvement

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One recommendation from the teacher participants was to incorporate a specific time in

the school day to meet with students. Several teachers reported not having enough time to meet

regularly. They commented that they would end up meeting during their planning time because

that was the only time they had available. Teachers also wanted to have access to discipline

reports, grades, and attendance patterns through Student Technology Information System (STI)

or mandatory progress report checks. Teachers reported that they had to rely on students, who

may

not be as truthful, for this information. One teacher commented, "If we had this information readily available, then we could quickly address issues as they come up." They also felt it would be beneficial to have some type of professional development on mentoring. Many of the teachers were concerned about being a more effective mentor.

Many of the students commented that the program was "pretty good." One student suggested that meeting mentors at the beginning of the school year in a different setting would be beneficial. Two students suggested having students who were previously in the program come back and talk to those in the program. One student's comment supported the teachers' comments about having more time to meet. The student stated, "I think there should be a class time when students can get with the mentors, because the teacher will have more time."   Both teachers and students were concerned about changing mentors the following year.   Teachers said it was beneficial to the relationship to keep the same student throughout his or her high school career. Teachers were also concerned with the number of students per teacher. Some mentors had two or three students to mentor. One teacher suggested recruiting some of our community leaders to serve as mentors.

Seventeen faculty participants served as mentors. Three were African American and fifteen were Caucasian. The representation of minorities on the faculty was low; therefore, representation of the minorities as mentors was also low. It would have been of great importance for the study to analyze race and gender factors of the partnership to determine if these factors added to the effects of the mentor relationship. However, demographic factors of the partnership were not included in the research design.

Summary

Analysis of the data was conducted to determine perceptions about the effectiveness of a mentoring program at a rural Alabama High School. The results of the research may be used to strengthen weak components and reinforce strong components of the program and add to the body of research on mentoring programs for at-risk youth. A discussion of the findings is presented in Chapter V.

CHAPTER V. DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study evaluated the effectiveness of a mentoring program designed to improve the graduation rate at a rural North Alabama High School by considering perceptions of student and teacher participants about the program and analyzing data on student behavior and grades. Chapter V presents a discussion of the findings of this study. There are six sections in this chapter. First, a brief synthesis of the key findings is presented, followed by a discussion of the findings. Implications and limitations of the project are presented in the following sections, and the last section offers recommendations for creating a more effective program.

Synthesis of Key Findings

The findings of this study served a three-fold purpose. First, identifying perceptions about the effectiveness of a newly designed dropout program may enable the designers to strengthen weak components. This evaluation may help determine if the program's goals were achieved. Second, data collection instruments were used to learn more about student and faculty perceptions about the effectiveness of the program. Third, data collection instruments were used to gather information about the effectiveness of the program. The instruments used to collect these data were journal prompts, semi-structured interviews, open-ended surveys, field notes, and attendance and academic records. These forms, instruments, and protocols may be used on an ongoing basis to assess program effectiveness.

The research goals of this study address the following questions: (1) To what extent, if any, did the views of the students involved in the program change regarding school? (2) What

aspects of the program, if any, changed at-risk students' perceptions of their potential for graduation? (3) What recommendations did students and teachers offer for improving the program?

To answer the research questions, student participants completed open-ended journals and participated in semi-structured interviews, and the researcher conducted an analysis of academic/attendance records. Teacher participants completed open-ended questions to offer their perception of the program.

To add rigor to the research, data from the journals, interviews, and surveys were analyzed using the qualitative software Qualrus and an emergent theme approach. Five categories and seven themes emerged from the data. Categories included mentor relationship, prior school/graduation perceptions, current school/graduation perceptions, program improvement, and aspects of the program that influenced changed perceptions. Each category was divided into the following themes: (1) positive mentor relationships, (2) neutral mentor relationships, (3) changed school perceptions, (4) reason for changed perceptions, (5) mentor trust, (6) time, and (7) professional development. Additional data from the researcher's reflective journal and student academic and attendance records were analyzed. Data analyzed from academic and attendance records were examined to determine if the grades and attendance of the students improved while participating in the mentoring program. Additionally, responses from both sets of participants related to recommendations for a more effective program were also analyzed.

Discussion of the Findings

This study contributes to the body of literature pertaining to positive effects of a teacher/student mentoring program to the engagement and academic success of at-risk students. The data revealed that a majority of the participants had positive feelings about the mentoring program. Of the 15 students interviewed, 12 felt that their views of school and graduation had become more positive as a result of participating in the program. This research also suggests that the presence of mentors aided students in changing their perceptions about school and graduation. Students and teachers agreed that the program was effective and should be continued.

The 12 student respondents who felt that their views about school changed positively reported that school was not a positive place for them in the past, but their mentors helped them to change their views. It appears that respondents in this research became more confident about their education because their mentors gave them personal attention and seemed to genuinely care about each individual student. Some participants reported that mentor teachers helped them to be focused and consistent. Some respondents also revealed that their education process had become easier and smoother due to the caring and supportive attitudes of the mentors.

The role of the mentor in changing the perceptions about school was significant in this study. A few students reported that they skipped school less often after being paired with a mentor. This may have been because the mentors checked students' attendance patterns and questioned students about absences during meetings. Some respondents reported not liking school in the past, but being able to have a caring adult at school to talk to helped them to change their views. The friendliness and supportive attitudes of the mentors helped students both academically and personally. Analysis of academic records revealed that some students

improved in one or more subjects during implementation year. Respondents felt that they were more confident about their education and school because of participation in the mentoring program.

The most important aspect of the research findings may be that many of the respondents developed the feeling that becoming a graduate was an achievable goal. Many students commented that their mentors had discussed with them how they could acquire knowledge and live a better life with the help of a high school diploma. A majority of the respondents stated that they are prepared for and focused on graduating high school with the help of their mentor after participating in the program.

A basic requirement for any prevention program is to encourage students to participate in school. It has been noted in different studies that student retention programs should include a creative mix of academic and extracurricular experiences, and provide a supportive caring learning environment (Coll & Stewart, 2008). This statement is supported by the student responses in this study. Findings from this research suggest the success of the program is attributed to students' feeling cared for and supported by their mentors.

The goal of mentors keeping education a salient issue for disengaged students through ongoing contact is a component of the Check and Connect programs (NCES, 2002), which has been identified as a consistently successful program. The mentoring program also emphasized ongoing contact with students through regularly scheduled meetings. Many students expressed that they looked forward to these meetings with their mentors. One student commented that the meetings with her mentor were the only reason she would come to school on some days. Even though these meetings were the mentors' attempts to connect with the student to keep track of attendance,

academics, and personal issues, the students felt it personalized their school experience, made them feel cared about, and increased their sense of school belonging.

