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Factors That Contribute To High School Drop-outs Earning Their High School Diploma

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NATIONAL LOUIS UNIVERSITY

FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS EARNING
THEIR HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENT FOR THE DEGREE

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

IN

EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

BY

ANNE GOTTLIEB

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NLU Digital Commons Document Origination Statement

This document was created as *one* part of the three-part dissertation requirement of the National Louis University (NLU) Educational Leadership (EDL) Doctoral Program. The National Louis Educational Leadership EdD is a professional practice degree program (Shulman et al., 2006).

For the dissertation requirement, doctoral candidates are required to plan, research, and implement three major projects, one each year, within their school or district with a focus on professional practice. The three projects are:

- Program Evaluation
- Change Leadership Plan
- Policy Advocacy Document

For the **Program Evaluation** candidates are required to identify and evaluate a program or practice within their school or district. The “program” can be a current initiative; a grant project; a common practice; or a movement. Focused on utilization, the evaluation can be formative, summative, or developmental (Patton, 2008). The candidate must demonstrate how the evaluation directly relates to student learning.

In the **Change Leadership Plan** candidates develop a plan that considers organizational possibilities for renewal. The plan for organizational change may be at the building or district level. It must be related to an area in need of improvement, and have a clear target in mind. The candidate must be able to identify noticeable and feasible differences that should exist as a result of the change plan (Wagner et al., 2006).

In the **Policy Advocacy Document** candidates develop and advocate for a policy at the local, state or national level using reflective practice and research as a means for supporting and promoting reforms in education. Policy advocacy dissertations use critical theory to address moral and ethical issues of policy formation and administrative decision making (i.e., what ought to be). The purpose is to develop reflective, humane and social critics, moral leaders, and competent professionals, guided by a critical practical rational model (Browder, 1995).

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Abstract

What happens to young people that leave or are put out of their high school before they earn their diploma? Some of them attempt to re-enter school and earn their diploma. This study identifies factors that help students re-engage in their educational journeys.

Two research questions guide this work:

- What factors prohibit high school drop outs from earning their diploma and working towards a post-high school goal?
- What can schools do to promote the factors that help students graduate and work towards a post-high school goal?

Relevant literature offers information about the dropout epidemic in the United States, what other studies have found causes students to dropout, and what helps students be successful. The study uses portraiture to describe four, African-American, male students that attend or attended Austin Career Education Center, a second chance school on the westside of Chicago. Two of the students are defined as “successful,” meaning they graduate with relative ease and work towards the post high school goal of a college education. Two of the students “struggle,” meaning attendance is erratic, credit is not earned, and one eventually drops out of school again. An analysis of their interviews reveals that the successful students have two factors that contribute to their success. First, they have a moment of connection with someone that motivates them to keep going. Second, they take responsibility for their actions, success and failures that have had.

Preface

This study begins with four young men and their journeys through public education in Chicago, Illinois. This paper ends with a section called Judgments and Recommendations, the answers to the research questions. These questions are genuine and authentic, based on my drive to serve the students I work with better. And the biggest lesson that I learned was not the answers to the research questions. Those answers are valuable but many possible answers to the research questions exist. I found two that might help me do my job more effectively. More importantly, I listened to students intently and took in their stories and voices. I turned them over like puzzle pieces in my mind until I felt like I knew them, cared for them, and watched over them. I hadn't done this type of listening in a long time. I talk to students and hear their backgrounds on a daily basis, but not really listened. Sometimes their stories start to sound the same and perhaps this phenomenon is natural. Slowing down and digging into their words reminded me that every student has a unique story of how he ended up outside of the mainstream system and how he is trying to fight his way back to it. Each student has a voice and a truth. Education and learning must begin with that voice. While this paper and study has an ending, their journeys and struggles continue.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The Students

Rashawn. He saunters down the hall on the way to see Ms. McDonough, his social studies teacher. The building is exceptionally quiet because it is a hot day in July. Rashawn needs to finish his U.S. History class, a graduation requirement. He didn't graduate in June, but knows that if he can earn his diploma by August, he will have classes at the city college paid for through a scholarship. He comes to school every Wednesday throughout the summer, getting work, dropping off work, taking exams, meeting with the teacher. I say, "Hey, Rashawn. What's going on? You ok?" He says what he usually says, "I can't complain," and continues walking. He is neither excited nor upset to be here. One month later, he earns that diploma and is currently attending classes at Truman City College. He has begun researching transferring to Columbia College because of their technology and arts focus.

Jerome. He comes home from college every summer and every summer he struggles against the neighborhood. I call him on a Wednesday and ask him to meet me at school for the interview. He immediately says he'll do it, no problem. On Thursday, he arrives 30 minutes late and his phone is blowing up. He apologizes several times because we can't start because of the phone calls. At the end of the interview, I finally ask him what is going on. His cousin was in a car that was shot at earlier that morning. No one was hurt, but plots are starting to form. After all that we have talked about for the past hour, I ask him, "How do you stay away from the streets, when everything seems to pull you in?" He looks at me and says, "If you hadn't called me for this interview, I would have been in the car too." The words punch me in the stomach. He is a high school

dropout that has clawed his way to college and it's worked out because of luck? I pray in my head that he will be safe for the next 24 hours. The next morning he is being driven back to college. And he makes it. I don't know how, but he does.

Natyia. He prefers to be called Nino. That's how his teacher addresses him quietly in the hall outside of class. She says, "Nino, how can we have a productive discussion?" He has an easy answer, "Tell the kids to be quiet." But she doesn't allow him to take the easy way, "Nino, you know not to be talking while others are talking, but so many people are talking no one can hear and why are you the loudest? Why are you off topic? What's going on?" Now, he has to pause because he has no answers. "Ok, ok, I'll be quiet." The teacher is close to exasperation because this is only one of many conversations she has had with Nino. "I don't want you to be quiet, Nino. I want you to show everyone what you know and what you can do." These conversations pepper Nino's day at school. In class, sometimes, he is too loud, too off topic, too much the leader of disruption. He is in school almost every day, proving that he must want something, but does he want it badly enough? No one is sure.

Corey. It is easy to forget that Corey is in the room. "I want him in the dual enrollment program," I say again. The registrar gives me some pushback because there are so few spots available. He tries a new tactic, "He didn't come to school last spring. He missed 45 of 60 days! He has to prove that he can come to school. If he can't come to school here where we're calling his house every day, how is he going to make it at college?" I have my own statistics ready: "He is the only student I have seen in 15 years here that has scored a 12.9 in math on this assessment. Do you know what that means?" I turn to Corey. "What do you want to do, Corey? Do you want to take the rest of your

classes here, at Austin Career? Or do you want to take some college next semester? We're concerned about your commitment to school. What do you want?" Corey doesn't speak at first; he is searching his mind or heart or both. Finally, "I'll be here. I want to graduate high school. I want to go to college." I don't admit to myself at the time, that there is little conviction in his voice. But his test scores push me forward and he is enrolled in the pre-college classes. I hope this will engage him in work that will keep him coming to school.

