THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS AT RISK OF DROPPING OUT: 
AN INTERPRETIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Of the many important issues facing policy makers, educators, concerned citizens and parents throughout this country, one stands apart: the alarming number of teenagers who choose to drop out of school. While considerable research exists substantiating the statistics for this societal predicament, studies that seek to uncover the individual human story behind this dilemma are still needed. Research studies like this one are emerging in an effort to unravel the experiences that lead to an individual’s decision to engage or not engage with their public high school education. Using qualitative phenomenological methods to analyze interviews from five students, this study explored the engagement experiences of students who were formally at risk of dropping out before enrolling in a credit-recovery high school. Interview data collected from the participants was analyzed using the framework of student engagement as a psychological experience, with a focus on the affective and cognitive dimensions. By exploring the phenomenon of engagement from the viewpoints of students who were once considered at risk of dropping out, this study seeks to enrich the research base for engagement and dropout literature and to identify factors that can be implemented in future dropout prevention initiatives.

Keywords: dropout, student engagement, alternative programs, small learning communities, blended learning, learning facilitator
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I dedicate this paper to the memory of my loving brother, Robbie.
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Chapter 1. Introduction

Problem and Significance

A complex and urgent crisis is facing American public school education. An estimated 3.5 million high school students are classified as dropouts (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). The Council on Virginia’s Future (2009) indicates students may not finish their studies due to a lack of motivation, financial troubles, a lack of success and poor preparation. In the U.S. Department of Education’s *High School Dropout and Completion Rates 2007 Compendium Report* published in 2009, it was reported that socioeconomic factors significantly impacted student failure in American public high schools, “In 2007, the event dropout rate of students living in low-income families was about 10 times greater than the rate of their peers from high-income families (8.8 percent versus 0.9 percent)” (p. 4). Other researchers have found that students’ perceptions of effective or ineffective instruction significantly contributes to the high dropout rate (Yazzie-Mintz, 2010). Many modern researchers and educators believe that a major contributor to the problem is the disconnection between 21st century tech-savvy students and traditional classroom instructional methodology (Dede, 2007; Prensky, 2001; Shaw, 2009).

In response to the dropout crisis, public school resources are being allocated to alternative, “recovery” programs and schools for students identified as "at risk" for dropping out. The intent of these alternative learning environments is to help students stay in school until they have “recovered” their missing credits needed for graduation. However, it remains unclear how, or if, students who are at risk of dropping out reengage with the learning process in these schools. Many current school reform initiatives seek to increase achievement as measured by coursework completion, but do not explicitly focus on student engagement. This study sought to explore the engagement experiences of students at risk of dropping out of high school and to identify factors
that can be implemented in future dropout prevention initiatives.

In 2008, a district in southeastern Virginia embraced the Communities In Schools® model to launch an alternative high school program to assist students who have struggled in the traditional high school setting and are at risk of dropping out of school. To enroll in this credit-recovery school, which for the purposes of this study has been given the pseudonym The Southern Performance Center (SPC), students must first receive recommendations from their “home school” guidance counselors. Typically, students receive such recommendations when the traditional high school experience is simply not working for them. Some of the most common reasons students apply to the Southern Performance Center include: pregnancy, truancy, social anxiety, family problems, health concerns, difficulty focusing and/or performing in a traditional high school setting. Once a student received a recommendation from their guidance counselor, they could begin the SPC application process that entails a reading and math test and an interview with members of the SPC staff.

The Southern Performance Center high school model is based on a nontraditional, student-centered, blended, small learning environment with 5 core teachers working as learning facilitators. At this site, each of the 5 classrooms was equipped with a laptop cart. Using the laptops, students accessed their digital coursework while the teachers move from student to student to answer questions. Students worked at their own pace to complete the classes they needed to graduate. Additionally, teachers worked with students either individually or in small groups to provide additional instruction when needed.

The Communities In Schools® model suggests a maximum enrollment of 75 students at one time. For the 2012-2013 school year, due to continued demand, the Southern Performance Center operated a day and evening program that served approximately 176 students. At the time
of this study, the school was in its fifth year in this district, serving students ranging in ages from 16-20. Of the students enrolled in the 2012-13 school year, 112 were Black (63.6%), 59 were Caucasian (33.5%), 4 were of Hispanic culture (2.3%), and 1 was Asian or Pacific Islander (0.57%). The gender breakdown was as follows: 105 male (≈60%) and 71 female (≈40%).

The instructional staff of the Southern Performance Center was comprised of 4 females and 1 male, of which 60% are Caucasian and 40% are Black. All learning facilitators possessed professional licensure in their respective subject areas: science, math, English, social studies and business. Three of the facilitators had district tenure. All had satisfactorily met the division expectations for their positions. In addition to the 5 core teachers, there were 2 additional full-time staff members, a Principal and an Administrative Assistant. In years 1-4 and at the end of year 5, the Communities In Schools affiliate provided the school with a part-time Services Coordinator. The Services Coordinator partnered with the SPC staff to bring resources and volunteers into the school, providing students the tools they need to stay in school and succeed beyond graduation.

In its fifth year at the time this research was conducted, the SPC used a blended learning format (web-based curriculum combined with face-to-face instruction) using Pearson’s NovaNET® courseware in years 1-4 and Edgenuity® courseware (formally Education2020®) beginning in year five. The SPC follows the structure of a small learning community, with 5 content teachers and an average of 15 students per class. Due to the school’s success in increasing the district’s graduation rate, the district expanded it in year three from a 75-student model to a 125-student model. This alternative school has now become a model for other area dropout prevention initiatives.

**Significance of the problem.** School districts throughout the country have used a number
of different approaches to address the dropout problem, and the Southern Performance Center model is one such approach. Currently, there is a need for dropout research that investigates more than graduation outcome resultant of such alternative programs, and instead considers the individuals behind the numbers. Relying on research that presents graduation outcome / statistics without investigating the intellectual, emotional or social experiences of at-risk students in alternative education programs may lead educators and policy makers to make uniformed and shortsighted programmatic changes. These decisions could have serious and long-lasting, possibly irreversible, societal repercussions. This in-depth, phenomenological study of students at one credit-recovery, computer-assisted learning model represents a step forward in addressing the human side of the American dropout problem, while potentially offering improvement strategies to the Virginia school under study.

Through a phenomenological interview process, this study explored what students who attended an alternative school in the southeastern United States perceived to be the experiences that caused them to engage, or not engage, with their high school educations. The research consisted of collecting and analyzing interviews with students who have or had been considered at-risk in their previous, traditional high schools, their perspectives on their time at the credit-recovery school, and insights into their own engagement experiences as impacted by their time at the alternative school. This study may contribute to the body of literature for current teacher education and preparation programs. Future teachers could benefit from a deeper understanding of current dropout experiences and solutions. Pestalozzi (1951) noted, “The teacher must be capable of watching man’s development, whatever direction it may take, whatever the circumstances. No profession on earth calls for a deeper understanding of human nature, nor for greater skill in guiding it properly” (pp. 32-33). Training future teachers in pedagogy and
content should include studies on current issues affecting students’ engagement experiences. This study endeavors to contribute to this body of teacher education literature.

While the goal of graduating former or potential dropouts has been realized in this southeastern Virginia school for the past five years, one questions the sustainability of the program if the 2008 startup plan for student learning is not soon investigated and addressed. Absent a formal research study, replicating this program may only be based on casual observation, conversations and hearsay. Considering current public school budgetary restrictions in a recessionary economic climate, it is increasingly important that academic studies like this one be conducted to explore the engagement experiences of students at-risk for dropping out of high school. Increasing the knowledge base regarding the dropout issue will help inform public schools officials and key decision-makers as they assess the value of current dropout initiatives. Moreover, investigating programmatic solutions to the dropout crisis may strengthen the trailblazing effort of other progressive, technology-focused schools, public or private, and provide valuable insights for leaders of academically floundering traditional schools.

**Practical and Intellectual Goals**

According to Maxwell (2005), “Practical goals are focused on *accomplishing* something—meeting some need, changing some situation, or achieving some objective” (p. 21). Practical goals should be rooted in an institution’s mission, seeking to advance it. The principle practical goals of this qualitative, phenomenological research project are: to explore student engagement of high school students in this Virginia school district and to identify factors that can be implemented in future dropout prevention initiatives.

Intellectual goals, according to Maxwell (2005) are “focused on understanding something—gaining insight into what is going on and why this is happening, or answering some questions
that previous research has not adequately addressed” (p. 21). The intellectual goals of this study are: 1) to understand the many experiences that play into a student’s perceptions regarding their education and high school graduation, and 2) to better understand the lived experiences of students at risk of dropping out.

**Positionality Statement**

As the primary researcher and a teacher at the site where this research was conducted, it is important to reveal some of my own potential professional and personal biases with respect to this study. I was among the first five core teachers hired when the southeastern Virginia credit-recovery alternative high school was founded in July of 2008. My role since then has been to implement and develop curriculum and pacing guides that align with current Virginia Standards of Learning for English, grades 9-12. In this capacity, I offer small group and individualized instruction for students to assist with their success in all English courses (eight total) as well as on their end-of-course Reading and Writing tests. I also represent the school as one of the high school Language Arts Curriculum Leaders. This entails participating in ongoing district professional development meetings and activities. A responsibility unique to the teachers at this alternative school is to assist the principal in the selection process of prospective SPC students, including interviews, assessment tests and team meetings. Also, teachers at this school are asked to serve as advocates for a small group of students in an advisory group. Throughout my five years as a full-time teacher/facilitator at the Southern Performance Center, I have developed a strong rapport with the staff members and students. I believe my experience as a teacher at this school helped develop a sense of open communication, trust and mutual respect as I interviewed SPC students for this study.

Born in Oklahoma, my cultural background is mostly European ancestry with a streak of
American Cherokee. I was raised by a mom who gave my two brothers and I the freedom to choose our own paths in life. My brothers both chose to drop out of high school in the first go-round. Ultimately, my eldest brother, now deceased, completed his GED and a university degree. My interest in teaching began as a *l’Université de Nice* English intern at *Lycée Nice-Ariane* in France. From there, I embarked on a two decade long career in education, teaching in both private and public American schools, ultimately accepting an offer to teach English at the credit-recovery, alternative high school that is the subject of this study.

I believe education is a key to freedom and opportunity. My passion for education is that each individual be given every possible opportunity to succeed, and that no door should ever be shut on a student who is willing to try. I also believe that each student has a right to a voice and that educators have the responsibility to respond in a meaningful way to that voice. Those who cannot listen, or who refuse to learn to hear those unique voices, should leave the occupation swiftly. A glowing ember of intolerance for injustice has resided at my core for as long as I can remember. This I embrace as a responsibility from my proud ancestors, the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma. Another of my driving personal forces is an unshakable sense of optimism, which undoubtedly led me to pursue this study and to believe that what is broken in American education can be fixed if good people put their minds, hearts and resources to work. I am quite sure this strong strain of optimism shot directly down my bloodline from my ancestor Will Rogers, whose philosophies resonate deeply and often encourage me as I do my small part to help fight the battle of high school dropout in 21st century America.

**Research Questions**

The primary research questions of this study are the following:

a. *What were the engagement experiences of students in a traditional high school*
prior to enrolling in a credit-recovery high school?

b. What were the engagement experiences of students enrolled in a credit-recovery high school after having been previously enrolled in a traditional high school?

In the final section of Chapter 1, I will explain why student engagement theory was selected as the framework for this study and describe why it is a useful theoretical tool for understanding individual dropout and re-entry into public school education.

**Theoretical Framework**

Engagement theory is multi-dimensional and malleable and relevant for predicting and preventing school dropout (Appleton, Christenson and Furlong, 2008; Christenson and Thurlow, 2004; Middlecamp, 2005; Sinclair, Christenson, Lehr, & Anderson, 2003), making it a useful theoretical framework for this research study. This section explains student engagement theory, provides background on several useful models of student engagement, and finally, focuses on particular components of student engagement theory that will provide a useful construct for addressing the two research questions of this study.

Student engagement is multidimensional. It is multidimensional because of the interplay between an individual’s behavior, emotions and cognition and his or her environment. Yazzie-Minz (2010) asserts there is no clear-cut definition of student engagement in current research literature; however, he explains that there is clarity on its multidimensionality and complexity. He points out that instead of looking at engagement in terms of measurable, discrete predictors like school attendance and time-on-task, one should consider broader dimensions. To better understand student engagement, Yazzie-Minz (2010) encourages researchers to think in terms of relationships. “Engagement can best be understood as a relationship: between the student and school community, the student and school adults, the student and peers, the student and
instruction, and the student and curriculum” (Yazzie-Minz, 2010, p. 1). Similarly, Middlecamp (2005) views student engagement as an interconnected, multileveled construct, “Engagement is more than simply selecting content. Equally vital is to simultaneously engage students at several levels, including their lives, our own lives, and the world in which we all live. These levels are interconnected in complex and meaningful ways” (p. 15). As a lens through which to view the phenomena of school dropout, engagement theory provides a means for examining the dynamic interaction between the student and his or her environment.

Student engagement is malleable. It is malleable because it is responsive to different educational contexts. To address this study’s research question concerning the engagement experiences of students in a credit recovery school, it is important to start by introducing educational contexts in which students may dwell. One important aspect of this educational context is teacher support. The quality and degree of teacher support continues to stand out in educational research as a key indicator of student engagement and success (Klem & Connell, 2004). Perceived teacher support, whether interpersonal or academic, appears to correlate positively with student engagement and a lower likelihood of students dropping out of school (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Marvul, 2012; Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider & Shernoff, 2003). In their quantitative research study entitled Social Capital and Dropping out of High School: Benefits to At-Risk Students of Teachers’ Support and Guidance, Croninger and Lee (2001) found that “teacher-based forms of social capital reduced the probability of dropping out by nearly half” (p. 548). Exploring the role of teacher support in the experiences of students will help shed light on their engagement experiences in a credit-recovery school, a key research question in this study.

In addition to teacher support, other identified components of social capital that impact
students’ engagement in educational contexts include peers, classroom structure and autonomy support (Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris, 2004). Studies show that peer rejection increases the likelihood of adolescents dropping out (French & Conrad, 2001; Parker & Asher, 1987). Specifically, Parker and Asher’s (1987) findings, produced in the Psychological Bulletin, indicate that low peer acceptance, and peer difficulties generally, were predictive of dropping out.

Another component of educational context is classroom structure. Research on classroom structure vis-à-vis student engagement shows a positive correlation between well-managed, orderly, flexible and responsive classrooms and student engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004; Klem & Connell, 2004; Uline & Tschannen-Moran, 2008). Another component of classroom context that has been studied in engagement literature is autonomy support. Fredricks et al. (2004) cite laboratory-based research experiments on intrinsic motivation indicating that educational contexts supportive of autonomy resulted in increased student engagement, whereas controlling environments resulted in inhibited student interest and persistence (Deci & Ryan, 1987; Grolnick & Ryan, 1987; Ryan & Grolnick, 1986). Also, Shernoff et al., (2003) found in their longitudinal study of student engagement that perceived control was an indicator of positive student engagement. While there are limited classroom-based studies that focus on the relationship between autonomy support and student engagement, the correlation is well founded and worthy of attention in future studies (Fredericks et al., 2004). For this research study, exploring the various components of educational context - including peers, classroom structure and autonomy support - was a primary focus for understanding the experiences of student engagement. It was anticipated that the most salient aspects of classroom context might be revealed in this study, hence demonstrating the impact of context on student engagement for different students.
Various models of student engagement make this construct a useful theoretical tool for understanding an individual’s decision to drop out and re-enter their high school education. Researchers have categorized student engagement using various dimensions, mostly falling within the behavioral, emotional/affective and cognitive domains. Christenson (2002), for example, employs a four-part taxonomy of engagement: academic, behavioral, cognitive and psychological, while Yazzie-Mintz (2007) focuses on three dimensions of engagement: 1) cognitive/intellectual/academic, 2) social/behavioral/participatory, and 3) emotional. Christenson and Thurlow (2004) separate student engagement into observable indicators - academic and behavioral engagement - and internal indicators - cognitive and psychological engagement. Downer, Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta (2007) conceptualize behavioral engagement as a component or byproduct of cognitive engagement and emotional engagement. In their longitudinal study of Canadian youth engagement, Archambault, Janosz, Morizot and Pagani (2009) operationalized the 3 dimensions of student engagement -behavioral, affective, cognitive- as a psychological experience. This is the engagement model that was the most helpful for this study since the primary research questions involved asking students to uncover their own experiences with engagement. While factors in the behavioral domain emerged from this study, the focus of this small scale, phenomenological study was not on elements such as students’ conformity to school rules, attendance, or involvement in extracurricular activities. Rather, investigating students’ experiences through the affective and cognitive dimensions was the most useful since the approach of this study was to have students reflect deeply on their own experiences with engagement. For the affective dimension, Archambault et al. (2009) include student feelings, attitudes, and perceptions toward school, while the cognitive dimension is articulated as “student psychological involvement in learning (eg, perceptions of competency,
willingness to engage in effortful learning, and task-oriented goals) and use of self-regulation strategies (eg, memorization, task planning, and supervision)” (p. 409). The diagram below represents a depiction of how this engagement model was applied to the current study:

Applying Archambault, Janosz, Morizot and Paganis's (2009) student engagement construct to a small-scale, phenomenological study

Student engagement as a psychological experience

Fredricks et al. (2004) suggest improving current research on student engagement theory by distinguishing a source of engagement within the behavioral, emotional and cognitive domains. To help determine the actual source of engagement when predicting individuals’ decisions to stay in school, they suggest using a single measure. Focusing on psychological and emotional dimensions of these models, acceptance, for example, may help identify factors or patterns underlying student engagement. “Students who experience acceptance are more highly motivated and engaged in learning and more committed to school” (Osterman, 2000, p. 359). A sense of belonging has been identified with better school performance (Degelsmith, 2001), adjustment (Clegg, 2006; Lee and Davis, 2000) and completion (Christenson, Sinclair, Lahr, & Godber, 2001; Shernoff et al., 2003). Belonging is defined as “an individual’s sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995 as cited in Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 80). To respond in a meaningful way to this study’s questions concerning engagement experiences of students at-risk of dropping out, it proved beneficial to view the data through the lens of such focused, singular measures of student engagement such as
belongingness and acceptance. In the visual below, examples of some specific, focused measures have been added to the previous diagram to depict how this engagement construct was focused as a theoretical lens for this phenomenological study:

Applying Archambault, Janosz, Morizot and Pagani's (2009) student engagement construct to a small-scale, phenomenological study

Student engagement as a psychological experience:
Identifying singular, underlying factors

Chapter 2 is dedicated to a literature review of the American dropout problem and some of the research findings, including a discussion of the role of technology in student engagement and dropout prevention.
Chapter 2. Literature Review

The American Dropout Problem: An Overview

Unraveling the American dropout problem is complicated. Researchers report a variety of reasons leading to a student’s decision to drop out of high school, including: a lack of connection to the school environment, a disconnect between student characteristics and school instruction, a perception that school is boring, motivation issues, academic challenges, and the weight of real world events. (Bridgeland, Dilulio, Morison, 2006; Council on Virginia’s Future, 2009; The High School Student Engagement Study, 2010; Levin & Arafeh, 2002; Rothman, 2002/2003). Researchers agree that most students drop out as the result of a lengthy process of disengagement from school (Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr, & Godber, 2001; Finn, 1989; Stout & Christenson, 2009). Engagement research points to an increased risk of student dropout when students feel disconnected from multiple aspects of their school experience (Archambault, Janosz, Morizot and Pagani, 2009).