One of the most important aspects of findings was that the mentor and student relationship was crucial to the program's success. This aspect of the program supports Orfield's (2004) research, which suggested that positive teacher/student relationships are an effective strategy for dropout prevention. As indicated in responses, the relationships between mentors and students in this program provided students an opportunity to deal with their social problems and be more successful in school.

Moreover, students who leave school early often cite a lack of social and academic support as a reason for doing so (Croninger & Lee, 2001). The Silent Epidemic (2006) reported that 65% of those surveyed felt there was a teacher they could go to for school problems, but no one to talk to about personal issues. This same report revealed that 62% of students felt their school needed to do more to provide someone to help with personal issues. A majority of the respondents felt that their mentor was honest, a well-wisher, and trustworthy. They felt that they could not share everything with their parents, so it was good to have a mentor with whom to discuss personal issues. In contrast, only one respondent described their mentor as being too "pushy" and overbearing.

However, the majority of student respondents in this study found their mentor to be a good support system for dealing with their personal issues as well as academic issues. This finding is consistent with the views of Christenson (2002) regarding the behavioral and academic engagement of students. Students must feel comfortable in the relationship with his or her teacher or faculty mentor to be able to facilitate the learning process.

Further, students reported their mentor as helping them academically. One student commented, "Since my mentor started tutoring me, I passed the science portion of the AHSGE. I could not have done it without him." Another student commented that he appreciated how his mentor takes extra time with him during class to make sure he understands. Another student commented that his mentor always encouraged him to stay awake, pay attention, and ask questions. Students identified that they felt that they could go to their mentor for tutoring in various academic areas.

Respondents stated that their mentors would also help facilitate their decision-making process by listening to them and helping them to come up with solutions by themselves. Mentors provided guidance for their career goals and helped students evaluate career options.

In mentor relationships, trust was an overarching theme that emerged from the data. Many students agreed that trusting their mentor was the key to having a positive relationship. One student commented, "I have to trust my mentor to share personal issues." A majority of the respondents felt that they could trust their mentor. This finding could be attributed to the process allowing mentors to choose students to mentor. Many teachers chose students they already had established a positive relationship with through classroom experiences.

In contrast, one student commented that he was not sure if he trusted his mentor and he needed more time to get to know if he could trust him. A few teachers chose students they had no prior experience with and this may have made it difficult to build a trusting relationship.

Implications of the Study

At the beginning of this dissertation, it was noted that a number of studies have been conducted to determine the effectiveness of various preventive drop-out programs (Coll & Stewart, 2008; Dynarski & Gleason, 2002; Finn, 1993; Finnan & Chasin, 2007; Fortune et al., 1991; Fossey, 1996). The issue of school dropout has consistently been a topic of concern and debate among educators and policy makers. Educational systems and governing bodies in the United States have implemented preventive programs and adopted various strategies to retain students and encourage them to complete their studies, although some approaches have been more successful than others have.

Christenson et al. (2000) suggested that developers of programs for at-risk youth should plan intervention strategies that improve school completion while lowering student disconnection from school. McPartland (1994) noted that implementing proven models, programs, or strategies for dropout prevention is not simple. The complexities identified at the implementation stage are usually unique to each setting. Orfield (2004) suggested those designing programs need to think about the extent to which the basic creed of the program is attuned to the original philosophy, wants, and capital of the setting in which a plan is to be implemented. For example, the philosophy behind this mentoring program aligned with the goal of using mentor teachers to connect with students through personal interactions, to increase academic success, and increase the graduation rate. This program was also a low-cost, research-supported method of decreasing the dropout rate.

Research has suggested that using teachers as mentors is a useful strategy in reducing the dropout rate (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Christenson, 2000). Therefore, one of the implications suggested by the findings of this study is that mentor relationships improved students'

perceptions of school and the potential to graduate for most participants. Serving as a mentor requires that a teacher be willing and able to take on this new role. Several of the teacher participants indicated the desire for professional development to better prepare them for these new responsibilities.

The data analyzed from academic and attendance records suggested that a majority of the students involved in the program increased performance in both areas. Additional data revealed that six of the respondents passed at least one section of the graduation exam while in the program and that a majority of the respondents felt better about school. Therefore, at-risk students were more likely to be engaged and complete school with the involvement of mentors. A majority of the respondents reported that they did not like school or did not feel comfortable in school for various reasons before the implementation of the mentoring program. After one year of implementation, the same students reported feeling better about school and wanting to graduate. One respondent expressed that someone cared about her and that made her want to come to school and perform better in her classes. Another respondent stated, "I used to skip a lot before my mentor showed interest in me and started checking up on me." Three students felt better about school because they had someone pushing them to do better and someone who helped them academically and personally. The importance of trusting relationships is clear. At-risk students, and perhaps all students, need to have trusting relationships with teachers.

A final implication from this study is related to teacher preparation and professional development. Teachers in this study did not receive any professional development in building successful relationships with students, although many indicated they would appreciate having this option. Instead, teachers were allowed to choose students to mentor with whom they had already established some type of relationship. Although authentic relationships proved to be

helpful for many of the students, training for current and preservice teachers on how to influence and nurture a relationship with at-risk youth would be beneficial.

Recommendations for Program Developers

This study revealed that teacher/student mentor relationships had a profound influence on students' perceptions of school and their potential to graduate. Students in this study revealed that the most important factor in the mentor relationship was developing trust between the teacher and student. Data also revealed that the mentoring program was effective in increasing the graduation rate. Well-designed teacher mentoring programs are a low-cost and effective strategy for keeping at-risk students in school (National Mentoring Partnership, 2001). The National Association of School Principals (2002) recommended that every high school student have a mentor to help personalize his or her experience because strong family support is not as prevalent today as in years past.

In addition, the findings from this research suggested that students are more likely to remain in school and graduate when they have a caring mentor, suggesting that at-risk students respond positively to caring teacher-student relationships. Students who feel cared for by their teachers are more likely to graduate from high school.

One respondent recommended providing all students, whether at risk or not, with a mentor. Feedback from the students suggested that every student should have a mentor to help them through school. Often students who are not at risk also feel isolated and need the extra attention that a mentor could offer. Every student should experience the positive effects that a mentor could bring to his or her academic experiences.

Another recommendation for program developers is to provide opportunities for parents to become involved in the mentor relationship. Even though parental involvement is needed for

all students, it is especially needed for students who are considered at risk. With ongoing

positive parental collaboration, the program may be more effective in achieving its goals.

Findings from this study suggest that teachers would prefer a scheduled meeting time

during the school day. Developing a scheduled meeting time of at least 30 minutes a week

would provide greater consistency and allow students and teachers to become better acquainted.