Purpose

I came to Austin Career Education Center (ACEC), an alternative high school with the specific mission of dropout retrieval, in 1998. The school helps high school dropouts earn a high school diploma and promotes the idea that this diploma is only the start of their academic career, not the end of it. In all of the years that I have been working at the Center, I have acquired hundreds of snapshots in my mind like the ones above. As Assistant Principal, I have handed out hundreds of diplomas and shook many very excited hands, like Rashawn and Jerome. But there are students like Nino and Corey that walk in the door wanting a diploma, a fresh start, a chance at a future, but sometimes don't make it. I have seen students come and go, dropout of our program and come back to graduate, and leave but not return. If they make it to the end, they are thankful that we are here, thankful that we have teachers that care about students and offer personal attention, and thankful that we supported and encouraged them to finish. But I don't know how to predict who will finish.

Many people would hear Corey's story and see the insurmountable obstacles in the way of his education. Some people would blame Nino for not being successful and

tell themselves that they did everything that they could to help him. But all of our students have obstacles to their education, that's how they end up at our school. And all of our students make a choice to come back to school. What makes some succeed and others not? What can the school do to make sure that every student succeeds in earning a high school diploma and works towards a post-high school goal?

Rationale

An estimated one-third of all public high school students drop out of school every year and almost half of African-American, Latino, and Native American students (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006). Dropping out costs the government billions in lost earnings, welfare, medical cost, and incarceration (Bridgeland et al., 2006). We know that the future is not bright for these former students. From a 2009 report submitted to Congress entitled "The consequences of dropping out of high school: joblessness and jailing for high school dropouts and the high cost to taxpayers," the statistics paint a bleak picture for the drop out and the nation. High school dropouts are 63 times more likely to be incarcerated than a four year college graduate (Sum, Khatiwada, and McLaughlin, 2009). African-American dropouts in particular are the least likely group to be employed, with a jobless rate of 69% (Sum et al., 2009). The report states in its conclusion:

There is an overwhelming national economic and social justice need to prevent existing high school students from dropping out without earning a diploma and to encourage the re-enrollment and eventual graduation of those dropouts who have already left the school system (p. 17).

In a speech to Congress in February of 2009, President Obama said that students that leave high school are "quitting on your country." The educational system cannot quit them.

Goals

The goal of this project is to document and describe the struggle to attain a high school diploma by four young people in Chicago, Illinois. Young adults come to Austin Career Education Center to get a diploma, to better themselves, to find a future. By walking in the door, they have made a step towards change and self-improvement. Some students have a clear idea of a goal that they want to achieve: a job that they want to get or a college they want to attend. But many students don't have a strong vision of their lives after high school. They question what a diploma really means for their future. What do they really want for themselves? They have been pushed out or chosen to leave the educational mainstream and left in limbo. As a result, education and their future goals are disconnected.

Many of the students that come to ACEC have not been successful at school before and have bad habits that led to their dropping out in the first place, such as poor attendance, constantly being late, and poor study skills. ACEC requires students to have half of their high school credits, which makes them beginning 11th graders, according to credits. Most students enter with reading and math scores at the 7th-8th grade range on a universal assessment. They are not only disconnected from educational motivation because they have been rejected by the system of education, but because they are far behind their peers academically.

Every student enters ACEC with a different number and combination of credits and in a different place on their journey towards a diploma and post-high school goals. We try to provide a welcoming and supportive learning environment for all students. We hire and support teachers that care and create an engaging classroom environment. These

teachers differentiate in many different ways with academic and behavioral interventions. We have a social worker on staff to help students with housing instability, transportation to and from school, child care problems, as well as social and emotional counseling. We have a college counselor that works with students on post-high school plans. And we offer as much personal attention as we can give. Are these things enough to re-engage students in the educational system? Why do some students thrive with these supports and others don't?

Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to discover what makes some students, students that have dropped out of school and faced obstacles to their education, keep going and others not. I want to explore what factors help motivate students to persevere in achieving their goals.

Primary research question: What factors contribute to high school dropouts earning their high school diploma?

Other questions that will be studied are:

- What factors prohibit high school dropouts from earning their diploma and working towards a post-high school goal?
- What can schools do to promote the factors that help students graduate and work towards a post-high school goal?

I believe that schools can serve students better. I believe that it is essential to make a commitment to young people and their education, especially young people that want to try.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The Dropout Problem

While the country faces the problem of high school dropouts, Chicago, in particular, presents numbers of epidemic proportion. Across the United States, almost one-third of students do not graduate from high school (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). According to research by the Consortium on Chicago School Research conducted by the University of Chicago, "almost half of the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) students fail to graduate from high school and in some CPS high schools more students drop out than graduate" (Allensworth & Easton, 2007, p. 1).

For a nation that pioneered public education for all and desegregated schools over 60 years ago in a declaration that separate schools were inherently not equal schools, we have not found a solution to this crisis. African-Americans as a group appear to struggle the most at completing high school in Chicago. According to a 2011 Chicago Public Schools report on trends, graduation rates have increased overall in the past few years, but the difference between the rates between African-Americans and Caucasian students has increased by 5.5% ("Despite Some Progress Being Made," 2012, p. 1). A little over half, 52.7% in 2011, of African-Americans graduated from high school in CPS. And "African-Americans have the lowest graduation rates and saw the slowest growth rate across all groups" ("Despite Some Progress Being Made," 2012, p. 2).

The consequences of dropping out impact African-American males the hardest. Northeastern University's Center for Labor Market Studies published a report in 2009 detailing the problems for African-American males that do not have a high school diploma. The report states:

On any given day, nearly 23 percent of all young Black men ages 16 to 24 who have dropped out of high school are in jail, prison, or a juvenile justice institution in America (“Left Behind in America,” 2009, p. 3).

Much of the literature discusses the problem, focusing on statistics: what groups are dropping out, what the consequences are to the individual and to society at large. Some studies look at why students are dropping out and then the literature moves to how to prevent them from dropping out. However, there are thousands of students out of school right now. What is being done to re-engage them? How can the system help dropouts become successful high school graduates?

