UNDERSTANDING WHY ADULT LEARNERS DROPOUT OF A HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA PROGRAM A SECOND TIME

A Dissertation by

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UNDERSTANDING WHY ADULT LEARNERS DROPOUT OF A HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA PROGRAM A SECOND TIME

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to my amazing wife, Dana (my lobster) and our four wonderful daughters, Mackenzie, Whitney, Bailiegh and Kylie. Thank you, Dana for your unwavering support and encouragement through our every endeavor.
Surround yourself with people who believe in your dreams.
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ABSTRACT

Increasing attention paid to the high school dropout situation since the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (2000) has brought about concerns (United States Department of Education, 2002a). In an attempt to bring greater clarity to the complicated issues surrounding school dropouts, I explored several under-researched aspects relating to dropping out of high school, such as adults returning to a high school diploma program and the non-monetary benefits of obtaining a high school diploma. According to Harris and Ganzglass (2008), 39% of adult learners across the nation voluntarily return to an adult alternative program to work on their regular high school diploma. Of these adult students who return, why are only 30% actually completing the program?

This study employed a qualitative interpretivist research design to attain an understanding of why adults dropped out of a virtual high school diploma program a second time. I conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 adults who had dropped out of high school for a second time, which provided these participants a voice, free to share his or her thoughts and feelings about past social exchanges through his or her own words. It became clear as a result of my data that no single reason fully explained why a particular study participant chose to drop out. Rather, one or more reasons occurred in tandem and it was this confluence of factors that created a sufficiently compelling set of circumstances that prompted each participant to exit the program. Implications from the research stress that additional research could be conducted in the areas of student connectedness, staff and administrators perceptions of why they feel certain students are not being successful in their school, and wraparound services for at-risk students and their families.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Researchers, educators, and policy makers have recently described the large number of students dropping out of high school on a yearly basis as a “problem,” a “crisis,” or an “epidemic” (Lofstrom & Tyler, 2009). Regardless of the words used to describe it, the increasing attention paid to the high school dropout situation since the 2002 passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has brought about concerns (United States Department of Education, 2002a). In an attempt to bring greater clarity to the complicated issues surrounding school dropouts, I explored several under-researched aspects relating to dropping out of high school, such as adults returning to a high school diploma program and the non-monetary benefits of obtaining a high school diploma. I also showed how they are relevant to adults who returned to obtain their high school diploma and end up dropping out a second time. In the following sections, I provide background information on dropout definitions and statistics, first and second time dropouts, drop out prevention and drop out recovery programs, adult high school learners, and the monetary and social rewards of obtaining a high school diploma versus not obtaining a high school diploma.

Dropout Rate Calculations, Definitions, and Statistics

From 1990 to 2010, the status dropout rate of high school students declined from 12% to 7%. The status dropout rate denotes the percentage of 16- to 24-year-olds who have not earned a high school credential or who are not enrolled in school (Aud, Hussar, & Kena, 2012). With the development of more uniform tracking and accounting systems brought forth through the requirements of educational reforms such as NCLB (2002) the National Governors Association, and America’s Promise Alliance, more attention and emphasis have been placed on connecting
with and keeping youth in school so they complete high school with a regular high school diploma.

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2008), a regular high school diploma is defined as the “standard high school diploma awarded to students in a State that is fully aligned with the State’s academic content standards and does not include a GED credential, certificate of attendance, or any alternative award” (United States Department of Education, 2008, p. 13). The high-school diploma has been associated with economic and social advantages that are unavailable to dropouts. Among these advantages are an enhanced opportunity to pursue post-secondary education and a greater possibility for career advancement (Swanson, 2004).

Even with an increased emphasis on school retention and a decreasing percentage of dropouts, over 7,000 students per school day (or one student every 26 seconds) drop out of high school in the U.S. (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011). The more than one million high school dropouts per year statistic prompted federal policymakers to enact policies such as NCLB that made higher graduation rates an imperative. NCLB required adequate yearly progress (AYP) toward obtaining a graduation rate of 100% by year 2014. Adequate yearly progress is a term used in NCLB guidance, which describes the annual academic progress made by each school, district, and state in the areas of reading, math, and graduation rate (United States Department of Education, 2002a). Early on, NCLB permitted any increase in graduation rate as acceptable evidence of adequate yearly progress. Within the parameters of the United States Department of Education’s Title I Final Regulations (2002b) school districts were allowed to establish their own methods for calculating the graduation rate and have these approaches approved by the U.S. Secretary of Education in their state plan. According to a review of NCLB state accountability workbooks conducted by Swanson (2003), fewer than 12 states used a
longitudinal graduation rate. True longitudinal graduation rate tracks students from the time they enter as a freshman or a sophomore until they graduate. The other 38 states used methods such as completion ratios, grade-to-grade promotion rates, and dropout rates in place of graduation rates, which rendered these methods unsuitable for state to state comparisons (Swanson, 2003).

Although the graduation policy requirements of NCLB were clearly articulated in the legislation, Cataldi and KewalRamani (2009) found the general public to be unaware of the actual high school dropout situation and its effects on individuals and society. Inaccurate reporting of how students were recorded when they exited a particular school skewed dropout rates and inflated graduation percentages. The misleading coding of dropouts inflated the graduation percentage since the dropouts were not included in the computation. This inexact process led policy makers, communities, parents, and students to believe graduation rates were higher than they actually were (Cataldi & KewalRamani, 2009). Levin, Belfield, Muennig, and Rouse (2007) found graduation rates to be low, 66% to 70% for on-time public high school graduation. This meant that when measured against the conventional four-year graduation timeframe, at least three out of ten students did not graduate through a traditional system (Levin, Belfield, Muennig, & Rouse, 2007).

Until 2007, overall graduation rates in the U.S. ranged between 66% to 88% with an estimated 50% to 85% of minority students graduating, depending on which organization collected the data (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2007). To remedy inconsistencies in the reporting of annual graduation rates, the governors of all 50 states collaborated on and signed into action the Graduation Counts Compact of the National Governors Association (NGA) in 2005 (Curran & Reyna, 2010). The governors understood the need for more accurate information in crafting education policy that relied on credible student outcome indicators. The governors hoped these
national, state, and district outcome indicators would better prepare students to graduate from high school ready for college, work, and civic life (Curran & Reyna, 2010). The four fundamental commitments of the compact were:

- Use a common, four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate formula;
- Build state data collection and reporting capacity;
- Develop additional student outcome indicators; and
- Report annually on progress toward meeting these commitments. (Curran & Reyna, 2010, p. 1)

In 2008, the U.S. Department of Education revised the NCLB requirement to create a more accurate and uniform count of graduation numbers (United States Department of Education, 2008). The revised policy required states to adopt a four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate. According to NCLB, the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate was explained as, “the cohort is ‘adjusted’ by adding any students transferring into the cohort and by subtracting any students who transfer out, emigrate to another country, or die during the years covered by the rate” (United States Department of Education, 2008, p. A1). By 2020, high schools were required to meet their state’s graduation-rate goal and show substantial year over year improvement. This more consistent and accurate graduation rate formula was implemented by all 50 states beginning with the 2012 to 2013 school year. A study released by the U.S. Department of Education in the same year this graduation formula was implemented concluded, “graduation rate numbers will soon appear to decrease ‘across the board’ as states move to a uniform calculation that requires them to track students individually, giving a more accurate count of how many actually finish high school” (Hollingsworth & Turner, 2012, p. 1)
Today, educators and policymakers are hopeful that, with more accurate graduation rates, schools and districts will be better equipped to focus on high schools with the highest dropout rates along with their feeder middle and elementary schools. These chronically underperforming high schools are commonly referred to as dropout factories (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Bruce, & Hornig-Fox, 2013). As outlined in the Building a Grad Nation report produced by America’s Promise Alliance (2013a), this more accurate information has the potential to guide more informed decision making by creating or modifying existing alternative and dropout prevention programs aimed at achieving a 90% graduation rate by 2020. America’s Promise Alliance is comprised of and supported by 357 nonprofit groups, businesses, communities, educators, and policymakers. Their work focuses on the Five Promises: caring adults, safe places, a healthy start, effective education, and the opportunities to help others (America's Promise Alliance, 2013b).

President Barack Obama, General Colin Powell, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, and America’s Promise Alliance chair Alma Powell announced Grad Nation to the American public on March 1, 2010. America’s Promise Alliance developed Grad Nation after holding 105 Dropout Prevention Summits across the U.S. The information gained from these summits prompted the Grad Nation movement to work with and through their 357 partners to provide human resource support and alternative and dropout strategies to American schools in confronting the dropout dilemma. Grad Nation’s mission is to develop young people socially and academically so that 90% of high school students graduate in 2020 prepared with the reading, writing, and math skills necessary for college and the 21st century workforce (America's Promise Alliance, 2010).
Additional incentives to decrease the dropout rate have come from the U.S. Office of Elementary and Secondary Education through their Academic Improvement and Teacher Quality programs. This office awards discretionary grants to state educational agencies (SEA) and local educational agencies (LEA) for implementation of the High School Graduation Initiative (United States Department of Education, 2012). These funds are intended to support SEA’s and LEA’s execution of successful, coordinated, and sustainable dropout prevention and re-entry programs in high schools. Only high schools with annual dropout rates that exceed their state average are eligible for these funds. Middle schools that feed into these high schools whose dropout rates exceed the State average annual date may apply for these funds as well (United States Department of Education, 2012).

**First and Second Time High School Dropouts**

For the purpose of this study, there are two defined categories of high school dropouts. A first time high school dropout is a student who discontinues his education prior to age 18 and before his cohort graduates as scheduled. A second time high school dropout is an adult, age 18 or older, who failed to obtain a high school diploma with her age appropriate graduating cohort, returned to an alternative on-site or virtual adult high school degree completion program (AHSD), and failed to obtain her high school diploma a second time. These adult students will be referred to as second-time high-school dropouts throughout the rest of this study.

There are distinctions between alternative programs and dropout prevention programs that facilitate a deeper understanding of second-time high school dropouts. The U.S. Department of Education (2010) defined an alternative program as “a public elementary/secondary school that addresses needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school, provides non-traditional education, serves as an unconventional school, or falls outside the categories of
regular, special education, or vocational education” (United States Department of Education, 2010, p. C1). The term alternative program is used to describe programs focused on serving at-risk students no longer in a traditional brick and mortar setting (Aron, 2006). Being at-risk can be identified by any number of risk factors such as having a learning disability, poor motivation, low intelligence, living in a single-parent home or born to a teenage mother, come from a family with minimal education or one who does not value education. A risk factor used heavily to measure whether a student is at-risk is that of socio-economic income, as the lower the income, the more at-risk the student is for being unsuccessful at school (Cassidy & Bates, 2005).

**Dropout-Prevention and Dropout Recovery Programs**

In an expansion of the two categories of high school dropouts discussed earlier, Lofstrom and Tyler (2009) placed dropout-deterrence programs into two categories. The first program category targeted specific or groups of at-risk students with dropout prevention as its primary goal (Lofstrom & Tyler, 2009). Dropout prevention practices included such strategies as personalizing instructional environments, offering active learning opportunities, providing academic support, and enhancing career and technical education programs (Porowski & Howley, 2013). The second program category reached out to a broader group of students other than just at-risk students. This category utilized school restructuring or school reform models designed to lower dropout rates that emphasized school attendance, building student self-esteem, increasing school engagement, and assisting students dealing with challenges and problems that contributed to the likelihood of dropping out (Lofstrom & Tyler, 2009).

In contrast to the program type described above aimed at deterring students from dropping out a first time, dropout recovery programs offer several opportunities to re-engage adolescents who have already dropped out of high school. One opportunity provided by these
programs is to have students return to a traditional brick and mortar school and graduate on time as seniors with their original freshman cohort. A second opportunity is to provide an alternative program within a traditional brick and mortar school. These school-within-a-school programs offer more flexibility by blending classes of traditional face-to-face instruction mixed with online or virtual instruction that allow students to work at their own pace. These two options for obtaining a high school diploma are typically referred to as dropout recovery and are only considered successful once the targeted student has returned to and graduated from high school (Catterall, 2011). Both of these programs are designed to help students obtain a regular high school diploma. The key difference is the dropout prevention programs target at-risk students before they drop out, whereas the dropout recovery focuses on students who have already dropped out. If neither of these prevention programs proves successful, there remains one alternative for adult students in most states including the state of Kansas. Kansas refers to its alternative as an adult high school diploma completion program or DCP.

**Kansas Adult High School Learners**

A Kansas DCP allows adults to enroll in high school classes to earn credits toward the Kansas State minimum of 21 required for graduation. To meet the requirements of this program, the adult must be at least 18 years of age and the cohort class she was scheduled to graduate with must have graduated (Kansas State Department of Education, 2009). In 2009 forty-six DCP sites were operating in the state, providing more than 3,000 adult high school dropouts a second chance at obtaining a high school diploma (Kansas State Department of Education, 2009).

The majority of DCP locations are housed in storefronts, or rooms within a commercial building, typically within or between retail stores with fewer than 10% in traditional brick and mortar school buildings (Kansas State Department of Education, 2009). Curriculum is delivered
on-site, through virtual technology, or through a blend of on-site and virtual. DCPs advertise through print, radio, television, and social media to raise awareness of this second chance opportunity for obtaining a high school diploma. Because the adult dropout population is likely to have work or family commitments that prevent individuals from attending school during typical daytime hours, DCPs provide flexible hours, virtual capabilities, and content that can be completed at a student’s own pace (South Central Kansas Education Service Center, 2013). More than 90% of the 46 statewide DCP locations were run by five Kansas education service centers in partnership with local unified school districts: South Central Kansas Educational Service Center, Educational Services and Staff Development Associate of Central Kansas, Southeast Kansas Education Center, Southwest Plains Regional Service Center, and Smoky Hill Education Service Center. Students who completed these programs and met the state minimum 21-credit graduation requirement received a certified Kansas high school diploma from the cooperating school district they were enrolled with at the time of completion (Kansas State Department of Education, 2009). It is important to note that, with the exception of Topeka, Kansas City, and Wichita, the majority of Kansas’ school districts are considered rural. This is important to note because the majority of adults who attend these programs live in a rural setting.

**Problem Statement**

According to Harris and Ganzglass (2008), 39% of adult learners across the nation voluntarily returned to an adult alternative program to work on their regular high school diploma. Of these adult students who returned, only 30% actually completed the program. To put this into national perspective, approximately 3 million 16- to 24-year-olds were counted as high school dropouts in 2010 (Harris & Ganzglass, 2008). If 39% of these 3 million dropouts were to return for their high school diplomas, 1.17 million students would be enrolled in degree completion
programs. Of this total, only 351,000 students would actually end up obtaining their diplomas. This leaves 2.649 million 16-24 year olds to continue their lives without a high school diploma.

The economic advantages of obtaining a high school diploma are clearly established in the literature and show correlations between students with a high school diploma and a tendency to live longer, seek out medical attention less often, earn approximately 30% more than those without a diploma, and have lower unemployment rates (Catterall, 2011). Levin et al. (2007) and Swanson (2004) concluded high school graduates enjoy better health because they tend to use preventative measures before going to the doctor and have higher quality jobs with better health insurance. They also discovered high school graduates had greater job satisfaction, higher employment rates, and experienced less detrimental social outcomes such as early childbearing and criminal victimization. The vast majority of studies of educational attainment focus on the financial cost to the individual and society, leading Levin et al. (2007) to observe:

A society that provides fairer access to opportunities, that is more productive and with higher employment, and that has better health and less crime is a better society in itself. It is simply an added incentive that the attainment of such a society is also profoundly good economics. (p. 22)

Hauser and Koenig (2011) cited government data listing unemployment rates for adults without a high school diploma at 59% (Hauser & Koenig, 2011). Johnston (2011) discovered that adults without a high school diploma were unqualified for 90% of jobs in the current labor market. However, as bleak as the employment outlook may be for adults without a high school diploma, little research has attempted to identify the underlying reasons for the low completion rate of adults who utilize an online learning design to return for their high school diploma a second time. Among the few studies that have investigated this problem in depth, several
possibilities for the low graduation rate through online learning have been proposed: (a) a perception of online classes as easier than traditional face-to-face classroom classes when the coursework actually may be more time consuming and rigorous than expected; (b) adult students may be dropping out a second time due to the lack of community that a traditional brick-and-mortar classroom provides; or (c) lack of monetary and social capital that deters adults from continuing with online classes (Choi & Park, 2009).

What the literature has failed to adequately recognize with regard to the high school dropout situation is the non-monetary benefits schools provide in the development of students. School districts not only provide the technical skills needed to achieve proficiency in reading, writing, and arithmetic but they also strive to provide a caring and safe learning environment for everyone that is free from discrimination. Schools should be structured in ways that support the energies of teachers and other staff members to care for children and adolescents (Noddings, 1988) for it is individuals and not organizations that care.

Within the confines of the school day, teachers, administrators, and other educational professionals provide opportunities for students to learn the necessary social skills to be able to function appropriately within any number of social contexts. Students are taught to share, collaborate with others, problem-solve, apply learning strategies to real life applications, create short and long-term goals, and be tolerant of those who are different from them. Educational employees are required to train and participate in annual professional development to better provide the kinds of supports that enable students to grow both intellectually and socially (Rotherham & Willingham, 2010).

Bridgeland, Dilulio and Morison (2006) found urban, low-income children in large inner city high schools were more likely to drop out of high school than those who did not match these
criteria. Nationally, almost one-third of all high school students fail to graduate. For Black, Hispanic, or Native American populations, this rate increases to almost 50% (Bridgeland, DiIulio Jr, & Morison, 2006). Rumberger and Lim (2008) described dropping out as a process more than an event. They found indicators of dropping out begin as early as the elementary grades where poor academic achievement was one of the strongest predictors of future disengagement from learning (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Bridgeland et. al (2006) reported the top five reasons students aged 16 to 25 dropped out of school were (a) classes were uninteresting, (b) they missed too many days of school, (c) they spent time with people who lacked interest in school, (d) they had too much freedom and not enough rules in life, and (e) they were failing school (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

The literature referenced above has relied on quantitative measures, typically surveys. To understand why returning adult learners drop out of an adult alternative virtual high school diploma completion program before attaining their high school diplomas, one should think about breaking the silence and give these adults a voice. Through individual interviews conducted as part of this research project, adult high school dropouts were invited to tell their stories and provide insights into their “experiences, perceptions, opinions, feelings, and knowledge” (Patton, 1990, p. 4).