This would also allow a specific time for the mentor and student to discuss academic and

personal issues. Keeping an accurate check on grades and attendance is an important part of the

program, and having a scheduled time during the school day may allow teachers to devote more

time to ensuring the student's success.

Program developers should also consider involvement of the administration, support

staff, and counselors as mentors. This would lessen the load of having three to four students to

one mentor. With fewer students to attend to, the teachers may be able to create a more in-depth

relationship with each student. Some students may also benefit from being paired with a faculty

member who is not a classroom teacher.

Findings from this research suggest that the success of the program was due to the

positive teacher/students relationships. Respondents felt it would be beneficial for the program

to allow current mentor partnerships to remain for the next school year. Respondents felt they

had already built a trusting relationship with their mentor and would not want to start over with a

new mentor. However, program developers should keep in mind that if a relationship is not

positive, they must respond accordingly.

Providing professional development for teachers is recommended to ensure teachers

understand how to form a mentoring relationship with at-risk students. It is important when

implementing programs to train teachers to ensure program buy-in and success. Teachers must

feel knowledgeable and confident in performing their duties to meet the needs of the students in the program.

Program evaluations are an important part of maintaining an effective program. Therefore, it is recommended that the program developers conduct annual evaluations to ensure the program is meeting goals and to make modifications in areas that are not working. All stakeholders must be participants in this evaluation to gain a broad-based sense of effectiveness. The results of these evaluations should be addressed each year and appropriate changes should be made to ensure program effectiveness.

Limitations of the Study

There were several limitations to this study. The potential for researcher subjectivity was an issue because of the researcher's employment and role as assistant principal of the school. The researcher addressed potential biases through journaling and analyzing field notes. As suggested in the research of Krefting (1991), the researcher used reflective journaling to keep an account of study logistics, explanations for researcher's decisions, and an account of thoughts, feelings, frustrations, problems, concerns, and questions. The reflective journal was reviewed during data analysis to check for potential bias.

Another limitation of the study was the number of student and teacher participants. Fifteen students were interviewed. Students could not participate in the study without a signed consent form. Several students who showed interest did not return the forms. More students' opinions would have added to the findings in this study.

All teachers serving as mentors were invited to participate in the study. An open-ended survey was placed in each teacher's mailbox. However, only 12 were completed. Even though the 12 provided in-depth responses, it would have benefited the program developers and this

research to have more input from teachers. It also would have benefited the research if the teachers had been given an opportunity to expand on their recommendation in a focus group setting.

An additional limitation of this study was the lack of ethnic diversity among the faculty serving as mentors. Previous research found that teachers rated relationships with children whose ethnicity matches their own as closer (Safft & Pianta, 2001). With a limited number of diverse teachers at the school, this study could not explore the role of ethnicity and its potential connection to mentor relationships.

Recommendations for Further Study

This study examined perceptions about the effectiveness of a mentoring program to decrease the dropout rate at a rural Alabama high school. The use of mentoring programs to help increase school engagement and decrease the dropout rate for at-risk students was revealed in this study. Three recommendations are offered for future study.

One recommendation is to collect more information about gender and race factors and how they may contribute to the mentor relationship. Data from this study did not provide information on the demographics of the mentoring relationship and how it related to perceptions about the effectiveness of the relationship. For example, it was not noted if African-American students were paired with African-American teachers and if female and male students were paired with the same gender mentor. The findings may have been enriched by the inclusion of gender and race data to further explore perceptions about mentor relationships. Race and gender information and how it affects students' relationships with their mentors may uncover insights into why some mentor relationships were effective.

A second recommendation is to meet with students to explain the research protocol. Each participant was given a letter explaining the research. However, an open meeting might allow for a simplified explanation of the research and offer a time to address questions about the research. This may have resulted in a higher student participation rate.

A third recommendation is to conduct focus group interviews with students. This would allow students to discuss other facilitating factors related to the program that could be used to assess the program's effectiveness.

Summary

The implementation of a mentoring program at a rural North Alabama High School has assisted the school's administration in meeting the goal of reducing the dropout rate. There are still areas for improvement. By better understanding methods successful in programs created to deter student dropout, additional programs can be created and implemented to increase the chances of students to graduate from high school. This research strongly suggests that mentoring is an effective strategy for improving at-risk students' perceptions about their school experience and helped lower the dropout rate at this school.

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Appendix A

Student Interview Protocol

1. **Proposed Date of Study**: From: March 1, 2007- April 30, 2007

2. **Project Title**: Effects of a Program to Reduce the Dropout Rate among 7th -12th Grade General and Special Education Students at Alexandria High School.

3. **Principal Investigator**: Jenise Hampton **Title:** Assistant Principal **Dept**. EFLT **Phone:** 334 327-8586 **E-mail**: jhampto.ah@calhoun.k12.al.us **Address for Correspondence**: 88 Blackberry Lane, Alexandria, Alabama, 36250 **Fax:**

4. **Source of Funding:** Not Applicable

5. **Status of Funding Support:** not Applicable

6. **General Research Project Characteristics:**

   A. **Research Content**: Education; Evaluation of mentoring program.

   B. **Methodology:** Retrospective; data will be recorded so that participants are indirectly identified; data collection will involve the use of interviews, audiotaping, and private files.

   C. **Participant Information**: Male and Female; Vulnerable population: Adolescents; I do not plan to recruit Auburn Students; I do not plan to compensate participants.

   D. **Risk of Participants**: None

7. **Project Assurance**s: Need Signatures

   Title of Project: Effects of a Program to Reduce the Dropout Rate among 7th–12th Grade General and Special Education Students at Alexandria High School.

8. **Project Abstract:**

   I. Summary of relevant research findings leading to this research proposal.

The extensiveness of the dropout problem threatens the nation's productivity and represents a terrible waste of young lives (Lehr et al., 2005). Today, nearly all students are expected to graduate from high school with a diploma. Yet hundreds of thousands of students in the United States leave school early without successfully completing school (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2002).

Although literature pertaining to dropouts is voluminous, there is a paucity of research on strategies for evaluating the effectiveness of dropout programs. Because dropouts are a problem for society and themselves, it is important to identify effective dropout prevention programs. This study addresses the drop out issue at Alexandria by providing an evaluation of a dropout program designed for a rural high school setting.

Program evaluations are necessary to close the gap between what we know about dropout programs and what we can do to improve them (Losen, 2004). McPartland (1994) stated it is critical to conduct evaluations of dropout intervention program effectiveness and make modifications as necessary.

II. Purpose Statement

This study will evaluate the effectiveness of a mentoring program designed to improve the graduation rate at Alexandria. This evaluation will not only add to literature related to dropout intervention programs, but also reveal modifications that can make this a more effective program.