Factors Related to Student Success

In the same study by the Consortium on Chicago School Research (2007), researchers studied factors to predict student success in high school. They looked at factors of the school system that could accurately predict a student's success, as defined as graduating high school. The study indicates that freshman year attendance and grades are the two biggest indicators as to whether a student will be successful or not in high school (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). The report suggests that if these two factors can be addressed early enough in a student's high school career, the path towards dropping out, in the cases where attendance is poor and grades are low, can change.

The study also concludes that boys score lower in a variety of school-related categories than girls. Boys are in class less and have lower GPAs than their counterparts. To the extent that the study compared 9th grade girls and boys with the same attendance, same 8th grade achievement scores, same time reported for studying and doing homework outside of class, boys still came up .3 short on their GPAs. The researchers investigated the possible role of gender bias by teachers and culturally relevant material,

and found very little evidence to suggest these are the reasons for the GPA gap between the genders. Instead, the evidence points to the relationship that girls and boys have with the school climate.

However, differences in failure rates by gender are smaller in schools where more students report strong student-teacher trust, personal support from teachers, schoolwide press to prepare for the future, and peer support for academic achievement... The substantial difference in boys' and girls' reports of personal support from teachers likewise suggests that boys are receiving less academic support from teachers than they feel that they need (p. 32).

This suggests that boys are not as successful at school because of a lack of relationship with teachers and less support from their peers.

Because dropouts are not just a school problem, but a neighborhood, city, state, and even national problem, the problem has been studied by community-based organizations as well. Seven community-based organizations create Voices of Youth in Chicago Education (VOYCE) (2008) to study student-led solutions to the dropout crisis. They conducted an action research project involving 12 high schools in Chicago and thousands of students. The report concludes that dropout rates can be decreased by creating a personalized plan to graduation for each students and "develop a process for student input into curriculum reform and professional development for teachers that would ensure a challenging and relevant education for all CPS high school students" (VOYCE, 2008, p. 2). A general lack of relevance to student lives left students feeling disconnected to school and more likely to be unsuccessful.

Gilberto Q. Conchas (2012) recently published his findings from a case study of a program designed to help academically, socially, and financially disadvantaged youth who were particularly at-risk for dropping out. The program has four objectives: decrease

truancy in school, improve academic skills and grades; prepare youth to enter and complete college, and overcome the digital divide that affects urban youth. Through data collection and interviews, the authors concluded that four factors contributed to students being successful in program: space, both time and physical, to foster peer relationships; incentives; social networks; and adults supporting and caring for these youth.

The conclusions from all three of these studies: the Consortium on Chicago School Research, VOYCE, and Conchas, center around the issue of school connectedness, mostly through relationships and trust. Students, especially boys, do worse in school because of lack of trust and support with teachers. Students that dropout feel disengaged and disconnected to what is being taught in most classrooms. And the way to help students succeed is to foster peer to peer and adult to youth relationships and mentoring to guide youth as they have to navigate tough choices in their urban neighborhoods.

I have looked at the problem of dropouts as they relate to systems: schools, classrooms, community organizations, and I have looked at groups: students, male students, African-American students, and African-American male students. But what must happen inside the individual in order for success to be achieved?

Carol Dweck, a world-renowned psychologist at Stanford University, has studied why people succeed and how to foster success. In her book Mindset: The New Psychology of Success (2006), she asserts that success of any kind is tied to the mindset of that student. Two mindsets steer behavior. A student with a fixed mindset believes that intelligence and achievement are inherent from birth and cannot be changed. However, a student with a growth mindset believes that intelligence is malleable and can be changed

with hard work. If a student with a fixed mindset gets a bad grade or struggles with a class assignment, he is more likely to avoid it and just believe he doesn't have the intelligence to do it better. Challenges and failures to a student with a growth mindset are opportunities to try harder, learn more, and improve. "The fixed mindset limits achievement" (Dweck, 2006, p. 15). Teachers, parents, and peers can influence a child's mindset. Adults praising hard work and effort foster a growth mindset. The outcome in school is not just about the grade or the completion of the task, but about work and overcoming struggle to learn something, regardless of the end score.

This growth mindset relates to the work of Angela Duckworth and her colleagues that centers around the idea of grit. Their study "Grit and Perseverance of Long Term Goals" (2007) defines grit as "perseverance and passion for long-term goals" (p. 2). The researchers developed a 12-question survey to measure how much a person will persevere through adversity. The data revealed two important conclusions. First, she found that people are extremely honest in answering the questions about themselves. The self-reported view towards one's own perseverance matched how successful one was at a given goal. Second, she was able to use the grit score to make predictions about students accomplishing their goals. The survey could predict how far students in the National Spelling Bee would go. The higher the score, the more likely the students were going to progress to higher rounds. The survey was also given to students entering the famed Westpoint Military Academy. The higher the student's score, the more likely the student was going to be successful and achieve at the school. Here is a tool that speaks to success that is not tied to an IQ or previous academic success. This begins to look at a person's own motivation as an indicator of future success.

Author Paul Tough examines some of Duckworth's work in his book How Children Succeed (2012). His first examination of this question comes from looking at the work of James Heckman, the economist from the University of Chicago. He studied students that took the GED high school equivalency test, believing that students who passed the GED were the same as students who graduated high school. But they weren't. Students who passed the GED were less likely to enroll in college and far less likely to complete college than their high school diploma counterparts. High school, he concluded, didn't just teach cognitive skills. High school also teaches some of the things that Duckworth speaks to in her research, non-cognitive skills.

When Tough examines what Jeff Nelson does at OneGoal, a college-prep program that works with youth in Chicago, he ties all of these elements together. The three year, OneGoal program has three parts. First, the program focuses on intensive ACT preparation. This increases skills for the exam, but also fosters a “you can do it, you can get smarter” attitude in students. The second part is called "Road Map to College" and the third part focuses on many qualities that Duckworth identifies as non-cognitive skills that lead to success, but Nelson calls them “leadership abilities.” Nelson explains, "Non-cognitive skills like resilience and resourcefulness and grit are highly predictive of success in college...And they can help our students compensate for some of the inequality they have faced in the education system" (Tough, 2012, p. 161).

In order to re-engage high school dropouts, I have to know why they dropped out in the first place, but I also have to know how to re-engage them in the educational process so that they will be successful in the future. This means finding out about how

they have interacted with the educational system before, what they need from the system now, and what they need inside themselves to be successful and graduate high school.