**Social Exchange Theory**

Much of the research about high school dropouts conveys a perspective of students as cogs in an economic machine. This is especially true of the analyses issued by the Alliance for Excellent Education, arguably the highest profile advocacy group in the U.S. working to end the dropout crisis. Although the Alliance acknowledges that no single reason explains why students drop out and implicates deficient academic skills and lack of engagement as significant barriers
to graduation (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011), the major thrust of their campaign rests on an economistic view of students that weighs the social and economic costs of dropping out for students and American society. They cite the average annual income in 2009 for a high school dropout was $19,540, whereas a high school graduate would have brought home $27,380, a difference of $7,840. The Alliance points out a less visible yet snowballing effect of high school graduation on America’s economy. They concluded that if every student from the class of 2011 had graduated, the national economy would benefit from nearly $154 billion in additional revenue over their life spans (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011). DeBaun and Roc (2013) found that 15% of all adults 25 or older in the U.S. have not graduated from high school. If 50% of these adults had completed high school, more than $7 billion in Medicaid costs could have been saved in 2012 alone (DeBaun & Roc, 2013).

In this study, I argued for a framework that went beyond the confines of this narrow viewpoint and allowed a select few U.S. citizens who qualified as high school dropouts to be analyzed through a less utilitarian and more social-relational lens such as that provided by social exchange theory (Chibucos, Leite, & Weis, 2005). This theory bridges disciplines of anthropology, social psychology, and sociology in ways that explore the potential of interdependent actions to create high-quality relationships. A basic tenet of social exchange theory is that certain rules of exchange must be performed by both sides in order for trusting and loyal relationships to evolve over time (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Completing a high school diploma as an adult is an accomplishment that typically occurs over an extended period of time, often with the help of trusting and loyal relationships. Similarly, choosing not to complete a high school diploma also plays out over an extended period of time and entails complex social behaviors that may not be reducible to the utility-optimizing metrics associated with cost-benefit
analyses and rational choice theory (Becker, 1976; Elster, 1989). Whereas human action involves both rational and non-rational elements and is embedded in structures of reciprocity, cooperation, and social obligation, rational choice posits that social action is purely calculative and governed by efficiencies of profit and loss (Scott, 2000; Scott & Marshall, 2009).

Social exchange theory’s (SET) roots have been traced as far back as the 1920s (e.g., Mauss, 1925) and remains one of the most influential organizational behavior paradigms to date (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Mauss, 1925). Blau (1964), Emerson (1972), and Homans (1961), expanded upon SET through their writings (Blau P. M., 1964; Emerson, 1976; Homans, 1961). Their early writings derived from utilitarianism or the maximization of happiness and minimization of suffering on the one hand and from behaviorism on the other, which is based on the belief that behaviors can be measured, trained, and changed. It has only been during the past couple of decades that social exchange theorists have come to understand the social structures involved during human social interactions and how they can create either balanced or unbalanced exchanges of power. Social exchanges can leave the parties--teacher and student--feeling as though they have both benefited from an encounter. Alternately, a person may feel he benefitted more than the other while other circumstances may leave neither party wondering if the encounter was beneficial at all. These exchanges determine whether future encounters will continue (Chibucos et al., 2005).

Chibucos et al. (2004), Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) proposed that social exchange theory relied on a number of important assumptions. The first assumption was that individuals were rational and made decisions based on costs and benefits routinely exchanged in everyday social transactions. The second assumption was that those involved in interactions looked to maximize benefits in terms of meeting basic individual needs. Third, social exchange processes
led to patterning of social interactions if they had produced positive benefits in the past (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). SET further assumed that individuals were goal-oriented in a social system where exchange processes created imbalances of power and privilege within social groups. Because humans live in competitive social systems, Chibucos et al. (2005) described individuals with resources as having a definitive edge in controlling and exerting power and as being better positioned to benefit from social interactions (Chibucos et al., 2005).

Chibucos et al. (2005) looked at SET more from the perspective of transactional pattern of interdependent exchanges. They point out that individuals are more willing to engage in the exchange when they perceive a balance of fair benefits (rewards or costs) from the relationship. Social exchanges between teacher and student have rewards and costs associated with both sides. Social exchange theory also suggests relationships are maintained when individuals feel reciprocity, or a balance of rewards and costs is present and mutually beneficial to both parties. Interdependent exchanges occur many times a day between student and teacher and, in order for the students to remain engaged, they must feel a fair reward to continue in that relationship (Chibucos et al., 2005).

Cook and Rice (2006) pointed out links between SET and “theories of social status, influence, social networks, fairness, coalition formation, solidarity, trust, affect and emotion” (Cook & Rice, 2006, pp. 53-54). Blau and Peter (1964) argued those who controlled valued resources created potential imbalance of power through the structural arrangements of the social interactions (Blau P. M., 1964). Teachers tend to hold the potential power in all social interactions with their students, so individual students as rational decision makers must decide whether the cost or reward of the social interaction is worth the engagement in the exchange process (Chibucos et al., 2005). Adults working toward a high school diploma face many
exchange processes on a daily basis and must negotiate not only the monetary rewards and costs of their individual needs but the psychosocial rewards and costs of maintaining a meaningful relational life (Duck, 1994).

Even though, according to Frey and Alman (2003), there is no lone theory that effectively applies to all adult learning environments, social exchange theory was used for this study as it provided a more human side to the equation rather than simply looking at potential high school graduates as economic actors (Frey & Alman, 2003). As previously noted, much of the research emphasizes the monetary loss these adults and society experience as a result of dropping out of high school. By interviewing adults who had dropped out of high school for a second time I provided my participants with a voice, free to share their thoughts and feelings about past social exchanges through their own words. I analyzed their experiences from their perspectives, not from the viewpoints of staff who were educating them at the time they decided to forego completion of a high school diploma.

**Purpose of Study and Research Questions**

The purpose of this interpretivist qualitative study was to generate a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of second-time adult dropouts. This study could have wide-range implications for how schools or programs determine policies and practices when working with or relating to students who have dropped out of high school or are at-risk of dropping out of high school. Additionally, this study may represent a contribution to the insight and recommendations on how to deal with high school dropouts on an individual basis whether they are a traditional high school student or an adult high school student. Questions guiding this study were:
1. Why did returning adult high school dropouts fail to finish their education in a traditional high school setting the first time?

2. What motivated the adult learners to drop back into a virtual high school diploma program to complete their degree for a second time?

3. Why do returning high school dropouts not complete an adult virtual high school diploma program?
Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

To bring deeper understanding to the dropout situation in the United States and how it relates to the research questions in Chapter 1, it is important to understand the vocabulary and formulas used to calculate graduation and dropout rates. It is also beneficial to understand the monetary and non-monetary consequences of not obtaining a high school diploma for the individual who drops out, the state she or he lives in, and the nation as a whole. The research behind adult learning theory, alternative programs for adult learners, the virtual school industry, and on-line strategies associated with retaining adult students will also be presented. This chapter will strive to provide the necessary information for the reader to understand the full implications of this study.

Calculating Graduation and Dropout Rates

Calculating graduation and dropout rates is not directly related to social exchange theory but is included in this chapter for a more thorough understanding of the history and process for all U.S. schools. For years, the productivity and efficiency of the U.S. educational system has been judged by high school graduation and dropout rates, and standardized test scores in the areas of reading and math (Lofstrom & Tyler, 2009). Determining these rates should be straightforward but in reality, these calculations are quite complicated and easily misunderstood by educators and the general public alike. For example, when it is reported in a news article that the graduation rate for high school students is 83% for the current graduating class, there is a tendency to believe the inverse is true for the dropout rate. The assumption is the graduation rate and dropout rate must equal 100%. In the above example, however, it would be erroneous to conclude the dropout rate must be 17%. Graduation and dropout rates are computed through two
completely different formulas and do not add up to 100% when added together for a particular year (Hauser & Koenig, 2011). Graduation rates are determined through a four-year adjusted cohort rate, which is calculated by using the number of students who earn a high school diploma divided by the number of students who entered that high school four years earlier, minus transfers in and out. The dropout rate is generally calculated by using the number of students who dropped out that year and divided by the number of students currently enrolled (Randel, Moore, & Blair, 2008). In the example cited above, the news article does not provide sufficient information to accurately determine the dropout rate.

Graduation rates have been part of the adequate yearly progress requirements as outlined by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) for all districts since 2002 as a measure of annual achievement in this area. At the onset of the requirements, districts were allowed to determine their own formulas for estimating graduation and dropout rates. Problems with having varying formulas for calculating graduation and dropout rates emerged almost immediately when one state attempted to compare its dropout rate against the dropout rate in another. This prompted the National Governor’s Association’s (NGA) Task Force to develop a common graduation rate formula on state high school graduation data (Curran & Reyna, 2010).

What developed from the NGA Task Force was the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate. This formula is calculated by dividing the number of graduating students by the number of first time ninth grade students four years earlier after adjusting for students who left and joined the cohort. The governors in all 50 states adopted this new graduation formula in 2005 and later it was adopted and amended by the U.S. Department of Education in October 2008. In order for the new graduation formula to be effective, each state must have a data system in place to utilize this new formula by school year 2014 (Hauser & Koenig, 2011).
Who Drops Out and Why

In order to gain perspective into what the dropout numbers mean, it is important to know what constitutes a high school dropout. According to the U.S. Department of Education, a dropout is an individual who: (a) was enrolled in school at some time during the previous school year; (b) was not enrolled at the beginning of the current school year; (c) has not graduated from high school or completed a state- or district-approved education program; and (d) does not meet any of the following exclusionary conditions: transfer to another public school district, private school, or state- or district-approved education program; temporary absence due to suspension or school-approved illness; or death (United States Department of Education, 2011). When examining who drops out and why, it is important to note the graduation rate gap between Caucasian students and students of color and male versus female.

Micheal (2011) pointed out for the graduating class of 2007, low-income students and students of color lagged significantly behind in graduation rates with relation to those who were middle-class and white. The graduation rate of white students was as much as 25% more than their peers of color. Students aged 16 – 24 and who were from the lowest quartile of family income were approximately seven times more likely to drop out of high school than students who came from the highest quartile (Michael, 2011).

Many reasons have been attributed to why students drop out and many characteristics have been associated with those who do but the primary basis of dropout research has been quantitative in nature with data derived from questionnaires and surveys. Bridgeland et. al. (2006) reported that in their survey of more than 500 ethnically and racially diverse high school dropouts between the ages of 16- to 24-years old, 47% reported they had dropped out due to classes not being interesting. Sixty-nine percent responded they were not motivated or inspired to
work hard, 66% would have worked harder if instructors had expected more from them, and 70% felt they could have graduated had they made even a minimal effort. Having to get a job and make money was reported by 32% of the respondents as the reason they had dropped out, 26% said they became a parent, while 22% left school to care for a family member. Of those surveyed, 35% left because they were failing their classes, 45% felt they began high school not fully prepared by earlier schooling, 32% were held back before dropping out, and 29% felt they could not have met the high school graduation requirements even if they had tried. In retrospect, 81% of these participants felt graduating high school had a direct correlation to success in life. Forty-seven percent said if they could go back and do it again, they would have stayed in school and earned their diploma (Bridgeland et al., 2006). It is evident from these survey results that many reasons or factors contributed to these students dropping out. Yet, this survey was not able to obtain the true stories of why these students actually dropped out or get to the root of the obstacles faced by these students that led them to forego earning their high school diploma.

Another intriguing aspect of high school dropouts is gender. According to the National Women’s Law Center (NWLC) (2007), female students dropped out at approximately the same rate as males and for similar reasons. The researchers who examined this phenomenon found one-third of male students dropped out and nearly half or more of these students had a racial or ethnic background other than white. Female students dropped out at nearly the same rate as males. On a yearly basis, one in four female students dropped out and within this gender, four in 10 Black female students and nearly four in 10 Hispanic female students failed to graduate with a high school diploma (National Women's Law Center, 2007).

What NWLC (2007) emphasized in their research was female dropouts faced more significant economic risk factors than male dropouts. In 2006, the unemployment rate for female
dropouts was 47% compared to 23% for male dropouts. Unemployment rates were consistent across racial and ethnic groups for each gender as well. Male dropouts from any racial group were one and a half times more likely to be employed than female dropouts from any racial background. The largest risk factor pertaining only to female dropouts was the situation of pregnancy and parenting and the burden it placed on the female student. Females often have the responsibility of raising children on their own which contributes to the pressure of dropping out of high school. NWLC recommended the incorporation of additional gender-based research into dropout intervention strategy development (National Women's Law Center, 2007).

**National Dropout Picture**

According to Balfanz, Bridgeland, Bruce, and Hornig-Fox (2013), the number of high schools that graduated fewer than 60% of students decreased from a high of 2,007 in 2002 to 1,424 in 2011. Their report showed positive growth in the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate among most of the 47 states that utilized this method of reporting. Of the 47 states, 24 states were above the 80% mark, 35 states had a graduation rate of 76% or higher, and 12 states had rates below 75%. Three states--Idaho, Kentucky, and Oklahoma--failed to report graduation rates below the cohort rate (Balfanz et al., 2013).

Despite the continued increase in high school graduation rates, discrepancies between students of different races, ethnicities, family income, disabilities and limited English still exist. Balfanz et al. (2013) identified no states where the graduation rate for white students was below 66% and only four states in which it was 75% or less. In contrast, the graduation rate was 66% or less for African American students in 20 states and 16 states had a similar rate for Hispanic students. There were 18 states with a graduation rate of 66% or less for low-income students. Graduation rates for students with disabilities were significantly low in 33 states and for limited
English students in 30 states. Finally, there were 11 states where the graduation rate for white students was 89% or higher but no states with a comparable graduation rate for African American, Hispanic, or economically disadvantaged students.

**National Implications of Dropouts**

As the data in the previous section suggest, there are significant personal implications for the more than one million students who annually fail to graduate with a high school diploma. A high school diploma enforces the notion the individual has both the cognitive and noncognitive qualities needed for success in adulthood. High school dropouts may be grappling with many external or internal factors leading them to dropout. A high school dropout may not be thinking of how his or her decision will affect not only his or her life but how it affects the community he or she lives in. Nonetheless, there is a powerful connection between obtaining a high school diploma and future economic and social success.

The direct costs to society of high school dropouts include loss of tax revenues, higher crime rates, and increased expenses for public assistance and health care. Bridgeland et al. (2006) reported four out of 10 16- to 24-year-olds who had not obtained a high school diploma received some sort of government assistance in 2001. A dropout is eight times more likely to be incarcerated than an adult who obtained a high school diploma. The lifetime cost to U.S. society for every youth who drops out and subsequently engages in a life of crime and drugs was estimated to range between $1.7 and $2.3 million (Lofstrom & Tyler, 2009, p. 86).

In light of the annual loss of state and national revenue due to the large number of high school dropouts, the Alliance for Excellent Education (2011) reported if half of all African American, Latino, Native, and Asian American high school dropouts had graduated in 2010, it would have resulted in tremendous economic growth. The number of jobs created would have
numbered approximately 30,000 with an increase of $5.4 billion in gross state product (GSP) nationwide, and an increase of $412 million in state tax revenue nationwide. Another important benefit would have been approximately 86,500 graduates eligible to earn a postsecondary degree (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

**Alternatives for Adult High School Dropouts**

In an attempt to combat the number of high school dropouts and afford them the chance to participate in more life changing opportunities such as job advancement and opportunities for post-secondary education, states across the country have employed many alternative programs for adults to obtain their high school diploma. As of 2005, 21 states had established statewide virtual education programs where adults continued to work toward a high school diploma. Cities such as New York, in conjunction with its department of education, relied heavily on flexible credit recovery programs while developing educational plans for students. Chicago has created early and middle-college programs. These programs are located on or near the campus of a postsecondary educational institution and allow students to earn not only high school credit but college credit as well. The goal is for the adult to graduate with a high school diploma and an Associate’s Degree simultaneously (Harris & Ganzglass, 2008). Donnelly College in Kansas, a coeducational, independent, Catholic institution in urban Kansas City, has been experimenting with such a program in an attempt to reduce local high school dropout rates. Much like Chicago’s model for early and middle-college programs, the college has invested in a partnership with Gateway to College National Network (GtCNN) to provide the Gateway to College program on their campus through a GtCNN grant award of $342,500 (Harris & Ganzglass, 2008). Similarly, Portland Community College in 2000 created the Gateway to College Program in response to the national high school dropout increase. The program allows high school
dropouts aged 16- to 21-year-olds to complete their high school diploma requirements while earning college credits toward an associate degree or certificate at the same time at local community colleges. The national program has partnered with 33 community colleges in 20 states and 125 school districts (Donnelly College, 2013). Donnelly College initiated this program in August 2013 and offered slots to 50 students who had dropped out of high school or lagged significantly in their high school credits. Donnelly College expects to enroll 300 students over the introductory three years (Gateway to College, 2013).

The Kansas State Department of Education has attempted to address the dropout issue at the state level by creating Kansas DropINs in 2009. Kansas DropINs is a dropout prevention initiative within the Kansas State Department of Education that operates under the auspices of the Kansas Department of Health and Environment. Kansas DropINs is committed to ensuring all students in Kansas graduate from high school ready to be productive citizens. Kansas DropINs publishes a quarterly newsletter and maintains a Facebook page which highlight the most current information and resources. Kansas DropINs supports and provides resources for alternative programs for adult dropouts throughout the state. The most heavily utilized Kansas adult programs rely primarily on on-line service providers referred to as degree completion programs (Donnelly College, 2013). These programs are created and independently run by school districts or in partnership with a Kansas Educational Service Center to provide the content necessary for an adult learner to earn his or her outstanding high school credits either virtually or on-site. A lack of traditional face-to-face programs for adult dropouts to earn their high school diplomas is compensated by the on-line programs whose flexibility is purportedly more conducive for adults to earn their diploma (Kansas State Department of Education, 2009). This flexibility will be discussed in greater detail within the next section.
The Virtual Learning Industry and the Adult Learner

Growth of the virtual learning industry over the past two decades has brought about alternative learning solutions for students in grades PreK-12, adult learners aspiring to obtain their high school diploma, and for adults pursuing post-secondary education. The virtual learning industry is thought to be well-suited for meeting the needs of a growing community of nontraditional students who are preparing themselves for the information and global society (Gibbons & Wentworth, 2001).