Teacher-Centered Classrooms

So why do students disengage? Some research points to the outdated teacher-centered classroom. Throughout American history, educators like John Dewey (1859-1952) have lamented the “lack of reflective attention” resultant of traditional, teacher-centered instruction:

It is hardly too much to say that in the traditional education so much stress has been laid upon the presentation to the child of ready-made material (books, object-lessons, teacher’s talks, etc.) and the child has been almost exclusively held to bare responsibility for reciting upon this ready-made material, that there has been only accidental occasion and motive for developing reflective attention. (Dewey, 1915, p. 94)

Downes (2010) believes that one teacher, in one role, is not realistic or relevant to meet the needs
of the 21st century learner. Shernoff et al. (2003) reference research that “collectively suggest[s] that student disengagement may stem from a lack of challenge or meaning, which was reported to typically occur in the lecture format (i.e., teacher-initiated instruction)” (p. 171). The lecture format is also known as whole group instruction or teacher-controlled instruction.

Another reason students may begin to disengage is because in the teacher-dominated structure of public high school classrooms, there is often disproportionate classroom-sanctioned time for student-led discourse, frequently a one-sided monologue, where students listen passively until they disengage. Freire (1970) referred to these teacher-dominated monologues as “verbalistic lessons,” one factor in the ready-to-wear educational approach which “serves to obviate [student] thinking” (p.61). Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider and Shernoff (2003) conducted a longitudinal study of 526 high school students across the U.S. to investigate how adolescents spent their time in high school and the conditions under which they reported being engaged. Data from this study revealed that students’ lack of active and meaningful classroom participation was a source of school disengagement: “The results showed that students spend approximately one-third of their time passively attending to information transmitted to the entire class (i.e., listening to a lecture, watching television or a video)” (Shernoff et al., 2003, p. 171). According to Young (1992), teachers who maintain discourse domination are holding onto an “impoverished notion of the dynamic nature of the classroom context” (p. 22). Such traditional, passive learning environments appear to adversely affect 21st century student engagement and learning.

**Lack of Personalization**

Without strong support systems in place to encourage successful completion of high school, either at home or at school, some students may be more likely to begin the disengagement
process that leads to dropping out. One of the issues here may be the decline in the personalization of schooling as students rise from one grade level to the next through middle and high school, especially by those from impoverished backgrounds (Felner, Seitsinger, Brand, Burns & Bolton, 2007). It is common and expected for elementary school students to receive much individualized attention from their teachers. As students rise in grade level, however, the personalization they enjoyed as youngsters begins to wane in many American public schools, since increased independence is the developmental progression norm. However, for some students, this decrease in personalization means they have lost bonds with any caring adult, and are thrust unprepared into isolating learning environments for which they are emotionally unprepared.

School Size: Overcrowded Classrooms

In large, urban schools, there is often a disconnect between student learning and school size. Large, impersonal, teacher-centered learning environments are typically not conducive to positive learning outcomes (Duke, DeRobert & Trautvetter, 2009; Fishetti and Smith, 2010). Unfortunately, many American public high school students are finding themselves in increasingly overcrowded classrooms and the quality of their education is suffering as a result (Bernstein, Millsap, Schimmenti & Page, 2008; Kahne, Sporte & Easton, 2005). In fact, research has shown that larger high schools may adversely impact the achievement gap in this country, “as they tend to serve disproportionately low-income (as measured by free and reduced-price lunch eligibility), urban, and minority youths—those most at risk of academic failure” (Bernstein, Millsap, Schimmenti & Page, 2008, p.17).

Cultural Capital & The Economic Gap

An issue that compounds the problem of marginalized students feeling “lost” in large high
schools is the ever-widening economic gap that is reflected in the daily interactions between teacher and student in public school classrooms across the country. According to Bourdieu’s (1973) theory of cultural capital and habitus, schools value and reward upper class cultural capital over lower class cultural capital, a driver to social inequality. As a result of family upbringing (linguistic and cultural), upper class children are better equipped to succeed in the academic arena that has been determined by the dominant culture. High-status families perpetuate educational attainment - and eventual life success - by encouraging the “academic ethos” (Brint, 2006, p. 178) in their children and their friends’ children; this is social reproduction. On the other hand, students representing culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) groups – including Latino Americans, Native Americans, immigrants, and the poor – are more likely to come to school with lower cultural capital, making them more susceptible to failure in the American public school system. By way of illustration, commonly used English grammar books (which typically frame the content of teacher discourse) are rife with constructions that counter linguistic messages CLD groups hear at home and in their neighborhoods. Examples include ain’t, ‘em, and the vernacular use of double negatives. In class, repeated corrections of such familiar vernacular communicates the message to the CLD student that s/he needs to either change their familiar, incorrect grammatical forms, or stop participating until s/he can get it right. If students who represent culturally and linguistically diverse groups receive hidden linguistic messages regarding their identities, they are likewise apt to withdraw and disengage from the learning process. According to Coleman (2000), “When educators are unaware of children’s culturally influenced language styles, miscommunications may arise that can lead to misperceptions and misunderstandings about interactional patterns, intelligence, and academic potential” (as cited in Lovelace and Wheeler, 2006, p. 304). This
includes the discourse sequence norm of Initiator-Reply-Evaluation (IRE) in which the teacher asks a student a question, the student replies to the question, then the student has his/her answer evaluated by the teacher. In the IRE sequence, students are expected to wait until permission is granted to reply to their teacher’s evaluation of their response. Students who come to school with white, American, middle class cultural traditions will experience more ease with the IRE sequence because this discourse style is typically valued and obeyed at home (MacLeod, 2009, p. 14). However, according to Gay (2000) and Kochman (1985), “Members of some CLD groups such as African Americans, Latino Americans, and Native Hawaiians typically display a communication style that is characterized as participatory-interactive” (as cited in Lovelace and Wheeler, 2006, p. 305). With this style of interaction, sometimes referred to as call-response, participants are expected, “to give encouragement, make comments, or display some type of movement as they are speaking” (Lovelace and Wheeler, 2006, p. 305). Teachers who are not trained or receptive to this communication style may misjudge or reject and possibly label it as rude or inappropriate behavior. This breakdown in communication sends a hidden and destructive message to the student – that his/her cultural and linguistic knowledge is inferior and wrong, an example of cultural and linguistic messages which may further propel the already discouraged student along the path of disengagement and eventual dropout.

**Implementation of New Learning Tools**

Modern educators need to better address the learning styles and preferences of 21st century students in which “knowing depends on practice and participation” (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005, p. 23). According to Siemens (2005), “The field of education has been slow to recognize both the impact of new learning tools and the environmental changes in what it means to learn” (n.p.). Using computers appeals more to most modern students than do traditional, textbook-centered
classrooms (Ally, 2004; Dede, 2007; Mayes & Fowler, 1999; Nastu, 2010; Prensky, 2006). Chris Dede, Harvard Professor of Learning Technologies, explains that emerging tools, applications, media, and infrastructures are playing a pivotal role in teaching and learning today. “The characteristics of students are changing, as their usage of technology outside of academic settings shapes their learning styles, strengths, and preferences” (2007, p. 11). Oblinger & Oblinger (2005) champion the benefits of digital resources to enable experiential learning, “Rather than being told, Net Geners would rather construct their own learning, assembling information, tools, and frameworks from a variety of sources” (p. 23).

To understand student engagement in technology-driven learning environments, the conversation regarding educational technology reform should not focus on how many computers are in the classroom, but rather on how they are used (Butzin, 2001; Demski, 2012). Even in this technology era, a good teacher-student relationship plays a key role in a positive learning experience. According to Greer and Mott (2009), “The relationship between instructors and student is at the core students' engaged learning; as such, technology should augment--not inhibit--the formation of that valuable relationship” (p. 3). This sentiment is encapsulated in an excerpt from a 21st century student:

In the classroom, we crave much of the same [interaction with a variety of people and material]. An online society may increase the means of communication, but it does not diminish the human need for connection. Instead, many Net Geners often leave the computer screen craving actual conversation and interaction with their classmates. (Windham, 2005, pp. 56-57)

Just as they did in traditional textbook-centered classroom settings, modern teachers must create learning environments that are attuned to the engagement processes of today’s digital learner.
Hu & Hui (2010) encourage investigating how “students’ learning effectiveness and satisfaction in technology-assisted learning can be improved by designing systems or using teaching strategies that encourage, facilitate, and reward their engagement in online learning activities” (p. 901).

**Indicators of Disengagement**

Indicators of disengagement are often accompanied by feelings of alienation, a poor sense of belonging, and a general dislike for school (Christenson & Thurow, 2004). As discussed in the previous chapter, a sense of belonging has been connected to school completion (Christenson, Sinclair, Lahr, & Godber, 2001; Shernoff et al., 2003). The applicability of the belongingness hypothesis to student dropout is in understanding some underlying reasons why students start down the path of school disengagement. Evaluating the belongingness hypothesis against a large body of empirical data, Baumeister and Leary (1995) concluded, “Existing evidence supports the hypothesis that the need to belong is a powerful, fundamental, and extremely pervasive motivation” (p. 497). To better understand human motivation, one can accept that humans desire “frequent, affectively positive interactions within the context of long-term, caring relationships” (Baumeister and Leary, 1995, p. 522). In their review of ethnographic and survey-based studies, Croninger & Lee (2001) reported that students who left high school before graduating often cited a lack of social and academic support as one reason for doing so.

They feel disconnected from teachers, despite self-described efforts to gain assistance from school personnel. Dropouts frequently complain that their teachers do not care about them, are not interested in how well they do in school, and are unwilling to help with problems. (Fine, 1986; MacLeod, 1987 as cited in Croninger & Lee, 2001, p. 551)

If this is so, then students who do not experience such relationships at school, with teachers or
classmates, may experience decreased motivation leading to declining school engagement. Compound that with other negative factors like the passive learning environments referenced earlier in this section or peer bullying, for instance, which in itself has been attributed to an increase in student dropout (Fried & Fried, 1996), and one begins to grasp the complexity of the potential processes at work in the student disengagement cycle.

**Strategies for Dropout Prevention**

Understanding the nature of student disengagement helps frame an investigation of which dropout prevention programs are effectively reengaging students. According to Montecel, Cortez and Cortex (2004) what is needed are effective, systemic reforms to improve a school’s holding power. Characteristics of schools with the greatest holding power include: small enrollment, fair discipline policies, caring teachers, high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation (Christenson and Thurlow, 2004; Marvul, 2012). The National Dropout Prevention Center’s analysis of research and practice on dropout prevention programs resulted in 12 strategies, including individualized instruction (including multi-sensory intervention) and “utilization of instructional technologies” (Duckenfield et al., 1990). Furthermore, according to information assimilated from a comprehensive review of federal dropout-prevention evaluations, characteristics that lowered dropout rates included: smaller class sizes, more personalized settings, and individualized learning plans (Dynarski and Gleason, 2002). As a result of their longitudinal study, Shernoff et al. (2003) suggest, “Activities that are academically intense and foster positive emotions stand the best chance of engaging students” (p. 173). The next two subsections will explore in more detail the research behind two of the many research-based dropout prevention strategies in contemporary America. The third subsection will highlight some programs that have effectively incorporated one or both of these approaches. Together,
they constitute a solid backdrop for understanding the elements that comprise the site of this study.

One approach: Small learning communities. Small learning communities (SLCs) have arisen in the last few decades as a potential solution to the problem of large, impersonal learning environments. According to Wasley and Lear (2001), the culture of SLCs typically “revolves around hard work, high aspirations, respect for others, and the expectation that all students will succeed” (p. 24). The Peter D. Hart Research Associates created a report for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation entitled The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts. This 2006 Civic Enterprises report is foundational to the Community in Schools® Performance Learning Center dropout prevention model. At-risk students surveyed for this 2006 report indicated they “wanted classes to be more relevant to their interests and lives and longed for smaller learning communities with more individualized attention” (Bridgeland, Dilulio, Morison, 2006, p. 14).

Increased personalization. Part of the distinctiveness of small learning communities is their emphasis on providing a learning environment that is more personalized than that offered by traditional schooling. This personalization permits students’ opportunities to form closer student–teacher relationships than they would in larger school environments (Armstead, Bessell, Sembiante, and Plaza, 2010). In a major study prepared for the U.S. Department of Education Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, Bernstein et al. (2008) found that all SLCs investigated strove to increase personalization for their students. (Bernstein, Millsap, Schimmenti & Page, p. 7). Through in-depth case studies of 18 SLC schools and survey results, he discovered an increase in personalization occurred with the following mechanisms: “individual assessments (76 percent), a cooperative learning focus (63 percent) or formal
mentoring programs (47 percent)” (Bernstein et al., 2008, p. 7). Having students work within teams where the teachers remain the same for more than one year helps assure that students will be known well by more than just one adult, offering them personalization that is “conducive to the formation of a community of learners” (Cotton, 2001, p. 31). Connell, J.P., & Klem, A.M. (2006) report that small learning communities are one of the key features in their First Things First (FTF) Framework for reforming student engagement and learning. The goal of the FTF is to improve critical student outcomes such as “attendance, test scores, persistence, and graduation rates” (p. 54). To effect meaningful changes in student outcome, the framework asserts that one of the main conditions is to create small learning communities that will result in “a more personalized learning environment” (p. 54).

**Increased opportunities to participate and develop social relations.** Research has shown that small learning communities afford students more opportunities to participate and develop social relations in school (Barker and Gump, 1964). Finn’s (1993) Participation-Identification Model of School Engagement underscores the role of student participation in school, focusing on student identification or non-identification with school. This theory asserts that students must both actively participate in school and have a feeling of identification with school in order for them to remain in school and graduate (Lehr, Johnson, Bremer, Cosio & Thompson, 2004). According to this theory, students demonstrate identification with school via behavioral indicators of engagement like attending school, following rules and completing work.

Engagement literature indicates that students in smaller learning communities do participate more in social and extracurricular activities (Finn & Voelkl, 1993). From data collected in focus groups during site visits to eighteen schools, Bernstein, Millsap, Schimmenti and Page (2008) portrayed successful SLCs as those characterized by “a friendly climate in which all students are
expected to succeed academically and socially with each other’s help” (p. 95). From their
descriptive single case study of the Hudson Early College High School in Southeastern North
Carolina, Thompson and Ongaga (2011) discovered that fostering a collaborative student spirit
resulted in increased student academic engagement. In their study, students’ relationships were
characterized by maintaining high expectations, using teamwork to complete class projects, and
“encouraging each other to attend school regularly and develop academic resiliency in the face of
challenges” (Thompson & Ongaga, 2011, p. 48).

**SLCs impact the graduation rate.** Felner, Brand, Adan, Mulhall, Flowers and Sartain
(1993) conducted longitudinal research on the School Transitional Environment Project (STEP)
that included a series of randomized, controlled studies to investigate the impact of SLCs in large
middle or high schools. Findings demonstrated that at the high school level, STEP produced
consistent declines between 40% to 50% or more in the overall school dropout rate (Felner et al.,
2007, p. 215). STEP-restructured school environments had “significantly more favorable
attitudes about school, teachers, and themselves, including higher expectations, greater sense of
achievement motivation, academic efficacy, and fewer socio-emotional/behavioral difficulties
than students who were not in such programs” (Felner et al., 2007, p. 215). Bernstein et al.
(2008) are among those who advocate for more empirical studies to further probe the long-term
effects of small learning communities on increasing promotion rates and reducing dropout rates.

**Another approach: Computer-assisted or blended learning.** Gross (2011) recommends
implementing hybrid-learning communities that could focus on system-wide issues while
working toward effective instruction and student interventions. Using technology, according to
Gross (2011), could be a huge breakthrough for schools who could more efficiently use their
resources to “correlate nonacademic problems with academic challenges” (p. 10). He offers the
example of Blackboard’s course management system and Pearson’s PowerSchool as platforms which could deliver student information systems while facilitating individualized learning.