CHAPTER THREE: Methodology

Research Design Overview

This study is qualitative research using the framework of portraiture. Through interviews and some quantitative data, I attempt to create a complete picture of each participant and his secondary educational history. With each picture, I try to answer my research questions: what factors contribute to high school dropouts earning their high school diploma, what factors prohibit dropouts from earning their diploma, and how can schools help promote the factors that lead dropouts to be successful. After each initial interview, the participant completed the 12 question Grit Scale Survey (Duckworth, 2007) (Appendix A). Grades, attendance records, and test scores were also collected from the students' academic files. The study focuses on four students that currently attend or graduated from Austin Career Education Center.

Participants

I selected all of the participants of the study based on availability and meeting the criteria I have set forth. The participants all had to be high school dropouts, meaning not attending any school for at least four months. I looked for students that had earned their diploma after dropping out of high school. These students are “successful” in terms of this study. I looked for students that had dropped out and had returned to a high school to try to earn their diploma but were failing classes or not consistently attending school. These students are “struggling” as defined by this study.

All four participants are African-American males who had dropped out of high school. It was not my intention at the beginning of this study to focus on gender. But due to availability of the participants and profile fitting in to the definitions that I had set,

these four students became the focus. Two of the subjects fit the criterion of being successful; Rashawn and Jerome have graduated high school after dropping out. Rashawn is currently enrolled in a junior college and Jerome is currently enrolled at Northern Illinois University, a four year school. Nino and Corey struggle to achieve the goal of a high school diploma. Both of these students have failed various classes and had poor attendance at ACEC.

I interviewed one female student that graduated high school in June 2012. As she was telling her school history, I discovered that she did fit into the definition of a high school dropout. She was out of school for less than four weeks. She used the word “transfer” when she spoke about how she came to Austin Career Education Center and that is how she sees herself. This different mindset could influence why she graduated from ACEC without failing any classes and with very good attendance. For these reasons, I did not include her interview and quantitative data in my analysis.

Data Gathering Techniques

Most of the data was collected in an individual interview with each participant. Each of the interviews was videotaped and later transcribed. I asked questions from a set list that I used for each participant (Appendix B). Some questions varied depending on if they had already graduated high school or not. This data gave me insight into the goals and mindset of each student. I hoped to identify the factors of success using this data. The interviews gave me a chance to get to the heart of what the participant’s mindset really was at given points throughout his schooling. I heard many different stories about important turning points in their educational history. After each interview, there were

follow-up questions that I asked participants as the need arose. These shorter interviews were not recorded on tape, but in note form only.

Not everything about someone can be captured in one interview or in one survey. Each boy has had his own long road to travel and it is impossible to record every influence on his life. In the analysis, I recount Rashawn and Jerome talking about certain events and these events were not articulated in Nino's and Corey's interviews, even when prompted. They might not have given answers to these prompts for many reasons. I have not known each of them for as long as I have known Rashawn and Jerome. Corey in particular never seemed to get entirely comfortable in the videotaped interview. Other, subsequent conversations were smoother, more open, but overall, he was the least comfortable talking about his journey and situation.

I gave the students the Grit Scale Survey at the end of the interview. I used the grit scale results to quantitatively determine the student's grit and compare this with interview statements made about his own determination.

Attendance data, grades, and test scores were compared. Discipline records were also noted for each participant. This quantitative data helped to corroborate the interview information and give a complete picture of each student.

Once the interviews were completed, I transcribed and analyzed the responses by coding the responses and noting any patterns that emerged (Seidel, 1998).

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

I interviewed all four subjects at Austin Career Education Center in a small office. I took notes as well as videotaped all of the initial interviews. There were follow-up conversation with Jerome and Rashawn that were done informally in person or over the phone. At the end of each initial interview, I gave the student the Grit Survey. I tried to gather as much information as possible about each student to address my primary and secondary questions: What factors contribute to a high school dropout eventually earning his or her high school diploma? How does Austin Career contribute to the success or failure of a dropout returning to high school? And what factors inhibit dropouts from earning their diploma?

Portraits of Two Successful Students

Rashawn

Rashawn is quiet and unassuming. He stands at 6' 2", a large teddy bear of a boy, whose weathered face tricks an observer into thinking he's older. He walks with purpose, but not in a hurry, in his own time and space that makes you believe that he knows who he is and what he wants to do. He thinks about each answer carefully because he starts and stops and tilts his head and starts again, after really thinking about what has been asked, really wanting to state his answer just so. "I had a choice. I could have just stopped," he says more than once at different points, emphasizing that no one ever forced him to go to school. But the reason he is here, the reason I am talking to him now, is because he chose not to stop. He chose to keep going.

He was given over to his grandmother soon after he was born. His mother didn't feel like she could take care of another child and there has never been a father in the

picture. During any conversation I have ever had, he always referred to this woman who raised him as his grandmother. But by the end of a follow-up interview, he reveals that she is of no blood relation. The woman that raised him from infancy was a neighbor who took children in, any children, who didn't have anyone else to care for them. When he explains this situation, he doesn't reveal any resentment towards his mother, with whom he is in contact. What his comments do reveal is a fierce loyalty towards his grandmother who gave him a stable and loving upbringing. Her commitment to children shows through in Rashawn's commitment to her.

Rashawn started his high school career at ACT Charter school, choosing not to attend his neighborhood high school, Clemente, because he thought the charter would be more serious. He knew they had uniforms and he thought it would be more focused on learning. Rashawn considered himself and was considered by others to be very studious and somewhat of a nerd. At ACT he was picked on quite a bit and that led to attendance problems even during his freshman year. He attended ACT for three years. He describes himself as 'lazy' when he attended ACT Charter School. At the end of three years, Rashawn should have been going into his senior year of high school with at least 17 credits, but he had only earned nine credits total and only one credit his last year at ACT.

After ACT closed, he bounced around, trying to make money. He sold drugs on the street, spent hours playing video games and going to tournaments, and enjoyed using his computer to make beats for local rappers. He tried to attend Cornerstone High School in Chicago, but found it too religious, he said, and stopped going. Rashawn described this period as kind of going through the motions with no direction for his future.

Then, a “turning point,” as he calls it, began. Two critical events took place within a few months of each other. First, a drug dealer that Rashawn had been working for tried to get him to give up going to school altogether. He tried to convince Rashawn that he could make more money and have a better life in the drug trade. But when Rashawn looked at this man, what he saw made him sad, not envious. This drug dealer was constantly worried about getting arrested or getting attacked by rival dealers. He didn't have a family or stable place to live. It's not a life that Rashawn wanted to have.