Benefits found by Cavanaugh, Gillan, Kromrey, Hess, and Blomeyer (2004) regarding the virtual learning industry included greater access for students with a wide range of needs, added flexibility in the scheduling of classes, and enhanced opportunities for greater parental influence on education (Cavanaugh, Gillan, Kromrey, Hess, & Blomeyer, 2004). However, the virtual learning industry has stirred up controversy regarding what pedagogy or adult learning theory is most effective for online instruction and what constitutes best practices for fostering a connected and engaging virtual learning environment. Adult learning theory will be discussed further in the next section. According to Wicks (2010) the online learning segment is growing at an annual rate of 16.8% and 48 states have online schools or state-led online initiatives. Wicks (2010) also reported over 4 million K-12 students in 2010 were part of a formal online program, including 217,000 students enrolled in cyber charter schools.

Online Learning Design and Adult Learning Theory

With increased use of online educational learning environments by adult learners, careful consideration of both adult learning theory and social exchange theory should be taken into account when developing this type of program. Most adults still envision the educational environment as the traditional sit and get approach, yet many adults wish to take advantage of
the virtual environment due to their chaotic schedules and the flexibility it provides them. Adult learners in the U.S. face many challenges brought on by today’s fast-paced and often hectic lifestyles. Family conflicts, multiple careers, childcare, fewer stable social structures, caring for aging parents, and transportation issues can readily interfere with learning (North American Council for Online Learning, 2011). While virtual programs may to some degree mitigate the impositions associated with these types of challenges, they may not necessarily provide adequate support for those adults who would benefit from a more personable, hands-on approach.

When designing an online learning environment for adults, Cercone (2008) found four adult learning theories that should be examined: (a) Andragogy, (b) transformative learning theory; (c) experiential learning, and (d) self-directed learning. These four adult learning theories are learner-centered, emphasize self-direction, flexibility, individualized approach to learning for every student and are more concerned with the process of learning than the content (Cercone, 2008).

Cercone’s (2008) andragogical model is based on six principles. The first principle before adults internalize their learning is the need for them to know why they need to learn the content presented to them. Adults will put forth more effort when they understand the benefits and consequences of learning or not learning something. The second principle is the learner’s self-concept. Once an adult has a self-concept of being responsible for his or her own life, they can become more confident and develop a desire to be self-directed. The third principle is the learner’s experiences. The adult has gathered more experience by simply having lived longer. This in comparison to a group of youth learners will create greater individual differences. The fourth principle is adults come ready to learn whatever they need in order to implement newly acquired knowledge into their real life situations. This principle is closely tied to the third
principle of experiences. Experiences tend to dictate when a learner is ready to learn a concept and when they can connect it to their current life situation. The fifth principle is orientation to learning. Adults are life-centered in their learning as opposed to subject-centered. Having a connection to real-life situations increases the desire of the adult to learn the subject. The final and sixth principle is motivation. Internal motivations on the part of the adult such as desire for increased job satisfaction and self-esteem motivate the adult to continue growing and developing throughout their lives (Cercone, 2008).

Transformative learning theory provides another view of adult learning theory. This learning theory “is the process of effecting change in a frame of reference” or in other words, making meaning out of the world through experiences (Knowles, Holton III, & Swanson, 2011). Mezirow (2002) declared frames of reference to be a person’s accumulated life experiences such as values, feelings, associations, and concepts that help them either accept or reject ideas based on their preconceptions. Transformative learners tend to seek out a frame of reference to help them make sense or categorize what they are learning. For the learning to become internalized, new information must be integrated into a sophisticated symbolic frame of reference by the learner (Mezirow, 2002).

The purpose of transformative learning is to recognize why we see our environment the way we do and learn how to constrain our limited perspective from influencing new learning experiences (Mezirow, 2002). Transformative learning helps adult learners make sense or “meaning of their experiences, the nature of the structures that influence the way they construe experiences, the dynamics involved in modifying meanings, and the way the structures of meaning themselves undergo changes when learners find them to be dysfunctional” (Mezirow, 1991, p. xii).
Experiential learning theory (ELT) is defined as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (Cercone, 2008, p. 149). What separates ELT from other learning theories is experience plays the central role in the learning process, and it is affective rather than cognitive in nature (Kolb, 1984). Three areas of focus comprise experiential learning which are: “(a) knowledge of concepts, facts, information, and experience; (b) prior knowledge applied to current, ongoing events; and (c) reflection with a thoughtful analysis and assessment of learners’ activity that contributes to personal growth” (Kolb, Boyatzis, & Mainemelis, 1999, p. 21). Adult experiences are resources to background knowledge of any adult learning experience.

Self-directed learning theory suggests control of the learner comes from within the adult. As a person matures, their self-concept develops into a self-directed learner rather than a learner dependent on someone else to guide them. The self-directed learner is able to enjoy and organize learning and see projects (i.e., learning) through to completion (Cercone, 2008). Regardless of the adult learning theory chosen for designing online learning programs the assumptions and tenets of social exchange theory should be examined when developing and providing professional development to staff members who will be delivering the content and interacting with these adult students.

**Helping Adults Persist in the Virtual Environment**

Persistence for the purpose of adult education is defined as: “adults staying in programs for as long as they can, engaging in self-directed study when they must drop out of their programs, and returning to a program as soon as the demands of their lives allow” (Comings, Parrella, & Soricone, 2000, p. 1). Persistence can be developed through adult learning theory
and social exchange theory. The four adult learning theories mentioned above along with social exchange theory are seen woven throughout the following paragraph based on Comings et al.’s work.

Comings et al. (2000) found a set of four supports that can be put in place to increase the odds of an adult finishing an online high school degree program. The first support is awareness and management of positive and negative forces. Positive forces include such areas as desire for higher income, while negative forces include such things as lack of free time, which can persuade adults to drop out. Programs that help students develop a plan to identify and manage positive and negative forces create persistence in adults. Self-efficacy is the second support that programs must develop in adult learners. Self-efficacy and self-confidence can be synonymous in this regard. Programs need to provide opportunities for students to experience success but not at a level so low that students do not grow academically. A balance between success and failure so growth and sustained effort is incorporated in producing self-efficacy is imperative for success. Establishing goals by the adult learner is the area where the third support is utilized. This process occurs before the program even begins for the adult learner. The staff of an educational program is integral in guiding the potential adult student in defining his or her goals and creating a road map to attain these goals. The last support builds upon the third support by helping the adult learner make progress toward his or her goals. In addition to knowing his or her goals and having a road map for getting there, the adult learner must also possess the ability to monitor and measure his or her success along the way and seek assistance when needed. Programs should be able to provide assessment procedures that measure the individual progress of the adult student (Comings et al., 2000, p. 2). Social exchanges occur with every step of the process.
Chapter 3

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative interpretivist research design to attain an understanding of why adults dropped out of a virtual high school diploma program a second time. The study attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. Why did returning adult high school dropouts fail to finish their education in a traditional high school setting the first time?

2. What motivated the adult learners to drop back into a virtual high school diploma program to complete their degree for a second time?

3. Why do returning high school dropouts not complete an adult virtual high school diploma program?

Lapan, Quartaroli, and Riemer (2011) believe interpretive qualitative researchers accept the belief that people establish meaning through the process of their interactions with the environment around them and since “each individual is unique and lives in a unique reality, individuals cannot be aggregated or averaged to explain phenomena” (Lapan, Quartaroli, & Riemer, 2011, p. 8). Employing qualitative methods allowed me to investigate the unique realities 10 individual adult high school dropouts were living. It created a dialogue between myself and the participants to where I was able to develop a relationship where the participants felt at ease to share their experiences with me (Crotty, 1998). I assembled and analyzed data from the individual interviews and organized the description of the findings to be manageable and understandable by the readers of this research in chapters four and five (Lapan et al., 2011).
Qualitative Design

Because individuals create their own meaning and understanding from their interactions with the world around them (Lapan et al., 2011), I chose an interpretivist qualitative design for this study. Interpretivist qualitative design allowed the phenomena to be explained through the perspective of the participants (Patton, 1990). This method allowed me to express participants’ stories, experiences, and interactions in experiential terms. This design permitted me to treat participants as unique yet similar to other participants (Stake, 2010) by asking open-ended questions about how he or she perceived and experienced the world. By following this protocol, probing questions emerged and changed as the study progressed (Lapan et al., 2011).

For this study, I was interested in how participants interpreted the experiences that led up to their dropping out of a traditional high school and then an alternative Kansas degree completion program which was not completed, making them two-time dropouts. Through semi-structured interviews and member checking, I brought to life the lived experiences of these participants through a series of vignettes and findings. The study design provided the road map for this to occur.

Research Site

The research site and participants section provides comprehensive information about the research site and criteria I used for participant selection. The study participants were chosen based on their experiences and decisions to drop out of a high school program twice in their lifetimes. The research site, located in South Central Kansas, was an adult high school diploma completion center that is not associated with the organization for which I am the executive director. I had no prior involvement with the degree completion program attended by the
participants. For confidentiality purposes, the exact site and identifying characteristics of the program are not revealed within the context of this study.

I purposefully chose the research site for its capacity to provide adult students who were able to impart data to answer my research questions (Merriam, 2009) due to the structure of the program. The format of the virtual program is essentially the same as the other programs located throughout the state of Kansas. According to the Kansas Department of Education Kansas DropINs web page (2013) there are degree completion programs in the south central Kansas towns of Goddard, Haysville, Wichita, Schulte, Mulvane, and Kingman. I met the study participants at the designated Kansas adult high school diploma program within south central Kansas. It was important to meet the participant at a neutral site to ensure confidentiality and a comfortable setting in which they were relaxed and willing share their experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

**Research Participants**

Research participants included 10 former Kansas adult high school diploma completion program students from South Central Kansas with whom I had no previous contact. Eligible participants were between the ages of 18 and 24 and had dropped out of both a traditional high school and a Kansas diploma completion center. Eligible participants were chosen through purposeful sampling to ensure “individuals are selected because they have experienced the central phenomenon” (Merriam, 2009, p. 78). Staff members from the South Central Kansas degree completion program provided directory information on eligible participants for me to begin the process of purposeful sampling. I planned to conduct as many individual interviews as necessary to gain the data needed for complete analysis of this research. This study required
maximizing the representatives who could best answer the research questions of this study (Creswell, 2008, p. 217).

The last goal of purposeful sampling I attempted to achieve was to select participants with whom I could establish the most beneficial relationships, ones that would best support my research questions (Lapan et al., 2011; Stake, 2010). I originally attempted to contact my sample of participants through an approved email. Due to a lack of response, I began to call the participants using the directory information to discuss my study and gauge their interest with participating in my study. I was able to secure six interviews within a short time frame of less than two weeks. After conducting the first six interviews I determined more data were needed and I interviewed four others. To remain consistent, I met with the 10 eligible participants in a comfortable and professional location within the same Kansas adult high school diploma program site.

Data Collection Plan

I relied on face-to-face, semi-structured interviews as the primary source of data (Merriam, 2009). I analyzed artifacts such as papers the participants may have written regarding the subject of their participation in school and why they dropped out. Stability of documents is one of the greatest benefits in using documentary material and was an unbiased source of data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 185). I provided a copy of the interview protocol to all the participants and explained each segment of it before they were asked to give their consent to participate in the study. (See Appendix A for consent form.) The participants kept one copy of the interview protocol and I retained the signed copy for proper containment.
Semi-structured Interviews

Because the act of dropping out is an event that cannot be directly studied or observed, it was imperative I conduct quality interviews. It was my intention to utilize interviews as the dominant strategy for data collection and recover information on what I was not able to observe because of the nature of the act happening in the past and begin to create insights on how my participants interpreted this part of his or her world (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Semi-structured interviews helped me gain insight into the participant’s perspective and learn about his or her feelings, thoughts and intentions during the time in their life when he or she chose to forego his or her high school diploma. Interviewing was the only instrument to attain the information needed for this study and obtain the quality data during the discussion. This process was largely dependent on me (Patton, 1990).

I conducted 10 semi-structured interviews, which included six males, and four females who were between the ages of 18 and 24. Six to eight interviews were originally scheduled but I determined there was need for additional participants to interview for further data collection after completing six. All semi-structured interviews were digitally recorded using multiple electronic devices. The application, Recorder Pro was used to capture the interview on my iPhone and iPad. The purpose of recording the interviews was to ensure the perspective of the interviewee be captured fully and fairly (Patton, 1990). All interview questions were administered in the same order, but due to the open-ended nature of the questions, follow up or probing questions were asked during the interview when further clarification was justified and was an important part of the process (Merriam, 2009). Interview questions are contained in Appendix B.

Because interviewing was my dominant strategy for collecting data, it was my responsibility to build a relationship with the participants, get to know them and put them at ease
I began the relationship building process through small talk when I first spoke to them over the phone to invite them to participate in my research. I developed a different rapport with each participant by looking for a topic we held in common or that I could tell was a passionate topic for him or her. I expressed to each individual participant the important knowledge they held within him or her that they could share with me. I explained how his or her experience could have a positive impact on future policies and procedures for students at-risk of dropping out of an adult high school diploma program. I attempted to put them at ease from the initial phone conversation by acknowledging that this was an extremely personal and sensitive topic. I further explained how this topic was worth sharing with me so advances in the educational community could possibly be made to aid current and future adults in their same situation.

The purpose of my study was immediately shared with my participants, assuring him or her that everything said within the confines of the interview would be treated with the upmost confidentiality and professionalism. I informed them of their right and option to cease the interview at any time, that no repercussions from me, the learning center or Wichita State University would come to them for doing so. This technique was used as a strategy for producing good interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The semi-structured interviews I conducted produced valuable and meaningful information that brought to light the participants’ experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge (Merriam, 2009).

**Document Review**

Documents reviewed in relation to this study came from adults who had enrolled in a Kansas degree completion program and have since dropped out. As part of the enrollment process adult students must write a *My Life Essay* based on several topics including one on why
they dropped out of high school the first time. The essay asked the adult to paint a picture of 
what was happening in their life, both positive and negative, during the time they chose not to continue down the path of earning their high school diploma. These documents were personal in that the story was told in first-person and “describes the individual’s actions, experiences, and beliefs” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 133). These documents were to provide insight into the personal perspective of the participants during the time of the act of them dropping out of high school the first time (Merriam, 2009).

**Data Analysis and Interpretation**

“Analysis involves working with the data, organizing them, breaking them into manageable units, coding them, synthesizing them, and searching for patterns” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 159). I began the data analysis process during the interviews themselves, listening for key words or phrases that led to follow up or clarifying questions. After each interview, I read personal notes taken by me during the actual interview prior to listening to the digitally recorded interview. Once that step had been completed, I transcribed the digital recordings of each interview to obtain a verbatim account of what had been said. Concurrent with the transcription was my initial search for inherent patterns and meanings in the data. After transcription, I developed thematic categories based on the classification and coding of textual elements that “were related to the study topic and were useful in analysis” (Lapan et al., 2011, p. 98). The next step was to take the categories developed through coding and I continued to refine them into larger but more definitive domains. Explanations and interpretation followed, allowing a coding scheme to be finalized that was applied to the entire data set (Lapan et al., 2011). Both supporting and discrepant data were rigorously examined and feedback from my
dissertation advisor regarding the effect it had on my conclusions was sought out by me to check for flaws in my logic or methods (Maxwell, 2004).

**Research Quality**

The personal journey these adult learners took to complete or forgo their high school diploma made it necessary for research quality to be at its highest rigor to ensure validity of the findings. Techniques I used to increase the credibility of my findings were triangulation, personal document review, and member checking. Triangulation of interview data collected from people with different perspectives were compared and crosschecked. Semi-structured interviews following an interview protocol were employed with 10 participants (Merriam, 2009). To ensure quality of this study, I followed these basic assumptions while interviewing my 10 participants: (a) I kept my self-esteem in check; (b) I realized I was not the center of the world; and (c) I made sure the participant knew his or her story was critically important. (Seidman, 2012).

Member checks or respondent validation was evidence that accurate interpretation had occurred and misrepresentation had not. With member checking, participants had the opportunity to look at my preliminary findings and provide feedback. By initiating this strategy, I also looked for my personal biases and misunderstandings of what I heard (Merriam, 2009).

External validity needed to be addressed as well as internal validity when linking the quality and credibility of this research with ethical practice. It was my goal to ensure this through transferability to other applications. To help make transferability of my research possible I provide ample details in Chapter 4 regarding the research participants and his or her stories in my results so that readers can make a determination on whether or not the findings could transfer to their own setting (Lapan et al., 2011; Patton, 1990).
Researcher Positionality

Qualitative researchers study the personal states of their subjects while transcending some of their own biases through the methods they employ in the inquiry process (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Biases, assumptions, and dispositions on the part of the researcher need to be explained so the reader has an opportunity to better understand how the researcher interpreted the data and reached his conclusion (Merriam, 2009). It was my responsibility to provide intellectual rigor, to ensure findings had been done to the very best of my ability (Patton, 1990). I used perseverance, creativity, and insight while returning to the data over and over again to make sure every aspect of the findings made sense to me while being aware of my own biases toward the subject being studied (Patton, 1990). I continuously returned to the data as I sought to make sense of the findings and provide the most accurate representation and interpretation of the data.

My research position was influenced by the role I played at South Central Kansas Education Service Center in Clearwater, Kansas. I was the Executive Director and was the “human research instrument” for this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A large proportion of my responsibilities was overseeing 20 DCP sites throughout the state of Kansas. Although I did not work directly with any of the adults within these programs, I had witnessed hundreds of students over the previous three years become second time high school dropouts through my supervisory role of the DCP coordinators.

Being an educational veteran in the K-12 public education arena for over 20 years as a teacher and administrator, I was extremely passionate about adult students’ success through the completion of a high school diploma. Success stories through our programs were shared with me when I attended or presented at our graduation ceremonies. It was a wonderful feeling to
observe the joy an adult felt when they were handed a high school diploma. It was as rewarding
to them then as if they had received it in high school. Often times their parents would attend the
graduation ceremonies and stories of what the next chapter of their lives will entail were
heartwarming. They would share how they planned to attend a vocational school, a community
college, or even a four-year university. A recent graduate at one of the county jail programs
spoke with the other inmates about how he had been accepted to a community college once he
was released. He attributed this possibility to the assistance provided by the DCP program.
Observing and listening to the personal stories our graduates told inspired me to understand why
other adult students were dropping out a second time.

The unintentional biasing or coloring of the information I gathered through this study
hampered my analysis of the data as well as my recommendations and conclusions and is noted
in chapters 4 and 5 through several personal reflections. In order to remain as neutral as
possible, I only selected participants who I had no personal contact with and did not know from
any prior or ongoing professional situation. No personal information regarding the participants
was shared with me before the interview. Approved protocol for individual interviews was
followed to create an atmosphere where participants were placed in an environment where they
talked openly and freely producing valuable data “filled with words that revealed the
Chapter 4

Findings

The purpose of this chapter is two-fold. The first section provides vignettes while the second addresses major themes that emerged from the field research following the interviews. It highlights findings related to the perceptions of adults who dropped out of a traditional high school degree program and an adult high school degree completion program. Data were collected through individual interviews with 10 participants who met the requirements for this study.