Individualized and self-directed learning are integral to computer-based schools across the country, and play a key role in addressing the learning needs of many students (Lawrence and Routten, 2009). Individualized learning is self-paced and diagnostic-driven. Students share the same learning goals, but progress through the curriculum at their own pace (Demski, 2012). This is different than differentiated learning, in which students share learning goals, but receive instruction that is tailored to their learning needs (Demski, 2012). The US Department of Education's Office of Educational Technology (2010) defines personalized learning as that which encompasses both individualized and differentiated instruction. In personalized learning, students’ personal interests are factored into their learning goals and content, potentially helping to deepen their learning experience (US Department of Education, 2012). According to Demski (2012), “Proponents of personalized learning believe this model actually promotes core learning better than the 19th century industrial learning model currently in place, in which all students learn the same thing in the same way at the same time” (n.p.).

Demski (2012) cites the example of Mooresville Graded School District (NC) that transitioned from a textbook-driven to a digital-driven, personalized curriculum in all of its eight, 3rd-12th grade schools. According to the superintendent Mark Edwards, within five years of this 1-to-1 laptop initiative, the district’s graduation rate rose from 64% to 91%. He attributes this to a dramatic increase in student engagement and achievement (Demski, 2012). Lawrence and Routten (2009) project an increase in student engagement for students at risk of dropping out of school as the opportunities for distance and computer-based learning continue to grow (p. 20).

In the white paper, “Using Online Learning for At-Risk Students and Credit Recovery,”
Watson and Gemin (2009) espouse the benefits of personalized learning using online curriculum for credit recovery in a blended learning environment. They define blended learning as “the convergence of online and face-to-face instruction” (Watson and Gemin, 2009, p. 2). Whether the learning approach be personalized, individualized, or differentiated, computer-based instruction that engages students and encourages positive teacher interaction seems to be an essential, 21st century strategy in American dropout prevention and recovery.

Among the many current models using personalized, individualized, or differentiated, computer-based instruction for dropout prevention, The Florida Virtual School (FLVS) stands out as a forerunner in offering students credit recovery online courseware (Watson and Gemin, 2009). The FLVS model offers both fully online and blended curricula. Additionally, blended curriculum is delivered at e-learning centers where the school “provides a mentor or facilitator to provide additional assistance to the student” (Watson and Gemin, 2009, p. 9).

Another successful dropout prevention model that uses online courseware in a face-to-face format is the Jackson, Michigan Alternative School. The uniqueness of this program is in offering students high-interest, high demand online courses such as digital photography and forensic science to motivate students “while they develop the independent learning skills, self-discipline and technology-based communication skills necessary to become successful online learners” (Watson and Gemin, 2009, p. 10). The high-interest course options are expanded as students demonstrate increasing competency in completing online courses. As Watson and Gemin (2009) report, “The blended approach of working with online curriculum with the aid of a teacher in the lab setting provides the structure many of these at-risk students need while they develop the maturity to work independently” (p. 10).
The Los Angeles Unified School District’s (LAUSD) Online Learning Programs presents another unique dropout prevention model with its blended learning approach using differentiated instruction. Based on LAUSD teachers’ assessments of diagnostic pretests, they can offer students individualized tutoring or group work in a face-to-face setting, then allow students to proceed with prescriptive online content at an individualized pace (Watson and Gemin, 2009). Such individualization has allowed the LAUSD students to experience success while remaining engaged with the content, something they had not often experienced in their traditional high schools (Watson and Gemin, 2009).

**Summary of Literature Review**

According to Christenson and Thurlow (2004), there is a gap in the literature on dropout prevention programs that “systematically document strategies that actively engage youth in the learning process and help youth to stay in school and on track to graduate while developing academic and behavioral skills” (p. 39). Archambault et al. (2009) recommend future student engagement studies, “need to investigate to what extent important contextual elements may interfere or contribute to student psychological experiences at school” (p. 413). This is supported by the work of Uline and Tschannen-Moran (2008) who state, “The particular personality of various spaces within a school may encourage a sense of belonging and foster a collective commitment to share learning goals” (p. 68). The present study sought to explore the lived experiences of students at risk of dropping out of high school and to identify factors in a nontraditional school that can be implemented in future dropout prevention initiatives.

Lowther & Ross (2003) suggest that additional, similar research to theirs is needed “in diverse contexts and with other student groups (e.g., disadvantaged populations) to demonstrate similar findings regarding classroom laptop use regarding teaching strategies and student
achievement” (p. 43). Also, the 2006 National Center for Education Statistics *Summit for Leaders in School Engagement* presentation suggests that future student engagement research should obtain data from students who are high achieving, at-risk and ethnically diverse (NCES, 2006, slide 42). With more than 50% of the proposed research site’s population eligible for free or reduced lunch, it is clear that this study represents a diverse context. As such, a research study at this site has the potential to contribute to the body of literature on how one particular dropout prevention program impacts student engagement now.
Chapter 3. Research Design

Research Questions

This research used the affective and cognitive dimensions of student engagement theory presented by Archambault, Janosz, Morizot and Pagani (2009) as a paradigm for understanding students’ psychological experiences with high school engagement. Specifically, the focus within the affective domain was on students’ perceptions of factors like acceptance, belonging and interest in school, while the focus within the cognitive domain included such factors as goals, perceived competency and “willingness to engage in effortful learning” (Archambault, Janosz, Morizot and Pagani, 2009, p. 409). The research questions focused specifically on students’ recollections of their experiences engaging or not engaging in their traditional high schools prior to enrolling in a credit-recovery school, as well as on their recent experiences with engaging or not engaging as students attending a credit-recovery school.

It was hoped that these interviews would reveal factors that led the students to decide to stay in school and graduate or not. The research questions of this study are the following:

1. What were the engagement experiences of students in a traditional high school prior to enrolling in a credit-recovery high school?

2. What were the engagement experiences of students enrolled in a credit-recovery high school after having been previously enrolled in a traditional high school?

The research in this study is qualitative, and open-ended interview questions were used. Data was collected from in-depth interviews with a representative sampling of five students who enrolled in the credit-recovery school after withdrawing from their former, traditional high schools. In this study, I have sought meanings and essences of students’ high school experiences rather than measurements and explanations. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to
explore the lived experiences of students at risk of dropping out of high school and to identify factors that can be implemented in future dropout prevention initiatives.

**Methodology**

**The qualitative research paradigm.** This is a study of human experience. As such, it is not approachable through quantitative approaches (Moustakas, 1994). A study of student engagement involves collecting “moving images” as provided through qualitative data rather than the “snapshots” of quantitative data (Weiss, 1998, p. 85). Fredricks et al. (2004) assert their concern that student engagement has frequently been studied using “a narrow array of methods” (p. 86) such as student and teacher surveys. They recommend future studies of student engagement use “thick descriptions of classroom contexts” (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 86) to improve our understanding of engagement. For that reason, they recommend future research approach student engagement using a qualitative method to better understand the phenomenology of engagement (Fredricks et al. 2004). Additionally, current research demonstrates that a qualitative approach may yield more significant results than a quantitative approach when studying the effects of technology-assisted instruction on student motivation and engagement. In her report “Learning with Laptops: Implementation and Outcomes in an Urban, Under-Privileged School,” Mouza (2008) states, “Quantitative data did not reveal significant differences in student attitudes towards computers and school between laptop and comparison students; however, qualitative data indicated that laptop integration created enhanced motivation and engagement with schoolwork, influenced classroom interactions, and empowered students” (p. 477). To better understand student engagement experiences in the context of a computer-assisted learning environment, then, a qualitative approach has provided a more in-depth and complete story.
**Phenomenology.** Education is a human interaction enterprise. A phenomenological approach allowed me to explore students’ lived experiences, known to Smith and Osborn (2008) as a participant’s “lifeworld” (p. 53). Cilesiz (2010) reports, “The purposes of a phenomenological study are to understand and describe a given phenomenon in-depth and arrive at the essence of humans’ lived experiences of that phenomenon” (p. 495). Cilesiz (2010) is an advocate of using the phenomenological approach to better understand students’ experiences with technology. He asserts, “A concentrated effort is needed to cultivate research on experiences with technology and to build a research agenda” (Cilesiz, 2010, p. 491). The National Dropout Prevention Center / Network (2012) cites evaluation studies of Community In School’s Performance Learning Center programs (quasi-experimental, survey, case studies), but made no mention of phenomenological studies. A qualitative, phenomenological approach enabled me to dig down and unearth the human story behind students’ engagement experiences in the context of traditional and nontraditional high schools, where the nontraditional school uses a blended online with face-to-face curriculum.

**Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.** Informed by the phenomenological movement, interpretative phenomenological analysis, commonly referred to as IPA, is likewise “concerned with the detailed examination of human lived experience” (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, Chapter 2, “IPA and Theory,” para. 1). Where IPA differs from general phenomenological studies is that in IPA the researcher attempts to interpret the participants’ experiences. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) explain that there are two major axes underpinning IPA – the experience of the participant and the interpretation of that experience by the IPA researcher. They refer to this as a “double hermeneutic” in that “the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them” (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009,
Chapter 1, “What is IPA?” para. 8). IPA made sense for this study because the focus was not just on knowing students’ experiences of engagement, but on understanding and making sense of common engagement experiences shared by students in particular contexts. In other words, the focus was on sense making in a particular context by individuals who share common experiences (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

**Site and participants.** I anticipated that the interview participants would feel at ease during the interviews because they knew my history with the school. This is important, as Lester (1999) indicates, “The establishment of a good level of rapport and empathy is critical to gaining depth of information, particularly where investigating issues where the participant has a strong personal stake” (p. 2).

**Participant selection.** Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) recommend purposive homogeneous participant selection in IPA since the goal is to gain insight into a particular, shared experience. The goal is to select participants “who ‘represent’ a perspective, rather than a population” (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, Chapter 3, “Finding a sample,” para. 2). In addition, Creswell (2007) urges researchers engaged in phenomenological study to choose participants who have the capability to reflect on and provide full descriptions of their lived experiences. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) encourage a small sample size for an IPA so that the detailed similarities and differences of the participants’ experiences will be revealed: “IPA studies are conducted on relatively small sample sizes, and the aim is to find a reasonably homogeneous sample, so that, within the sample, we can examine convergence and divergence in some detail” (Chapter 2, “What is IPA?” para. 10). For this study, the sample size was limited to five participants, thereby allowing me to uncover the essence of each individual’s experience. The researcher only considered participants who attended the school for at least one semester.
To address validity concerns like favoritism, bias or seeking a teacher’s approval, no students who were currently taking classes from the researcher were considered as participants. Also, students who spent less than a year in their traditional high schools were not included since one of the research questions asked participants to discuss their engagement experiences in a traditional high school, and time less than one year would most likely not provide a full enough picture of the experience. This is especially true if the student had excessive absenteeism, as is often the case with Southern Performance Center applicants. Using the aforementioned criteria, the researcher conferred with the other four teachers and the principal to identify five students whom they believe met the following criteria, thus creating a homogeneous purposive sampling for this phenomenological study:

- Would be willing and capable of participating in lengthy, in-depth interview sessions;
- Would be able to give thoughtful and serious responses to questions regarding their experiences as a student.

Additionally, homogeneity of participant sampling was achieved for this study since each of the five research participants experienced the same admission process to the credit-recovery high school:

- Received recommendations from the guidance counselors in their traditional high schools,
- Scored at an 8th grade level or higher on the math and reading admission tests,
- Received favorable recommendations from the SPC interview panel.

The process for selecting participants included: establishing contact, obtaining informed consent, insuring confidentiality, agreeing to place and time commitments, and obtaining permission to record and publish collected data (Moustakas, 1994).

**Data collection through in-depth, phenomenological, semi-structured interviewing**
Data collection took place in the conference room of Southern Performance Center and in a private room of one of the district’s four traditional high schools, the site of The SPC’s 2013 summer school. In this study, the researcher utilized the individual, long, semi-structured interview: an informal, interactive process using open-ended comments and questions. However, to ensure some level of methodological consistency, the researcher established a three-part format to the long interview. Borrowing from Seidman’s (2006) framework for in-depth, open-ended, phenomenological interviewing, the interviewer conducted one long interview with 3 sections (instead of three sequential interviews). The sections follow Seidman’s (2006) model:

1. The context of the participants’ experiences was established;
2. The participants were asked to recreate the details of their experiences;
3. The participants were asked to reflect on the meaning of their experiences.

Within this 3-part, 60-90 minute format, the researcher remained flexible, making allowances for the natural unfolding of student responses to the open-ended questions that were written on an IRB-approved interview schedule. To fully explore students’ engagement experiences, allowance was made for follow-up questions. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) encourage the use of an interview schedule in IPA data collection, allowing the researcher “to set a loose agenda (topics that she would like to discuss with the participant), to anticipate potential sensitive issues (and to inform the participant in advance), and to frame her questions in suitably open forms” (Chapter 4, “In-depth interviews,” para. 3). They suggest that the interview schedule include a range of six to ten open questions along with prompts (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). As data was collected for this study, the researcher made every effort to utilize the *Epochen* (or bracketing) process (Moustakas, 1994), to set aside prejudgments and approach
the open interviews with an unbiased, receptive presence and to maintain the role of highly engaged, active listener (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

Instruments used to collect the data were an Apple Macbook, a tape recorder and field notes. Data collection was monitored to ensure the safety of the participants (Fraenkel et al., 2012). After the research was explained satisfactorily and all questions about the research were answered, participants (all of whom were over 18 years of age) were asked to sign the IRB-approved consent form prior to the interviews. During the final phase of data collection, collaboration with individual research participants helped validate the collected data to minimize threats to internal validity. Angers & Machtmes (2005) encourage allowing participants “to read, correct, and make comments on written descriptions, assertions, and interconnected components, [of] . . . field notes and observations” (p. 778). By scheduling follow-up appointments with each participant, the researcher provided the students opportunities to validate or correct their transcribed interview responses.

Data analysis (Moustakas, 1994; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008). The content of the interviews was recorded in digital format using Audacity 2.0.3®. A backup recorder was also used to tape the interviews. Transcripts were produced, then transcribed verbatim. Data was collected and stored securely into a laptop which is password protected. The transcribed interviews were used to develop a textural description of the students’ engagement experiences. Groenwald (2004) contends that phenomenological data, by its nature, does not lend itself to computer analysis, even though for other types of qualitative research there are many excellent software packages. Manual organization and analysis of data in this study occurred by regarding every statement relevant to the topic as having equal value. This required multiple readings of the transcripts (see Step 1 below).
An application of Smith, Flowers and Larkin’s (2009) guide to conducting IPA analysis was used in this study. They suggest beginning with an analysis of the interview that is believed to be the most “detailed, complex and engaging” (Chapter 5, “Introduction,” para. 8), then applying the following procedure before moving on to analyze the second, third, and subsequent interviews. Their suggested steps are outlined below:

1. Step 1 - read and reread the data
2. Step 2 – make initial notes
3. Step 3 – develop emergent themes
4. Step 4 – search for connections across emergent themes
5. Step 5 – move to the next case
6. Step 6 - look for patterns across cases

(Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009)

While the first analysis served as a baseline, it was important to bracket the themes from the analysis of the first interview while analyzing the next interviews, “allowing new themes to emerge with each case” (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, Chapter 5, “Step 5: Moving to the next case,” para. 1).

Of their six-step analytic process, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) point out that Step 2 – comprehensive exploratory commenting - is “the most detailed and time consuming” (Chapter 5, “Initial noting,” para. 1). From the comprehensive notes (created as a result of Step 2), the themes discovered in Step 3 should “reflect a synergistic process of description and interpretation” (Chapter 5, “Step 3: Developing emergent themes,” para. 5). In Steps 4 and 6, the meaning units were manually listed and clustered into common themes. This stage involved removing overlapping phrases and repetitions. A research diary was helpful throughout the
process to record analytic descriptions along with the researcher’s commentaries (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). It was also beneficial at this point in the analysis to create a graphic representation of the emerging themes (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). As they emerged, the researcher united any themes that related common student experiences. This included the engagement experiences from their traditional high schools as well as experiences within the context and structure of the alternative setting that may have caused students to reengage with their high school education and decide to pursue a diploma.

**Validity and Credibility Questions**

As the site where the researcher works as one of the five core teachers, the Southern Performance Center would constitute what Creswell (2009) refers to as a *natural setting*: “This close up information gathered by actually talking directly to people and seeing them behave and act within their own context is a major characteristic of qualitative research” (p. 175). However, a key limitation of the qualitative approach is “Reactivity” (Maxwell, 2005), which is the effect the researcher has on the participants. As the key researcher and a teacher in the school, this includes my own professional and intellectual goals, disclosed below:

- To explore student engagement in this school district;
- To understand the many experiences that play into a student’s perceptions regarding their education and high school graduation;
- To better understand the lived experiences of students at risk of dropping out.
- To assist the district leadership in determining if any modifications need to be made to current credit-recovery dropout prevention approaches or initiatives;
- To identify factors that can be implemented in future dropout prevention initiatives.

Remaining mindful of my own professional and intellectual goals, I remained neutral throughout
the interview process so as not to lead or sway the students in their responses. Utilizing the *Epoche* (or bracketing) process throughout the study helped me to put aside prejudgments and approach the open interviews with an unbiased, receptive presence. To increase transparency, I disclosed my subjectivity statement prior to beginning the research (Appendix). Furthermore, I kept a reflexive journal (different from the research diary mentioned earlier) in order to note my personal observations, biases, notes and questions as they arose throughout the data collection process. Peer reviews were also implemented to reduce the impact of the researcher’s subjectivity on the findings. Participants were asked to validate data and clarify the researcher’s interpretations in order to further bracket subjectivity in this study.