This led him to search hard for a school to earn his diploma. He enrolled at an alternative program at Orr High School, a school within a school. And the second part of the 'turning point' occurs when Rashawn met Mr. Potts and Mr. Ferguson. This teacher and guidance counselor gave Rashawn money to get to school, drove by his house to wake him up so he would be on time, and wouldn't let him be lazy or fail. Rashawn saw this dedication to him and felt obligated to return the favor. "When people really care, even when you don't care, you kind of like...I didn't want to take that for granted," Rashawn explains, "I didn't want to let them down. I had a reason to keep going." But after one semester, the program was shut down.

At this point, Rashawn knew that he would keep going no matter what. He and another student found Austin Career Education Center and enrolled right away. He turned 19 within a few weeks of starting school and he had one thing in mind: graduating. His attendance was excellent and he was almost always on time. Teachers quickly discovered that he lived just down the block and didn't have many obstacles in the way in terms of getting to school.

Because of his good grades and good attendance during his first semester with us, he was chosen to participate in a dual enrollment program, attending a Chicago City College and finishing high school at the same time. The coursework would be challenging, but we hoped to introduce students to college with the continued support of high school. Students were told that attending their college class would count toward high school credit they were expected to pass this class in order to graduate in June.

Within a few weeks of the program starting, Rashawn had already missed a couple of classes. The City College policy was that a student was only allowed to miss three classes and on the fourth miss, he was dropped from the class. We were working with a professor that knew our students and what their obstacles might be. It was clear by the end of February, six weeks into the semester, that Rashawn was not going to make it. He had lost his job and was barely coming to school because his grandmother was in the hospital. Rashawn explains: "Someone has to keep watching the house. The neighborhood is not a place where you can just leave it alone. Otherwise, everything would be gone." He also needed money. This meant working for his uncle, selling beats that he makes on his computer to whomever would listen, and going to video game tournaments where he usually places high enough to win prize money. Eventually, he and his grandmother were unable to keep their home and needed to look for a new place to live. During this time, Rashawn was only coming to school once or twice a week.

While many teachers and our social worker tried to meet with him, he was very independent minded. He would come to school for half of the day and then leave and say he would have to "take care of things." All of us were worried that he would not be able to graduate in June and we weren't sure how to help him. By May, he was too far behind

in two classes and graduating was in jeopardy. A deal was struck, he attended night school to earn back a half credit from one of the classes and he would make-up the U.S. History credit over the summer.

Rashawn came faithfully over the summer to meet with the history teacher and earn his credit. He received his high school diploma in August 2012. He enrolled in Truman City College in September and because of an error on his account, he could only register for two classes. He has passed those two classes with Bs and at the time this paper was written, he is enrolled in four classes for Spring 2013 term.

He feels he can achieve anything. "I won't consider everything an obstacle. The obstacle is getting over myself. Now that I've done that, there are no more obstacles," he explains. He plans on attending Truman for two years and then transferring to Columbia where he wants to study video game design.

Jerome

One cannot help but like Jerome from the first time he says hello. His smile is radiant, his manner is easy-going, and he has a genuine curiosity about people. He only stands 5' 6" but his warm personality makes him seem bigger. On the morning of the interview he was particularly distracted. His phone kept ringing and he kept apologizing. When we finally got started, he answered almost every question with specific details, like the address of Dunbar High School, the first high school he attended and the dates of when he first entered and graduated from ACEC. These details help him mark his journey, a long journey that is not over just yet.

He has lived almost his whole life under the care of his grandmother because of his mother's intermittent drug use. He has never known his father. He sailed through

elementary school. He knew he was a good student, labeled 'smart' from early on. He remembers positive feedback from teachers and he states, "even the hard questions that sometimes we didn't have to do, I would do it."

During his freshman year, his engagement and motivation for school changed, primarily because of his peers. He fought at school almost every day. "I'm talkin' about I'll go in your classroom and knock you out. I wasn't proud of it or nothin' but, you know. That's just how it was," he explains. This was his life: being wild at school, hanging with a crew of boys, and living most hours of the day on the streets. He was kicked out of school for poor attendance and fighting before the end of his sophomore year with 10 credits out of 29 attempted and a GPA of 0.6724.

Jerome was out of school for the next two years. Every day he earned money and occupied his time with selling drugs and hanging out with his crew. He believed that his chance at doing anything else or being anything else was over. If he ever thought about leaving 'the life' he couldn't see a plan to do it. He didn't know that schools to help a student finish earning their diploma existed.

In the summer of 2008, Jerome's grandmother sat him down for a talk. She explained to him that she was proud of him in many ways, except that he didn't have his high school diploma. This, he explains, made him cry. "I used to cry about that...that really gave me a turning point in my life like I need to do something fast." Soon after this conversation, Jerome discovered he had a cousin that went to an alternative school that accepts high school dropouts. He enrolled at ACEC in November of 2008.

When he started, he just wanted to get in and get out. He explains that he didn't want to talk to anyone, cause any trouble, just do what he had to do and be done. On the

first day of classes at ACEC, Mr. Alexander, the Dean of Students, noticed him singing in the hall. When Mr. Alexander asked Jerome what he planned to do after high school, Jerome told him that he wanted to go to college. He said it because he thought that's what Mr. Alexander wanted to hear. At this point, Jerome had never really thought about going to college, after all, it was just a few months ago that Jerome realized he could get his high school diploma. But Jerome remembers, Mr. Alexander told him that if Jerome came to school every day that he would get him a scholarship to any college in America. The memory is not entirely accurate, according to Mr. Alexander. Chances are, he says, that this promise wasn't made on the first day of school because he would have had to get to know him a little bit first. And while we do have a scholarship program through the school, it is only for Illinois colleges and universities, so Mr. Alexander doubts that he said the scholarship applied to "anywhere in America." Regardless, this memory has been burned into Jerome's mind as an important part of his journey.

This journey has not been without bumps. His attendance was always good, but there were short periods where he would not come to school, usually because of a problem at home. They went months sometimes without heat in the winter and he would have to eventually go stay with a friend and that made coming to and from school difficult. Also, many people lived in his grandmother's small apartment. This made even finding a place to sleep and then getting up for school the next day an obstacle. Because he was no longer selling drugs, he didn't always have money for food and clothes. Sometimes, Jerome felt like giving up. He says, "I felt like giving up. But at the same time, I knew I couldn't." He knew that he didn't want "that life." Two of Jerome's close friends were killed in front of him while he was living his life on the streets, and many

people he knew were in jail. He was motivated to push away from all of that negativity and he had the pull of a promise to his grandmother and the promise made to him about the scholarship.

Jerome graduated from ACEC in June 2010, earning 23 As and one B. He earned a full four year scholarship to Northern Illinois University (NIU) in Dekalb, Illinois where he started in the Fall of 2010 and is still enrolled and attending at the time this paper is completed.