Vignettes

The following vignettes offer insights into the stories of the ten study participants who had dropped out of both a traditional high school program and an adult high school diploma program. I interviewed ten participants to gather information that would enable me to better understand how their individual journeys impacted their decision to drop out of a high school diploma program. The participants were between the ages of 18 and 24. Their names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

Michelle

Michelle was a 24 year-old, Caucasian female, who is married and the mother of one child. She had the expectation of one day completing her high school diploma so she could attend college to study criminology. Michelle studied criminology in high school and was interested in the field and felt she could make a positive contribution to society as a criminologist. She explained her goals with a confident tone in her voice. It took many years for her to get to this mature and confident level because of the journey she endured.
When Michelle and her older sister were only toddlers, their mother abandoned them. Their elderly grandmother adopted the two girls and raised them as her own. Michelle had a difficult time dealing with being adopted during high school but eventually learned to cope with those feelings in adulthood with the help of her husband. As a high school student, Michelle described herself as a wild child who made regretful choices because she surrounded herself with friends who also made unhealthy choices such as skipping classes, smoking, and participating in drugs. She described her teachers as adequate but felt students like her who were not involved in sports where not given as much attention as those who were. This created an unbearable learning environment. Yet even though she felt unconnected to the teachers because of her lack of involvement in sports, the high school secretary and school resource officer befriended Michelle. She expressed that both the secretary and school resource officer really cared about the students and did everything they could to encourage her to stay in school and complete her high school diploma. They continue to keep in touch with her to this day for encouragement purposes.

Because of her situation at home, Michelle had difficulty getting out of bed in the morning and going to class. She reflects now that she was lazy--a brat--and did whatever she wanted because of the age and health of her grandmother. Her choice of friends and immaturity due to life circumstances created a situation where she felt she did not need to continue her high school education. She decided to drop out during her junior year.

Michelle mothered a child shortly after dropping out of high school and did not really have a clear vision of where she was going. Becoming a mother matured her in ways she did not expect which prompted her to reflect on her behaviors in high school. Continued encouragement from her grandmother, the now former school secretary, and school resource officer brought her
to the adult learning program the first time. She wanted to make sure she could tell her child she had her high school diploma. She also wanted to make her grandmother proud. The adult program she joined was wonderful for her. It was different than the traditional high school program because she was treated as an adult. The curriculum was online: she could work at her own pace and receive support from qualified teachers whenever she needed, not when the teacher had time. If she didn’t get online for a couple of days, the teachers would contact her to make sure everything was going well and see if they could support her in any way. She created a network on Facebook of students she knew in high school and they encouraged each other to continue their work. She was determined to get it finished.

Unfortunately, Michelle’s grandmother passed away while she was attending the adult high school diploma program. The loss of her grandmother discouraged her to the point of not having the fortitude to continue and she dropped out. After some time passed and Michelle had time to grieve, she returned to the adult high school diploma program to continue her work. Life turned in a positive way for her. She met her husband, got married, and they purchased a home together. Unfortunately, the marriage, purchase, and renovation of the house, even though positive, created a situation where she dropped out of the program once again due to time constraints. Michelle vowed to go back and continue since she only lacked three credits for her high school diploma.

Michelle reflected on her high school diploma journey and wished she had realized during high school how important a diploma was for future advancement. She realized how immature she was during that time of her life and now looked at a high school diploma through a different lens. When she was in high school, she didn’t see the diploma as an advancement tool but eventually recognized it as the only way to give her the opportunity for a professional career.
As a parent, she wanted to provide her child more educational support than she was given, help her do her best, and help her obtain her high school diploma the first time around. Michelle desired to lead by example for her family by eventually going back and obtaining her diploma.

**John**

John was a 19 year-old male, Caucasian, and father of one. He desired to come back and continue his work for a high school diploma but was unable to do so because of his home situation. John felt his responsibility to take care of his child came first and that was his main focus at that point in his life. His educational journey is described below.

John never liked going to class in high school because of the continuous bullying he endured from other students. John felt most of his teachers were unwilling to step in and address the bullying he endured because he was not involved in athletic activities or other school sponsored events. However, he described one English teacher who seemed different than the rest because she cared about him and took an interest in his time at school. John confided his school feelings to her and acted appropriately in her classroom to show his respect. She counseled him on positive ways to address the pressures he was feeling because of the bullying but instead, John handled the stresses of the learning environment by acting out and being loud and obnoxious in his other classes. John felt this behavior created a poor learning environment for all students. He believed the negative behavior he exhibited was due to the frustration of being picked on. He wasn’t sure how to handle the pressure appropriately. Acting out in class was an avenue for John to draw a different type of attention to himself other than being bullied. This pressure climaxed when John’s stepfather, who had raised him since infancy, committed suicide. The suicide of his stepfather caused his mother to fall into a deep depression, rendering her nearly incapable of providing emotional or physical support for John. The combination of being
picked on and the trauma of the suicide influenced his decision to drop out of high school after his freshman year. At no time did any of the staff members at the high school reach out to him to provide emotional or educational support after his stepfather’s suicide. At no time did anyone from the high school contact him after he dropped out to encourage him to return.

After leaving high school, John fathered a child with his girlfriend. He found himself in a position where he was court ordered to enroll in and attend an adult high school diploma program because of the poor choices he made in the adult world. He found the adult program to be better suited for him because of several factors. First, he felt the staff at the adult program treated him as an adult rather than an adolescent. Second, the program offered him an online curriculum that allowed him to work at his own pace whenever and wherever he wanted to work on it. Third, if he had a question, he could email, call, or stop in to receive assistance from one of the teachers. The teachers were always very friendly and willing to help out but John realized that completing the program was ultimately his responsibility.

Although the adult high school diploma program was beneficial for John because of its format, life outside of school once again brought pressure that led him to drop out of the adult high school diploma program. After John and his child’s mother decided to separate, he obtained custody of the child and assumed the role of single father. The schedule needed to care for his child conflicted with both his work life and school life. He decided to drop out in order to work to pay his and his child’s expenses and provide the necessities of life such as rent, food, and clothing. At the time of his interview, John was four or five credits short from obtaining his high school diploma. He wanted to attend the program again but was unsure when that would be possible.
Billy

Billy was a 24 year-old Caucasian male who described himself as living an alternative lifestyle. Being a Caucasian male did not impact his educational career path as much as his alternative lifestyle. His educational journey is explained below.

Billy found it challenging growing up in a tiny Midwest community. He believed everyone knew everything about each other. He was immature during his high school years when he chose to party, obtain tattoos and body piercings, and color his hair. He took advantage of every opportunity outside of school to attend parties in the surrounding countryside and spend time with friends instead of focusing on academics.

Besides his acknowledgement of immaturity, Billy cited bullying as another reason he disliked attending classes. Students made fun of his choices in clothing, hair color, piercings, and tattoos. His perception was that teachers were likely to give attention to the high school athletes or to the students whose parents were influential due to their family money rather than to the students who did not meet these criteria. Billy remarked that bullying by the student athletes was tolerated and even accepted because of their stature among the teachers. He believed he did not have a voice because he was not an athlete nor did his family possess sufficient wealth to give them status within the community. Billy felt powerless because of this.

There was, however, an English teacher who befriended Billy and treated him as an adult. He explained that the way she spoke to him let him know she believed in him and that gave him reassurance he could continue in school. He found himself spending more and more time with her to feel safe. Her behavior toward Billy sufficiently motivated him to keep up with high school until the beginning of his senior year. Unfortunately, something occurred during that first semester that changed everything for him.
Billy had a core group of three friends whom he confided everything to. These three friends were always there for him and he felt as though they were an extension of his family. No matter what happened in school, whether he had been bullied, picked on, or physically assaulted, he knew the support of those three friends would always be there. He shared every piece of information about himself with them and trusted them implicitly.

It wasn’t until the beginning of his senior year that students and teachers began to talk about his homosexual lifestyle. Word of this circulated quickly and he was soon called into the principal’s office. The administrator did not give Billy an opportunity to explain the discussions that had occurred with the students and staff members; rather, the principal believed without question the rumors that were being circulated. Billy admitted he was traumatized by this event and felt as though he had been condemned. He saw no other option than to leave school. He was comfortable and proud of his sexual orientation and left the administrator’s office that day never to return to high school again.

Billy attempted to complete a General Equivalency Diploma program as soon as he left high school but quickly dropped out to find employment in a larger city. Billy found a job as a server in a restaurant where he discovered his passion for the food industry. The server’s position provided enough income to live modestly for a few years. The time away from school and his discovery of the food industry allowed him time to mature and reflect upon his future goals. He decided to attend the American Institute of Cooking and then open his own business but realized he could not enroll until he completed his high school diploma. It was the requirement of a high school diploma and the maturity he developed through countless attempts to better his career without a high school diploma that brought him to the local adult high school diploma program.
What Billy liked about the adult high school diploma program was the way he was treated. The staff recognized and welcomed him as an adult with different needs because of his age and need to earn a living. He liked the curriculum because he could work from home, the park, his work, or anywhere he could take his laptop and find an internet connection. The typical classroom distractions of multiple students talking, waiting for other students before moving on, or being left behind by the teacher because he was moving too quickly were no longer issues. Billy could work on his assignments at his own pace, whenever or wherever he wanted, day or evening.

The program worked for him until he felt he didn’t have the time to work on his diploma any longer. Billy was working longer hours and making more money. He felt he was disillusioned into thinking he didn’t have the time to continue his education even though he knew he needed it to fulfill his dream of opening his own restaurant. He realized that at some point in his life he would have to finish his high school diploma. He knew he wasn’t ready to finish his high school diploma and recognized that unless you are ready you will not finish.

Billy’s first goal is to go back to school next fall and finish his remaining five or six credits to earn his high school diploma. Once that accomplishment is fulfilled he hopes to not only attend the American Institute of Cooking but also attend a four-year university to obtain an accounting degree. He would like to use the accounting degree to manage the business side of his restaurant. He believes he is weak in math but also believes if he can somehow achieve his goal of obtaining his high school diploma then he can conquer anything else he sets his mind to.

Sam

Sam was a 21 year-old Caucasian male who had no children and was unmarried at the time of the interview. He worked a low-wage job and was into racecar driving. He was
attempting to build his racecar team up to a competitive level where his team could be competing
in 60 or more races a year. Like his racecar team, Sam had experienced a lot of transience
during his high school years. His journey is described in the following paragraphs.

Over the course of three years, between his freshman and junior years in high school,
Sam attended four different schools. Until his freshman year he had a stable, suburban life with
a mother and a stepfather. Sam’s stepfather was an integral part of his life because he had raised
Sam since he was one-year old. Sam was active in sports and participated in baseball and soccer
for as long as he could remember. High school began positively for him and he did well in
school and was well liked by other students and faculty.

Sam moved to another city during his sophomore year because his parents of 15 years
decided to divorce. His mother thought it would be beneficial for him to live with his biological
father as she went through her divorce. He felt angry and confused from the sudden changes in
his life. Sam went from being in a loving, stable environment where he was flourishing to a new
city where he knew no one. He began attending a high school twice as big as the one he came
from and was told he could not participate in sports for at least one year because of high school
transfer policy. The new high school he attended left him lost and confused. The school was
large enough to make him feel invisible and disconnected from everyone except for friends who
came to visit him on weekends. He also had to learn to live with a new parent he barely knew.
He had only seen his biological father on weekends and adapting to his father’s living style was a
big adjustment.

After one semester with his biological father, Sam moved back with his mother. By this
time she had moved to another city, which forced him to attend a third high school. Sam had
difficulty adjusting to the new high school and began acting out in class. He was quickly
referred to the school district’s virtual school to eliminate the need to be on campus. Looking back, Sam admitted the virtual school was probably his best option at the time and he should have completed it but instead chose to drop out of the program. The emotional toll of the divorce and moving between so many schools in such a short amount of time was too much for him to cope with. Sam’s response was to drop out of high school.

After dropping out, Sam worked menial jobs for several years to pay his bills. It was during this time he became involved in racing. He quickly realized that making minimum wage was not going to allow him to live a lifestyle he desired, such as owning and running his own racecar team. His parents encouraged him to go back and finish his high school diploma so he could eventually go to college if he wished. Maturity from living life on his own, encouragement from his parents, and experiencing the employment constraints that come to a person without a high school diploma forced Sam to conclude that enrolling in an adult high school diploma program was his only option to better his life opportunities.

Sam liked the format of the virtual program because of its ability to let him work at his own pace whenever and wherever he wanted. He liked the freedom to be able to choose how much time he spent on each subject. If math became too hard or too much, he could stop, take a break, and then move to a different subject to make it more manageable. The staff encouraged him by calling, emailing, or having him come in to see them. They always treated him as an adult and respected how much or little he accomplished. Sam felt as though he was in control of his education at all times.

After completing several courses, Sam dropped out of this program because his work hours picked up and he acquired a new sponsor for his race team. He worked 10-hour days, came home, and worked on his racecar another six to eight hours each night. Sam felt
comfortable dropping out because he was making more money than ever before and things were going better with his race team. His new racing sponsor had offered a substantial increase in salary if he were to go back and complete his high school diploma. Sam saw this opportunity as a pay raise and began looking into beginning the adult high school diploma program again. Today his goal is to become financially stable and free and feels that he can accomplish this by obtaining his high school diploma.

Allie

Allie was a 20 year-old bi-racial female with one child. Her aspiration was to one day complete her high school diploma, attend college, and become a creative writer for her favorite video game company, BioWare. Allie was confident that a high school diploma would eventually bring her professional success and was willing to achieve that certificate to better her life and the life of her child. Her story of how she arrived at where she was at the time of the interview is outlined in the following paragraphs.

Allie struggled in school, even before she reached high school. Academics were not easy for her. She explained how the immaturity level of many of the students made it difficult for her to focus in school and distracted her from being successful in the classroom. According to Allie, her teachers were not able to control the behaviors of the other students, creating an environment that was challenging for her to learn in. She was involved in band but not athletics. It was obvious to her that the athletes were treated better than non-athletes, or at least better than those who participated in less prestigious activities such as band. The staff tended to interact with the student athletes on a more frequent basis, calling on them to help or answer questions and allowing them more leniency when it came time to turn in assignments. Allie would ask for help from the teachers but they turned her down most of the time even though they knew she was
failing the majority of her classes. This left her feeling discouraged with school and its personnel.

Allie did not have a strong family support system at home. She had a single father who provided food, shelter, and clothing but very little emotional support or encouragement. She became pregnant during her freshman year of high school. The pregnancy, coupled with the lack of support from home and school, left Allie feeling like she had no other option than to drop out of high school. She dropped out her second semester of freshman year. No one from the school ever contacted her after she stopped attending to ask why or offer support for coming back.

Allie gave birth to her child later that year and continued to live at home with her father. She found employment at a local retail store because she needed to work and this was the most feasible option. Because she did not have transportation, her employment had to be within walking distance from home. Over the years, she looked for better jobs close to home but many of the higher paying employers would not consider her because she did not have a high school diploma. The inability to advance in a career helped Allie decide to enroll in an adult high school diploma program. She began the program shortly after she should have graduated from her traditional high school. The program was a good fit for her. It was beneficial that she could work on the assignments either virtually or on-site. She blended the model and worked mostly virtually but came on site for exams or if she struggled with the content. Allie liked the software because it chose assignments that were at her level and allowed her to advance as quickly or slowly as she needed.

The program staff were welcoming and Allie enjoyed the freedom from rules and procedures she was accustomed to in a traditional high school setting. She commented on the level of support she received from her two instructors. The instructors helped her understand the
work. They did not show her one time and go away; they stayed with her until she understood it completely. The instructors took an interest in her personal life and made her feel as if she were part of their family.

Even though Allie believed she had found the perfect educational fit for her situation, she dropped out of the program shortly after beginning it. Her personal life led her to make the decision to drop out again. She had broken up with her boyfriend, who had the only transportation in the family, and she had to take on more hours at work to help pay her bills. She continued to live with her father although she found him to be of little help. Allie today is raising her child on her own, working and providing the necessities for her home. She is saving for a car. She looks forward to going back to the high school diploma program so she can move on with her life and pursue her goals of attending college and obtaining a professional job.

Juan

Juan was a 21 year-old married Hispanic male with no children. He had plans to obtain his high school diploma within the next year and attend college. His experience with physically demanding construction jobs and lack of employment opportunities without an advanced degree influenced his outlook for future goals. Juan’s educational journey is explained in the following paragraphs.

Juan spent the majority of his educational career in Mexico. He did not move to the United States until he was in middle school. He felt his language barrier with English disadvantaged him with regard to learning what he needed to know. Juan was hesitant to ask questions in class because he felt inferior to native English-speaking students. Many times he needed to ask his teachers what certain words meant but chose not to because he did not want others in class to know about his struggle with English language rules. The several times he did
ask questions, his teachers made him feel inadequate by telling him to look up the word in a dictionary or ask someone else in the class. He perceived his teachers as being annoyed and angry with him because he had not mastered the English language yet. He felt disconnected at school.

He turned to his friends for support. They did not provide a positive influence for him to continue trying at school due to the immature outlook they all shared. They all believed they would be young forever and did not need to have an education to be successful in life. Instead, they encouraged him to have fun by skipping classes to spend time with them, with girls, and to get a job at McDonald’s. His work schedule had him working from 3:00 p.m. to midnight almost every day. The more he worked the less he attended school. He felt empowered because of the money he was making and believed he did not need a high school diploma. His attitude toward school was that he did not need it and that like his friends, he was going to live forever. Juan made the final decision to drop out of high school during his junior year. Juan’s parents accepted his dropping out because he had a job and did not require any type of financial support from them. He lived at home and paid for everything himself. Looking back, Juan felt his parents should have been more involved by insisting that he complete his high school program. His parents were indifferent towards education and felt it was appropriate to drop out as long as he was employed.

Life after dropping out of high school was more difficult than Juan had anticipated. He lost his job at McDonald’s and sought employment in the construction industry. He spent years working menial construction jobs that no one else wanted to do. They were jobs such as scraping walls and ceilings and hanging drywall while standing on stilts. The jobs paid very
little and the foreman who was in charge of them bullied him and his coworkers by screaming at them, making them work more hours than discussed, and paying them less than agreed upon.