Because a purposive sample group was used in this study, and due to the small sample size, the results have limited external validity and, as a result, limited generalizability. Generalizability of findings was not an objective for this phenomenological inquiry. The goal was to obtain descriptions of lived experience, so participants’ representativeness of the general population was not a factor (Creswell 2007; Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). However, as indicated earlier in this proposal, I anticipate that these results may be used to help inform improvement strategies to continue reducing the dropout rate within this researcher’s district and beyond.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

This study did not pose any obvious risks to the participants. Having received formal permission from the school division, recruitment into the study was voluntary and was initiated by an IRB-approved introductory letter to the selected SPC students and their parents/guardians, explaining the purpose of the study and requesting students’ voluntary participation. Another IRB-approved letter of informed consent and participation, available for review, followed. The
purpose of this letter was to satisfy the following ethical concerns:

- Participants should not feel in any way coerced into participating in this study.
- Participants should not feel that their standing or success at the school or the district would be in any way affected by their participation in this study.
- Participants’ participation in the study will remain confidential and their true identities will never be disclosed or discussed as a result of this study.

Within 5 days of sending home the Informed Consent letter with prospective student participants, the researcher followed-up with a phone call to explain the form and answer any questions the parents/guardians or students may have about the research. All willing participants (and their parents if they are under 18 years of age) were asked to sign this IRB-approved, agreement to participate, informed consent letter. This informed consent letter explains the purpose, research process, risks, confidentiality and voluntary nature of the research. Participants were informed that they could discontinue involvement in the study at any time. To protect the privacy and confidentiality of participants, I have safeguarded their names by replacing them with pseudonyms and asking participants to read the final report to identify any disagreeable representations. All information has been held in strict confidence.

Summary

With an increasingly worrisome dropout rate in this country, it is imperative that policymakers and school leaders continue supporting and reviewing research that sheds light on the many complex factors that contribute to the problem as well as those that offer viable solutions. An extensive review of dropout and engagement literature reveals that specific contextual factors of learning spaces and approaches need to be more closely investigated to provide a clearer understanding of the processes at work in student engagement, disengagement
and dropout.

While some aspects of the dropout problem and its solutions may be revealed through quantitative means, understanding the human experience behind the dropout crisis is best explored through a qualitative approach. It was anticipated that through thick descriptions, quotations and tables, this qualitative phenomenological study would reveal the human story behind why and how students engage--or do not engage--with their high school education. Exploring the phenomenon of engagement from the viewpoints of students at-risk of dropping out before and after they entered an alternative school offers an opportunity to enrich the research base for engagement and dropout literature.

A specific goal for this research includes offering improvement strategies to the Virginia district at which this study occurred. In the broader sense, I anticipate distinguishing my findings from prior student engagement and dropout research while suggesting areas for further investigation. It is also hoped that this study will contribute to the body of literature for current teacher education. Finally, the outcomes of this study will be explored in terms of social meanings and values.
Chapter 4. Report of Research Results

Section 1: Students At Risk of Dropping Out

The five students in this study have been given the pseudonyms Jalen, Christie, Maria, Marquis and Earl. These students were selected purposively due to having spent a minimum of one year at their traditional high school prior to enrolling at the alternative, credit-recovery school, also given a pseudonym, *The Southern Performance School*. The criteria for this purposive sample group also required that each student spent at least one semester at the alternative, credit-recovery high school after undergoing the standard SPC application process. Further, to address issues of favoritism, bias and seeking teacher’s approval, and to add to the purposive sampling criteria, none of the five students could have been taking classes from the researcher, nor would they be at any time in the future. Finally, the researcher consulted with the other four teachers and the principal to ensure the selected participants met the following additional selection criteria:

- Would be willing and capable of participating in lengthy, in-depth interview sessions;
- Would be able to give thoughtful and serious responses to questions regarding their experiences as a student.

The results are divided into two sections, Section 1: Profiles of Five Students At Risk of Dropping Out, and Section 2: At-Risk Students’ Perceptions of Their High School Engagement Experiences. In Section 1, the students’ backgrounds and stories are shared in their own words. Their perceptions of how they experienced school prior to high school and their views toward education before entering high school for the first time are described in narrative form. Their specific experiences and behaviors in the context of transitioning from middle school to high school are also presented as they emerged from the data.
In Section 2, the two research questions will be presented with a synthesis of essential results that emerged from the data. The data illustrated similarities and differences in ways the students described their high school engagement experiences, and what they found at the alternative, credit-recovery school that impacted their engagement experiences and decisions to stay in school and not drop out. A table summarizing key themes will be presented at the conclusion of each subsection for Section 2.

**Student 1: Jalen.** “In elementary I used to get honor roll. Yeah, I was good. It seemed like in 7th grade things started changing.” Jalen described his early experiences with education in terms of the academic success he had achieved in elementary school. By contrast, his post-elementary experience with school is described in social terms. When asked about his experiences transitioning from elementary to middle school, for example, he focused on his popularity with the other students:

I was the man. Yeah, everybody know me from *wiling out*. It just seemed like I knew everybody from 5th and from where I stay in the area. And everybody lives around here, so they already knew me from the neighborhood.

When asked what he remembered of his learning goals and his efforts to achieve in middle school, Jalen confessed that in middle school he was, “really too much worried about girls . . . not focused on academics.” When asked to describe his experiences transitioning from middle to high school, Jalen focused again on the social, repeating the topic of popularity and adding to that the notion of school as a place for fun, “I just thought it was going to be fun.” Jalen stayed at his high school for three years before going to the alternative school.

**Student 2: Christie.** Like Jalen, Christie stayed at her zoned high school for 3 years prior to enrolling at the alternative school. Unlike Jalen, however, when asked about her early
experiences with education, Christie focused on her academic standing and the role her mother played in motivating her to succeed. She remembered her learning prior to high school as being “easy:”

Oh I liked it [elementary and middle] better, because it was easy. It changed when I got to the middle of ninth grade because I got my report card and it changed my view. It was harder. My mom was more on it than me.

Christie reported that her lack of success in the transition to high school became a turning point in her view of herself as a student. At the beginning of the interview, Christie made another reference to her mom, “being on her in middle school,” reiterating that she was able to succeed with this parental involvement. Recounting that her mom was “more on it than me” in her transition from middle school to high school underscores a recurring theme throughout much of Christie’s interview, her self-reported lack of motivation for her academics post-middle school, and her struggle to re-inspire herself to succeed academically once she fell behind.

**Student 3: Maria.** Unlike Jalen and Christie, Maria only spent a year and a half at her zoned high school before going to the alternative high school. Like Christie, Maria reported being successful in elementary and middle school, “I liked elementary and middle school a lot. I did really good with school because I got honor roll a lot.” Not only did Maria report succeeding in elementary and middle school, but she said she found school to be interesting at that time, “It was a lot more easy and a lot more interesting.”

When asked about her experiences transitioning to high school, Maria cited her inability to succeed in high school as she had in elementary school and middle school, stating that she was too focused on the wrong things. Like Jalen, Maria admitted, “I was more of having fun than being more focused on school at the time.”
Maria’s enjoyment of school had not always been due to social reasons. She reported that in middle school she actually enjoyed going to school because she liked math and social studies. A recurring theme throughout Maria’s interview is her struggle with the freedom and independence of high school. She first mentioned this when asked what she remembered about her learning goals and her effort to achieve prior to entering high school for the first time, “I thought everything was going to be OK, and then I got distracted when I got to high school.”

**Student 4: Marquis.** Like Jalen, Marquis reported doing well in elementary school then beginning his academic decline in middle school, “I gave my best effort in elementary only. Middle school changed; I barely got by in middle school because things got harder and I was distracted more.” Marquis remembered the distractions of his middle school experience as ranging from “typical little kid stuff - throwing paper balls at each other, just talking loud, just joking around” to a place where “lunch was pretty wild because there were a lot of fights.”

Unlike Jalen, Christie and Maria who had little or nothing to say when asked whether or not they felt accepted or like they belonged in elementary and middle school, Marquis responded to the question in detail:

I felt like I belonged more in elementary. I really didn’t have a lot of friends in middle school; I was kinda to myself. The only person I had was one of my best friends who I call my brother, so he kept me going a little bit because we saw school as a competition sometimes.

Marquis went on to state that in middle school he sometimes felt like he was not accepted with the popular groups of kids. He also admitted that in an effort to be accepted with the popular kids he did, at times, participate in inappropriate actions which he later referred to as “stupid”: “Sometimes I would participate with them, but that would only be with the ones that I thought
were cool.” Marquis was enrolled in his zoned high school for two years before enrolling in the alternative school.

Student 5: Earl. Before being admitted to the alternative school, Earl spent three years at his zoned high school. Like Marquis, Earl was eager to respond to the question of whether or not he felt accepted or like he belonged in elementary and middle school:

Not at all. Growing up, people used to make fun of me for being gay, so I never used to fit in to any of the schools until I got to the Southern Performance School, and once I got to the Southern Performance School, people just didn’t care.

In terms of academics, Earl explained that he participated in a gifted program in elementary school, “In elementary school I was actually accepted into a gifted program where they would come once a week and we would meet in the cafeteria for three hours, and we would do gifted education.”

Earl also remembered wanting to go to the district’s academic magnet middle school, but said his mother wanted him to go to the middle school closer to his home where he had been accepted into what he called “a slightly gifted program.” Earl went on to say that this program was disbanded after his 6th grade year. He refers to this experience as “kind of a waste.” Earl stated that he remembered wanting to continue with the gifted services in middle school, and that it was his belief that not being able to do so definitely changed the course of his future.

Section 2: Research Questions

Five students once considered at-risk of dropping out were interviewed to explore and gain understanding of their unique perspectives regarding their high school experiences. Each described specific components of his or her own personal responses to their individual engagement experiences as a public high school student. They identified essential components
that influenced their decisions to enroll at the Southern Performance Center and they described how their experiences at the Southern Performance Center influenced their decisions to stay in school and complete their educations. In this section, the key results will be revealed, with each student’s unique experience with the engagement phenomena as the focal point.

**Research Question 1: What were the engagement experiences of students in a traditional high school prior to enrolling in a credit-recovery high school?**

**Unprepared for the transition.** In the five interviews, all participants expressed not feeling adequately prepared for the transition from middle to high school. Marquis remembered his nervousness upon entering high school for the first time, and his surprise at the level of freedom in the school, “I was really nervous because of the environment I was in, looking really free and there was a lot of faces I wasn’t sure if I wanted to meet yet, so I was just really, really nervous.”

The other students referenced misconceptions they had as they entered high school. Jalen said he just thought high school was going to be fun, while Christie said she had not understood that not working in school and failing classes could cause you to get behind. Maria brought up a similar point, explaining that she found high school to be very different from middle school and that she had not realized that if you do not do well in high school, your future could be “judged.” Maria regretted that she had not understood this from the beginning nor had she understand how the grading system worked. She also mentioned not having the support system she needed as she transitioned from middle to high school:

When I first started high school I wasn’t understanding the grade system, how, you know, how your grade point average can get you into schools and stuff. I wasn’t thinking about that at all. I just thought like it was just going to be like middle school. I didn’t have
anybody to tell me that you have to do really good in high school, so it was very hard for me in the beginning, very hard. And I was coming from a pretty good middle school, so it just like a whole big transition – a lot harder.

Earl also spoke about his difficulty transitioning from middle school to high school. His comments centered on the differences in school size, different teachers and different students in the classes. Overall, he characterized the transition experience as *jarring*, “High school is very jarring nowadays, especially that transition your first few weeks as a freshman are like really, really rough.”

**Large school size a detriment.** Another key theme that emerged from all five interviews was the negative impact school size had on the participants’ high school experiences. According to Marquis, for example, “High school was too big of a place to me. I like smaller environments.” Jalen described his high school as having “so many people,” and Christie directly referenced large class sizes as a reason why she eventually stopped working in high school, “There’s just so many classes and so many books and then you just get lazy and slowly stop. And then the teacher couldn’t just focus on me because there’s so many students.”

Similarly, Maria spoke at length about how school size was a deterrent to her getting the help she needed from teachers:

I just needed more one-on-one with them instead of, you know, the teacher and her 38 students in one classroom and really we couldn’t ask for help. That was what really made it really hard for me. That’s what messed up everything at XYZ High School. It was really overcrowded and there were so many students.

Earl’s comments were fairly consistent with Maria’s, even regarding his example of class size (37 versus Maria’s 38). He did not necessarily put the blame on the teacher for not giving
him more time and attention, but viewed the problem of overcrowded classes as one that teachers had to battle as well. He spoke of this in regard to his Latin class, “Just because when you have 37 students in one classroom, you cannot give them all individual time. You can’t see what they all need; you just can’t – there’s not enough time.” Earl went on to say that he didn’t think it was possible even for an excellent teacher to successfully manage a class as large as 37 students. He expressed surprise that the administration would overbook a Latin class, since students “need the connection with the teacher in a foreign language class.” The proof of this, he believed, was in how he made a D average in his crowded Latin class, but achieved an A after switching to a French class with only 10 students.

Earl explained that large classes negatively impact students’ abilities to have a rapport with their teachers. When asked what he meant by rapport, he spoke about the need students have to have a connection with their teachers, whether it is positive or negative feedback:

There needs to be at least some type of rapport in general, whether it be positive or negative. Whether the teacher doesn’t like you or the teacher likes you, there needs to be at least some type of interaction between student and teacher because even when it’s negative interaction, I mean it’s still criticism. It might be negative criticism but it’s still affecting you positively because you know, “Ok, I don't know how to do this so he might not have told me in the right way, but now I know I need to work on that.” Whereas when you’re in a large classroom like that, you just get your test handed back to you with the answers that were wrong or marked X and you get no further explanation.

Social issues: Belonging and acceptance. Another theme that emerged from the interviews was the impact social issues had on the students in their traditional high schools. Earl referred to the experience of not having enough positive interaction with classroom teachers in
addition to repeated negative interactions with peers as key influences in his decision to leave high school. In his interview, he made a connection between large school size and the unmanaged clicks that persecuted him and others for a variety of reasons, including for being homosexual, “Because in a school this big, you have the popular clicks that normally doesn’t like gay people and then everyone follows along with the popular click.” Although Earl stated he felt like there were students who accepted him “for who he was” in high school, he also asserted, “The majority of them either made fun of, bullied or just didn’t like me because of who I was.” Earl went on to say that after his freshman year he got to the point where he just didn’t care what they said anymore because he was so tired of hearing it. At the same time, he characterized the bullies who targeted him for being gay as “mean, vulgar and offensive.” Earl made a point of telling the researcher that he was not alone in experiencing this harassment, “I wasn’t the only one; a lot of other people got made fun of too.”

Marquis’ interview corroborated Earl’s portrayal of peer bullying in his high school. Describing himself as “quiet,” Marquis talked about students being “mean” to him and to others like him in the school “for no reason.” He said the students who made fun of him and others did not even know him, “They made fun of people that they didn’t know and then sometimes if I was just there, they would just start talking to me.”

**Discipline issues.** The theme of discipline emerged as a reason why some of the research participants began disengaging from their traditional high schools. Although he was the recipient of bullying in school, Marquis indicated that he was also guilty of behaving badly in high school. Marquis explained that he got in trouble “for stupid stuff,” but said it was mostly because he was “in the wrong place at the wrong time.” Marquis also indicated disappointment that once he got in trouble, the administration continued to characterize him as a problem
student. He described what amounts to a self-fulfilling prophecy; administrators believed he was a troublemaker, so he behaved like one. Marquis dubbed this the Principal factor, "They just assumed because I was with the group. Yes my decision went on because a lot of principals doubted me and didn’t trust me enough."

Jalen and Christie also brought up the issue of discipline as an obstacle to their success in high school. Jalen admitted responsibility for some of his behavioral choices, “So I was skipping, you know, going to so many different lunches, just talking to everybody. I wasn’t even worried about school, for real.” Jalen expressed the stress he felt from getting in trouble so often in high school, “At ZYX, I just stayed getting in trouble for the smallest things, so I wasn’t relaxed. It was a lot of tension.”

Similarly, Christie described getting in trouble as “so easy over there and over nothing.” She said she got in trouble “over dumb stuff like ‘take your hat off,’ and, ‘your shorts are too short.’” Christie explained a problem she faced when suspensions caused her to miss class time. She stated that missing class time caused her to fall behind with her classwork, ultimately making it very difficult for her to recover academically. She described this cycle of miss school ➔ fall behind ➔ fail as a reason she eventually gave up hoping for success in high school.

Lack of focus. Another theme that emerged from the participants in this study was a lack of focus in the school setting. Socializing in school took precedence over learning for some of the research participants. As Christie fell further and further behind in her classes and began to give up on the hope of succeeding, she said that socializing in school became her priority, “The reason I went to ZYX, even though I wasn’t learning anything, is because I had friends. If I hadn’t had friends to see every day, I wouldn’t have went.” For Maria, over socializing was not
the result of a lack of success in the classroom, but one of the root causes. She explained that she was very distracted by her friends and often focused on “the wrong things:”

At XYZ High School I had a lot of friends so it lets in bad influences, and I got to the point where I didn’t want to go to school anymore or like I just didn’t really care for my grades anymore.

Similarly, Marquis stated that he allowed his many friends to distract him from his work in high school, “I knew a lot of people, so they all distracted me.” When asked about his least favorite class in high school, he said math, admitting that he could have asked for help but his mind was distracted by social influences, “Yeah I never really asked for help because my mind was in other places. I wasn’t focused on school.”