III. Methodology

Two targeted groups of teachers and students serve as the population from which data will be collected. The nature of the research questions will be addressed by a qualitative research method. Participants will be interviewed using individual and group settings.

IV. Expected Outcomes

The expected outcome of this evaluation will be the assumption that the implementation of the mentoring program has been effective in reducing the dropout rate at Alexandria High School.

V. Significance of Project

Schools across the nation still grapple with how best to address the issues related to dropout prevention. Presently, there is increasing pressure on local schools to enact change in their dropout prevention strategies that will decrease the number of students dropping out of school. However, the literature on the evaluations of programs to help decrease school dropout rates is lacking. Thus, the significance of implementing this study to evaluate the effectiveness of this program will add to the body of literature pertaining to program evaluations for dropout prevention.

9. Purpose and Significance

a. The findings of this study will serve a three-fold purpose. First, an evaluation of the effectiveness of a newly designed dropout program may enable the designers to build strong components and strengthen weak components. This evaluation will help determine if the program goals were achieved. Second, data collection instruments will be used to measure faculty perceptions of the effectiveness of the program. Third, data collection instruments will also be used to gather information on the impact the program has had on the school. Based on these findings, changes can be made toward a more effective program.

b. How will results be used? Dissertation

10. Key Personnel Involved With Data Collection:

Jenise Hampton   Assistant Principal   EFLT

Roles/responsibilities:

I serve as researcher and the assistant principal at Alexandria High School, the location for this research. I have served in this position for approximately two years. Currently at Alexandria High School, one of my responsibilities includes overseeing the school's mentoring program for our School Improvement Plan. My interest in this research is embedded in my desire to ensure the success of the mentoring program. For Alexandria to achieve Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), it is essential that we improve our dropout rate each year. To accomplish this, it is highly important for me as the researcher to determine what the current perceptions are of the program as well as what is needed to improve our mentoring program. To find the most effective methods for improvement, it is my responsibility to learn the views of participants in the program. My responsibility also includes collecting and interpreting data.

11. Location of Research: Alexandria High School, P.O. Box 180, Alexandria. AL 36250.

12. Participant Population: Participant populations include teachers who serve as mentors for at-risk students. Participant population also includes students involved in the program. Student participants are based on the variation of at-risk factors, gender, grade level, and age.

Maximum # of participants to Validate: 15 students 12 teachers

Maximum # of participants: 20 students 10 teachers

b. The criteria established for student participant selection will be students who are currently in the mentoring program. These students must be in the 9th–12th grade. Student selection will also be established by the completion of parental and student consent forms. To ensure ethical treatment of the student population, pseudonyms will be used for student's confidentiality. Interviews will be scheduled before and after school in a secluded classroom to protect their identity. Interviews will be conducted

individually so participants can speak freely without their identity being exposed. All interview tapes and documents will be kept in a locked file drawer. Only the researcher will be allowed to review collected data.

The criteria established for teacher participants will be teachers who serve as mentors for the program.

c. Solicitation of teacher volunteers will be made through announcements during faculty meetings two-weeks prior to the interview.

Solicitation for student participants will be made through letters explaining the project and asking for student and parental consent to be turned in to the researcher if they desire to participate.

Maximum # of student participants is 20.

Maximum # of teacher participants is 12.

d. Group assignments will be determined by independent characteristics of at-risk factors which places student in the program.

e. There will be no compensation for participants.

13. **Project Design and Method**

    a. Two targeted groups of teachers and students serve as the population from which data will be collected. The nature of the research questions were best addressed by a qualitative research method. A focus group was conducted with teachers who discussed the desired program effect and helped to focus the questions for the qualitative research.

    b. The research questions were best addressed by a qualitative method. Student participants were selected based on their participation in the mentoring program and a variation of at-risk factors among the participants. Letters will be given to selected participants explaining the program and requesting participation. Teachers will be solicited during a faculty meeting. The data will be collected during one school term from multiple sources to establish triangulation. Students will be asked to write a reflective journal of their perception of the mentoring program prior to participating in the interview process. These sources include data from semi-structured focused interviews, reflective journals, academic records, and mentor logs. The interviews will be conducted on two-levels; group and individual. Group interviews will be held in the school library after school with teachers. Individual interviews will held before or after school in a secluded classroom for students. Individual interviews will last no more than 45 minutes. Group interviews will last no more than 90 minutes. Pseudonyms will be used to protect the privacy of participants.

    Individual interviews will allow in-depth conversation about student perspectives of the program. These interviews will also clarify information collected from the reflective journal. Mentor logs will be examined to verify meeting times and comments made during mentoring sessions. Reflective journal responses will allow for information

gathered in the interviews to be cross referenced. Students' academic and attendance records will be examined for areas of improvement since the initiation of the program.

The researcher for this study will conduct all interviews and collect all data. All interviews will be taped and transcribed at a later date. The reflective journal will be collected one day before the interview to highlight areas that would need clarification. The researcher will use probes to generate conversation relating to the research topic.

Analysis of the data will be performed by the researcher. The transcripts for the interviews, as well as responses to reflective journals, will be examined for evidence of recurring themes and patterns relevant to the research questions. The patterns and themes will be coded for analysis. The final analysis of attendance and academic record will allow the researcher to determine if the perceived outcome is reflected in students' academics and attendance.

Once data has been collected and examined, the results and suggestions for program changes will be reported. Based on the report action will be taken to make recommendation for changes to the program.

14. **Risk & Discomforts**

Students risk having their identities revealed as participants in this study.

15. Students will be given an informational letter explaining the research and requesting parental and student consent.

Students will return consent form in a sealed envelope to the researcher only.

Interviews will be scheduled before or after school as to conceal identity from faculty and other students.

Interviews will be held in a secluded classroom to conceal identity.

Pseudonyms will be used for all participants

Data will be conducted and examined by the researcher

Taped interviews and other data will be locked in a file cabinet in the researcher's office.

16. **Benefits**

Enhanced mentoring relationship

Enhanced mentoring program

17. **Protection of Data**

a. Data will not be collected as anonymous

b. Data will be collected as confidential

c. Participants' data will be linked to information by the use of a pseudonym

d. The need to link participants' to collected information is to compare participants' interview information with academic and attendance records.

e. Code list will be stored in a locked file cabinet with other collected data.

f. Data collected as confidential will be recorded and examined as anonymous

g. The use of audio cassette and hard copy information will be used to store information. The data will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's office. In the absence of the researcher, the cabinet will be locked by the researcher.

h. Only the researcher will have access to participants' data

i. The data will be retained through June 28, 2007

j. Hard copy data will be destroyed by a paper shredder. Audio cassettes will be destroyed by removing and cutting tape.