Throughout this period, Juan discovered he did not want this type of employment for the rest of his life. Even at his young age, he saw the physical toll it was taking on his body. Around this time he met his wife who was attending an adult high school diploma program. She encouraged him to attend with her and he enrolled. Juan liked the format of the program. The virtual component of the online degree program allowed him to work whenever and wherever he wanted. He also liked the ability to look up the meaning of words online without having to ask others to explain their meaning. Juan worked hard for over a year until he and his wife had to stop for financial reasons. He needed to take some time off to work and save money so they could continue the program.

At the time of his interview, Juan’s wife had secured a job that allowed both of them to reenter the program. They planned to enroll during the next enrollment period. Juan concedes that he was not goal oriented in high school but now knows exactly what he wants and needs to do to achieve his dreams of one day earning his high school diploma, attending college, and securing a professional job. These dreams are a prelude to what he wants to accomplish for his future children. He wishes to be a positive role model and provide the best family environment he can for them.

Peter

Peter’s vignette is similar to Juan’s. Juan and Peter did not know each other at the time of these interviews and it was coincidental that both of them moved here from Mexico and attended the same high school (although at different times). It was only through the interviews that I discovered the two participants attended the same high school.
Peter was a 24 year-old, Hispanic male who was married with two children. He grew up in Mexico and moved to the United States when he was 12 years old. He knew almost no English when he arrived. He enrolled in middle school as soon as his family established residency here in the United States. The rest of his story is told in the following paragraphs.

Peter disliked school because he did not feel a connection to the school. He felt his language barrier kept him from being successful in class. It was uncomfortable for him to ask questions of the teacher because he did not want to look inferior to the other students. He was much more comfortable outside of school where he could be with his friends without the pressure of having to speak English. Although his conversational English was becoming stronger, he continued to struggle with the academic side of English.

There were several reasons why Peter was able to complete grades six through nine but did not return after his freshman year in high school. First, he missed many classes because he obtained a job at McDonald’s. Second, he married his girlfriend right before his 16th birthday and third; he felt mature enough to make it through life without a high school diploma. His parents were upset that he made these choices and encouraged him to go back to school. He considered re-enrolling in high school but his wife, at age 16, gave birth to their first child. This forced him to continue working to support his new family.

What Peter discovered was that the money he was making at McDonald’s was not enough to support the three of them. He applied for many higher paying jobs but they all required a high school diploma as a minimum credential for employment. Because of not having his high school diploma, Peter was left to earn a living working physically demanding jobs such as landscaping. Eventually he decided he could not do this type of work for the rest of his life and decided to go back for his high school diploma.
Peter found an adult high school diploma program but did not like it. The program was not on-line and it demanded many written reports with no support for his English language deficiencies. He dropped out of that program after several weeks. It was Peter’s wife who found a second adult high school diploma program for him to attend. They enrolled together and liked the format of the program. They could both work at their own pace and there was English language support on site. The online curriculum contained an English support component that was beneficial to both Peter and his wife.

Later, Peter dropped out of this program for financial reasons. His wife gave birth to their second child and he needed to find additional work to support them. Peter had to leave the state for several months to work landscaping in a warmer climate. He returned after making the necessary money to sustain his family during the winter season. Peter planned to re-enroll in the adult high school diploma program some time that spring. It was important to him to earn his high school diploma. Peter wanted to be a positive role model and wished to tell his children that he completed his high school degree.

**Heather**

Heather was an unmarried, 20 year-old Caucasian female. She had planned to earn her high school diploma, attend college, and work toward a degree in social work. The educational path she experienced is explained in the following paragraphs.

Academically, Heather produced good work and enjoyed what she learned in high school. Even though academics were one of Heather’s strengths, she felt trapped in school where there were few people she could talk to. If she spent time with anyone outside of school it was with family. She attended school with cousins and didn’t have any friends outside of family. Heather believed she was targeted for bullying because she did not participate in athletics and did not
have a supportive base of friends to protect her. With each passing school year, the bullying she endured became worse. She let staff members know about the bullying but no one would address her tormenters. The bullying was severe enough that Heather went to the principal and informed him of what had been happening. He investigated the allegations and called her into his office. He agreed with her accusations but encouraged her to drop out because of the severity of the harassment. He felt she would be safer in an alternative setting. Nothing ever happened to the students who were bullying Heather; they were allowed to continue school as if nothing had ever occurred.

She was transferred to an online school during her junior year but never went back to the program after finishing her second semester. She felt disconnected and became depressed, not wanting to get out of bed and convinced she would never accomplish anything in life. It was her former band instructor who encouraged her to return to high school. He had heard about her situation and became concerned she had dropped out. Conversations between the two of them became more regular and he would ask her almost daily when she was going to go back and finish her high school diploma. After a year of this encouragement, she enrolled in an adult high school diploma program. This program was different from her traditional high school experience. Faculty greeted her who were less concerned with rules and procedures and who were more interested in wanting to support and help her obtain her diploma. The staff empowered her; she had control of when she would work, what she would work on, where she would work, and how quickly or slowly she would complete the coursework. The staff made it clear to Heather they were there to support whatever need she had.

The program worked well for Heather until she got pregnant. She had to discontinue her coursework because of unexpected complications. Heather planned to reenroll as quickly as she
could. She was only a few credits short of attaining her high school diploma and was determined to go on to college. Her goal was to be a positive role model for her child and provide a loving, supportive home.

**Taylor**

Taylor was a 21 year-old unmarried, Caucasian male who did not have any children. Taylor’s educational story was different from the others because he did not ever officially drop out of school. Instead, Taylor had not passed enough classes to graduate with his classmates and was asked to leave the last semester of his senior year. He attended all four years of high school but lacked credits because of his failure rate. His educational journey is described in the following paragraphs.

Taylor was connected to his high school because of his extroverted personality. He socialized with friends, teachers, custodians, administrators, parents, and anyone else he ran into. Taylor never knew a stranger and really enjoyed being at school. What Taylor did not enjoy was his homework. His philosophy was that classwork was meant for class time, not something to be done outside of school. He believed out-of-school time was meant for spending with family and friends. However, this translated into Taylor failing many core subject areas, especially in math. Not only did he fail many classes but he spent a good deal of time in the principal’s office for acting out in class, trying to be the class clown, or for skipping classes to be with friends. Taylor was not a mean spirited student; rather, he was immature and looking to have fun rather than focusing on school.

Taylor had to take summer school every summer due to the number of classes he failed during the regular school year. However, attendance issues and lack of turning in assignments during summer school became a problem. Taylor failed almost all his summer school classes.
He and several best friends were in the same situation: insufficient credits for graduation. Taylor’s administrator met with him before his last semester and informed him there was not enough time to recover enough credits for him to graduate. They encouraged him not to return and he complied. Taylor acknowledged he had every opportunity to pass his classes throughout his high school career but still believed the staff pushed him out of school during his last semester.

After taking some time off from high school, Taylor enrolled in an adult high school diploma program. He found the adult program to be more effective for him because he did not have as many distractions. When he worked online, there were no other students to distract him from his work. If he had questions, he could go to the teachers for help. Taylor recalled there was no homework in this program because the traditional block schedule for different subjects did not apply. It was his responsibility to complete all class work at his own pace whenever and wherever he wanted. Taylor admitted having a difficult time with outside distractions such as going out with friends and backyard wrestling which caused him to stop and start the adult program several times. He was only a few credits short of earning his high school diploma when he dropped out but hoped to begin the program again soon. Once he completed the program he planned to attend either a technical college or move to a large city for other opportunities that were not available locally.

Jimmy

Jimmy was a single, 19 year-old Caucasian male with no children. He enlisted in the U.S. Army but they would not allow him to attend boot camp until he finished his high school diploma. Jimmy’s educational journey is described in the following paragraphs.
Jimmy was always physically larger than the other boys in his class and excelled at sports. He enjoyed letting others know he was better than they in any physical challenge. Jimmy didn’t go to school for the academics but to act as though he was physically superior to everyone else. He thrived on conflict and would try to fight someone different almost every day. He made it to the ninth day of his sophomore year before he was asked to drop out of high school. On that occasion, Jimmy was involved in a fight so severe that criminal charges were going to be filed against him for assault and battery. Jimmy’s principal explained that if he were to drop out of high school, he would not take him to an expulsion hearing. The principal informed Jimmy that he would lose if the incident went to an expulsion hearing and he would be expelled for a minimum of 180 days. But if he dropped out, he would be allowed to reenroll at a different high school in a different district. Jimmy chose to drop out but never reenrolled in another school.

During his adolescence, Jimmy was a ward of the state who lived in a series of foster homes from the age of 12. He thought the aggressive behavior he displayed during this period in his life was a coping mechanism to deal with the pain he was feeling inside. If he were tougher than anyone else, he believed, then no one could ever hurt him again. What he didn’t realize was he was only hurting himself by acting this way.

After dropping out of high school, his life worsened. Jimmy ran away and lived on the streets for years. He became addicted to drugs. His lifestyle landed him in jail where he reflected on what he needed to do to turn his life around. He knew he needed a change so he enrolled in an adult high school diploma program that would begin as soon as he was released. He met his girlfriend shortly after beginning the adult program. The program was beneficial to Jimmy in that he was surrounded by other adults who also realized they needed their high school
diplomas to be able to advance themselves. This support encouraged him to attend and complete his work. It was a different environment for him because he didn’t have to prove himself physically and only needed to focus on his coursework.

Even though the program was going well, Jimmy made a poor choice again and had to move in with his girlfriend and her parents for support. They encouraged him to go back to the program and even helped him by taking him to and picking him up from the program on weekdays. Jimmy refocused himself and visited a recruiter for the U.S. Army. He was allowed to enlist, but was not allowed to formally ship out for training camp until he obtained his high school diploma. At the time of the interview, Jimmy was back working on his high school diploma and had been drug-free for six-months. Jimmy was confident he would make it this time and was optimistic about what the future held for him and his girlfriend.

**Document Review**

During the conceptual stage of this study, I proposed reviewing *My Life Essays*. As part of the enrollment process of the degree completion program adult students wrote a *My Life Essay* on why they dropped out of high school the first time. The essay asked enrollees to paint a picture of what had happened in their lives, both positive and negative, during the time they discontinued working on their high school diplomas. I posited these documents would contain data to support my three overarching study questions but upon review of 25 *My Life Essays* obtained from the south central Kansas adult high school diploma completion program, I found the information to be only minimally and superficially informative. The data failed to enrich the findings derived from the 10 in-depth structured interviews and thus are not included in this study.
Major Themes

I began this study by posing three broad questions that addressed the problem of adults dropping out a second time from a high school diploma program. In my professional capacity as a director of an educational service center in Kansas, the number of adults who enrolled but failed to complete the high school diploma programs offered through the service center troubled me. As a consequence of this phenomenon, my interest was aroused to learn about the factors that prompted these adults to drop out a second time. My three overarching research questions were:

1. Why did returning adult high school dropouts fail to finish their education in a traditional high school setting the first time?
2. What motivated the adult learners to drop back into a virtual high school diploma program to complete their degree for a second time?
3. Why do returning high school dropouts not complete an adult virtual high school diploma program?

After conducting 10 individual interviews and spending approximately 25 hours talking with adults about the reasons and circumstances that culminated in their decisions to drop out, my analysis of the data yielded seven salient findings. I list these findings below after which I discuss each one individually in depth. It is important to bear in mind that after listening to these stories, it became clear to me that no single reason fully explained why a particular study participant chose to drop out. Rather, one or more reasons occurred in tandem and it was this confluence of factors that created a sufficiently compelling set of circumstances to prompt each participant to exit the program. The implications of what it means to have multiple factors
working in unison to dissuade students from obtaining their high school diplomas are discussed in the final chapter.

The seven salient findings are (in no particular order of importance):

Finding 1: Dropping out of school the first time was associated with being bullied by other students, school administration, or staff. Bullying created hostile educational environments that were not conducive to staying in school.

Finding 2: Dropping out of school the first and/or second time was associated with traumatic life events. Participants did not receive adequate personal support or mental health counseling to help them resolve the impact of these events.

Finding 3: Dropping out of high school the first and/or second time was associated with a lack of resources and/or social capital.

Finding 4: Lack of well-paying adult employment opportunities prompted participants to return to school to attain their high school diploma.

Finding 5: Personal need or ambitions were critical attributes for successful completion of the program.

Finding 6: Participants believed the virtual adult high school degree completion program was an appropriate model for returning adult students.

Finding 7: Participants thought staff members involved with the adult high school diploma program treated them with respect and dignity, attitudes not routinely experienced in high school.
Dropping Out of School the First Time was Associated with being Bullied by Other Students, School Administration, or Staff. Bullying Created Hostile Educational Environments that were not Conducive to Staying in School

Throughout the interviews, numerous participants related descriptions or recollections of bullying that had been directed at them in high school. According to Nansel et al. (2001), bullying is a definite type of aggression where the behavior is intended to physically or emotionally harm another person(s). The behavior occurs repeatedly over time and the behavior creates an imbalance of power with a more powerful person or group attacking a less powerful person or group.

Even though the episodes of bullying occurred years before these interviews took place, participants remembered and explained in detail how the hurtful treatment by students and school staff members still echoed within their memories as if it had happened only yesterday. Billy and John noted being made fun of because of their choice of clothes, hair color, tattoos, piercings, family situations, friends, perceived lack of intelligence in class, or sexual orientation. Billy’s experience after informing his classmates he was gay met with inappropriate behavior on the part of his building administrator. The principal called him into his office and was visibly upset with Billy. His administrator did not attempt to make Billy feel at ease or ask him any questions about the rumors and discussions that were being spread around the building regarding his sexual orientation. The first words out of the principal’s mouth were: “The reason people think you are a fag is because you have a tattoo and an earring and you color your hair.” Billy endured bullying from his classmates for years because of his fashion choices but this one comment from an administrator about his sexual orientation caused him to turn around, leave the school, and never return. There was great sadness in his voice and tears in Billy’s eyes when he
spoke to me about this encounter. It was obvious that the principal created pain and sorrow within Billy to depths that may never fully be healed.

John, in contrast, spoke with almost no emotion in his voice as he described the treatment he received from other students when he was in school. He explained how he “stuck to himself” because he “didn’t really have any friends.” Classmates seemed to delight in teasing him about anything they thought would upset him. John’s coping mechanism were to be “loud and obnoxious” in the classrooms where he received little to no support from the teachers in keeping him safe from the negative treatment of other students. If he was acting out in class, there was less time for other students to act out against him. Teachers were forced to discipline John because of his behavior but he did not mind because being the recipient of negative attention from teachers was better than receiving no attention at all or being bullied by students.

Several other participants claimed they were bullied because they did not participate in high school sports or were not part of what Michelle explained as the “superficial high social rank of students.” Jimmy, Michelle, Sam, Billy, and Heather all perceived staff members to have treated students who participated in athletics on a more equal level as the adults. Billy, Michelle and Heather noted athletes were given more privileges such as less class work, more time to complete class work, and more opportunities to be late to class or miss a class without incurring a consequence such as detention. If non-athletes were late to class or absent without an excuse, they almost invariably received detention or had to make up the missed class time outside of the school day. Billy stated, “the teachers paid more attention to the high school athletes and the cool kids than they did the kids that didn’t really have a big popular name or play sports.” Michelle noticed the “teachers were a lot more into the students who were on the sports team.” Sam, who was an avid sports participant until he transferred around from school to school was
excluded from participating in mainstream sports his junior year because he was racing his car on weekends. Sam’s baseball coach instructed him to choose between the two because he would not be allowed to participate in both. Sam knew this was not a school rule but a way for the coach to control the situation and exclude him because the baseball coach wanted him to concentrate solely on baseball. He stood up for himself and told the coach he “was wrong because baseball is a school sport and it shouldn’t matter and I will choose racing over anything.”

Allie, Billy, Heather, and Taylor asserted they were bullied because they were not friends with the right people. It was the perceived social ranking of students in high school that led others to make fun of, put down, or exclude these participants from activities or social gatherings in and out of school. These disrespectful attitudes toward them left them feeling disconnected from school and friends.

Two of the participants interviewed, Juan and Peter, were English Language Learners (ELL) from Mexico who experienced bullying in a different context than the others. Because of their lack of fluency with the English language, Peter and Juan were ridiculed and made to feel inferior by their teachers and classmates. If they had questions about certain words or phrases, the teachers would give direction for them to either look the word up or ask a classmate to explain it to them. If they asked a classmate, they received derogatory comments about not being native English speakers. Juan explained it in this manner:

It was kind of hard because English is my second language to me so to go to the teacher and say, “What does this mean?” or “What does that word mean?” it kind of made me feel like, uh, inferior to the other students because all of the other students knew it but I
wasn’t going to ask because I didn’t want the other kids to ask why I didn’t know this or didn’t know that.

Juan and Peter found it easier to disengage from their classmates, teachers, and classes rather than stay in school and be taunted by remarks from native English speaking students about their lack of English language proficiency. This treatment in school was a major contributor to Juan and Peter dropping out of high school the first time.

Each participant who experienced bullying either did not feel school provided a safe environment in which to tell an adult the truth about what was happening or if they did tell an adult, the solution worked against them. Heather, who was harassed on a daily basis by a group of four girls, had no other option but to tell her teacher about the repeated verbal abuse she received. The teacher refused to acknowledge the bullying behavior on the part of the four girls, so Heather went to her principal and explained how the group of four girls made fun of her. She explained how the group of four girls made fun of or taunted her about her choice of friends, clothing, and activities such as her involvement with band, purposefully creating an environment where Heather was too uncomfortable to participate in mainstream school sport activities. To his credit, the principal investigated the situation. But when the investigation was completed, and even though the high school principal acknowledged the behavior had occurred, he asked Heather to drop out of school instead of confronting the problem. As Heather explained it, “So, he had me transfer to an online school because it [the bullying] was that bad. It was really bad.” She opted not to attend the online school but dropped out of high school completely. Heather’s decision to drop out was due to the lack of corrective action taken against the four girls who had created the hostile school environment. The four girls remained in school with no repercussions for their behavior.
Several participants who experienced bullying believed they were “pushed out” of high school either directly or indirectly. Heather and Taylor were verbally asked to leave school by their respective building principals. Heather was asked to leave because four female bullies were victimizing her. Taylor was asked to leave during his last semester by his assigned building administrator because he had not completed enough credits to graduate on time. Jimmy was given an ultimatum of either leaving school or facing expulsion because in the judgment of his building administrator, “Your behavior is no longer welcome at this building.” Billy, Juan, Peter and Allie all believed they were unwelcomed in school because of the negative treatment they received from the staff who either ignored them or allowed others to create a hostile school environment. The four participants who were not directly asked to leave thought they were not welcome there. Allie articulated it this way: “I just got discouraged and thought what was the point?” This statement from Allie was in response to repeated encounters of being ignored by teachers when she asked for help with her classwork.