**Academic difficulty.** Alongside issues of school size, social and disciplinary distractions keeping the research participants from focusing on their academics, the five interviewees in this phenomenological study referred to experiencing a variety of academic challenges during their time in the traditional high school setting. These challenges included: not understanding the material, boredom with the material, not feeling actively involved in their own learning, experiencing a sense of disconnection from teachers.

**Not understanding the material.** Maria, Christie and Marquis each discussed not understanding the material as a reason they experienced difficulty with their academics. As discussed in the last section, Maria blamed her interest in socializing on her academic focus problems; however, when asked later in the interview (Section III) to reflect on her abilities to learn at the traditional high school versus at the credit-recovery high school, she revealed that her lack of focus at the traditional school was accompanied by “not understanding the subjects and stuff.”
For Christie, not understanding the material was enough to impact her decision to go to school. In her straightforward manner she stated, “I didn’t used to like going to school because I didn’t understand nothing.” Similarly, in his interview Marquis reflected that his decision to quit school was impacted by his frustration in not understanding the material even though at the time he explained his reasoning as school was simply not for him, “I thought about quitting because it didn’t seem like school was for me at the time. I look back on it now and it’s only because I didn’t get what they were trying to teach me.”

Boredom. Christie and Maria brought up the topic of boredom in their interviews. When asked which class in the traditional setting was her least favorite, Christie said math, “because it’s hard and it’s boring.” Maria said science was her least favorite traditional high school class. She explained that science was hard for her because she did not understand the material. When asked to describe the interaction she remembered having with the science teacher, Maria responded, “I hardly never like communicated nothing at all.” While beginning to recreate the details of her traditional high school experience in Section II of the interview, Maria interrupted her own train of thought about friends distracting her with a segment on the frustration she experienced with her teachers, and how school “wasn’t fun anymore.” This is the point during the interview when she brought up her issue with a science teacher:

I remember in science class there was this one teacher I always had and he just had that mono voice where it just wasn’t catchy to you at all, and then there would be like a quiz the next day after and I was just like alright forget it. I don’t even care because I didn’t like science. He made me not like science.

Maria reported that she eventually switched science teachers.
Not actively involved in the learning process. Several students recounted not being actively involved in the learning process at their previous, traditional high schools. When asked to reflect on his learning goals, effort to achieve, and learning abilities and knowledge in his previous high school, Marquis explained that he “didn’t really work in his other school when it came to the main classes. The only thing I had to hope for was my electives because those were the only ones I was passing.”

Jalen’s lack of activity extended to all his courses, including electives. He took responsibility for his inactivity, “It wasn’t really too much interaction because I never really asked for help much.” This lack of involvement was reinforced later in his interview when Jalen explained that he never really involved himself in the academics of his traditional high school prior to enrolling in the credit-recovery, alternative high school, “Back then it seemed like I didn’t even do work. When I came over here seem like I started over. I didn’t even do high school when I was in high school.”

Some good teaching and rapport, but an overall disconnect between teachers and students. Even though Jalen stated that he did not do high school when he was in traditional high school, he still made a point of speaking favorably about his history teacher at two different points in the interview, once when asked about favorite teaching styles and again when asked about favorite classes in his traditional school. Jalen said he enjoyed this teacher and her class because she “did it all” and made class “lively.”

Similarly, when asked to recreate the details of her traditional high school experience, and teacher interactions specifically, Christie remembered an 11th grade English teacher whom she described as nice, and as someone who helped increase her desire to learn. She went on in some detail about this particular teacher:
She like made everything fun and we would learn and we didn’t even know we were learning. It wasn’t boring. You know how kids skip classes because they don’t want to go? People went because it was fun and she was nice.

But one question later when Christie was asked how much interaction she remembered having with her traditional high school teachers and how helpful they were, she conveyed a contrasting, pithy sentiment, “They were terrible.” When asked to elaborate, Christie described her experience preparing for end-of-course (SOL) tests, what she claimed were the only times certain teachers would show an interest in her:

The only time they like would ask or were worried about anything was SOL time and they were worried about their SOL scores. But they knew I was failing the class the whole time and then they would like try to teach me the whole year worth in like a week so I could pass their SOL, but that’s not going to work. I didn’t get it.

Christie went on to say that those teachers would give her an end-of-course test review packet and tell her to read it on her own, which she would try to do, after which she said she would fail her end-of-course tests. When asked to reflect on her interest in her previous high school, Christie again referenced her frustration with teachers who did not seem to connect that she, and others, were not keeping pace with the class lessons, “When you said you didn’t understand something, they wouldn’t really elaborate what the problem was; they would just keep going.”

When asked to describe the type of teaching that he considered the least effective at his traditional high school, Earl recounted his frustration with teachers who considered teaching a process of writing notes on the board, having students copy those notes, then reading the notes aloud to the class. In a somewhat exasperated tone, he concluded this description with, “That was them teaching; that literally was them teaching!” Earl also brought up his experience of
being ignored by teachers. For example, he referred to a psychology teacher whom he believed, “did not care at all whatsoever.” Earl described asking this teacher questions in class to which she would reply, “It's in the book. Look it up.” He also said that he would ask this teacher if he could meet with her after school and she would reply, “No, I’m busy today.” Although Earl admitted that he believed some teachers in his traditional high school did care about students, his overall impression of teacher behavior was that they were generally “numb” and “cold” due to so much repeated student misbehavior:

I think some teachers actually care about their students whereas some teachers just have gotten to the point where I would say they are getting kinda numb to the way students are because there are so many bad students nowadays so they just don’t care anymore. They’ve grown cold to the students.

Maria depicted her traditional high school teachers--and the system in which they worked--as rigid and unforgiving. This rigidity was a source of frustration and disconnection for her:

Everything had to be due at a certain time. There was like no second chances. You had to do it right there and then, or you would just get a zero and you would not do good on that certain subject. That was really hard for me.

In contrast to her experience with a science teacher, Maria recounted her interactions with a Spanish teacher and a math teacher in her traditional school as very positive. She described her relationship with the Spanish teacher as close for the year and a half she was at her high school, explaining that this teacher understood her very well, was good at helping her and was willing to spend extra time with her. Similarly, Maria described the Algebra I teacher in her traditional
school as “really awesome.” When asked why she thought this teacher was awesome, Maria explained:

Because she made everything very catchy. She made math into like a puzzle. It wasn’t more like, you know, like a craziness like where you don’t understand. She made it more like understanding the basics of math and how it was like so much like a game and that’s what I liked about it. She made it really easy for me. But those were my only two classes – Spanish and my Algebra I class – and everything else I didn’t like at all.

Maria concluded her response to the teacher interaction question by stating that some of her traditional high school teachers were helpful and that she was able to “bond” with some of her teachers.

Likewise, when asked to recreate the details of his traditional high school experience, Marquis recalled favorable memories of a gym teacher, “My gym teacher – he was the coolest. He would let me stay in his class whenever I got in trouble for something stupid.” But when asked about teaching methods in his core classes, Marquis’s memories became less positive, especially regarding his math class:

I don’t think I can say much for the teaching style to be honest. It was really complicated how they were explaining it because there were some teachers that explained it simpler ways than they did, that I just went to them and asked for help and I got it way better.

But, most of my classes, they were just really complicated. They didn’t teach it too well for me, especially my math class. I think that was my failing point right there.

Marquis stated that one-on-one time with teachers was the most beneficial way for him to learn since he was “a hands-on type of guy.” He said that if teachers could pull him over and show him at the desk whatever they were doing, that would work better for him than talking generally
to the whole class, and “doing chalkboard work.” Marquis said he was able to spend one-on-one
time with one math teacher for a while, but that the teacher “went away a few months after, so
nobody else did that after.” Marquis reflected that if he had had more one-on-one time with
teachers in his traditional high school, he might have been more successful. One of his
conclusions for this lack of one-on-one time with teachers was favoritism; “I guess I could say, a
lot of teachers there had favoritism so it kinda made it unfair for people like me, the quiet ones.”
Later he explained, “The teacher would go to their favorites first and then finally come to the
back to the people who really needed help.”

*Giving up: Not willing to try anymore.* Each of the five research participants reported
experiences that culminated with them giving up on trying to succeed in their traditional high
schools. When asked what experiences at his previous high school led him to apply to the credit-
recovery, alternative high school, Jalen explained how he never really connected with the
education of his previous school due to his stronger desire to skip class and socialize. And later
during the reflective portion of the interview (part III), Jalen again remembered the tension and
stress of frequently getting in trouble at his traditional school and stated flatly, “I used to hate
school.” Jalen said he got to the point where going to his traditional school was no longer worth
the stress, “I had to get up out of there.”

When asked in part II of the interview what he experienced at his traditional school that
led him to apply to the credit-recovery, alternative high school, Earl stated the main reason he
had to quit his traditional school was because he was so far behind academically due to missing a
lot of school when his mother had a stroke. He reported another pivotal event that influenced his
decision to quit which was a conflict he had with his Speech class teacher the day he returned
from extended absences resultant from his grandfather’s death. On his first day back in school,
Earl said his teacher informed him he would need to give his speech that day. Earl said he told the teacher he had not even thought about the speech since his grandfather’s death, “or given it a single thought.” Instead of being understanding given the circumstances, Earl reported that his Speech teacher “didn’t care about my personal life and that this was my high school life and that should be the most important thing.” Earl verbally confronted the teacher and was consequently suspended. He said he never returned to his traditional high school after that episode.

Maria described a more gradual exit from her traditional high school. For her, it was a matter of feeling overwhelmed with the school size, her work, and not getting the help she needed. When asked what she experienced that led her to apply to the Southern Performance Center, Maria explained how difficult and fast-paced the work was, how there were so many people, how the teachers were “always busy” and could not give her one-on-one help, how confused she was, and how “strict” everything was. When asked what she meant by “strict,” Maria described the rigidity of due dates and “no second chances.” Maria’s disconnection process was conveyed as a process filled with inner conflict. She spoke about how difficult it was for her just to be at her high school, “But other times I just didn’t really care, so it was just very hard for me to be at XYZ High School.” But then she revealed her inner conflict with graduation and how she eventually began accepting the idea of pursuing a GED instead of a high school diploma, “Of course I wanted to graduate high school, but I always thought like well if high school doesn’t work out, you can always get your GED, so it was just that type of mindset. I was always going to fall back on GED, not striving for a diploma or a degree afterwards.”

When asked how his perceptions of school had changed since attending the alternative school, Marquis recounted how close he had come to quitting school in his 10th grade year before being admitted to the SPC, “I thought about quitting because it didn’t seem like school was for
me at the time. I look back on it now and it’s only because I didn’t get what they were trying to teach me.” Marquis reported that his decision to give up on his high school education was due to his poor reputation with the administration along with his belief that he was not progressing academically. He summarized his inner struggle with the following, “Yeah, a lot of my decision was really just the Principal factor, and the fact that I really didn’t see myself getting anywhere in that school.” Marquis said that eventually he just gave up hope, “I kinda just lost hope in the whole system.”

Christie explained in clear terms how her lack of academic progress also impacted her decision to quit, “I gave up when I was at ZYX because I knew I wasn’t getting anywhere.” Christie realized that by failing so many classes she would not graduate on time, and this led her to a final shut down, “Yeah, because I failed all my classes, and then I wouldn’t have graduated on time. Then I was just like, I don't want to do it.” Christie admitted that she was not taking her role as a student seriously once she lost hope for an on-time graduation, “I wasn’t real serious when I was going to ZYX because I didn’t care anymore.”
Summary of Research Question 1: *What were the engagement experiences of students in a traditional high school prior to enrolling in a credit-recovery high school?*

**Table 4.1**

*Research Question 1 Results: Experiences of Disengaging from Traditional High Schools*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Difficult Transition</th>
<th>Large Schools/Crowded Classes</th>
<th>Social/Discipline</th>
<th>Academic Difficulty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jalen</td>
<td>I just thought it was going to be fun</td>
<td>XYZ had so many people.</td>
<td>I was skipping, going to so many different lunches, just talking to everybody.</td>
<td>Back then it seemed like I didn’t even do work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christie</td>
<td>I found out like you couldn’t fail a class or you would be behind.</td>
<td>Just so many students and so many books and then you get lazy and slowly stop.</td>
<td>I got in trouble a lot. And I didn’t get along with the Dean.</td>
<td>I didn’t used to like going to school because I didn’t understand nothing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>It was very hard for me in the beginning, very hard</td>
<td>It was really overcrowded and there were so many students. It was really, really busy.</td>
<td>I was more of having fun than being focused on school at the time.</td>
<td>You had to do it right there and then or you would just get a zero; that was really hard for me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marquis</td>
<td>I could see it being a harder experience because of the bigger environment.</td>
<td>High school was too big of a place to me.</td>
<td>They were just being mean for no reason. I knew a lot of people so they all distracted me.</td>
<td>I didn’t get what they were trying to teach me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earl</td>
<td>That transition your first few weeks as a freshman are like really, really rough.</td>
<td>When you have 37 students in one classroom you cannot give them all individual time.</td>
<td>The majority of them either made fun of, bullied or just didn’t like me because of who I was.</td>
<td>That was them teaching; that literally was them teaching!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.1 demonstrates that the students in this study shared common experiences in their traditional high schools. These common experiences causing them each to begin disconnecting from high school include: the transition from middle to high school, the large school environments and crowded classrooms, social and discipline issues, and academic difficulties. Students in this study expressed feeling unprepared for the freedom, independence and expectations required to succeed in a large high school. They were impacted emotionally, socially and academically in their respective departures from their zoned, traditional high schools. Some of the emotions that were conveyed in the interviews regarding their high school experiences included: aloofness, confusion, disappointment, anger, frustration, hopelessness, disenchantment, unhappiness and insecurity. There was some divergence in the students’ social experiences in that 2 of the participants (Marquis and Earl) said they were bullied, made fun of or rejected by their peers, while 3 of the interviewees described positive social experiences in which they enjoyed the companionship of many friends at school. Admittedly, these 3 students also experienced disciplinary problems resultant of their social choices. Academically, 4 of the 5 students in this study described their own struggles with being unfocused, bored or not understanding course material, while the 5th student, Earl, described experiencing academic difficulties external to himself such as class size and poor teaching. In regard to the influence of teaching on the participants’ experiences in their respective high schools, the data collected was rich and diverse. The interviews revealed a definite line between teachers whom the students perceived to be excellent and those whom they perceived to be deficient. Indicative of this divergence is the range of descriptors used by the participants regarding their high school teachers, including: cool, lively, terrible, eighty-something years old, nice, asleep, fun, yelling, busy, mono voice, awesome, distant, helpful.
Research Question 2: What were the engagement experiences of students enrolled in a credit-recovery high school after having been previously enrolled in a traditional high school?

An overview. All five, research participants expressed renewed interest in their academics after attending the Southern Performance Center. This structure of the SPC, as mentioned in earlier, was comprised of a nontraditional, student-centered, small learning environment with five core teachers working as learning facilitators in separate classrooms. At this site, each of the five classrooms was equipped with a laptop cart. Using the laptops, 15 students at a time could access their digital coursework in a self-paced manner while the content-certified teacher moved from student to student offering individualized instruction as needed. Students at the SPC would take three courses at a time, meaning they only switched classrooms three times daily. The administration of the SPC anticipated that students could complete each of their three courses in approximately nine weeks, allowing them to finish six classes in a semester just as they would with a traditional school schedule.

Small class size and fewer classes at a time. A common theme that emerged from all five interviewees was the advantage they experienced as a result of small class size at the alternative high school. For Maria, the small learning environment made an impression on her when she initially transitioned from her traditional school, “It was a lot smaller and quieter.” During the reflective portion of the interview as Maria was discussing how she became more focused on her work and less on the distractions of her peers, she elaborated that the smaller class size of the SPC allowed her to get a lot more help from teachers, “It was a lot smaller so you get more help from your teachers than at regular school.”

As with Maria, Marquis discussed how the small learning environment of the SPC helped him focus on his education since he didn’t have the distractions of so many peers, “Because the
smaller environment helps a lot, and less interaction with a lot of students, so you can actually concentrate on what you’re doing.” Jalen explained one of the main differences he experienced at the SPC was feeling “more relaxed” due to the lack of peer distractions and discipline trouble as he had experienced at his traditional school. He attributed this to the smaller class environment, which he equated specifically to less female distraction, “Yeah, when I came to SPC there weren’t that many girls so I was chillin’; yeah I was more focused on my work.” In his interview, Earl cited class size as the main difference and advantage between his traditional high school and alternative school.

When Christie was asked to reflect on any difference she experienced in her motivation at the traditional school versus the alternative school, she contrasted how overwhelmed she had been with her previous high school, “Just so many classes and so many books and then you just get lazy and slowly stop.” At the SPC Christie explained that she just felt like she was going to finish because of the different environment which for her meant smaller class sizes and fewer classes-and books- to keep up with, “I felt like I was going to finish and stuff until like, I don’t know, it’s just different like a different environment.”

**Blended learning: Online curriculum and time with teachers.** All five students interviewed for this study referenced The Southern Performance Center’s structure of small class size combined with the blended learning format as a main reason they reengaged with their high school education. Earl, for example, explained that he benefited the most from the smaller classes at the Southern Performance School since he was better able to connect with his teachers using the blended learning format, “With having smaller class, being able to connect with the teacher and just build the rapport that allowed you to succeed more and more, especially with the online-based, education platform.”
Self-paced curriculum: Students feel ownership of their learning. Jalen described how he experienced a transformative sense of independence and ownership using the blended online and face-to-face learning format at the SPC:

When I got there, it was just like, if you don’t do your work, you going to get left behind. Like I said before, it’s like a college atmosphere. You gotta take care of yourself. But at the same time, y’all would help us out.