Appendix B

Informed Consent/Assent Form

Student
INFORMED CONSENT/ASSENT
For a Research Study Entitled
Effects of a Program to Reduce the Dropout Rate Among 9th–12th Grade General and
Special Education Students at Alexandria High School

You are invited to participate in a research study to evaluate the effectiveness of a newly implemented mentoring program at Alexandria High School. This study is being conducted by Jenise Hampton, Assistant Principal under the supervision of Dr. Cynthia Reed, Director of the Truman Pierce Institute at Auburn University. I hope to determine if students' involvement in the mentoring program changed their views of school and their potential to graduate. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you have been a participant in the mentoring program.

Your participation in this study will help determine the effectiveness of the mentoring program. Based on these findings changes can be made toward a more effective mentoring program for Alexandria High School.

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to write a one-page informal journal entry describing your thoughts and experience in the mentoring program. You will also be asked to participate in a 30-45minute interview discussing your thoughts and experience in the mentoring program. Your participation is strictly voluntary. There will be no compensation or benefits provided for your participation.

Any information obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential. Information will be locked in my office at all times and destroyed upon completion of this project. Information collected through your participation may be used to complete a dissertation, which evaluates the effectiveness of the mentoring program. If so, none of your identifiable information will be included.

_____   _____
Parent/Guardian's Initials   Participants Initials

If you agree to participate and later desire to withdraw from this study and withdraw any information that you have contributed, you may do so at any time without penalty. Your decision whether or not to participate will not jeopardize your future relations with Auburn University, Alexandria High School, or the mentoring program in which you participate.

If you desire to participate, please return your signed consent form within 3-5 school days from today's date to the mailbox labeled "Valley Pride" in the front office. You may contact Jenise Hampton by phone at (256) 741-4411 or e-mail at jhampto.ah@calhoun.k12.al.us with any questions or concerns. You will be provided a copy of this form to keep.

For more information regarding your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Auburn University Office of Human Subjects Research or the Institutional Review Board by phone
(334)-844-5966 or e-mail at hsubjec@auburn.edu or IRBChair@auburn.edu.

HAVING READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED, YOU MUST DECIDE WHETHER OR NOT YOU WISH TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY. YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES YOUR WILLINGNESS TO PARTICIPATE.

Participant's Signature	Date	Investigator obtaining consent	Date

Print Name	Print Name

Parent/Guardian's Signature	Date

Print Name

Page 2 of 2

Appendix C

Confidentiality Agreement

CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

Name of Signer:

During the course of my activity in collecting data for the research titled: **"Assessing the Effects of a Program to Reduce the Dropout Rate Among 9th –12th Grade General Education Students at Alexandria High School",** I will have access to information, which is confidential and should not be disclosed. I acknowledge that the information must remain confidential, and that improper disclosure of confidential information can be damaging to the participant.

By signing this Confidentiality Agreement I acknowledge and agree that:
1. I will not disclose or discuss any confidential information with others, including friends or family.
2. I will not in any way divulge, copy, release, sell, loan, alter or destroy any confidential information except as properly authorized.
3. I will not discuss confidential information where others can overhear the conversation. I understand that it is not acceptable to discuss confidential information even if the participant's name is not used.
4. I will not make any unauthorized transmissions, inquiries, modification or purging of confidential information.
5. I agree that my obligations under this agreement will continue after termination of the job that I will perform.
6. I understand that violation of this agreement will have legal implications.
7. I will only access or use systems or devices I'm officially authorized to access and I will not demonstrate the operation or function of systems or devices to unauthorized individuals.

Signing this document, I acknowledge that I have read the agreement and I agree to comply with all the terms and conditions stated above.

Signature   **Date**

Appendix D

Open-Ended Prompts

Student Individual Interview Prompts

- Describe your relationship with your mentor.

- How has your mentor helped you with school, as well as personal issues?

- How did you feel about school before you had a mentor? Why did you feel this way?

- How do you feel about school now that you have a mentor?

- Why do you feel your views have or have not changed about school?

- How has the mentoring program help you to become successful in school?

- How do you feel about your potential to graduate?

- Has this view changed since your mentor relationship began? How?

- Do you think having a mentor will help other students be more successful in school? Why or why not?

- Describe an ideal mentor relationship.

- What could be done to make the mentoring program a more effective program for students?

Appendix E

Questions for Clarifying Student Perceptions

- How often do you and your mentor meet?

- What do you often discuss when you meet with your mentor?

- Have you experienced any improvement in your grades or attendance since you have

    been meeting with your mentor? If so, how has your mentor helped with the

    improvement?

- Do you feel you are more successful in school due to discussions and meetings with your

    mentor? Explain

- Would you like to participate in the program the following school year? Why or why not?

Appendix F

Teacher Open-Ended Survey

- Rate the mentoring program from 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest. Why?

- What aspect of the program did you view as effective? Why?

- What aspect of the program did you view as ineffective? Why?

- What area of the program should be changed? Why?

Appendix G

Permission to Conduct Study

Alexandria High School
P.O. Box 180
353 Stadium Drive
Alexandria, Alabama 36250

(256) 741-4400
Telephone
(256) 820-7161
FAX

March 15, 2007

Ronald Chambless, Principal Alexandria High School
P.O. Box 180
Alexandria, AL 36250

Dear Mr. Chambless:

I am completing a dissertation titled Assessing the Effects of a Program to Reduce the Dropout Rate Among 9th -12th Grade Students at Alexandria High School. I would like your permission to interview students and teachers at Alexandria High School to gain their perception of the mentoring program.

This study is being conducted by Jenise Hampton, assistant principal at Alexandria High School under the supervision of Dr. Cynthia Reed, director of the Truman Pierce Institute at Auburn University. I hope to learn if students' involvement in the mentoring program changed students' views of school and their potential to graduate.

Information collected through participation may be used to complete a dissertation, as well as aid in building stronger components and strengthening weak components of the program

If this research meets your approval, please sign this letter below and return to me. Thank you very much for attention in this matter.

Sincerely,

Jenise Hampton

Jenise Hampton

PERMISSION GRANTED FOR THE RESEARCH REQUESTED ABOVE:

Ronald Chambless, Principal Alexandria High School
P.O. Box 180
Alexandria, AL 36250

Date: 3/15/07

Appendix H

Auburn University Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval

AUBURN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD for RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS
R E S E A R C H   P R O T O C O L   R E V I E W   F O R M

For information or help completing this form, contact: **THE OFFICE OF HUMAN SUBJECTS RESEARCH**, 307 Samford Hall,
Phone: 334-844-5966   **e-mail:** hsubjec@auburn.edu   **Web Address:** http://www.auburn.edu/research/vpr/ohs/index.htm

Complete this form using Adobe Acrobat Writer (versions 5.0 and greater).