To bring closure and further clarity to this finding of bullying, I stumbled upon an interesting discovery. During the first interview, I sensed something was not right with the treatment Michelle received from the school or with the lack of support from staff members. Michelle never mentioned that anyone from the high school contacted her to find out why she had not returned to school. This prompted me to ask this probing question: “Had anyone [administration] from the school ever contacted you since the last day you left?” I asked Michelle this question and every subsequent participant thereafter. Every participant answered “No;” he or she had never heard from administration at the school or from the school district in general after dropping out. This resounding “no” by every participant showed the extent to
which they were not connected to their high schools or perhaps not wanted by the administration at their high schools.

**Dropping Out of School the First and/or Second Time was Associated with Traumatic Life Events. Participants did not Receive Adequate Personal Support or Mental Health Counseling to Help Them Resolve the Impact of these Events**

Several participants throughout the individual interviews described traumatic events they had suffered that seemed related to dropping out. Several participants experienced profoundly disturbing events in their lives such as abandonment by parents, death of a parent, suicide of a parent, and divorce. Whereas one traumatic event can be devastating in and of itself, Michelle was unfortunate enough to have experienced two traumatic events in her lifetime. Michelle was abandoned when she was one-year old. She and her older sister were taken in and later adopted by their elderly grandmother. Although her grandmother raised both girls as her own, Michelle continued to harbor unresolved feelings of anger toward her mother for abandoning her daughters. Michelle let me know where this anger came from when she stated, “I had a really hard time dealing with being adopted when I was growing up.”

Michelle’s anger led to a rebellious attitude and disruptive behavior at school. She befriended girls who encouraged her to skip school, smoke cigarettes, and do drugs. When asked about her friends, Michelle responded:

Oh gosh, I didn’t have the best friends, I don’t think. I didn’t have the best judgment of character, either, so my friends were not all that great. They weren’t trying to help me to finish or encouraging or stuff like that – it was always going more the bad route that you don’t want your kid to go down. It was more of a negative than a positive with my friends.
The anger and resentment Michelle had to wrestle with on her own as a result of her abandonment by her mother and her misguided choice of friends clearly contributed to her decision to drop out of high school.

After Michelle left high school, her grandmother pressed her to go back and get her high school diploma. Eventually, she went back as an adult. Once Michelle began the adult high school diploma program and began making progress toward her diploma, another event happened that squelched her desire to finish her diploma a second time. Her grandmother suddenly passed away. The pain from this loss caused her to regress emotionally and become depressed. This traumatic event served as the trigger that caused Michelle to drop out of the adult high school diploma program.

Another participant, John, experienced the loss of a stepfather. His stepfather, who had raised him from age one, took his own life when John was in high school. The loss was devastating to him and his mother. This suicide left John’s mother grief stricken and John was consequently left with no emotional or physical support to encourage him to continue his education. John unexpectedly found himself without a clear direction of where he needed to go. He opted to support his mother and dropped out of high school within months of the suicide. Unfortunately for John, he was not able to adequately support his mother and found himself making choices that landed him in trouble with the law. When John turned 18, he found himself at the adult high school diploma program as a result of a court order.

Divorce was another traumatic event described by participants. One participant in particular, Sam, described the event as shocking and unexpected. Sam explained to me how he had the “perfect” family up until the day his parents told him they were divorcing. Sam lived in a suburban neighborhood filled with middle class families, had many friends, participated in any
sport he wanted, and had visions of one day having a professional job. The divorce not only caused his immediate family to split apart, but this event caused Sam to change residences and schools four different times within three years. Almost overnight he went from a seemingly stable two-parent family living in a suburban neighborhood, the companionship of many friends, and active participation in several sports to being uprooted and displaced. Sam explained,

My stepdad wanted me to move in with my dad, which was kind of weird because I would only see him every other weekend and so living with him full time was a big change and it just really threw me off.

Living with his biological father lasted approximately one year and then Sam was asked to return to his mother who by this time had moved to another city. Sam described how the emotional toll of having to move frequently into different homes and attend different schools was so overwhelming that he decided to discontinue his education. He found it increasingly difficult to create lasting friendships with his peers and sustain positive relationships with his teachers because of the transience he experienced in his personal life.

Even though his parents were encouraging him to continue, Sam was unable to muster the strength or resolve to go back to school. The movement between schools kept him perpetually behind his classmates and trying to catch up was a major academic challenge. There are numerous research studies that address the experience Sam endured. Sorin and Lloste (2006), for example, found that 70% of students who moved between two different schools within three years experienced significant school and social adjustment and negative academic achievement (Sorin & Iloste, 2006).

In addressing traumatic events and bullying as discrete influences, I weighed the logic of weaving them into one major theme but ultimately decided to separate the two. Yes, bullying is
traumatic, but it is typically an action against an individual that is repeated and sustained over time. The traumatic events described in this finding were a one-time debilitating action that caused serious damage to particular study participants that triggered a swift and radical change to an individual’s family and social structure. This radical change created a downward spiral in participants’ lives that still reverberates within them today. This debilitating outcome will be discussed in depth within the next chapter of this study.

**Dropping Out of High School the First and/or Second Time was Associated with a Lack of Resources and/or Social Capital**

Several participants articulated how a lack of resources and/or social capital hindered their pursuit of education both in the traditional high school setting and during their time in the adult high school diploma program. An example of this was when Allie became pregnant during her freshman year in high school and commented on the lack of support she received at home and at school. Allie did not have a mother at home and her father chose not to provide any assistance to her and her child other than a place to live. She believed her only option was to drop out of high school because staff had consistently ignored her. She was failing most all of her classes. Whenever she would go in for help or ask for help in class, the instructors would disregard her, tell her to not worry about completing the assignment or tell her to just take a seat and be quiet. Allie felt ignored by her teachers on both an academic and emotional level. They did not acknowledge Allie’s educational needs, nor did they encourage her emotionally. Allie realized that she would need to support her unborn child by finding employment, so she decided to dropout. She summed it up with this statement:
I probably would have dropped out regardless because even before I found out I was pregnant, I wasn’t really doing very well in school and started to feel like what’s the point and couldn’t understand it and nobody would help me understand it.

Allie would go in for help before and after school but not a single teacher would provide assistance because, she believed, she was academically behind the other students. The teachers would allow her to sit in class and not participate or complete homework as long as she was quiet.

Several years after Allie dropped out of high school, she received support from a boyfriend. He would help take care of her, drive her to the adult high school diploma site when she needed to go there and help watch and take care of her child. When their relationship ended, Allie was left with no transportation. Allie’s father refused to drive her anywhere and at the time of her interview, she still did not have a vehicle of her own. Even with the lack of support, she managed to maintain a positive outlook. Allie explained, “I live with my dad but I don’t really count on my family for help very much. Unfortunately, but that will make me more independent in the long run.”

The lack of money to support themselves and their families was mentioned by almost all participants as a significant deterrent to completing the adult high school diploma program. Six of the 10 participants interviewed stated they had dropped out of the high school diploma program multiple times and returned multiple times to once again work on their high school diploma. They would drop out of the high school program and work long enough to pay for food, rent, and daily necessities. Juan and Peter ceased attending the adult program and left the state for employment opportunities elsewhere only to return to their prior Kansas residence where they first began their adult high school career. Their employment included jobs such as
landscaping and agricultural fieldwork, which often times made them migratory and financially dependent on the vagaries of climate. Peter was one participant who had come and gone from the adult program because of migratory working opportunities. He stated, “A couple of months ago I moved to California and I had to stop the program here, but I want to get back into it – maybe this coming month.”

Juan and Peter, who married at a young age, explained their inability to complete their high school diploma program was brought about by different reasons. Peter’s spouse worked when he was home from migratory employment, leaving him to take care of the children by himself. Peter had no immediate family support system to provide the time necessary to work on the program. Juan had dropped in and out of the adult high school degree program several times and relied on the support of his wife who provided a plan for both of them to finish. He gained employment to provide the necessities for them to survive. This enabled Juan’s wife, Isabel, to work on and finish her high school diploma. Isabel planned to find employment now that she had obtained her high school diploma which would allow Juan to return to the adult high school degree program. Juan acknowledged,

If it wasn’t for Isabel I wouldn’t even be as far as I am because she is out there trying to make the money right now. So, I want to go back and get this done as soon as possible so I can get out there and work and start having kids.

This particular example of support was an outlier compared to the others who experienced little to no support from family. It took two people with no resources or support to create and execute this plan that allowed both of them to work on their high school diploma, but at different times.
Lack of Well-Paying Adult Employment Opportunities Prompted Participants to Return to School to Attain their High School Diploma

Participants mentioned the lack of opportunity for professional employment as a catalyst for them to return for their high school diploma. Once the participants entered the labor market, few good-paying jobs were available to them without a high school diploma. The jobs available to those without a high school diploma were, as John expressed, “the only kind of jobs you will get are the jobs that people don’t want to do, that’s all.” Allie declared, “It’s hard to get a job without a high school diploma and I want to go to college eventually but I can’t do that until I get one. It’s just a struggle without it.”

The employment opportunities for someone without a high school diploma mentioned by Juan, Sam, Allie, Michelle, Billy, and Heather were jobs such as working at McDonald’s, waiting tables, hanging sheetrock, cleaning debris and unused materials from construction sites, prepping for painters, landscaping, roofing, painting, road construction, cashiers at small retail chains, cleaning houses and businesses, and washing windows. Jimmy and Taylor attempted to join the military but were denied admission because they did not have their high school diploma. It is worth pointing out that all of these jobs are classified as un-skilled labor and the majority are physically demanding and take a toll on the body. Peter determined early on after working several physically demanding jobs that this was not the career path he wanted to continue down. He stated,

Because I don’t want to work so hard and just get paid a little bit for nothing. You know how some people say that hard work pays off but not really if you don’t have an education. If you have an education and you work hard it will pay off but without an education you won’t go anywhere.
Juan was another participant who decided to go back and earn his high school diploma because of the lack of employment opportunities without it. One job in particular swayed his mind. He conveyed this narrative to me:

This last job that really made me change was this job I had where I was doing some drywall. I was doing texturing the ceilings. That job was horrible, I feel like I was pretty much a slave man because we went up there and we were prepping for the new houses and you know you prep it and cover all of the walls with plastic and stuff and some guy comes with a big hose and starts spraying the ceiling and it was just a big mess. And not only that, you had to be walking on stilts, like very high stilts. I had a friend who fell off his stilts and broke two ribs and so I was like I can’t do this anymore.

Sam kept coming back to the adult high school diploma program because he realized he would not be able to advance professionally without one. After spending years working long hours for minimal pay at a factory he came to this conclusion:

With a diploma you can go out and get so much further in life than what you can without it. I mean an example is, you could be working for 10 dollars an hour with no diploma and for some people, they think that’s ok. But this is 2013 and stuff is expensive, houses are expensive to rent or own, cars are expensive, nice stuff is expensive. If you want stuff, you have to get your diploma and go to college and get that degree. Then you can start making 20 plus dollars per hour.

One participant out of the 10 I interviewed—Jimmy--had secured an agreement with the U.S. Army to begin boot camp as soon as he earned his high school diploma. Michelle, John, Billy, Sam, Allie, Heather, and Taylor wanted to return to the high school diploma program in
order to have the opportunity to attend a junior or technical college or four-year university. Juan and Peter wanted their high school diploma to secure any career other than physical labor.

**Personal Need or Ambitions were Critical Attributes for Successful Completion of the Program**

The participants interviewed had not successfully completed all requirements for their high school diplomas and when queried about what would have helped them persist in the program until completion, another theme emerged. That theme focused on a personal need or desire to complete their high school diploma.

The participants did not make excuses for where they were in the journey to earning their high school diploma. Instead, they remarked how it was up to the individual to see the process through, not anyone else. Emotional maturity was described by six out of ten participants but was described in more detail by Michelle. She explained how she acted immaturely in high school due to her home situation. Because her elderly grandmother was raising her, Michelle behaved as if school was a social arena rather than an important process needed for further education and employment opportunities. Michelle did nottake high school seriously but later wished she had. Reflecting on her past brought about a new outlook on education for her. She believed it would be beneficial if,

Parents would sit and guide their children more towards a positive direction and let their kids know that high school is kind of a serious time and you really do need to do your best and stuff like that because I wasn’t really aware how important high school was you know, so I didn’t have my brain wrapped around that. I just didn’t know, so I didn’t care. Michelle recognized how important a high school diploma was and that it was her responsibility to do the work when she had the opportunity. She did not possess the maturity when she was
initially in high school but after dropping out recognized the importance of a high school diploma and experienced the desire to finish her education.

Michelle also had a personal desire to honor the wish of her grandmother who suddenly passed away when she was 21 years old. Her grandmother raised her from infancy and longed for Michelle to attain her high school diploma. Michelle re-enrolled in the adult high school program and began working toward her high school diploma in an attempt to fulfill her grandmother’s last wish.

Billy experienced a similar feeling as Michelle and commented that a desire and readiness had to be internalized. He stated,

I just wasn’t ready for it and I think that is one thing that people don’t understand is if you’re not ready to do this, you’re not going to finish. If you don’t care about it, you’re not coming back. That’s just the way it works. That’s just how the human brain works, if you don’t care about something you’re just going to walk away from it – you know?

Several participants including Peter returned to the program in order to be a positive example for their own children. Peter affirmed,

I want to get it done so I can show my kids that I got it done. I’m not going to let my kids tell me they are not going to do it because I didn’t do it. I want to get it done before they go off to school and I want to show them they have to do it.

Other participants noted an increase in their self-confidence when they were working on their high school diploma coursework, which in turn produced a desire to continue the program. One participant, Heather, remarked,

I felt so much more successful when I was working on my program when I went back. I was just lying in bed all day before I went back feeling like I was never going to get
anywhere in life. I felt ten times better about myself. It’s a good thing. It was a huge boost for me.

For other participants, it is the anticipation of what the high school diploma holds for them that creates the internal commitment they need to go back and continue their work. They look forward to the day they receive their diplomas and what it will mean to them. For Michelle, Allie, and Peter, it means an opportunity to be a positive example for their family and educational and employment advances that will better their lives and the lives of their families. Jimmy summed it up with this statement:

It’s going to be one of the best experiences to lift my head up and receive my diploma and say I did it. To get that smile on my face to know I accomplished something. If you have kids it shows them that mommy and daddy can do whatever it takes. It shows those kids that my mom and my dad did it and so can I. It’s one step at a time and it’s as easy or hard as you want to make it –just get it done! It’s just about yourself and what you can do with it!

This statement by Jimmy represents the feelings echoed by most of the participants. Seven out of ten participants commented on how it was up to them and no one else to complete this journey and how it will signify a momentous milestone in their lives once they attain their diploma.

**Participants Believed the Virtual Adult High School Degree Completion Program was an Appropriate Model for Returning Adult Students**

Every participant shared personal evidence that the adult virtual high school degree program was an appropriate and positive model for returning adults. Participants enjoyed and appreciated the flexibility of the online curriculum. They enjoyed the opportunity to work on the subjects they wanted, when they wanted, and where they wanted.
Billy told me about the advantages he enjoyed that resulted from program flexibility:

The computer thing was kind of nice, I could sit in my bed and do it, go to the park and do it, I could do it wherever I wanted to. It was nice that I didn’t have to come in and do it in front of a teacher and listen to them gab because that is just annoying to me.

Even though the program was structured virtually it provided support to the adult learners with access to a physical site complete with certified teachers who were capable of answering questions in real time. All participants were able to access assistance from the certified staff either virtually or on-site. It was nothing like the traditional program they dropped out of. It was not a standard 40-minute class with one teacher dictating what occurred during that time frame within a brick-and-mortar building. The participants found the online curriculum met them at their level, allowing each person to progress at his or her own pace. Sam explained the flexibility of the program like this:

I think it’s a great program. Online you can go at your own pace and if you’re struggling with a math section you can move to an English or Science or something different. You don’t have to sit there for that whole hour just learning about math. You can do it for thirty minutes or so and if you’re struggling with it you can just take a break from it and go onto something else. It’s pretty much a work at your own pace kind of deal. You don’t have someone telling you to get 100 problems done in 10 minutes and then they talk the full 45 minutes in class.

Allie told me how high school was difficult for her because of the distractions she encountered with other students. She liked the procedures and setup of the virtual program and described her thinking with this statement:
I like that the program is more catered to you, like what you need to be working on. You don’t have to follow along with a bunch of other people and what they are doing because some of them are above you and some are below you. It meets you at your level and I can get things done faster when I can do it myself and don’t have to follow along with everyone else.

Juan and Peter found the adult program met their ELL needs as well. When they were in a traditional high school setting, they had to rely on teachers or other students to help them with vocabulary and how to correctly use words in context. The adult model they were using had a built in component to help non-native English speakers with comprehension and application of the English language. Juan gave a snippet of how the adult program has benefited his style of learning. He stated:

And now with Odysseyware, I can go online and I can translate everything in Spanish and get the whole message. If I don’t know the whole passage in Spanish, I just read the whole definition and figure it out. It’s helping me do this.

Taylor had a different view on what constitutes homework. When he was in high school, he determined that homework needed to be completed during school hours whereas after school activities were reserved for friends and family. That way of thinking put him in a position where he was eventually asked to drop out. With the adult program, he has personally defined coursework within a new framework. He explains the adult program and homework this way:

It let’s you work at your own pace and that’s something that’s really good for kids who don’t like to do their homework. There really isn’t such a thing as homework in this class because it’s online. It’s a collective class, meaning anything you do at home is just the
same as doing it at class. It doesn’t separate it into schoolwork and homework -- you just do it.

Every participant had their own positive perspective on the adult high school degree program, but they all agreed that the program’s work at your own pace and online availability were conducive to the needs of adult learners. The program provided instructional flexibility and took into account the diverse schedules these participants’ experienced and demanded as adults.