Earl also spoke enthusiastically and in detail about the curriculum at the Southern Performance Center in the reflective segment of his interview. One of his main points was that self-paced curriculum eliminates the one-size-fits-all mentality of schooling, “I think that’s the way school should be in general. It takes away the pre-established pace of what they think you should learn at.” When asked to elaborate on his experience with the self-paced online curriculum, he provided a detailed response:

Well in whole class instruction, when you think about it, you have thirty students in a classroom. The chances of all the students grasping one, single concept all at once is slim to none. Now you have chances of half of the students grasping that concept, half of them don’t. Well the teacher’s going to move on because half of them get it. They’re just going to keep it moving. Now when you’re on the computer facing your own self, and you get to a part where you don’t understand it, you can stop, slow it down, take your time, spread it out, ask the questions you need to ask, do the research you need to do, and then move on.

Maria conveyed a similar sentiment regarding the advantages of blended curriculum. She explained that she enjoyed learning on computers “instead of paper and books and stuff” and that it actually made her “eager to learn more.” When asked to explain this further, Maria responded,
“I think that helped me a lot more and helped me understand my subjects just a little more and so I was looking forward to that.” Later in her interview, when asked to reflect on some of the main differences between the high school she attended prior to the SPC and the SPC, she described how working on the computer made her feel “closer” to her education. She also spoke about how this new learning format motivated her:

I felt more one-on-one with my education, and that was what made me more motivated to keep on going with school because at one point I didn’t want to do school anymore because I wasn’t close to my education as I am now, or willing to keep on going.

Just as Maria described feeling “closer” to her education with the blended learning format at the SPC, Marquis explained feeling better about learning because “it was all just in my face.” For Marquis, this structure enabled him to pay better attention to his work and he liked seeing specific examples in the online lessons, “For me it is better to read what you have to do and when you see a good example like right there, you’re actually like listening, when you actually pay attention, it’s really easy.”

Christie described how she preferred the blended learning format of the SPC versus the book learning at her traditional high school since it seemed like the material was more condensed on the computer, “The learning style is better for me. I understand the material better because it dims it down. Like, they gave us a book and they wanted us to read like the whole chapter. Over here, it’s the same thing, but shorter.” The advantage of this self-paced online curriculum for Christie was that, just as with Marquis, it allowed her to focus more on her work and less on other distractions, “I’m just focused more about getting my work done than talking to somebody.”
One-on-one with teachers: Teacher connection. The theme of having access to one-on-one time with teachers emerged from the interviews as the research participants described renewed interests in the curriculum of the SPC. Earl, for instance, reflected on how much he enjoyed the independence and autonomy of the self-paced computer curriculum at the SPC, yet he also explained how necessary it was for him to have a teacher nearby to encourage him to keep up with his work, “They keep you, I wouldn’t say on pace, because it’s your own pace, but they keep you on track to actually complete your class.” He said that the teachers at the SPC could motivate the students to keep working because of the rapport they were able to build in such small classes, “You get to know your students. You get to know the looks on their faces when they’re really confused.”

When Christie was asked to reflect on her learning goals, effort to achieve in school, and learning abilities and knowledge at the SPC, she explained that she could learn better at the SPC because of both the computer curriculum and the one-on-one time with her teachers, “I think it’s both because if y’all weren’t here, then we would just be confused.” She went on to explain that if given the choice to learn at home on the computer she would still prefer the blended format of the SPC “because when I do it at home I still have questions but y’all aren’t there. And my mom doesn’t know.”

Christie, Maria and Marquis explained how the small classroom size of the SPC combined with the blended learning format allowed the students to get the one-on-one time they needed with teachers. According to Christie, “There’s not as many so y’all can work with a certain person because a lot of people don’t need help because they’re learning on their computer.” Maria described how helpful it was to get the help she needed when she needed it, and not feeling rushed at the SPC:
I got a lot more help than I did at XYZ and the fact that I was at my own pace. I didn’t feel like I was being rushed like I did when I was at XYZ because everything on a certain date, but at SPC I was more on my level.

Marquis contrasted the lack of help he had received at his traditional school—which he attributed to favoritism—with the availability of teachers at the SPC to help him when he needed it. He said when he didn’t understand a concept on the computer, for example, “the teacher would be there” to help him understand. He specifically mentioned the math teacher at the SPC who “gave me hands-on examples, and he actually explained it clearly to where you or I could understand.”

Peer acceptance. The problems Earl and Marquis described with peer acceptance at their respective traditional high schools were resolved once they entered the Southern Performance Center. According to Earl, “I think the students are a lot more understanding about people’s home lives, and what affects people and what doesn’t affect people.” He believed this was partially due to the fact that the students at the SPC all had reasons for being there, “The students there are all really accepting because we all have a reason why we’re there.” Earl explained that even though he believed the teachers at his previous high school had been “really accepting,” it was not enough to protect him and other gay students from being bullied by others, which he attributed partially to the large class size, “When you have one person that is accepting versus the thirty-five other people in your classroom, it doesn’t really do any good.” At the SPC, Earl found acceptance and explained that being gay was never even an issue, “Me being gay wasn’t a thing. It's like, great; nobody cares. It’s actually really amazing.”

Marquis described feeling more accepted at the Southern Performance Center as well. In contrast to his experiences at the traditional high school where he said he was made fun of by his peers, he described getting along with everyone at the SPC, “And even the students, the ones that
didn’t know me, they didn’t bother me.” In addition to feeling more accepted at the SPC, Marquis concluded his interview by explaining that his newfound friendships benefited him in that he was encouraged to stay motivated and graduate:

When my friends that I did make would make it out of here and graduate, that would encourage me to keep going because I guess I don’t like being a late bloomer all the time, so that was me trying to catch up. I guess that was important. It’s good to have a good friend that pushes you, especially in this program. I just saw myself as being stubborn. I didn’t want to give up- getting better things in life, having better opportunities, get that diploma. It feels really good.

Renewal of learning and career goals. In the final, reflective segment of the interviews, the common theme of renewal of learning and career goals since attending the SPC emerged from all five, research participants.

Learning goals: Success breeds success. Participants described how finding initial academic success in the blended curriculum at the SPC led to more and more academic successes, eventually resulting in a changed future outlook. When Christie was asked to reflect on how she viewed school after switching to the SPC, for example, she smiled broadly and replied, “I like it. Because I’m getting stuff done. I feel as if there’s a change, like it’s getting done. I’m about to be done.” Then a little later in the interview when she was asked to reflect on the value she placed on her education after attending the SPC, she described how finishing classes “pushed” her to continue working, “When I was finishing classes and stuff, I guess I - I forgot what the word is called - pushed more to finish.” She also described this phenomenon of newfound academic motivation as having a “feeling” she could finish.
When Maria was asked in the reflective segment of the interview to describe how, or in what ways (if any) her feelings, attitudes and perceptions toward school had changed since attending the SPC, she described how she was willing to learn more because she “started to get interested.” She went on to explain how learning once again became fun and how she was happy with her successes.

When Marquis was asked in the reflective segment of the interview to reflect on the value he placed on his education after attending the SPC, he described how he was at first cautious about changing his negative view on education, but then “fully changed views” after successfully completing an English course, “After going through English class so fast, I got a lot of hope, so that was a big booster.” The success of completing one course at his new school inspired Marquis to continue working in other classes and to regain hope that he would eventually graduate.

**Learning goals: Taking charge.** When asked to reflect on how his learning goals had changed since attending the SPC, Earl explained that the structure of the blended curriculum at the SPC allowed him to take charge of his learning timeline. He said that once he understood the self-paced nature of the blended curriculum, he decided to make his own calendar of the work he needed to complete in order to graduate. When asked to explain this more, he drew a comparison between his previous goals and his new ones, “The goals at XYZ were to get out of school, survive the day without getting suspended, don’t yell at anybody, don’t freak out on anybody, don’t get suspended. The goals at SPC were finish the class, get your credit.”

**Renewal of career goals.** Earl stated that his future goals included college, a medical career and dropout advocacy. He explained that prior to attending the SPC he believed he would have pursued his GED and then sought a two-year degree, just so he could get “a decent job.”
He ended his interview by stating that he felt much more hopeful for his future than he had while a student at his previous high school.

When Maria was asked to reflect on her learning goals, her effort to achieve in school, and her learning abilities and knowledge at the SPC, she launched into a discussion of how she was much more motivated for her future:

I want to go to school and stay in school for a while as much as I can. Even though I don’t like school very much but I would like to stay in there to get a better job in the future, so my goals from before to now are a lot more different. My mindset has completely changed on where I want to be at in life.

Prior to enrolling at the alternative school, Maria stated that even though she had known a diploma was important, she was prepared to pursue a GED, “I always thought like well if high school doesn’t work out, you can always get your GED, so it was just that type of mindset. I was always going to fall back on GED, not striving for a diploma or a degree afterwards.”

Jalen’s reflections on how his feelings, attitudes and perceptions toward school had changed since going to the SPC also revealed a clear change. He admitted “hating school” prior to enrolling in the alternative school, but “feeling better” once he got there. He went on to say that he never would have even thought of summer school while a student at his previous high school, but had attended summer school two years in a row since attending the alternative school. After Jalen described how his feelings and attitude toward school had changed, he explained his new future goals; “I want to finish school now and further my education instead of just finishing high school and being done with it. My future feels way brighter now than back then.”
Marquis ended his interview by reflecting on how he had realized new goals since becoming a successful student in the blended learning environment of the Southern Performance Center. After stating how he had become a much more serious learner at the SPC, he enthusiastically added, “I feel like my future is going to skyrocket because now I’m determined to get places!”
Summary of Research Question 2: *What were the engagement experiences of students enrolled in a credit-recovery high school after having been previously enrolled in a traditional high school?*

Table 4.2

*Research Question 2 Results: Experiences of Reengaging at the Alternative School*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Small Classes</th>
<th>Blended Learning</th>
<th>Social Changes</th>
<th>Renewal of Goals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jalen</td>
<td>SPC was just like 15 people in there so it was a little class.</td>
<td>When I got there it was just like, if you don’t do your work, you going to get left behind.</td>
<td>It was more like a community college atmosphere; teachers weren’t on us all the time.</td>
<td>I want to finish school and further my education instead of just finishing high school and being done with it. My future feels way brighter now than back then.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christie</td>
<td>At the SPC there’s not so many [students] so y’all can work with a certain person because a lot of people don’t need help . . .</td>
<td>The learning style is better for me. I understand it better because it <em>dims it down</em>.</td>
<td>I’m just focused more about getting my work done than talking to somebody at SPC.</td>
<td>I forgot what the word is called—<em>pushed more to finish</em>. I had a feeling I could finish because I was going through it fast and because I was learning it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>It was a lot more smaller than XYZ. SPC was a lot smaller and quieter.</td>
<td>I felt more one-on-one with my education, and that was what made me more motivated to keep on going with school.</td>
<td>Of course I missed my friends and stuff, but I like the fact that it was more like a community college type thing, and I wasn’t just like stressed.</td>
<td>I want to go to school and stay in school for a while as much as I can. My mindset has <em>completely</em> changed on learning and where I want to be at in life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marquis</td>
<td>I like smaller environments.</td>
<td>For me it is better to read what you have to do and when you see a good example, like right there, you’re actually like listening. When you actually like pay attention it’s really easy.</td>
<td>Less interactions with a lot of students . . . All the teachers were just so positive with me and I got along with <em>everyone</em>. Freedom.</td>
<td>I feel like it [my education] is going to skyrocket now because I’m determined to get places. I take my learning a little more seriously now—<em>a lot</em> more seriously actually.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earl</td>
<td>Having smaller classes, being able to connect with the teachers and just build the rapport that allowed you to succeed more and more.</td>
<td>When you’re on the computer facing your own self, and you get to a part where you don’t understand it, you can stop, slow it down, take your time, spread it out, ask the questions . . .</td>
<td>The students there are all accepting because we all have a reason why we’re there.</td>
<td>The goals at SPC were to finish your class, get your credit, get your half credit. I’m realizing I’m going to be in college for 8 years . . .</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.2 represents a synthesis of common engagement experiences experienced by the participants after enrolling in the alternative school. Following interpretive phenomenological analysis protocols (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009), the themes of reengagement that emerged from the interview data include: small classes, blended learning, minimal social distractions and renewal of goals. Regarding structure and context, the interviewees discussed how the small school size, the blended learning format, and the “community college like” environment of the Southern Performance Center impacted them each. Their common responses to these structures were to reengage, to reverse prior thoughts of quitting or pursuing a GED, and to complete their high school educations with a diploma. These revelations of reengagement emerged as the students discussed new or renewed learning and career goals, the final theme in this chapter.

Just as all five participants had lamented the largeness of their zoned high schools in the first half of the interviews, they expressed value and appreciation for the small size of the alternative school in the second half of the interviews. The students reported how the structure of smaller and fewer classes at the SPC helped them focus more on their academics and less on their peers, which also helped them feel less overwhelmed and stressed. Additionally, the students reported benefiting from more one-on-one time with their teachers in the blended learning environment due to the structure of the smaller class size.

The students in this study described experiencing increased motivation and success due to the self-paced, blended learning format of the SPC. The students conveyed satisfaction with the level of independence with the self-paced curriculum. The levels of autonomy inherent in a self-paced, online curriculum made the students responsible for their own learning and made them feel “closer” to their education as Maria put it. At the same time, the participants described how helpful and necessary it was to have a teacher available to explain or encourage them as they
completed their online coursework.

The participants in this study described how they became motivated to pursue their high school educations once again due to the minimal social distractions at the SPC. For Earl and Marquis, this came in the form of social tolerance and acceptance. At the SPC, Earl felt safe from being bullied due to his sexual orientation, reported getting along with his new peers and no longer being made fun of or bothered, as he had been in his zoned high school. In his interview, Earl even expressed compassion for students he knew at his previous high school whom he believed would continue to be bullied for their sexual orientations, and stated that they should all be permitted to attend the Southern Performance Center:

I personally think the gay students around here—the ones that are being made fun of because I remember when I was at XYZ, I wasn’t the only one, a lot of other people got made fun of too—I honestly think the SPC should be a viable option for gay students to go to because it is so accepting.

Jalen and Maria compared the SPC to a community college atmosphere, alluding to the level of focus, maturity and initiative necessary to complete their own computer coursework. All the study participants expressed being able to overcome previous focus issues due to the minimal social distractions at the SPC.

The students’ experiences with school reengagement was expressed not only in the investment of time completing the self-paced curriculum at the SPC, but in the (re)formulation of academic and career goals. Success with the online courses fostered more hope and encouragement for the students in this study, indicated by such expressions as: I started to get interested, I felt pushed more to finish, I feel as if there’s a change, it’s getting done, I got a lot of hope. In addition to a renewed willingness and eagerness to engage in effortful learning, the
students in this study also expressed renewed hope and interest in career goals as a result of their reengagement experiences. The students articulated these future goals and hopes with the following phrases: further my education, my future feels brighter, I would like to stay in there [school] to get a better job in the future, I can be an orthopedic surgeon, my future is going to skyrocket.
Chapter 5: Summary of Findings and Recommendations for Practice

Overview

The goal of this interpretive phenomenological study was to explore students’ recollections of their experiences engaging or not engaging in their traditional high schools prior to enrolling in a credit-recovery school, as well as on their recent experiences with engaging or not engaging as students attending a credit-recovery school. The results revealed the extent to which “important contextual elements may interfere or contribute to student psychological experiences at school” (Archambault et al., 2009, p. 413), a gap in current engagement and dropout research.

Through interviews and interpretive phenomenological analysis, I attempted to interpret the experiences of five students who left their public high schools and subsequently enrolled at The Southern Performance Center alternative high school. In order to make sense of common engagement experiences in particular contexts, I applied Smith, Flowers and Larkin’s (2009) six-step analytic process and united themes relating common student experiences. I analyzed experiences from the students’ traditional high schools as well as experiences within the context and structure of the alternative setting.

Theoretical Framework

Research has shown that students disengage gradually and over time (Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr, & Godber, 2001; Finn, 1989; Stout & Christenson, 2009). To help focus the study of a complex and multilayered engagement process, the study’s two research questions were viewed through the lens of Archambault, Janosz, Morizot and Pagani’s (2009) student engagement model, with particular attention to the psychological and emotional dimensions. More specifically, using single measures of engagement in the psychological and emotional
dimensions like acceptance, belongingness, interest in school, goals, willingness to engage in effortful learning and perceived competency as suggested by Fredricks et al. (2004), sources of engagement did in fact emerge from this small scale, phenomenological study. The research questions involved seeking to uncover students’ engagement experiences in the context of traditional and nontraditional high schools. As such, it was beneficial to frame the questions with engagement theory, which provides a means for examining the dynamic relationship between the student and his or her environment (Middlecamp, 2005; Yazzie-Minz, 2010). The environment in this study included students’ relationships with their peers, their teachers, their instruction and their curriculum.