1. PROPOSED DATES OF STUDY: FROM: _____03/30/2007_____ TO: _____04/30/2008_____

(?) REVIEW TYPE (Check one): ☐ **FULL BOARD**   ☑ **EXPEDITED**   ☐ **EXEMPT**

2. PROJECT TITLE: _Assessing the Effects of a Program to Reduce the Dropout Rate Among 9th-12th Grade General Education_
Students at Alexandria High School.

3. _____Jenise Hampton_____   _Asst. Principal_   _EFLT_   _327-8586_   _echoljv@auburn.edu_
   PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR   **TITLE**   **DEPT**   **PHONE**   **E-MAIL**
   88 Blackberry Lane Alexandria, AL 36250   256-820-4171
   ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE   **FAX**

4. SOURCE OF FUNDING SUPPORT: ☑ Not Applicable   ☐ Internal   ☐ External (External Agency): _____

5. STATUS OF FUNDING SUPPORT: ☑ Not Applicable   ☐ Approved   ☐ Pending   ☐ Received

(?) 6. GENERAL RESEARCH PROJECT CHARACTERISTICS

A. Research Content Area	B. Research Methodology
Please check all descriptors that best apply to this proposed research project.	**Please check all descriptors that best apply to the research methodology.**
☐ Anthropology ☐ Anthropometry	Data collection will be: ☐ Prospective ☑ Retrospective ☐ Both
☐ Biological Sciences ☐ Behavioral Sciences	Data will be recorded so that participants can be directly or indirectly identified: ☑ Yes ☐ No
☑ Education ☐ English	Data collection will involve the use of:
☐ History ☐ Journalism	☐ Educational Tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement)
☐ Medical ☐ Physiology	☐ Surveys / Questionnaires
☐ Other (Please list:)_____	☑ Private Records / Files
Please list 3 or 4 keywords to identify this research project: _Evaluation of_	☑ Interview / Observation
a mentoring program.	☑ Audiotaping and / or Videotaping
	☐ Physical / Physiologic Measurements or Specimens

C. Participant Information	D. Risks to Participants
Please check all descriptors that apply to the participant population.	**Please identify all risks that may reasonably be expected as a result of participating in this research.**
☑ Males ☑ Females	☑ Breach of Confidentiality ☐ Coercion
Vulnerable Populations	☐ Deception ☐ Physical
☐ Pregnant Women ☐ Children	☐ Psychological ☐ Social
☐ Prisoners ☑ Adolescents	☐ None ☐ Other (please list:)
☐ Elderly ☐ Physically Challenged	
☐ Economically Challenged ☐ Mentally Challenged	
Do you plan to recruit Auburn University Students? ☐ Yes ☑ No	
Do you plan to compensate your participants? ☐ Yes ☑ No	

For OHSR Office Use Only
DATE RECEIVED IN OHSR: _____ by _____   PROTOCOL # _____
DATE OF OHSR CONTENT REVIEW: _____ by _____   DATE ASSIGNED IRB REVIEW: _____ by _____
DATE OF IRB REVIEW: _____ by _____   DATE IRB APPROVAL: _____ by _____
INTERVAL FOR CONTINUING REVIEW: _____

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?7. PROJECT ASSURANCES

PROJECT TITLE: Assessing the Effects of a Program to Reduce the Dropout Rate Among 9th-12th Grade General Education Students at Alexandria High School.

A. PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR'S ASSSURANCE

1. I certify that all information provided in this application is complete and correct.
2. I understand that, as Principal Investigator, I have ultimate responsibility for the conduct of this study, the ethical performance this project, the protection of the rights and welfare of human subjects, and strict adherence to any stipulations imposed by the Auburn University IRB.
3. I certify that all individuals involved with the conduct of this project are qualified to carry out their specified roles and responsibilities and are in compliance with Auburn University policies regarding the collection and analysis of the research data.
4. I agree to comply with all Auburn policies and procedures, as well as with all applicable federal, state, and local laws regarding the protection of human subjects, including, but not limited to the following:
   a. Conducting the project by qualified personnel according to the approved protocol
   b. Implementing no changes in the approved protocol or consent form without prior approval from the Office of Human Subjects Research (except in an emergency, if necessary to safeguard the well-being of human subjects)
   c. Obtaining the legally effective informed consent from each participant or their legally responsible representative prior to their participation in this project using only the currently approved, stamped consent form
   d. Promptly reporting significant adverse events and/or effects to the Office of Human Subjects Research in writing within 5 working days of the occurrence.
5. If I will be unavailable to direct this research personally, I will arrange for a co-investigator to assume direct responsibility in my absence. This person has been named as co-investigator in this application, or I will advise OHSR, by letter, in advance of such arrangements.
6. I agree to conduct this study only during the period approved by the Auburn University IRB.
7. I will prepare and submit a renewal request and supply all supporting documents to the Office of Human Subjects Research before the approval period has expired if it is necessary to continue the research project beyond the time period approved by the Auburn University IRB.
8. I will prepare and submit a final report upon completion of this research project.

Jenise Hampton		
Principal Investigator (Please Print)	**Principal Investigator's Signature**	**Date**

B. FACULTY SPONSOR'S ASSSURANCE

1. By my signature as sponsor on this research application, I certify that the student or guest investigator is knowledgeable about the regulations and policies governing research with human subjects and has sufficient training and experience to conduct this particular study in accord with the approved protocol.
2. I certify that the project will be performed by qualified personnel according to the approved protocol using conventional or experimental methodology.
3. I agree to meet with the investigator on a regular basis to monitor study progress.
4. Should problems arise during the course of the study, I agree to be available, personally, to supervise the investigator in solving them.
5. I assure that the investigator will promptly report significant adverse events and/or effects to the OHSR in writing within 5 working days of the occurrence.
6. If I will be unavailable, I will arrange for an alternate faculty sponsor to assume responsibility during my absence, and I will advise the OHSR by letter of such arrangements.
7. I have read the protocol submitted for this project for content, clarity, and methodology.

Faculty Sponsor (Please Print)	**Faculty Sponsor's Signature**	**Date**

C. DEPARTMENT HEAD'S ASSSURANCE

By my signature as department head, I certify that every member of my department involved with the conduct of this research project will abide by all Auburn University policies and procedures, as well as with all applicable federal, state, and local laws regarding the protection and ethical treatment of human participants.