At the end of the interview, after the camera is turned off, I ask him about all of the phone calls. His tone changes to a frustrated one. His brother, Coby, was in a car earlier that morning that was shot at. No one was hurt, but plots of retaliation are being planned. Jerome is to leave to go back to NIU the next morning. I asked him how he stays out of the neighborhood problems. He explained that this issue, this shooting, involved his brother, not just a friend or cousin, but his *brother*, with particular emphasis. Just like the word *streets* is synonymous with selling drugs, gang affiliations and violent acts, the word *brother* means that blood is the strongest bond there is along with an “I would do anything for him” attitude. That is the code. I told him that I wanted him to be safe and I remind him of his ride to college the next day. He said he knows. And while he never gave me an answer to my question about what is going to happen later that day, he made a quick comment about wanting to stay at NIU next summer if he could. As he left and he saw the extreme worry on my face, he returned to jovial Jerome. He was all smiles, telling me not to worry, that he really enjoyed talking to me, and he hoped that my paper goes well. I walked him to the door of the school and watched him walk down the street

to his home. The next afternoon, I found out from our college counselor who drove him out to school that he made it back to NIU for the start of the fall term.

Portraits of Two Struggling Students

Natyia

Natyia also has a smile a mile wide that lights up his whole face. And while he writes his given name on all of his papers, he is called Nino (NEE-no) by everyone that knows him. He is a complex young man, full of dualities. One-on-one, he is focused and respectful, attentive and thoughtful. With his friends he is more of a typical teenager: self-centered and the resident joke-maker, immature and carefree. On the one hand he is an amazing student with incredible critical thinking and analysis skills. On the other hand, he runs a crew that sells drugs and is heavily involved in street life. Finally, he can articulate things that he wants from his education but his actions show little commitment to this process. He has chosen to try to earn his high school diploma but struggles with attendance, behavior, and turning in assignments.

Nino was raised by his mother and has never known his father. He neither liked nor disliked school in the primary grades. Nino started at Douglass High School and was on their freshmen basketball squad. Before his freshmen year ended, his mother moved and he transferred to Morton West High School. He missed basketball try-outs for summer league at Morton and never played basketball there. He explained that basketball kept him motivated during his freshmen year and he would never miss a practice. He didn't have this activity to focus on at Morton. "I didn't have nothing to push me, to motivate me to keep my grades up." After two years at Morton and earning some but not all of his credits, Nino returned to Chicago.

He didn't want to comment on why he came back to Chicago. At some point between his sophomore and junior year, his mother put him out of the house because he was selling drugs. She wanted him to stop and when he didn't, she said that he couldn't live there anymore. It is unclear exactly where Nino went to live next. When he moved back to the city, he attended Westside Holistic Alternative High School. He didn't transfer back to a CPS school because of "attendance problems" that began at Morton West. He explained that he was behind in his credits and didn't want to be older than all of the other sophomores. He chose an alternative, dropout retrieval school that required less credits to graduate. He had poor attendance at Westside because of the pull of the streets. He preferred making money on the corner than going to school. Yet, he would show up to school at certain points. "I wasn't really focused. I would just come. I'd do nothing but then sometimes, I would try to catch up and it wouldn't be enough." During his first semester, he only earned 1.25 credits out of 4.25 attempted. After that, he dropped out.

A friend who was attending ACEC told him about the school. He told Nino that the teachers helped students a lot and that it was different than other schools. I asked Nino why he chose to go to school at all. He said he wanted "to do something with my future....there's only so long that the lifestyle [of the streets] you live can go. You have to keep evolving or everybody going to move forward and you still going to be at the same spot." When I asked Nino where he learned this lesson, he said, "Life." Nino enrolled in December 2011.

He started a mid-year short semester well, with good attendance and good grades, earning credit in both of his classes. By the spring, however, he was not passing three out

of his five classes and the staff was concerned about drug use. He had two write-ups for coming to class under the influence of marijuana after lunch. And it was noted that some teachers thought other drugs might be involved. He was more disengaged and non-participatory in class.

I spoke to him recently about being at a crossroads. Nino was not put in the program at ACEC that was preparing students to attend Wright City College in the Spring of 2013 because of his behavior from the previous spring. Teachers did not think his behavior would be good enough to be a representative for our school and that he would really buckle down for college work. By the end of October, some staff members thought he should be added to the group because he seemed more focused and serious about school. I spoke to him on two separate occasions and the Dean of Students spoke to him about changing into the special prep classes with a special group of students. He was excited about the opportunity and really wanted to do it. His classes were changed on a Thursday and he attended the rest of that week. On Monday he missed school and Tuesday he came saying that his living situation had become really unstable and he might have to move to Tennessee and stay with his sister. The move would take place that Friday. The rest of the week, Nino was in and out of class, not focused, and not his usual self.

He did not move to Tennessee but has not been the same since. He has not been as focused on class and his attendance has been inconsistent, missing one to three days a week. He has failed to begin the steps to enroll at Wright even though many students in the class have started and completed that process. In his interview with me he indicated that he could be a better student if he “got involved in something... That’s what keeps my

time.” I thought that focusing on an academic challenge might be that activity. I sat him down to talk to him about really committing to this opportunity. Our social worker also talked to him about if this opportunity would be too stressful or if he could rise to the level of this challenge. She believed that he would need a major life change: a change in where he’s living and to give up selling drugs with his crew. At the end of the day of these talks, we both told Nino to let us know the next day what he thought he might want to do. He has not talked to us about it since and has chosen to focus only on getting his high school diploma.

One of my final questions for Nino was if he felt like it was now or never for his diploma. He responded: “You don’t never know, like, you know how some people have a normal life, like, they have a routine. There’s not no routine in my life. You never know where you’re going to end up. I just want to finish high school. That’s all.”

If he passes the classes on his schedule, he will earn his high school diploma by June 2013. He failed the second part of his math class when he changed classes and will receive only partial credit. This should not affect his projected graduation. He is currently earning Ds and Cs in the rest of his classes.

Corey

I have watched Corey participate in class and he stands out among the other students. He appears to enjoy participating in class rather than sit on the side and just bide time until the period is over, as some students do. For as much time as he misses from school, he can enter into a class so seamlessly, like he’s never been gone, like he’s heard every part of the lesson. And he participates in a way that shows a genuine interest in dialogue and learning. One-on-one, in the office, Corey appears more uncomfortable. He

looks directly into the camera several times before he can ignore it and really focus on the questions. Giving answers about himself is a bit more difficult than giving answers in class.