The students in this study revealed that relationships with their peers influenced their decisions to engage or not engage with their respective educations. This was revealed through the psychological and emotional measures of acceptance, belongingness, interest in school, goals, and willingness to engage in effortful learning (Archambault, Janosz, Morizot and Pagani, 2009). When Marquis and Earl were bullied, for instance, they felt like were not accepted by their peers, which impacted their feelings of belongingness. As a result, they reported feeling distracted and struggled to maintain interest and focus on their academics. This is characteristic of the disengagement process, as described by Christenson and Thurow (2004). On the other side of the coin, in their decisions to foster feelings of belongingness with their peer groups, Jalen, Christie and Maria maintained peer relations, even at the expense of their academic successes. They ultimately became overwhelmed, stressed or apathetic toward their academics as a result of their social choices, and consequently their psychological involvement with their learning was diminished or severed altogether. In other words, they were in the process of disengaging.
Students’ relationships with their teachers or administrators also influenced their decisions to engage or not engage with their educations. Even though several students in this study experienced strong, positive ties with one or more teachers in their traditional high schools, the large class environments along with other contextual and structural factors appeared to negate the potential engagement benefits. Moreover, negative experiences with some teachers or administrators possibly offset the benefits of the positive adult relationships they sporadically experienced. While perceived teacher support appears to correlate positively with student engagement and a lower likelihood of students dropping out of school (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Marvul, 2012; Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider & Shernoff, 2003), teacher support alone does not seem to be enough to keep some students engaged. This could be due to social capital, which has been shown to impact student engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris, 2004). Social capital refers to the social institutions that students depend on for interpersonal support (Croninger and Lee, 2001). When students come to school lacking social capital, they are at a disadvantage. According to Croninger and Lee (2001), teachers can provide a form of social capital for at-risk students that they do not have at home. However, occasional, inconsistent teacher connections do not seem to be enough to keep some students engaged and motivated in their learning, especially when other factors like negative peer relationships and academic difficulties are pressing down on them. A consistent connection with an adult who cares is paramount to student success (Klem & Connell, 2004), but may not be enough for some.

Students’ relationships with their instruction and curriculum also impacted their engagement experiences. Students in this study experienced diminished interest in their academics for a number of reasons, including: a lack of perceived competency, an inability to focus, boredom, an inability to connect to the dissemination method, an inability to get the help
they needed in a timely and personalized manner, an inability to catch up or keep up with the pace of the work, an inability to connect to the one-size-fits-all curriculum. On the other hand, students in this study experienced an improvement in their involvement in the learning process after joining the SPC. Reasons for the changes appear to have been due to the changes in the structure and context of the school, including: an interest in the online curriculum, the personalization and independence of the self-paced learning format, the availability of teachers in the small classes to assist them, and the gratification and motivation of being able to finish a class and move on to another class without waiting for other students.

Limitations

This study has limitations. One limitation is the sample size of only five research participants. While a small purposive sampling is reasonable for a phenomenological study, the results cannot be generalized (Moustakas, 1994). Also, this study was only conducted in one public school division in one southeastern urban region of the United States. Therefore, results are not generalizable. More research is needed before the results can be generalized.

Another limitation of this study is the role of the researcher, who is a teacher at the alternative, credit recovery high school. While this afforded the benefit of collecting data in a natural setting (Creswell, 2009), it is a limitation because of the effect the researcher could have had on the participants, also known as reactivity (Maxwell, 2005). The students may have provided answers that they thought I would expect. On the other hand, the students seemed comfortable sharing their responses with me in the interviews. This is most likely due to the mutually respectful rapport we had previously established in our roles at the school. To increase transparency, I disclosed my subjectivity statement to each research participant prior to beginning the research. To avoid reactivity, I utilized the bracketing process throughout the
study. One way I did this was to use a reflexive journal throughout the data collection process to note my personal observations, biases, notes and questions as they arose throughout the data collection process. Another way I bracketed my biases and reduced the impact of my subjectivity on the findings was to ask participants to validate the data.

Findings

One of the goals of this study was to increase the knowledge base regarding the dropout issue in an effort to help inform public schools officials and key decision-makers as they assess the value of current dropout initiatives. To begin to respond to this goal, I have synthesized the key results of this study as they relate to the study’s primary research questions:

1. **What were the engagement experiences of students in a traditional high school prior to enrolling in a credit-recovery high school?**

2. **What were the engagement experiences of students enrolled in a credit-recovery high school after having been previously enrolled in a traditional high school?**

**Research Question 1: What were the engagement experiences of students in their traditional high schools?** As indicated in Chapter 3, engagement research reveals that there is an increased risk of student dropout when students feel disconnected from multiple aspects of their school experience (Archambault, Janosz, Morizot and Pagani, 2009). Participants in this study described their traditional high schools as large environments for which they were unprepared and where their unsupervised peers could exert undue pressure on them. They experienced being bullied and wanting to be popular. They also experienced the negative impact of the discipline system. The participants explained how they frequently made poor social choices that impacted their academic standing, and reported that sometimes they dug a hole so deep they could not get out and back on track academically. They described teachers from their
traditional schools in contradictory terms such as: helpful, nice, fun, awesome, cool, busy, terrible, cold and lazy. The students reported experiencing little consistent connection to the teaching and curriculum of their traditional schools. Instead, they reported feeling bored, overwhelmed, frustrated or lost.

The students in this study were unable to deal with feeling lost in the large classes of the large high schools. They wanted more time with some of their teachers. Several participants in this study brought up unfavorable incidents with teachers that negatively impacted them and reportedly influenced their individual decisions to quit school. This demonstrates how important it is not to underestimate the devastating impact one unjust encounter with a person in authority can have on a student. Earl described such an experience in the incident with his Speech teacher after which he said he left his traditional high school for good.

Some of the findings from this small scale, phenomenological study correlate to widely known developmental characteristics of adolescents: sense of justice, need for freedom, and need for connection. As a parent of two teenagers, this writer corroborates the research on adolescents: they are conflicted individuals. They want to be someone, but they don’t yet know who that someone is (Miller, 2011). They want freedom and independence; yet they yearn for the availability of a caring adult. They want justice, but they sometimes behave unjustly. They don’t want adults to correct them, but actually they do. They don’t want to get lost in a crowd, but they want to belong to a crowd.

**Research Question 2: What were the engagement experiences of students enrolled in a credit-recovery high school after having been previously enrolled in a traditional high school?** The participants in this study described experiences of reconnecting with their high school educations after leaving their respective traditional high schools and enrolling in the
credit-recovery high school. The phenomenological analysis indicated that the context and structure of the alternative school enabled students in this study to reengage with their high school educations, and the role the Southern Performance Center teachers played in creating classroom cultures of reengagement cannot be overlooked. Uline and Tschannen-Moran (2008) referred to such a context as “the particular personality of various spaces within a school” which they report “may encourage a sense of belonging and foster a collective commitment to share learning goals” (p. 68). The students did not describe these teachers as better than those at their other high schools, but neither did they articulate any negative descriptors of their new teachers. Rather, the positive remarks the students made regarding their SPC teachers were more related to their skillful adherence to roles as Learning Facilitators in the blended learning environment where they were available to help and encourage the students when needed. The students also acknowledged the role the administration and faculty of the SPC played in creating a culture of tolerance and acceptance.

The students reported that the structure of small class size combined with the self-paced, online curriculum helped them become interested and focused on school again. The sense of ownership and responsibility for learning inherent in a self-paced, computer-driven curriculum culture appealed to the students’ needs for independence. At the SPC, the students either work on their individually tailored computer coursework or there is nothing else to do. The choice not to work is simply not an option in this learning environment.

These combined factors lead one to believe that for this study the change in engagement the students experienced was connected to the following contextual and structural factors:

- The roles played by effective learning facilitators,
- An atmosphere of tolerance and acceptance,
• School and class size,
• The curriculum dissemination method, and
• The curriculum itself.

These results indicate the potential replicability of such an alternative learning environment.

Recommendations and Implications for Educational Practice

Specific recommendations: An overview. In addition to increasing the knowledge base regarding the dropout issue to help inform public schools officials and key decision-makers as they assess the value of current dropout initiatives, another goal of this study is to help inform improvement strategies to continue reducing the dropout rate within this researcher’s public school district and beyond. To that end, based on the outcome of this small scale, phenomenological study and the literature that informed it, I recommend two specific strategies that I will discuss in some detail below:

1. Institute and support start-up small learning communities;
2. Personalize blended learning in student-centered classrooms where teachers work as learning facilitators.

Institute and support start-up small learning communities. As indicated in Chapter 2, the small learning community (SLC) model provides a more personalized learning environment comparable to a functional family. Teachers know and care about students, which results in “greater student engagement, attendance, and effort” (Gross, 2011, p. 9). This is backed by research indicating that having 10 positive contacts with resistant students often changes their attitudes and wins their trust (Johnson, Sparks, Lewis, Hall, & Johnson, 2006 as cited in Sparks, Johnson & Akos, 2010, p. 49). Also, according to Gottfredson and DiPietro (2011), “Students in smaller schools may be more likely to develop a greater sense of trust in the adults and to share
common expectations for behavior with others in the school” (p. 71). Gottfredson and DiPietro (2011) found evidence that reducing the ratio of students to teachers helped reduce student victimization. Archambault et al. (2009) suggest that socio-emotional well-being should be a primary focal point in ongoing engagement research, and they encourage educators to create “connectedness through individuals and positive climates in the schools” (p. 414). The school restructuring movement encourages schools to move away from a bureaucratic structure and toward this type of communal or “family” structure, where students experience “shared responsibility and commitment to common goals, lateral decision making, and greater individual discretion” (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, Paris, 2004, p. 73). Schools with features of communal organization have demonstrated higher gains in student engagement over time (Lee and Smith, 1993, 1995).

According to recent literature, the group dynamics and design inherent in the start-up SLC school model—like the Southern Performance Center—has resulted in more favorable student outcomes than with the conversion SLC model. Using a mixed-methods approach to evaluate the implementation and outcomes of large-scale reform with various types of SLCs in the Baltimore City Public School System (BCPSS), Smerdon and Cohen (2009) found more positive outcomes with the start-up schools than with the conversion schools, citing the “clean slate” which allows the school missions and goals to be formulated “without preexisting conceptions of the school’s identity or purpose” (p. 253). Additionally, Ravitz’s (2010) national survey study of 395 high school teachers showed that in start-up small schools there appeared to be equal success in changing teacher culture and student culture, whereas in “conversion” small schools changing student culture was not as successful as changing teacher culture (p. 307). Similarly, in a mixed-methods study comparing new start-up SLCs with high schools that had been converted to SLCs,
researchers found that outcomes for student attendance and student achievement was better for the start-up schools, again citing the advantages of starting fresh (Shear, Means, Mitchell, House, Gorges, Aasha et al., 2008, p. 2023). Similar to Smerdon and Cohen (2009), Shear et al. (2008) found that start-up schools had the advantage of starting with a clean slate, allowing them to develop “coherent school visions, structures, and practices” (p. 2024).

**Personalize blended learning in student-centered classrooms where teachers work as learning facilitators.** Herbart’s (1896) nineteenth century concept of an effective teacher was one in which the teacher focused on individualizing instruction, “If the teachers possess originality, they will utilize all that comes to hand to provide stimulus and occupation for the objects of their care” (p. 78). According to historian William J. Reese (2001), educators in the early 20th century progressive movement paved the way for a teacher as facilitator model, “The teacher should be a guide, not master . . . something needed to be done about the many incompetent teachers who sent their pupils to nearly eternal sleep” (p. 23).

Demski (2012) defines student-centered learning as that in which the student, not the teacher, is the central figure. In the teacher as facilitator model, the teacher is connected to the students, to the curriculum and to the times. In Farmer & Dravecys’s (1970) enduring article, “The ‘Turned On’ Teacher and Beyond: Education as a Socio-Technical System,” a teacher is one who is emotionally, intellectually and existentially involved with: (1) the subject matter being taught; (2) the contemporary scene; and (3) what is relevant for students. Middlecamp (2005) exhorts teachers to consider sharing personal stories with students as a way to connect, and ultimately, engage them in their specific content area, “The art lies in telling stories to open paths of communication, especially to those who have not trod the ground before and are glad if somebody else can point the way” (p. 19). Creating such paths of engagement, Middlecamp
(2005) believes, can pave the way for the teacher-student connection that is vital to the learning process. Student-controlled contexts that are structured so that students can experience increased autonomy, as in small group and individual instruction, often lead to increased student engagement (Fredricks, 2004; Grannis, 1978; Mark, 2000; Shernoff et al., 2003; Stodolsky, 1988).

In his research, Downes (2010) lists 23 roles required of an effective teacher. Since no one teacher can perform every role, and no student needs every role, he indicates students would be better served if schooling became more student-centered, “Instead of focusing on teaching as an undifferentiated whole, perhaps we can look at the specific needs of students, identifying where the provision of more appropriately focused services would offer the needed support” (n.p.).

Throughout the United States, there are numerous examples of teachers who are effectively embracing the teacher as facilitator model in their classrooms. Catalina Rios, a Spanish teacher since 1990 and a project leader for the national Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity (SEED) Project, exemplifies student-centered teaching, “I aim to create classroom environments where life experiences and family and community stories matter. I guide my students in making connections between their own experiences and perspectives and the content, activities, and challenges we face in our learning” (Rios, 2002, p. 129). Robert Kunzman, a high school teacher since 1990 in Los Angeles and Vermont, and a graduate fellow at the Stanford School of Education, was recognized as the Key Club teacher of the year by his high school students (Intrator, 2002, p. 93). As with Catalina Rios, Robert Kunzman speaks of the “moments of authenticity and connection” with his students as “fuel for the passion that brought him to teaching in the first place” (p. 92). He refers to the relational value of the teacher as a guide and
listener, “The opportunity to really listen to my students’ voices and lives in a space carved out by questions of profound importance--this has sustained my work, my calling, over the years” (Kunzman, 2002, p. 92).

For over thirty years, the concept of teacher as facilitator in the American high school has been successfully implemented in community-based, alternative schools called Performance Learning Centers. These schools operate in partnerships between local public school systems and community-based organizations, and are the result of Bill Milliken’s profound dedication to the American high school dropout crisis. Milliken (2007), author of The last dropout: Stop the epidemic! founded the Communities in Schools (CIS) organization as a nonprofit, nonpartisan “antidote to the dropout epidemic” in America (p. xxv). This CIS dropout prevention initiative is based on a nontraditional, student-centered learning environment. Millikan (2007) contributes a large measure of the success found in the Performance Learning Center model to the changed role of the teacher, “I’ve seen teachers who were considered mediocre become much better once they had an environment created for them that respected them and provided the resources they needed to do their job” (p. 108). Milliken’s vision for teacher as facilitator is grounded in the first of nine CIS principles, “Programs don’t change kids - relationships do” (p. xxviii). The Communities in Schools’ Performance Learning Center training manuals delineate this role in the following (partial) list of facilitator job responsibilities:

- Recognize barriers that impede student progress and provide appropriate academic, technical and social support services.
- Make teaching and learning challenging, relevant and individualized.
- Fulfill multiple obligations (teacher/counselor/manager) and a commitment to the entire PLC.
- Demonstrate non-discriminatory and inclusive polices and practices
  
  (CIS of Georgia PLCs, 2008, p. 9).

According to the 2007 study, *Dropout Risk Factors and Exemplary Programs: A Technical Report*, Communities In Schools® is the nation’s fifth largest youth serving organization and the leading dropout prevention organization, “delivering resources to nearly one million students in 3,250 schools across the country” (Hammond, Linton, Smink and Drew, 2007, p. 10).

Another dropout prevention program that has successfully implemented the teacher as facilitator model is the solution-focused alternative school (SFAS) in Austin, Texas. Franklin, Streeter, Kim and Tripodi (2007) conducted a quasi-experimental, pretest-posttest group design to examine the differences in credits earned, attendance and graduation rates of 85 students. Their results demonstrated that students in the experimental group—those enrolled in the alternative school—obtained significantly more credits than those in the comparison group—those having similar characteristics but enrolled in another high school in the same city (Franklin et al., 2007, p. 141). In their study, Franklin et al. (2007) highlight the unique classroom management and teaching method aspects of the SFAS, features consistent with Millikan’s CIS model for dropout prevention, “The role of teachers at the SFAS is not merely to focus on instruction, but to become a facilitator and motivate students to become active learners who develop a feeling of responsibility for their education” (p. 135). This notion of increased motivation is supported in a dropout prevention research evaluation study by Somers, Owens and Piliawsky (2009), who conclude that a more personalized learning environment, “may have been helpful in avoiding failure during the transition to high school” (p. 356).

Lawrence and Routten (2009) support the concept of the learning facilitator who, alongside the online teacher, doubles the self-directed learning process. In their three-year, ethnographic
case study of Union Hill High School in the N.J. Union City District (the site of Project Hiller), Light, McDermott, & Honey (2002) discovered that relationships improved between students and teachers as laptop technologies were integrated into classrooms contexts. Songtao Mo’s (2011) study on the influences of instructional technology on the motivation and engagement of students in higher education demonstrated that integrating instructional technology into face-to-face courses “enhances student learning engagement and motivation, hence has the potential of improving student performance” (p. 149).

**Implications for educational practice.** A goal of this study is to provide helpful insights for leaders of traditional schools. I believe that one of the most important implications of this study is the need for leaders to keep their fingers on the pulses of their students’ heartbeats. No student should feel unsafe, bullied or disregarded at school. It is the leader’s responsibility to use every means available to create communication channels that prevent students from encountering such damaging experiences. Leaders should prioritize a continual elicitation of student feedback via surveys, focus groups, interviews and student representation on faculty/administrative committees, for example. The feedback should represent the diversity of a school’s student body in terms of ethnicity, socioeconomics, gender and sexual orientation. By providing students a constant two-way communication channel, students can provide updated feedback on issues pertaining to their emotional, social and academic well-being and satisfaction. School leaders will be better equipped to find out who the disenfranchised are and to address problems before they get out of hand. Using such valuable feedback, leaders should seek to establish cultures of caring and tolerance, and consider creating an atmosphere modeled after the dynamics of a functional family. Creating this type of culture implies manageability. Cultures of caring, tolerance and mutual respect are better managed in small learning communities, so
high school leaders should consider studying and instituting SLCs, especially in large high schools.