**Participants Thought Staff Members Involved with the Adult High School Diploma Program Treated Them with Respect and Dignity, Attitudes not Routinely Experienced in High School**

Study participants experienced a lack of respect and dignity in high school as described in the section regarding bullying and a hostile educational environment. These same participants found a much different culture at the adult high school diploma program. Instead of skipping classes and acting out behaviorally like they had in high school because of the lack of respect and dignity from their classroom teachers, participants found the interaction between staff and themselves at the virtual high school diploma program to be quite different. Staff at the adult high school diploma program created a caring and motivating environment and a setting in which learning and positive relationships were encouraged and fostered. Allie provided me with an insight into how she knew the staff at the adult learning center cared about her:

If I had a question, they would help me and made sure I understood the answer. They were not going to come and show me one time and expect me to be able to do it every time. Just the way they talked to me about things other than school and what’s going on with me. You could tell that they really cared and that they wanted to help me succeed.
Peter found the staff at the adult learning center to be less judgmental and more responsive to adult needs. The staff did not pressure him to get things done as quickly as other native English-speaking students. He described his interactions with the staff like this:

I like that they are really laid back and they don’t push me to get everything done at once. I also like that they will help me when I have questions and don’t make me feel inferior. I feel like an adult here. In high school I was treated like a child. I like the way they treat us.

Participants explained how staff members treated them with respect and dignity. Study participants believed staff members at the adult program understood their needs as adults and the life situations they brought with them, such as having to work and take care of themselves and the needs of their children, if they had any. The staff members not only treated the participants as adults but they treated them as if they were family. Billy remarked,

When I first came in, they were really welcoming here. I had never had two people be so entrusted in me. Ted was always like, how’s it going? Have you been working on this or that? He’s always very happy and they are just really nice, wholesome people and it’s really weird for me to have someone outside of my family care for me like that.

Part of the family atmosphere of the adult program was the empathetic way in which each staff member encouraged and held the participants accountable for the work they completed. Almost every participant spoke of the commitment staff members had for him or her when they failed to complete any work for several days. Taylor explained it like this:

They are really supportive here too. They will call if you don’t work a couple of days and they won’t be rude or anything like that, they’ll just be like “hey just want to see if
you’re going to get some work done today” and stuff like that. They are really encouraging and they’re all on Facebook, too.

Staff members provided genuine outreach to these adults in an attempt to create a nurturing environment, an effort the participants appreciated. Michelle gave this example of how staff members at the adult learning center encouraged teambuilding with the adult learners:

They throw little parties and get-togethers for us and you know, bring in little dishes of food for us to share. There is a ceramics class where we all get to sit and paint and stuff. I mean, you feel kind of stupid and stuff but it’s all for a good cause [networking] and you get to sit and hang out with your peers, they are so supportive of us. If you raise your hand they are right there to help you and they are so encouraging. Everyone gets along!

The staff at the adult learning center never ceased encouraging their adult students to continue attending or returning to the program if they dropped out. It was never a matter of how many times adults dropped out; it was about meeting their immediate needs and encouraging them to drop back in. Sam was one such participant who had dropped out several times but was continuously being called, texted, and messaged on Facebook to come back in. It was this personal touch and caring that kept Sam coming back to the program. Sam told me:

Annie would always call me and ask me how I was doing and if I wanted to come back to the program. I told her if I can I would but at the time I was working like crazy. She always understood and let me know she would be there when I was ready to come back.

Participants described how the personal interactions of the staff at the adult learning center made them feel as if they were important and that the staff genuinely wanted to help them succeed at attaining a high school diploma. As described within the second section of this chapter it appears that the structure of the virtual program and the treatment of the participants by staff
members were conducive for success on part of the adult. Even with the appropriate format for these adults to be successful within the adult learning center, participants continued to drop out a second or third time or more. They did not begin this second-chance journey with a clean slate; they continued to deal with the consequences and ramifications of dropping out the first time. The psychosocial effects stemming from bullying, exclusion, and differences endured by my participants while in high school still resonated profoundly within each one of them and continued to affect their ability to attain a high school diploma. This connection between what happened to these participants as adolescents and how it continues to impact their ability to complete their high school diploma as an adult are addressed in greater detail within the following chapter.
Chapter 5
Discussion and Conclusions

The emphasis of this chapter is to review the purpose of this study, research questions, summary, and discussion of the findings. Interpretations of the findings from Chapter 4 are expanded upon in this chapter. I provide suggestions and recommendations at the conclusion of this chapter.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this interpretivist qualitative study was to generate a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of second-time adult dropouts. This study has wide-range implications for how schools or programs determine policies and practices when working with or relating to students who have dropped out of high school or are at-risk of dropping out of high school. Additionally, this study contributes to the insights and recommendations on how to support high school dropouts on an individual basis whether they are a traditional high school student or an adult high school student.

Overarching Research Questions

1. Why did returning adult high school dropouts fail to finish their education in a traditional high school setting the first time?
2. What motivated the adult learners to drop back into a virtual high school diploma program to complete their degree for a second time?
3. Why do returning high school dropouts not complete an adult virtual high school diploma program?
Major Themes

Finding 1: Dropping out of school the first time was associated with being bullied by other students, school administration, or staff. Bullying created hostile educational environments that were not conducive to staying in school.

Finding 2: Dropping out of school the first and/or second time was associated with traumatic life events. Participants did not receive adequate personal support or mental health counseling to help them resolve the impact of these events.

Finding 3: Dropping out of high school the first and/or second time was associated with a lack of resources and/or social capital.

Finding 4: Lack of well-paying adult employment opportunities prompted participants to return to school to attain their high school diploma.

Finding 5: Personal need or ambitions were critical attributes for successful completion of the program.

Finding 6: Participants believed the virtual adult high school degree completion program was an appropriate model for returning adult students.

Finding 7: Participants thought staff members involved with the adult high school diploma program treated them with respect and dignity, attitudes not routinely experienced in high school.

Discussion of Findings

Detailed discussions of key findings from my study are presented in this section. Results of each finding are presented in its own subsection, along with rationale and connection associated with them. I provide my interpretation of the perceptions of my participants as seen
through the eyes of these adults who, on several occasions, have ceased working toward attainment of a high school diploma.

**Dropping Out of School the First Time was Associated with being Bullied by Other Students, School Administration, or Staff. Bullying Created Hostile Educational Environments that were not Conducive to Staying in School**

As reported in my literature review, Bridgeland et al., (2006) conducted over 500 quantitative surveys across 25 locations throughout the United States to determine who and why students dropped out of high school. The top five major factors reported by these students for dropping out were: (a) their classes were not interesting, (b) they missed too many days and could not catch up, (c) they spent time with people who were not interested in school, (d) they had too much freedom and not enough structure in their lives, and (e) they were academically failing (Bridgeland et al., 2006). It is unclear how these students were polled but it is evident that bullying was not part of the top five major findings of this survey. Similarly, none of the findings involved relationships with teachers, administrators, or other school staff members.

The psychosocial treatment my participants experienced in high school in connection to being bullied by students and staff was hurtful to them and reverberates deeply within them today. My study allowed me to sit down face-to-face with my participants and have them explain what bullying meant to them, describe how they were treated, and discuss what the repercussions of such treatment were. Their responses went far beyond what might have been learned from survey research in which they filled in a bubble marked “I was bullied.” The treatment my participants experienced could be explained through Fine’s “push-out” theory and social exchange theory as reported by Cropanzano et. al (2005).
Social exchange theory posits that reciprocity is the most beneficial exchange rule in developing lasting and trusting relationships. Reciprocity is repayment in kind. The examples that follow are not exemplary models of how staff members or peers should have responded to these participants’ social or academic situations.

Bullying was hurtful and demoralizing for Billy when he heard the words his administrator expressed to him about his sexual orientation and the taunting he received from his classmates regarding his fashion choices. It was painful for John when he spoke about the insufficient support he received from his teachers when he was made fun of or teased because he had no friends. Michelle spoke of the “superficial high school social ranking of students” and how it weakened her sense of connectedness to staff and students. Jimmy, Sam, and Heather all had similar feelings in regard to the treatment they received from staff members and other students because they did not know the right people, belong to the right family, or star on one of the sports teams. Juan and Peter discussed how they felt inferior to other students and staff members because they were not fluent in English. These perceptions of inferiority stemmed from the hurtful or demeaning ways some staff and students treated these participants. Certain staff members apparently chose to disregard them when they needed help or instructed the two of them to ask classmates for assistance. The persistent lack of positive reciprocity on behalf of the staff and student body brought about feelings of inferiority and encouraged their disconnection from school. It was difficult for these participants to return to an environment where the norm for social exchanges by members of the staff and student body were demeaning and detrimental. Over time, it became a major factor in their decision to drop out of high school.

Even though the words “pushed out” or “excluded” were not used verbatim to describe what happened to my participants in high school, it was interpreted by me through their stories,
body language, and tone of voice that student, staff, and administration pushed out the majority of those I interviewed. Fine (1991) wrote about public high school exclusion. She found that bureaucratic regulations governing schools pressure large number of students to drop out through practice of exclusion; she called these students “push outs” (Fine, 1991).

Fine (1991) found fundamental ideological fetishes pulled attention away from what actually occurred when students were pushed out of school. Ideological fetish number one is universal access. Universal access leads us to believe that the current educational policies and practices that are in place provide universal access to every student. What her research found was that if a student was able to leave external factors such as divorce, suicide, pregnancy and abandonment at home so their ability to focus and learn at school was not hindered, free of language barriers and capable of independent learning then the current educational policies and practices were for that student. If that student did not fit the mold just described then the opportunity to a public education was hollow.

Most of my participants did not describe themselves as athletic, had no desire to participate in mainstream sports, believed they were not friends with the right group of students, came to school dealing with the psychosocial effects of a parent suicide, abandonment issues, divorce, language barriers, and did not emanate from influential families. Because of this, they did not fit the mold of what the school staff thought were the right type of students. This kind of rejection rendered them almost expendable. School administrators bluntly told Heather, Taylor, and Jimmy to leave high school. Billy, Juan, Peter and Allie believed they were unwelcome because of the negative treatment they received from students, staff, and administration. These students were in essence pushed out of high school.
“Naturalness” of the public-private split was another ideological fetish that Fine wrote about and is intertwined with the fetish of universal access. Fine (1991) found that the public-private split was the presumption that a school’s responsibility stopped at the building door. It was this deep-rooted belief that allowed unequal outcomes to not only live, but thrive. She found that at times, schools would simply ignore the private needs of the home by excluding bilingual materials from the parents of their children who qualified for bilingual services. If the parents had received the bilingual materials, they would have been better equipped to help their children with homework that may have been assigned by their teachers. Schools would try to minimize the amount of interaction between community and school (Fine, 1991). In my study, evidence of the public-private split was present in the stories my participants voiced about not receiving a phone call or visit from administration to determine why they had dropped out of school or not returned to school. No attempt was made to provide support for these students to come back to school. Several participants echoed words similar to Allie’s: “I just got discouraged and thought what was the point.” The inactions of the staff reflected a belief that school responsibility for the well-being of students stopped at the school building door.

As stated in Chapter I, Cropanzano et al. (2005) ascertained that certain rules of social exchange must be performed by both sides in order for trusting and loyal relationships to take root and evolve over time (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). In other words, within an emerging context of trust and loyalty, both the student and staff member or student and peers need to be positively contributing to the relationship within the parameters of the school day or the needed relationships will not develop and survive. I interpreted through the stories of my participants that they did not receive the needed affirmation or constructive social interactions between them, the school staff and student body for trusting and loyal relationships to evolve. They
experienced the reverse of trusting and loyal relationships. The behavior my participants
endured by high school staff members and students caused them to enter into a downward
psychosocial spiral they could not cope with or work through. This downward spiral not only
affected them in high school but also created psychosocial consequences that continued to affect
their choices into adulthood.

While reflecting upon the findings of my study, I realized I possessed a misperception
going into this study that I was not aware of when this journey began. My misperception was
that the study participants were going back for this second chance at a high school diploma with
a “clean-slate,” that is, they were emotionally or psychologically free from the consequences of
dropping out the first time. But I found that the reasons or consequences of dropping out as
adolescents continued to have a resounding negative effect on their ability to continue their
education a second time. My participants did not begin their second chance at a high school
diploma without residual effects from their adolescence; they continued to deal with prior events
in their lives such as suicide of a parent, abandonment by a parent, divorce, pregnancy,
homosexual lifestyle, and minimal to no parental or peer support with physical needs and social
emotional needs. This effect will be developed further within my interpretation of the next two
sections.

Dropping Out of School the First and/or Second Time was Associated with Traumatic Life
Events. Participants did not Receive Adequate Personal Support or Mental Health
Counseling to Help Them Resolve the Impact of these Events

The first assumption of social exchange theory is that individuals are rational and base
decisions on costs and benefits routinely exchanged in everyday social transactions. The second
assumption of social exchange theory is that interactions look to maximize benefits in terms of
meeting basic individual needs (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Traumatic events experienced by some of my participants created situations where they believed the only viable option for them was to drop out of high school in order to meet their basic individual psychosocial and physical needs on their own. Anyone reading the stories of my participants may think that some of them were thinking or acting irrationally by dropping out of high school. Within the context of social exchange theory my participants were taking care of themselves because the relationships they had with either school or home were not. The participants’ decision to drop out of high school was a rational solution for them to deal with the pain and suffering they were experiencing.

Students are pressed to deal with traumatic events if schools are ill equipped or unwilling to provide physical and psychosocial needs created by the event itself. Living through the incident of a parent suicide created more pain than a student like John could cope with on his own. There was no outreach offered on the part of his school to provide any grief counseling for him or his family. No one from the school provided information on outside agencies to help John and his mother work through the tragedy they were experiencing. This traumatic event influenced John to make a decision to drop out of high school that helped him with a pressing psychosocial need at the time but created a decision that delayed any opportunities for further education or job advancement later in his life. John’s father had been the person who took care of the family’s physical and psychosocial needs and within one instance, that support was no longer present.

Michelle not only dealt with her feeling of being abandoned by her biological mother, she also had to contend with the tragedy of losing her grandmother who raised her as her own when Michelle was a very young adult. Her high school did not provide her with support for her
feelings of abandonment. Unfortunately this lack of support from the school left Michelle with a lack of self-confidence and she befriended a group of girls who were not supportive or encouraging of her to finish high school. It led to her skipping school, smoking cigarettes, and consuming drugs to cope with the feelings of anger and resentment. These actions on her part festered into a major contributor to her dropping out of high school the first time. She sought out relationships that she felt were reciprocal even though they were relationships that were damaging to her present and future. In Michelle’s mind these relationship choices were rational but were met with unfortunate results.

Divorce is a more prevalent societal traumatic event than suicide, death, or abandonment and became a major contributor to Sam dropping out of high school. His parents divorce was not only a spontaneous traumatic event, it morphed into a prolonged series of pain he endured by moving four different times within three years while in high school. Sam did not receive support from staff members to help him with his many school transitions or feelings of anger and resentment toward his parents because of how the divorce affected him and his family. He did not befriend anyone who was negative in nature; instead he focused all of his attention and energy on racing cars. This became his passion and a release from the pain he experienced and ultimately steered him to drop out of high school.

Students are more willing to engage in a social exchange with a staff member when they perceive a balance of rewards and costs from the relationship. Staff providing support to students who have experienced a traumatic event or prolonged bullying can create a balance between the two entities which in turn encourages the student to seek further engagement with the staff member (Chibucos et al., 2005). It would be the desire of the student that the relationship with the staff member be positive and helpful in meeting the psychosocial need that
the student was experiencing. This positive staff and student relationship could assist the student in avoiding future destructive relationships.

I discovered that participants who experienced bullying and/or traumatic events allowed these experiences to influence their decision to drop out of high school because they were not offered other means to cope with the experience. The decision of my participants to drop out may be interpreted as an irrational decision at the time, but these participants were hurting beyond what they could cope with. I interpreted that my participants’ decision to drop out was rational in their mind. They were willing to do whatever was necessary to stop the pain and gain back control of their lives that they had lost due to the decisions of adults within their social structure.

This decision in turn created almost irreversible repercussions with regard to obtaining a high school diploma. These participants found themselves in a cycle that was not beneficial to them as they worked toward their high school diploma as an adult. Because they dropped out they were not able to find stable, high paying, or personally satisfying employment. This uncertain employment stability and low wages left these participants with a lack of resources or social capital to go back for their high school diploma and maintain the necessary time to complete the degree. Lack of resources and social capital is explained in further detail below.

**Dropping Out of High School the First and/or Second Time was Associated with a Lack of Resources and/or Social Capital**

Resources can be anything from money, to transportation, to clothing, and shelter. Wright, Cullen and Miller (2001) determined that social capital is another type of resource characterized by its emphasis on the quality of the relationships between (or among) people and its ability to provide resources and psychosocial support without concern for repayment of such
resources (Wright, Cullen, & Miller, 2001). Relationships between staff and student, student to
student, and child to parent can involve social capital but Coleman (1994) explained in more
detail how the family is the key institution through which social capital is acquired. He
mentioned three avenues in which families can transmit social capital: (a) time and effort
devoted by parents, (b) emotional ties between parents and their children; and (c) instructions
from parents concerning what is and what is not acceptable behavior on the part of the child.
Coleman found critical factors of parent – child interactions that can “aid children’s social and
intellectual development” (p. 595). Working on homework and talking with them are two
examples of parent investment in time and effort. Coleman (1994) also points out that strong
supportive family social interaction such as attending parent teacher conferences, school
programs or athletic events and celebrating child accomplishments as a family creates strong
family attachment (Coleman, 1994). These social interactions can create the foundation for
building strong moral values against pleasure-seeking or destructive behavior and play an
important role in preventing individual actions that threaten future family ventures and
relationships (Wright et al., 2001). Social capital is intertwined with social exchange theory in
that social capital is a network of relationships that can be instrumental in terms of increasing
exposure to favorable opportunities that materially or emotionally improve the quality of our
lives. Within the context of my study lack of social capital was mentioned more when
participants were questioned about their high school experiences with regard to family and
friends than when they were describing their adult experiences.

Social exchange theory posits that relationships are built upon, sustained, or undermined
through a series of interdependent transactions. I argue this is true, but should also be examined
from the viewpoint of interdependent transactions between multiple members of the relationship
not solely one person to another. My participants were often put in a position where several people were externally influencing them at one time, not just one person to another in a singular social interaction.

Allie described a lack of resources and social capital when she found out she was pregnant. Her father provided little to no emotional support during and after the pregnancy. The resources offered by her father were minimal as well. He provided his house for them to live in but did not provide transportation or any other necessities such as clothing and only minimal food. It was up to Allie to gain employment to provide the necessities for her and her child such as diapers, clothing, and her share of the bills. Social capital from the school was not provided to help Allie through her pregnancy and the lack of support from her father created the triad of social interactions between her, the school and her parent that I wrote about in the paragraph above. Allie was not dealing with just the social interactions between her and the school. Neither Allie’s father or school offered counseling, outreach programs, or daycare options to help her continue her high school diploma coursework. The ultimate responsibility of providing necessities thus fell to her. This duty created a situation where Allie could not continue working toward her high school degree as an adolescent or as an adult.