Corey has always lived with his mother and his brothers and sisters. At different times, other relatives have lived with them, but his nuclear family, aside from his father, has always lived together. Corey has had very limited contact with his father. The family has moved a few times, but always stayed in Chicago and mostly on the westside.

Corey started high school at Crane High School, but he said that it was too rough. He stated that there was "a lot was going on there." In the spring of 2008, at the end of Corey's freshmen year, a 15 year old was shot while leaving school at the end of the day. When police arrived, there were upwards of 50 young people fighting on school grounds. Tension between rival gangs was believed to be the cause. New reports indicate a culture of violence in and around the school that occurred almost on a daily basis.

Corey attended Crane his freshman and sophomore year, failing all but two classes his sophomore year. But because of the fighting, he transferred to Steinmetz for his junior year, hoping it would be more focused on learning and he earned quite a few credits with Cs and Ds. After only one year, Corey decided to leave Steinmetz. He said that he didn't like the school because the staff hassled students. His attendance was poor during this time because he didn't want to deal with the hallway staff. The teachers were 'ok,' but the security was a problem that became too much for Corey to bear every day.

He was out of school for much of the 2011-2012 school year. He said he wasn't doing much of anything. For a short period of time, he was on the street selling drugs, but "it wasn't his thing." In the fall, he tried to enroll in Truman Middle College, also a

dropout retrieval school, but attended only one day. He explained that it was too far to travel from the westside and he “didn’t have no support from nobody.” When I asked him what that meant he said, “My mama, she say all this stuff, but when it is was time to go to school and that she wouldn’t, she didn’t give transportation or money or nothing like that.”

Corey’s cousin was attending ACEC at the time and told him about it. Corey began classes at ACEC in May of 2012, during a short-semester. When Corey took the universal screening test when he entered, he scores indicated 11th and 12th grade levels in reading and math. Over 75% of students enter ACEC at a 6th, 7th, or 8th grade level. Even though he scored at a high academic level, he only earned credit in one of two classes his first semester because of poor attendance.

Despite these attendance issues, he was recommended by a teacher for the program preparing students for Wright College, a City College of Chicago. He was assigned a set of morning classes to prepare him for the entrance exam and college classes to begin in January. He has over 25 absences this semester, about 50% attendance, and is not passing any of his classes.

I have talked to him throughout the semester about why he misses class. He was living with his mother and said that there were a lot of people living in one apartment. It was hard for him to get sleep because of people going in and out of the rooms all night long. He would fall asleep and not wake up for school. He struggles with money for transportation, although I have told him about the bus card program ACEC has which provides transportation cards to students that can’t afford to get to and from school. Corey has never taken advantage of this program.

I asked him what he likes about ACEC. He said we have “a different idea of a classroom. It’s not just a whole bunch of problems and throwing the work out there and expecting students to do it.” This is what his old schools were like. He likes ACEC a lot better.

I asked him why he wants his high school diploma. When he was out of school before and after trying to go to Truman, he tried to get a job. He explained, “I see that without a high school diploma that was real hard.” And he feels like time is running out. He is 20 years old and many people he knows already have their high school diploma. He wants to get it done. “I’m going to make it. I know I’m going to make it. As long as I’m on top of getting here, that’s the hardest part.” When I asked him what his plan was for getting to school, he said that he didn’t really have a plan, but he hoped it worked out.

At this time in the semester Corey is in serious danger of not passing any classes and this would delay his graduation in June. He has not been at school for over a week. When he shows up, I pull him to the side and ask him about his absences. Corey informs me today that he has had to be home with his brother, to take him to the hospital. His brother had some seizures and the doctors don't know why. "I got a car," he states. "So it's easier to get back and forth." I have no idea how he got a car or if he has a license but I know that I don't want to know the answers to those questions. The doctors think his brother is having seizures because of heavy drug use. He has told me during other conversations that "his people have a lot of problems" and he needs to "be there for them." He gives up coming to school to help out his family and deal with this situation. At the time this paper is completed, Corey missed the last week and a half of school,

including final exams. He will not earn credit in any of his classes and therefore, is not on schedule to graduate in June.

Themes

Four young men present four unique and difficult journeys through schooling. Their stories help to answer the main questions of this study. What factors contribute to high school dropouts earning their high school diploma? Also, what factors inhibit dropouts from achieving this goal and what can school do to promote the factors that contribute to dropouts earning their diploma?

The boys, in many ways, are more alike than they are different. Rashawn, Jerome, and Nino have never known their fathers and Corey has known him only in a very limited way. Rashawn, Nino, and Corey have all been at multiple schools before coming to ACEC. All four boys have been out on the street selling drugs for some period of time. Finally, all of the boys consider themselves smart and have had above average scores compared to most students that attend ACEC.

All of the areas where the four students are very alike help to highlight the ways that they are different. These differences reveal two main themes as factors that led to Rashawn and Jerome being successful and earning their diplomas.

1. Both boys made personal connections at school as part of a turning point in their lives and in their motivation for school.
2. Both boys articulate acceptance of responsibility for their failures and their successes.

Personal Connections at School

Much of the research points to lack of personal connection at school as a reason that students, especially boys, dropout (VOYCE, 2008; Conchas 2012). The Consortium on School Research (2007), in examining why male students consistently and significantly have lower GPAs than girls, states that boys are often receiving less support from school staff. This disconnection leads to lower grades which can contribute to disengaging in school and dropping out. For the participants in this study, personal connections with school staff were a major factor in continuing to go to school and earn a diploma. Rashawn found two people, Mr. Potts and Mr. Ferguson, at the alternative program at Orr that wouldn't give up on him, even when he wasn't sure of himself. Finding these two adults help Rashawn with a "turning point" in his life from which he has never looked back.

For Jerome, his connection is made when he speaks to Mr. Alexander and Mr. Alexander promises him a college scholarship. From that point on, Mr. Alexander mentors Jerome through school. Like Rashawn, Jerome uses the words "turning point," and Mr. Alexander is essential to this perseverance toward his goal.

Nino and Corey do not speak about any specific staff members that have impacted their lives. Both boys admit at different times at school that they have had no one to help them, no one in their corner. All of the boys have worked with the same staff at ACEC, but Nino and Corey have not found that person with which to make a connection and help them focus on school. This lack of connection may contribute to their struggle of earning a diploma.

Schools can work to promote positive relationships between students and staff. In Rashawn's and Jerome's cases, a connection was made with a staff member that wasn't a teacher. While the teachers see the students the most, support staff appears to play just as important a role in a student's engagement in school. An adult at school believing in their success helped Rashawn and Jerome believe in themselves.