The transition from middle school to high school is a pivotal juncture for young people in American society. Recall that Earl characterized this experience as “jarring” (Interview 5, p. 8). In this study, the students’ lack of adequate preparation to effectively transition to high school was a contributor to eventual school disengagement. Well-planned, research-based transition programs should be instituted in high schools for incoming freshmen. Also, students need to be closely monitored during their 9th grade year. This could be accomplished through effective advisory programs, peer counseling and adult counseling services. Along those lines, the role of school counselors and school psychologists in the lives of transitioning students cannot be underestimated. These professionals should be given every resource possible to carry out their critical work. Adolescents who are not prepared for the level of sudden freedom found in many of our high school are at risk of making unwise choices with dire long-term consequences, especially when they come to school lacking psychological, emotional and/or social capital.

Another important implication of this study that could provide helpful insight for school leaders is the reminder to prioritize teacher support, especially in large urban schools. Teachers face many struggles in and out of the classroom for which they are too often unprepared and unsupported. Sometimes well-meaning, once impassioned teachers become disenfranchised because the knots of a dysfunctional school system tie their hands. They, like their students, need to have a voice. Other times, administrators have not done their jobs to properly evaluate and train teachers to ensure that those who are exerting the most direct and significant influence on future generations do so carefully and with the utmost reverence for the task. To help matters, school leaders need to assign experienced and trained mentors to all new teachers and to any
teachers with unsatisfactory evaluations. Furthermore, greater effort and resources must be exerted toward teacher evaluation, certification and recertification. Such resources used today may pay dividends tomorrow.

As stated earlier in this study, future teachers could benefit from a deeper understanding of current, research-based dropout processes and solutions. Additionally, I contend that all accredited teacher education programs should include a rigorous study of adolescent development and psychology, including contemporary, peer-reviewed research on the role technology plays in that development. Furthermore, continual improvements should be made to the student teaching experience. For instance, only experienced teachers with consistently excellent evaluation records should be permitted to monitor student teaching experiences. Along those lines, teacher education should include many experiential learning opportunities where student teachers can gain a better understanding of the real life encounters s/he is likely to encounter in a classroom. Finally, future teachers should be well-versed in handling all aspects of a computer-assisted learning environment since that is likely the future direction of education.

**Future Research**

This study revealed that disengagement is indeed a complex and multilayered process (Middlecamp, 2005; Yazzie-Minz, 2010). In order to understand why contemporary American students are disengaging and dropping out of high school, research studies need to be conducted on the developmental processes of the 21st century adolescent under the influence of technology. Specific research on the role blended learning plays in helping struggling students to succeed in school would also benefit the research base.

While this small-scale study is not generalizable, it does, however, demonstrate the potential impact school size and school transition have on student engagement. More studies
should be conducted to determine the impact school and class size have on school engagement and achievement. These future studies should target specific content areas. It is not likely that Earl’s engagement experiences with his high school foreign language classes were unique to just him. Students’ success or lack of success in a foreign language class could be largely attributable to class size, and research that looks closely at individual content areas could benefit future pedagogical practices and administrative decisions. This study provided a glimpse into the experiences of five research participants who each struggled with their transitions to large public high schools. Future research should be undertaken to uncover how and why students struggle with this transition. Studies should also investigate the influence of high school transition programs on student engagement, involvement, achievement, retention and graduation.

This study did not seek to investigate teachers’ perspectives on the high school dropout issue, but gathering such data could provide valuable insights and ultimately help inform the research base on effective dropout prevention measures. If high school students disconnect partially because they do not believe their teachers care about them, are interested in how they do in school or are willing to help them with their problems (Fine, 1986; MacLeod, 1987 as cited in Croninger & Lee, 2001), then research needs to uproot what processes are influencing such beliefs. Research that investigates teachers’ perspectives on student engagement could help address structural and psychological processes underpinning the dropout phenomenon.

**Conclusion**

Unraveling the complexities behind why students engage or do not engage with their high school educations in modern America means exploring the human story behind this issue. That is what this qualitative, phenomenological small-scale study has attempted to do. Looking through the lens of Archambault, Janosz, Morizot and Pagani’s (2009) student engagement
model, with particular attention to the affective and cognitive dimensions, the human story told in this research reinforces research on why students disengage from their high schools and drop out. Feeling bullied, disregarded, ignored, lost or confused adversely impacted students’ feelings of acceptance, belongingness, their motivation, their perceived competency, and their goals. Even when students sporadically experienced acceptance by peers and/or teachers, it was not enough to outweigh their accumulated negative experiences and keep them in school. The stories in this study seemed to indicate that once students began losing faith and hope in their high school success, the context and structure of the large schools with overcrowded classrooms made getting back on track more difficult, almost insurmountable, and so they slowly began to give up.

Providing social and academic support to students at risk of dropping out is essential (Croninger & Lee, 2001). Small schools that successfully utilize instructional technologies in a personalized setting of tolerance and respect fall within the description of schools that potentially have the greatest holding power (Christenson and Thurlow, 2004; Duckenfield et al., 1990; Dynarski and Gleason, 2002; Marvul, 2012), encourage a sense of belonging, and foster a commitment to share learning goals (Uline and Tschanen-Moran, 2008). The results of this study bore that out. Each of the five students in this study experienced a dramatic shift in motivation to complete high school after experiencing success at the alternative, credit-recovery school. The online instruction combined with the learning facilitators’ individualized attention encouraged the students to take ownership of their studies. Social issues that distracted the students in the larger classrooms were no longer at play in the small school. They began to experience success and hope and eventually a renewal of their goals. This change is encapsulated in the experience of Maria, who went from, “I was always going to fall back on
GED, not striving for a diploma or a degree afterwards” to, “My mindset has completely changed on learning and where I want to be in life.”

Educators and school leaders are in the business of serving students. It seems basic, but this underlying *raison d'être* often gets lost in the daily routine: the responsibilities, expectations and countless pressures weighing constantly on the shoulders of well-meaning educators and school leaders. This research study endeavored to bring educators and school leaders back to their centers by focusing on the phenomenon of students’ high school engagement experiences. While the voices of the educator and school leader are crucial, they are not the only voices we need to hear if we are to tackle issues that influence students’ decisions to drop out of school. Instead, we need to hear the hard truths of students’ daily experiences: their fears, their disappointments, and their frustrations. By listening intently and acting accordingly, we stand a chance of unraveling and solving the complex and urgent crisis of high school dropout, and as we listen, let us bear this in mind: there is no more time to waste.
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Appendix A: Study Recruitment Letter

July ___, 2013

Dear [Name of Student],

I am completing a doctoral thesis entitled *The Lived Experiences of Students At Risk of Dropping Out: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis*. Because I no longer teach you, and because the staff believes you would be a good representative of the experience, I would like to invite you to participate in my research project.

The goal of my research is to better understand your experience as a ____student before and after you enrolled at this school. I would also like to understand the experiences that lead an individual to decide whether or not to complete their high school education.

If you are interested in participating in this study, notify me and I will give you a “consent form.” After a few days, I will call you and your parents/guardians so that I can better explain this form, and why I am inviting you to join this study. I will answer all your questions in order to make sure you and your parents understand all parts of the study. You and your parents will also be invited to meet with me in person to ask questions if you would like.

After signing the consent form, we will set up a time when we can meet in the school conference room where I will conduct a 60-90 minute interview with you. __________, our Services Coordinator, will observe these interviews, but I will be asking all the questions. The interview will be recorded only so that I can transcribe and analyze the data. After that, I will provide you with your transcript to make sure I have accurately understood your responses. I will do my best to limit the time required of you, but it will be very helpful to have you verify my understanding of your answers. Your confidentiality will be maintained all along this process of writing my report. Any report publications based on this research will use only anonymous individual and group data. You will not be identified. Your decision to participate or not in this project will be kept confidential and will have no effect on your standing at __________.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may withdraw at any time. If you are interested in participating, please contact me either in person, by email at robinson.kel@hsusky.neu.edu, or by phone at ____________.

Sincerely,

Kellie Robinson
We are inviting you to take part in a research project. This form will tell you about the study, and the researcher will explain it again before the interview. You may ask the researcher any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. Your choice to participate is entirely voluntary. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you (and your parent/guardian if you are under 18 years of age) to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
You have been selected to participate in this study because you are a student at _________.

Why is this research being done?
The purpose of my project is to understand the experiences that lead to an individual’s decision to stay in school or drop out.

What will I be asked to do?
I plan to conduct interviews with each participant for up to 90 minutes. This interview will be recorded and transcribed. At the beginning of the interview, you will be asked to give a brief description of your biography and some background on your high school experiences.

The research questions to be investigated in this study are:
1. What are the engagement experiences of students in a traditional high school prior to enrolling in a credit-recovery high school?
2. What were the engagement experiences of students enrolled in a credit-recovery high school after having been previously enrolled in a traditional high school?

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
The interview will take place in a conference room of either ____________ (if conducted during the academic school year), or ______ High School (the site of summer school), and will last between 60-90 minutes. ____________, our Services Coordinator, will observe the interviews. After I transcribe and analyze the data from the interviews, I will provide you with your transcript to make sure I have accurately understood and written your responses. Having you verify my findings will be very important.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
There is no risk or discomfort for you that I can foresee. However, if you wish to stop for any reason, let the researcher know and the interview will end immediately. If you decide to withdraw from the study, any data collected or recorded from the interview will not be used in this research.
Will I benefit by being in this research?
There will be no direct benefit for you for taking part in this study. However, your answers may help us learn more about students’ experiences with staying in school or deciding to drop out. It is hoped that the results of this study can be used to better understand the lived experiences of students at risk of dropping out of high school. It is also hoped that the knowledge gained from this study will benefit future dropout prevention programs.

Who will see the information about me?
Your part in this study will be confidential. Only researchers in this study will see this information about you. No publications or reports will use information that can identify you in any way. During the interview, the door to the room will be closed so nobody except the researcher and Ms. Sinclair will be able to hear our conversation. The audiotape will be held in a secured location and will be destroyed following analysis and transcription.

Can I stop my participation in the study?
Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Even after beginning this study, you may quit at any time with no implications to you whatsoever.

Will I be paid for my participation?
You will not be paid for your participation in this study.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?
If you have questions about this study please contact Kellie Robinson at (757)727-2790 or robinson.kel@husky.neu.edu, the person mainly responsible for this research. You can also contact Dr. Sandy Nickel at (617)513-6884 or s.nickel@neu.edu, the Principal Investigator.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?
If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115, telephone: (617)373-2215, email irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

I agree to take part in this research.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant’s Signature</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Investigator obtaining consent</th>
<th>Date</th>
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Parent/Guardian’s Signature Date
(For students under 18 years of age)

| ___________________________ |      |
| Print Name                  |      |

page 2 of 2
Appendix C: Subjectivity Statement

To increase transparency, I will disclose my subjectivity statement to each research participant prior to beginning the research:

“Even though the site of this study is where I work as a teacher, and where you attend as a student, please know that my position during the research is to remain objective. As I interview you, I will do my best to put aside prejudgments and approach the interview with an unbiased, receptive presence while actively listening to your responses.”
Appendix D: Telephone Script

The following transcript will be used when the researcher calls the parent/guardian of students who are interested in participating in this study. The purpose of the phone call will be: 1) to explain the consent form that they and their child must sign if they wish to participate in this study, and 2) to answer all questions in order to ensure a thorough understanding of all facets of the study.

“Hello, may I speak to the parent or guardian of __________________? This is Kellie Robinson. I am calling because your child, __________________ has expressed an interest in participating in my doctorate research study and I want to explain it a little better to you and see if you have any questions for me before you sign the Consent Form which I sent home with your son/daughter.”

“As you may see on the Consent Form, the purpose of my project is to understand the experiences that lead to an individual’s decision to stay in school or to drop out. It is hoped that the results of this study will benefit future dropout prevention programs. Your son/daughter was selected to participate in this study because s/he now ____________. I would like to interview your son/daughter for 60-90 minutes in a school conference room. At the beginning of the interview, I will ask your son/daughter to give a brief description of his/her biography and some background on his/her high school experiences. The research questions I plan to investigate in this study are:

1. What are the engagement experiences of students in a traditional high school prior to enrolling in a credit-recovery high school?
2. What were the engagement experiences of students enrolled in a credit-recovery high school after having been previously enrolled in a traditional high school?”

“____________, our Services Coordinator, will observe the interviews. After I transcribe and analyze the data from the interviews, I will provide your son/daughter with his/her transcript to make sure I have accurately understood and written his/her responses. Please know that my position during the research is to remain neutral and unbiased. All of your son/daughter’s information will be kept confidential, and s/he will not be identified in any way.”

“I am happy to go over any part of the Consent Form with you now or in person if you wish. Do you have any questions about any part of the Consent Form, or about any part of this research project or your child’s possible participation?”

“If you agree to allow your child to participate in this study, please sign both pages of the Consent Form and have your child return it to school tomorrow or as soon as possible. Thank you for your time and feel free to contact me at (757)727-2790 or at robinson.kel@husky.neu.edu if you think of any more questions or have any concerns. Thank you.
Appendix E: Interview Schedule

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, Department of Education

Name of Investigators: Kellie Robinson, Graduate Student and Dr. Sandy Nickel, Principal Investigator

July 2013

Script for Introductory Statement

First, I would like to thank you for your time today. As you know, we will spend between an hour and an hour and a half together today for this interview. We have already reviewed the Informed Consent, but I still want to be sure you understand the framework of this study and that I answer all your questions. First, everything you share will be held in highest confidence. This means that except for the Principal Investigator, Dr. Sandy Nickel, who is my academic advisor at Northeastern University, I am the only one who will have access to the data. To make sure this happens, all of the files are password protected and any written files will be locked in a drawer in my home office. You will be assigned a number as I gather and organize all the interview data, and during my final report, I will give you a pseudo name to protect your identity.

It is important for you to remember that this is a voluntary study, which has absolutely no bearing on your status as a student at ______________. At any time you have the right to exit the study. Aside from our time today, I will be contacting you to follow-up and make sure I have documented what you share with me is correct. I will be aware of your time during this follow-up and will do my best to keep it at a minimum. I will be using a computer and a back-up tape recorder to tape our interview. I will transcribe our interview and then take that transcript and organize the information you provide me, along with the other participants, to see what types of similarities and differences emerge. My goal is to understand the experiences that lead to an individual’s decision to engage or disengage with their high school education.

We will be spending from 60-90 minutes talking about 3 different types of questions. First, we will talk about your background as a student. Second, we will talk about your day-to-day experiences as a high school student. Third, I will ask you questions that will encourage you to reflect on the meanings of your high school experiences. If at any point you do not understand a question, please ask me to clarify. You also have the right to decline to answer any question that you do not wish to answer.

Before we begin, do you have any questions for me?

The questions and prompts will be used to begin the interview process. Most of the interview time will be spent following up students’ responses.

Historical Background Questions

Section I: Biographical/experience questions. (Rationale: to establish the context of the participants’ education experiences.)

1. Tell me about your high school enrollment experiences.
• How long were you in high school prior to enrolling in the _____?
• How many high schools did you attend prior to enrolling in the _____?
• Tell me about your experiences transitioning from one high school to another.

2. In general, what were your views toward your education prior to entering high school for the first time?
• Tell me about your experiences transitioning from middle school to high school.
• Tell me what you remember about your earlier interests in school, whether or not you felt accepted, and whether or not you felt like you belonged in the schools you attended prior to entering high school for the first time (elementary and middle).
• Tell me what you remember of your learning goals, your effort to achieve in school, and your learning abilities prior to entering high school for the first time (elementary and middle).

Research-centered Questions
Section II: Recreate the details of your high school experiences. (Rationale: to probe the details of participants’ high school experiences, pre and post attending __________.)

3. What did you experience at your previous high school(s) that led you to apply to the ____?
• Tell me about the school(s) you attended prior to coming to the ____: the students, the teachers, your classes.
• What were some of your favorite courses in your previous high school(s)? Why were they your favorite classes?
• What were some of your least favorite courses in your previous high school(s)? Why were they your least favorite classes?
• Without using teachers’ names, describe your interactions with teachers in your traditional high school(s). How much interaction was there? How helpful were the interactions?
• What were the teaching styles that helped you the most or the least in your previous high school(s)?

4. What is it like at the ____?
• Tell me about the ____: the students, the teachers, your classes.

Reflective Questions
Section III: Reflect on the meaning of your experiences (Rationale: to allow for more implicit information regarding students’ psychological experiences with school engagement, applying the affective and cognitive dimensions of Archambault, Morizot and Pagani’s (2009) student engagement construct).

5. What do you think some of the main differences are between the high school(s) you attended prior to the ____ and the _____?

6. In what ways (if any) have your feelings, attitudes and perceptions toward school changed since coming to the _____?
• Reflect on your interest in your previous high school(s), whether or not you felt accepted,
and whether or not you feel like you belonged.

- Reflect on your interest in your time at the _____. whether or not you felt accepted, and whether or not you felt like you belonged.

7. In what ways (if any) has your involvement in school changed?
- Reflect on the value you placed on your education prior to attending the _____.
- Reflect on the value you place on your education after attending the _____.
- Reflect on your learning goals, your effort to achieve in school, and your learning abilities and knowledge in your previous high school(s).
- Reflect on your learning goals, your effort to achieve in school, and your learning abilities and knowledge at the _____.

8. What other important things, if any, would you like to tell me about being a student at the _____. or about being a student in your previous high school(s)?

**Script for Concluding Statement**

As our time comes to a close, I want you to remember that if you have any questions or concerns about participating in this research, you may contact me at robinson.kel@husky.neu.edu or (757)727-2793. You can also contact Dr. Sandy Nickel, the Principal Investigator, at s.nickel@neu.edu or at (978)513-2215.

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Telephone: 617-373-4588. Email: irb@neu.edu. Please note: you may call anonymously if desired.

I want to thank you for taking time out to meet with me today. I have enjoyed our interview, and will be in touch in the next 2-4 weeks for follow-up.