Department Head (Please Print)	**Department Head's Signature**	**Date**

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8. PROJECT ABSTRACT: Prepare an abstract (400-word maximum) that includes: I.) A summary of relevant research findings leading to this research proposal; II.) A concise purpose statement; III.) A brief description of the methodology; IV.) Expected and/or possible outcomes, and V.) A statement regarding the potential significance of this research project. *Please cite relevant sources and include a "Reference List" as Appendix A.*

The extensiveness of the dropout problem threatens the nation's productivity and presents a terrible waste of young lives (Lehr, Clapper, and Thurlow, 2005). Today, nearly all students are expected to graduate from high school with a diploma. Yet, hundreds of thousands of students in the United States leave school early without successfully completing school(National Center of Educational Statistics, 2002).

Although literature pertaining to dropouts is voluminous, there is a paucity of research on strategies for evaluating the effectiveness of dropout prevention. Since dropouts are a problem for society and themselves, it is important to identity effective drop out prevention programs.

Program evaluations are necessary to close the gap between what we know about dropout programs and what we can do to improve them(Losen, 2004). McPartland(1994) states it is critical to conduct evaluations of dropout intervention program effectiveness and make program modifications as necessary.

This study will evaluate the effectiveness of a mentoring program designed to improve the graduation rate at Alexandria High School. This evaluation will not only add to literature related to dropout intervention programs, but may also reveal modifications that can be made to make this a more effective program at Alexandria High School.

Teachers and students involved in the program will serve as the population from which data will be collected. The research questions will be addressed using qualitative design. Participants will be interviewed using semi-structured, individual interviews, and focus groups. Documents related to the drop out program will be analyzed. Student attendance and records will be assessed to compare with data collected from interviews.

An expected outcome of this evaluation will be to learn more about the effectiveness of the program through teachers and student perception. The outcome of this evaluation will also allow the programer to identify areas for improvement.

Schools across the nation still grapple with how best to address the issues related to dropout prevention. Presently, there is increasing pressure being placed on local schools to enact change in their dropout prevention strategies, in order to decrease the number of students dropping out of school. Evaluative data on the effectiveness of programs designed to decrease school dropout rate is lacking. Thus, the significance of this study is that by evaluating the effectiveness of this program the results of the study may add to the body of literature pertaining to program evaluations for drop out prevention and help identify the perceptions of students and teacher participating in the program at Alexandria High School, allowing for changes to be made to improve the effectiveness of the program.

9. PURPOSE & SIGNIFICANCE.
   a. **Clearly state all of the objectives, goals, or aims of this project.**

The findings of this study will serve a two-fold purpose. First, an evaluation of the effectiveness of a newly designed drop out program may enable the designers to build stronger components and strengthen weak components. This evaluation will help determine if the program goals were achieved. Second, data collection instruments will be used to measure faculty perceptions of the effectiveness of the program. Based on these findings changes may be made toward a more effective program.

   b. **How will the results of this project be used? (e.g., Presentation? Publication? Thesis? Dissertation?)**

Results will be used to complete a dissertation, possible school professional development presentation, or article in professional journals.

10. KEY PERSONNEL INVOLVED WITH DATA COLLECTION. Identify each individual involved with the conduct of this project and describe his or her roles and responsibilities related to this project. Be as specific as possible.

Individual: Jenise Hampton   **Title:** Asst. Principal   **Dept/ Affiliation:** EFLT
Roles / Responsibilities:

Participant recruitment
Conducting the informed consent process
Data collection
Data analysis and interpretation

Individual: Dr. Cindy Reed   **Title:** Major Professor   **Dept/ Affiliation:** EFLT
Roles / Responsibilities:

Assist with data analysis and interpretation

Individual: Shaun Eller   **Title:** Teacher   **Dept/ Affiliation:** Alexandria High School
Roles / Responsibilities:

Conduct mentor focus group interview

Individual: _____   **Title:** _____   **Dept/ Affiliation:** _____
Roles / Responsibilities:

Individual: _____   **Title:** _____   **Dept/ Affiliation:** _____
Roles / Responsibilities:

11. LOCATION OF RESEARCH. List all locations where data collection will take place. Be as specific as possible.

Alexandria High School
P.O. Box 180
Alexandria, AL 36250

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12. PARTICIPANTS.

a. Describe the participant population you have chosen for this project.

Participant population include teachers who serve as mentors for at-risk students involved in the program. Student participants will be invited to participate based on a variety of at-risk factors including gender,age,ethnicity, and grade level.

What is the minimum number of participants you need to validate the study?   15

What is the maximum number of participants you will include in the study?   30

b. Describe the criteria established for participant selection. (If the participants can be classified as a "vulnerable" population, please describe additional safeguards that you will use to assure the ethical treatment of these individuals.)

The criteria for student participant selection will be students who are currently in the mentoring program. These students must be in the 9th-12th grade. Student selection procedures will also include the completion of parental and student consent forms. To ensure ethical treatment of the student and teacher participants pseudonyms will be used to protect confidentiality of responses. Interviews will be scheduled before and after school in a secluded classroom to protect the identity of the participants since no one except the interviewer will be there. Interviews will be conducted individually so participants can speak freely. All interview tapes and transcribed documents will be kept in a locked drawer. Only the researcher and Dr. Reed will be allowed to review data.

The criteria established for teacher participants will be teachers who serve as mentors for the program.

c. Describe all procedures you will use to recruit participants. *Please include a copy of all flyers, advertisements, and scripts and label as Appendix B.*

Solicitation of teacher participants will be made through announcements during faculty meetings two-weeks prior to the interviews. Solicitation for student participants will be made through letters explaining the project and asking for students and parental consent to be turned in to the researcher if they desire to participate.

What is the maximum number of potential participants you plan to recruit?   30

d. Describe how you will determine group assignments (e.g., random assignment, independent characteristics, etc.).

There will be no group assignments.

e. Describe the type and amount and method of compensation for participants.

There will be no compensation.

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13. PROJECT DESIGN & METHODS. Describe the procedures you will plan to use in order to address the aims of this study. (NOTE: Use language that would be understandable to a layperson. Without a complete description of all procedures, the Auburn University IRB will not be able to review protocol. If additional space is needed for #13, part b, save the information as a .pdf file and insert after page 6 of this form.)

a. **Project overview. (Briefly describe the scientific design.)**

Teachers and students involved in the program serve as the population from which participants will be solicited and data will be collected. The nature of the research questions were best addressed by a qualitative research design. A focus group was conducted with teachers who discussed the desired program effect and helped to focus the questions for the qualitative research which will be employed in this study.

b. **Describe all procedures and methods used to address the purpose.**

The research questions were best addressed by qualitative methods. Student participants will be invited to participate based on their participation in the mentoring program. A purposeful sampling approach will be utilized to ensure representation of students with a variety of risk factors(i.e.,gender,ethnicity, and grade level). Letters will be given to selected potential participants explaining the program and inviting their participation. Teachers will receive invitations to participate during two faculty meetings. Data will be collected during one school term from multiple sources to allow for triangulation of the data. These sources include data from reflective journal entries, semi-structured interviews, academic records, and mentor logs. Students will be asked to write a reflective journal entry describing their perception of the mentoring program prior to participating in the interview process. The interviews will be conducted on two-levels;group and individual. Group interviews will be held in the school library after school with teachers. Individual interviews will be last no longer than 45 minutes. Group interviews will last no longer than 90 minutes. Pseudonyms will be used to protect the privacy of participants.