Lack of money was the number one factor cited by six out of ten of participants for why they dropped out of an adult high school diploma program. These participants would drop out of the adult program long enough to work more hours to pay for necessities such as food, rent, and daily necessities. Two of the participants would leave the state for migratory work and return when they had enough money saved up to sustain them for an additional semester or two of working toward their high school diploma.
Lack of money was a consistent consequence of dropping out the first time. Because study participants shared a history of dropping out of high school and the second-time adult degree program, they were not qualified for higher-wage jobs. Often, their employment was part-time or seasonal. Uncertain employment created a barrier to stability within the home, which often created inconsistent time for the participants to work on their high school coursework. The adult students in the study tended not to prioritize obtaining their high school diploma if they were concerned about when or where their next paycheck was coming from. Meeting their own and their family’s material needs came first.

**Lack of Well-Paying Adult Employment Opportunities Prompted Participants to Return to School to Attain their High School Diploma**

It was my observation that lack of well-paying or personally satisfying employment opportunities was a by-product of not having a high school diploma. To advance in a career path, a high school diploma is the first step. You cannot attend a junior college or vocational college until you obtain a high school diploma. You cannot enlist in the military without a high school diploma and it is not possible to attend a four-year university without one either.

Anyone without a high school diploma tends to have limited employment opportunities. Every participant I interviewed mentioned the lack of high paying, personally satisfying, and stable jobs for adults without a high school diploma. John articulated it best when he said, “The only kind of jobs you will get are the jobs that people don’t want to do, that’s all.” Every participant explained how the experience of working jobs “no one wants” created a sense of maturity he or she did not possess in high school. Billy mentioned how he, “finally found my passion and I want to open my own business and get a business administration degree and an accounting degree.”
All ten of my participants expressed a desire to attend some sort of post-secondary educational institution, but they knew that it would not be possible without their diploma. Again, it is the perpetual cycle of not having a diploma that creates lack of employment opportunities, low-wage opportunities, and unstable working hours that in turn create a lack of resources for support. Sam mentioned how some weeks he would be forced to work 10-hour days, seven days a week for months on end when the demand at work was high. He found those times to be a deterrent to working on his diploma because he “would come home from work and not really want to go stare at the computer for 4 hours after working ten hour days.” Even though lack of employment was a formidable barrier to completing high school, it also provided growth and maturity and a personal desire to go back to complete their high school diploma when their circumstances permitted.

**Personal Need or Ambitions were Critical Attributes for Successful Completion of the Program**

All ten participants acknowledged a personal need or desire to complete his or her high school diploma for one reason or another. Michelle wanted to complete her high school diploma to honor her deceased grandmother who raised her from birth. Peter wanted to earn his high school diploma to provide a positive example for his children. Heather wanted to complete her high school diploma because of the assertive influence it had on her self-confidence. Billy wasn’t ready in high school but felt his maturity level in adulthood was closer now to where it needed to be for him to go back and finish. Study participants saw the positive social exchange value that came from achieving their high school diploma. They viewed this accomplishment as a way of contributing to the relationships they had with others.
None of the participants interviewed made excuses for where they currently were in his or her life. Quite the contrary, each accepted full responsibility for dropping out regardless of the reason and acknowledged wanting to move forward to create a more positive future for themselves and their families. These participants have internalized to a strong degree the prevailing American ideology known as bootstrapping. They believe whole-heartedly in the American Dream and in American meritocracy. In order to believe so firmly in these ideals, they have had to reject the effects of outside factors and circumstances that have served as formidable obstacles to achieving these goals. Participants understood the value of education but were unable to get out from underneath the accumulated disadvantages piled up against them. This acceptance for their individual motivation can be explained through self-determination theory (SDT).

Ryan and Deci (2000) identified three psychological needs that are the basis for self-motivation through SDT. The three needs of competence, relatedness, and autonomy are essential for optimal growth and integration of people’s personality development as well as social development and personal well-being. Self-motivation involves energy, direction, persistence, and equifinality. Equifinality refers to how early experiences such as parental divorce, suicide, abandonment, and physical abuse can lead to similar circumstances later in life. (Ryan & Deci, 2000). My participants were living out equifinality through their cycle of attending school, dropping out of school, attending again and then dropping out again because of many of the issues mentioned in earlier sections with regard to equifinality.

What I interpreted from their answers during our interviews, body language, and tone of voice was pride and determination to break the cycle they were in. My participants had a tremendous amount of pride in how they conducted themselves and for what they wanted for
themselves as they attempted to better their lives. They were determined to obtain their diploma and use this to move on to more positive opportunities such as post-secondary education, the military, or other job opportunities. I sensed this determination when Allie told me she was going to earn her high school diploma so she could fulfill her dream of “writing the story line for one of my favorite video game companies.” I sensed the fortitude to succeed when Michelle told me, “I only have five or six credits left and I’m going to finish!” Ryan and Deci (2005) would explain this attitude and behavior through the extrinsic motivation known as integrated regulation. Integration occurs when individuals identify his or her needs and assimilate them to his or her self and then bring them into congruence with his or her other values and needs. Actions exemplified by integrated motivation share many qualities with intrinsic motivation, and are yet still considered extrinsic because they are done to attain separable outcomes rather than the sake of enjoyment on the individual’s part.

The piece of paper that signifies his or her high school diploma will be a tremendous accomplishment, as Jimmy eloquently stated: “To get that smile on your face to know you accomplished something.” What impressed me was how in tune the participants were with his or her unique situation. Each participant acknowledged that they should have finished their high school diploma when they were in high school, but life situations provided them with a choice, a choice to continue or drop out. The choice to drop out has placed them in a situation where it is going to be difficult to improve their chances for other opportunities until they earn their high school diploma. My participants recognized their needs and began to assimilate them into a belief that they will one day achieve their high school diploma no matter how many barriers they encounter or how long it may take.
Participants Believed the Virtual Adult High School Degree Completion Program was an Appropriate Model for Returning Adult Students

The program the study participants attended helped them persist in the virtual environment. Persistence is defined by Comings et al. (2000) as, “Adults staying in programs for as long as they can, engaging in self-directed study when they must drop out of their programs, and returning to a program as soon as the demands of their lives allow” (p. 24). Eight out of ten participants enrolled in the adult high school diploma program more than one time. The remaining two have dropped out only once but are planning to return when their lives become more stable.

Comings et. al (2000) noted that an effective adult online diploma completion program needs to be self-directed. Participants such as Michelle, Billy, Sam, Heather, and Jimmy referred to this as being able to work at their own pace. They appreciated the flexibility the curriculum and computer-based programming allowed them to complete their work. The virtual program also eliminated distractions such as students acting up in class, an array of noises, and students moving about the classroom. Allie appreciated that the program was differentiated. She said it best: “It meets you at your level and I can get things done faster when I can do it by myself and don’t have to follow along with everyone else.”

Participants also received guidance managing the external positive and negative forces they experienced on a daily basis. It was not part of my formal interview protocol but at one point I overheard the lead teacher of the program assist a student with his work schedule as I waited for my next interview. The student, who was not a participant in the study, was struggling with how much he was working and contemplated stopping the program. The lead teacher offered suggestions for how to make time in his schedule and even offered to call his
manager. I interpreted through her actions that she was trying to eliminate this obstacle so the student would not have to leave the program.

All of my participants supported the structure of the program. When I asked them if there was anything the staff at the program could have provided to have kept them from dropping out, they all responded “no.” They each dropped out of the adult program for a reason related to a complication of dropping out the first time. For Michelle, it was the passing of her grandmother. For Sam, Billy, Juan, Peter, Jimmy, John, and Heather, it was lack of resources or social capital. The study data made it clear that the structure and support of the adult program was not a reason why participants dropped out of high school a second time.

**Participants Thought Staff Members Involved with the Adult High School Diploma Program Treated Them with Respect and Dignity, Attitudes not Routinely Experienced in High School**

When it came to the treatment they received in high school versus the treatment they received from the staff at the adult learning site, the participants’ experiences were like night and day. High school staff and students tended to treat the participants with a lack of respect and dignity as noted in the bullying section of my findings. At the adult learning program, however, participants experienced an environment rich in caring and motivation. Participants referenced how the staff fostered relationships by answering questions, providing social opportunities, utilizing social networking to communicate with others, and by motivating them to persevere. The participants were told things such as, “You are doing a great job,” “Keep working,” and “It’s all up to you.”

The participants said they were treated with respect and made to feel like adults while attending the program. I could sense through their tone of voice and by the way their faces lit up
when they spoke about the program that they truly felt valued as a student and as a person. Heather summed it up when she stated, “I feel like an adult here, unlike in high school where I felt like a child. I like the way they treat us.”

The staff at this adult program appeared to have provided the appropriate structure, content, and social structure for my participants to be successful and earn their high school diploma. If this virtual model was appropriate and the staff provided appropriate supports to negate the negative forces, then why were these adults dropping out of the program when it was the complete opposite of what they experienced in high school?

**Conclusions**

The reasons adults drop out of an adult high school diploma program are complex and cannot be thoroughly explained through one theory. I began this study utilizing social exchange theory as a guide and discovered that Fine’s (1991) research on public high school exclusion and Deci and Ryan’s (2000) self-determination theory were beneficial in analyzing my data on why adults dropped out of a high school diploma program. The truth is that education does not operate independently of other social and economic influences. Participants understood the value of education but were unable to get out from underneath the accumulated disadvantages piled up against them. They placed themselves in a negative situation that perpetuated itself over and over because of the consequences they faced without a high school diploma. Dropping out the first time put them at high risk of experiencing physically demanding and low paying jobs, higher unemployment rates, unstable working environments, single parenthood, a need for social services, and incarceration. The participants I interviewed experienced one or more of these risk factors after dropping out of high school, factors that came together to create a cycle that was not easy to break.
The adult high school degree completion program met the needs of the participants as far as the structure, content, and staff support of the program. It did not, however, help participants overcome obstacles in their day-to-day lives that included strenuous physical labor, raising children, traumatic events, and lack of resources or social capital. Six out of 10 participants worked low-wage, personally unsatisfying, physically demanding jobs or multiple jobs at one time. It was difficult for them to find the energy to work on the academic content of a diploma completion program no matter how flexible the program was. No amount of support or encouragement from the staff at the adult program was able to make up for the amount of energy expended at their jobs.

Minimal to zero income results in minimal to zero resources to meet the material and emotional necessities of life. If there is no social capital such as a spouse, boyfriend, girlfriend, in-laws, or parent to support them emotionally or financially, students may be unable to escape the instability within their adult lives that prompted them to drop out the first time. Many times these lack of resources or low levels of social capital were present when they were in a traditional high school setting but according to my participants, the schools also failed to reach out to them and offer solutions for their psychosocial or academic support needed for them to graduate the first time.

Psychosocial consequences from traumatic events were still evident with seven of my participants at the time of the interviews. They had begun to deal with what had happened to them but the lack of a diploma was holding them back from moving on to a post-secondary education. They were unable to make it work at that point in his or her life because of lack of resources.
The reason adults drop out of a high school degree completion program a second time is not an easy interpretation. The process begins before they drop out of high school the first time. It may begin when they unexpectedly come face to face with severe personal and emotional conditions such as bullying, traumatic events, lack of resources and social capital and do not receive sufficient support to overcome these challenges. My participants found themselves attempting to overcome the risk factors they were experiencing as a second-time dropout with minimal success because of the negative cycle they were striving to overcome.

**Implications**

The focus of this final section of the study addresses the implications of the research that can be applied to current and future educational practice. The implications that follow are not all-inclusive and are open to interpretation by the reader. It is my intent to use the implications of this study to begin conversations among the educational community to seek out solutions to dissuade at-risk or disconnected students from dropping out of high school the first time.

**Connectedness**

This study was conducted to understand why adult learners dropped out of a high school diploma program a second time. It became visibly apparent when reviewing the findings and conclusions that adult students dropped out of high school a second time due to the repercussions of dropping out of high school the first time. More research needs to be conducted on connectedness of the student and school and its impact on high school graduation rates. According to Blum, Libbey, Bishop and Bishop (2004), student connectedness is the belief by students that staff members in school care about them as individuals as well as their learning. Blum et al. (2004), found that students who reported high levels of connectedness to their school
were less likely to suffer from emotional distress, violent activities, suicide attempts and drug use.

This study flushed out that a disconnection from school was present early in their high school careers. The perceptions of my participants were they became disconnected from school either through bullying, traumatic events, or a lack of social capital such as parental or peer support during difficult situations described within the vignettes of Chapter 4. It was evident from the data my participants provided that school staff and administration either had no idea or chose to ignore what was occurring in their lives to reach beyond the classroom doors to connect with them and their families and seek out solutions for the issues each individual was experiencing.

Response To Intervention

A recommendation to remedy this disconnect is through the recent movement of response to intervention (RTI) models that have been reshaping the educational community’s view during the last eight years on how to provide academic and behavioral support to all students. RTI began as a model for educators to provide a tiered system of evidence-based strategies to help reduce the number of students being placed in special education services for academic or behavioral reasons. Many states have adopted their own version of RTI model and have explored ways of identifying students at risk of not only academic or behavioral issues but also those at-risk of dropping out of high school. Once identified, these students could either be provided direct services in the school setting or referred to outside agencies to assist them and their families with more serious issues.
Building Leadership and Professional Development

Building leadership is crucial for creating the culture to provide a framework for identifying and supporting at-risk students. Additional administrative professional development may be necessary to build capacity for an RTI model to support students at-risk of dropping out of high school not only at the building level but at the district level for fidelity of implementation. Developing this model would require money, energy and time. Time within the school day is the one commodity that could be re-envisioned when developing a schedule to support an RTI model and would require reorganizing how buildings utilize staff to work with identified at-risk students. Additional research could be conducted in the areas of student connectedness, staff perceptions of why they feel certain students are not being successful in their school, administrators’ perceptions of why they feel certain students are not being successful in their school, and wraparound services for at-risk students and their families to enhance high school RTI models.

Partnering with Outside Organizations

Along with the implications mentioned above, staffs could benefit from professional development to learn how to identify, plan for and assist disconnected students and families. Partnerships with outside social service organizations could be formed with such agencies as Communities In Schools (CIS). CIS is a nationwide network working in public schools to surround students with a community of support, empowering them to stay in school and achieve in life. Additional research could be beneficial in the area of best practices for partnering public schools with outside organizations for a community of support. The opportunities to connect and
partner with organizations are viable solutions for student support and should be embraced as we move forward in our quest of ensuring all students leave high school with a diploma.

Research also needs to be conducted on adult high school students. Quantitative surveys conducted by Bridgeland et al. (2006), in *The Silent Epidemic* and Rotermund (2007) in the *California Dropout Research Project* netted superficial reports of why students dropped out of high school the first time. My study took an in-depth look through semi-structured interviews to understand why the adult students dropped out of a high school diploma completion program a second time and further research could add to the base of literature for additional studies.
List of References
References


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References (continued)


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References (continued)


APPENDICES
Purpose: You are invited to participate in a study of understanding why adults drop out of a high school diploma program a second time. I hope to learn adult perceptions of their opportunities and barriers to obtaining their high school diploma.

Participant Selection: Eight participants are sought to participate in individual interviews. You were selected as a likely participant because you meet the criteria of not completing a high school diploma through a traditional setting nor through an alternative high school diploma program as an adult. You will be asked to participate in an individual interview with me.

Explanation of Procedures: Your participation will consist of one individual interview that will take approximately 30-60 minutes and will be conducted at the Haysville Learning Café at 315 S Seneca, Haysville, Kansas 67060. You may be asked to participate in a follow-up interview if clarification of your responses is needed or if additional questions arise that are pertinent to this study. With your permission, I will digitally-record the interviews, and notes
will be taken during the observations. A transcript of your responses in the interview will be made available to you to ensure accuracy and to allow you an opportunity for additional feedback. I will be asking you questions such as… what was your educational experience like in high school? What experiences led you to not completing high school the first time?

**Discomfort/Risks:** All information gained during the interviews will remain strictly confidential. You are requested to be open and honest during the data collection process. Your involvement in all data collection will be voluntary, and all participants will be made aware of the purpose for research and their rights as research subjects. There are no anticipated risks associated with participating in this study. However, if you feel uncomfortable with a question, you may skip it.

**Benefits:** If you participate, you may benefit by gaining a better understanding of the educational experiences and opportunities a high school diploma can be for adults. All stakeholders may benefit from having an opportunity to be heard regarding their views on educational settings and services. So that others might benefit from what we learn, the researcher plans to share the results of this study through presentations at state and national conferences and publications in scholarly journals. Throughout this entire process, any information obtained through this study including presentations and publications of this research will in no way identify you in any manner. All information obtained will remain confidential and disclosed only with your permission.

**Confidentiality:** Any information obtained in this study in which you can be identified will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. Audio tapes will be transferred to an external hard drive that utilizes password protected software. Interview data will be stored with other research documents and materials in a secure location. No codes will be
used linking the data to the participants. After three years interview data will be deleted from the external hard drive and the dissertation will be the only document left in existence.

**Refusal/Withdrawal:** Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relations with Wichita State University or Haysville Learning Café. If you agree to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

**Contact:** If you have any questions about this research, you can contact me: Brad Pepper by Phone at 316-258-2184 or by email at bpepper@sckesc.org or my advisor, Dr. Eric Freeman, at Phone #(316) 978-5696 or Email eric.freeman@wichita.edu. If you have questions pertaining to your rights as a research subject, or about research-related injury, you can contact the Office of Research and Technology Transfer at Wichita State University, Wichita, KS 67260-0007, Phone #(316) 978-3285.

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. Your signature indicates that you have read the information provided above and have voluntarily decided to participate.

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

____________________________________________________ _______________________
Signature of Subject       Date

____________________________________________________ _______________________
Witness Signature       Date
Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. What was your educational experience in high school like?

2. Describe your relationship with a teacher or teachers in high school.

3. Describe your relationship with your friends in high school.

4. What experiences led you to drop out of high school the first time?

5. What happened that made you decide to enroll in a Kansas degree completion program?

6. What was your experience like in the degree completion program?

7. What did you like or dislike about the degree completion program you participated in and why?

8. Describe your relationship with the staff at the degree completion program.

9. Can you tell me how you decided to drop out of the degree completion program?

10. Can you think of anything that may have helped you stay in the degree completion program and complete your high school diploma? Why do you think that?