Individual interviews will allow in-depth conversation about student perspectives of the program. These interviews will also clarify information collected from reflective journal entries. Mentor logs will be examined to verify meetings times and comments made during mentoring sessions. Reflective journal responses will allow for information gathered in the interviews to be cross-referenced. Students' personal academic and attendance records will be examined for areas of improvement since the initiation of the program. As assistant principal of the school, the researcher has access to these files.

The focus group interviews will be conducted by a member of the School Improvement Committee. Individual student interviews will be conducted by the researcher. All interviews will be audio-taped and transcribed at a later date. The reflective journal entries will be collected one day before each interview to highlight areas that might need clarification during the interview. The researcher will follow a semi-structred interview format and question probes to generate conversation relating to the research topic.

? c. List all instruments used in data collection. (e.g., surveys, questionnaires, educational tests, data collection sheets, outline of interviews, scripts, audio and/or video methods etc.) *Please include a copy of all data collection instruments that will be used in this project and label as Appendix C.*

Reflective journal prompts
Interview prompts
Audio-tape
Mentor documentation log
Academic record

? d. Data Analysis: Explain how the data will be analyzed.

Analysis of the data will be performed by the researcher. The transcripts from the interviews, as well as responses for the reflective journal will be examined for evidence of emergent themes and patterns relevant to the research questions. The patterns and themes will be coded for further analysis. A quantitative analysis of attendance and academic records will allow the researcher to determine if the perceived outcomes are reflected in students' academics attendance.

once data has been collected and examined the results and suggestions for the program changes will be reported to the School Improvement Committee. Based on the report action may be taken to make a recommendation for change to the program.

? 14. RISKS & DISCOMFORTS: List and describe all of the reasonable risks that participants might encounter if they decide to participate in this research. *If you are using deception in this study, please justify the use of deception and be sure to attach a copy of the debriefing form you plan to use and label as Appendix D.*

Students risk having their identities revealed as participants in this study. Although, risk is being minimized using pseudonyms and conducting interviews in a vacant classroom to conceal participants' identity.

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15. PRECAUTIONS. Describe all precautions you have taken to eliminate or reduce risks that were listed in #14.

Student will be giving information letter explaining the research and requesting parental and student consent. Participants will return consent forms to a locked mailbox in the main office of Alexandria High School. The researcher will be the only person who will unlock the mailbox to obtain contents. Interviews will be scheduled before or after school to conceal identity. Individual interviews will be held in a secluded classroom to conceal identity. Pseudonyms will be used to protect the identity of all participants. Data will be collected and analyzed by the researcher. Audio-taped interviews, code list, and other data will be locked in a file cabinet in the researcher's office numbered 308 located at Alexandria High School, P.O. Box 180 Alexandria, AL 36250.

16. BENEFITS.
   a. List all realistic benefits participants can expect by participating in this study.

Possibly an enhanced mentoring relationship and enhanced mentoring program.

   b. List all realistic benefits for the general population that may be generated from this study.

Possibly an enhanced mentoring program.

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17. PROTECTION OF DATA.

    a.   Will data be collected as anonymous?   ☐ Yes   ☑ No   *If "YES", go to part "g".*

    b.   Will data be collected as confidential?   ☑ Yes   ☐ No

    c.   If data is collected as confidential, how will the participants' data be coded or linked to identifying information?

    Confidential data will be linked to information by use of pseudonyms. A code list will be maintained to link interview data with student academic and attendance information.

    d.   Justify your need to code participants' data or link the data with identifying information.

    There is a need to link participants to collected information to compare participants' interview information with academic and attendance records. The review of these documents will show if there had been progress in academics and attendance since the beginning of the mentoring program.

    e.   Where will code lists be stored?

    The code list will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's office number 308 located at Alexandria High School, P.O. Box 180, Alexandria, AL 36250.

    f.   Will data collected as "confidential" be recorded and analyzed as "anonymous"?   ☐ Yes   ☑ No

    g.   Describe how the data will be stored (e.g., hard copy, audio cassette, electronic data, etc.), where the data will be stored, and how the location where data is stored will be secured in your absence.

    Audio cassettes and transcribed information, and other documents will be used to collect data. The data will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's office number 308 located at Alexandria High School, P.O. Box 180, Alexandria, AL 36250. In the absence of the researcher, the cabinet will be locked. The researcher will be the only person with a key to the file cabinet.

    h.   Who will have access to participants' data?

    Only the researcher will have access to participants' data. Dr. Reed will only have access to the data when assisting with data analysis.

    i.   When is the latest date that the data will be retained?

    The data will be retained through June 8, 2008

    j.   How will the data be destroyed? (NOTE: Data recorded and analyzed as "anonymous" may be retained indefinitely.)

    Hardcopy data will be destroyed by a paper shredder. Audio cassettes will be destroyed by removing and cutting tapes. All electronic data will be erased from computers used through the use of software designed to sanitize computer files.

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PROTOCOL REVIEW CHECKLIST

All protocols must include the following items:

☑ 1.   Research Protocol Review Form (All signatures included and all sections completed)

☑ 2.   Consent Form or Information Letter (examples are found on the OHSR website)

☑ 3.   Appendix A "Reference List"

☑ 4.   Appendix B if flyers, advertisements, generalized announcements or scripts are used to recruit participants.

☑ 5.   Appendix C if data collection sheets, surveys, tests, or other recording instruments will be used for data collection. Be sure to mark each of the data collection instruments as they are identified in section # 13, part c.

☐ 6.   Appendix D if a debriefing form will be used.

☑ 7.   If research is being conducted at sites other than Auburn University or in cooperation with other entities, a letter from the site / program director must be included indicating their cooperation or involvement in the project. NOTE: If the proposed research is a multi-site project, involving investigators or participants at other academic institutions, hospitals or private research organizations, a letter of IRB approval from each entity is required prior to initiating the project.

☐ 8.   Written evidence of acceptance by the host country if research is conducted outside the United States.