Personal Responsibility / Growth Mindset

The second major factor for Rashawn and Jerome earning their high school diploma is a sense of personal responsibility for successes and failures. This relates to the work of Carol Dweck (2006) and her ideas about mindsets. According to Dweck, a person with a growth mindset sees the possibility of learning, growing, and changing things. And those things are in the control of the learner. A person with a fixed mindset believes that one is either talented at certain things or one is not and developing a particular skill is out of own's control. I apply these terms to the participants, their stories, and their ability to succeed at school. From this perspective, the ability to succeed at school is now a skill that grows or is fixed, depending on the mindset. And therefore, is either in one's control or not. Rashawn and Jerome accept personal responsibility in their narratives. They both identify points where they were not making good choices, accept that, and know they are responsible for successes also. Rashawn knew his laziness would not lead to a successful path. By the time he arrived at ACEC, he knew that nothing would stop him because he got out of his own way. In the end, Rashawn saw himself as the obstacle and the solution.

Jerome knew that he was not on a good path when he was fighting every day in school. He knew that he didn't want to live the rest of his life on the streets, but he didn't

know what to do about it. His cousin gave him access to a way to change his life by telling him about ACEC. He also knows he's "on a mission right now... I just try my best to live life to the best way."

Nino does admit that he doesn't always make good choices. But in the same breath will blame it on the fact that he's young and doesn't have any guidance. Sometimes he looks to other people to be responsible for his success. He states that he needs "somebody to push me and motivate me." He also blames his failures on a lack of routine and stability. Nino puts heavy emphasis on not playing basketball at Morton leading to his bad attendance and grades. When I asked him why he didn't try out his sophomore year, he says that he was already doing other things. All of this blame takes the responsibility off of Nino for the success or failure of his own future. Dweck would say that Nino doesn't see his ability to succeed in school as in his control and that it is fixed until something else, something other than himself, changes.

Corey blames the problems at Steinmetz on the hallway staff. He blames not attending Truman Middle College on the school being too far. And he blames his mother for not helping out with transportation. But there is no mention about how he has contributed to his situation today. Like Nino, Corey might see succeeding at school as out of his control.

Schools can work with students to promote a growth mindset. Dweck has a website with curriculum working with students on how to recognize that abilities are not fixed, but changeable and in one's control. The curriculum focuses on rewarding students for effort and even struggle, not just the end product or grade. Teachers can emphasize what has been learned that a student didn't know before a lesson or unit, instead of just

the outcome of a quiz or test. Getting students to recognize the growth mindset will encourage personal responsibility for one's own educational success.

Grit Scores as a Factor

I chose the 12 Question Grit Scale Survey developed by Duckworth (2007) because I hoped it would reveal factors of success that contribute to high school dropouts earning their diploma. The participant completed the survey and answers were assigned values one through five. Five point responses corresponded to gritty behavior, persevering, and passion towards a goal. The values for each response were totaled and divided by 12 so that the end score was between one and five. A final score of five indicates that the responder is extremely gritty and a score of one shows that the participant doesn't have much grit at all.

Participant's Name	Grit Score
Rashawn	3.5
Jerome	4.2
Nino	3.0
Corey	4.5

According to Duckworth (2007), the students that are more successful, like Rashawn and Jerome, would have the highest grit scores. Across the complete scale, their scores are much closer to five, the grittiest score, than they are to a one. Rashawn's and Jerome's stories correspond to their high scores. Rashawn didn't let his grandmother's illness and failing a class keep him from earning his diploma. He did what he had to do to get it done. When he went to enroll in college, he didn't let an error on his financial

record which led to a delay in registering which led to classes being closed, keep him from taking two classes and getting started. He could have easily said he would wait until next semester, but he kept going in the face of adversity.

Jerome displays a similar commitment to his goal. He didn't let problems in his household, like no heat and sometimes no place to sleep, keep him from earning almost all As at school. He doesn't let the neighborhood problems deter him from getting back to college and focusing on his future.

Corey's score, then, doesn't match his struggle to reach his goal of a high school diploma. He is the least likely to actually get his diploma based on his attendance and current grades but he has the highest score. Duckworth's research shows that most people are extremely honest when completing the survey. Is Corey not being honest or is there some other explanation for his high grit score?

Corey might be extremely honest in his responses to the survey. Grit is defined as perseverance and passion. His passion, right now, might not be school. He has had to do a tremendous amount to survive his living situation. His basic needs: food, shelter, and safety, are in question almost every day. Taking care of his family requires his constant attention and in the case with getting his brother to the hospital, probably some creative problem-solving. Corey might be incredibly gritty when it comes to taking care of his family. He is just not as determined when it comes to school or it cannot be his first priority right now. I do not have enough information from my interviews with him to know the answers to these questions.

While some schools attempt to teach grit, it is not part of a standard curriculum. There are things that schools can do to encourage perseverance and problem-solving

obstacles. Paul Tough (2012) records examples of this by KIPP Schools in New York giving character report cards to highly successful chess programs in the Bronx. But if grit involves passion, how does a school teach a student to be passionate about school? This idea of having grit and being successful leads to many more questions for schools to consider.

CHAPTER FIVE: JUDGMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

These four young men have each had a unique, complicated journey through school. Millions of dropouts just like them are struggling with similar issues. The problems they face are messy and the answers to this study's questions are as well. My study focuses on how high school dropouts re-engage in the educational system and succeed or struggle to earn a diploma. The primary question is: what factors contribute to high school dropouts earning their high school diploma? The two secondary questions are: what factors inhibit dropouts from earning their diploma and how can schools promote the factors that lead to success?

Two main themes emerged from the stories of the four participants. First, the two students that are successful had positive personal relationships with staff members at school. These staff members supported their struggle at finishing high school and provided motivation to keep going. The two struggling students could not point to any such people at school that supported them in this way. Second, the two successful students articulate responsibility for failures and successes in their lives. They appear to believe that they have more control over things. This idea pushes them to find solutions and overcome obstacles. The two struggling students spoke more about blaming others for failures and lack of success.

Schools can help students by promoting these factors that appear to lead to successful students. Schools can focus on positive relationships between students and staff and mentors that help in school. Two staff members at one of Rashawn's schools went above and beyond the classroom to show Rashawn that they believed he could finish school and accomplish his goals. They found resources to pay for his transportation

to and from school and went to his house to pick him up when necessary. This connection with staff helped Rashawn commit to his education and earn his diploma.

Schools can help students develop a growth mindset and see problems as in their control to solve. Jerome could articulate mistakes that he made at previous schools. When he arrived at Austin Career, he worked with staff to solve problems. His hectic life outside of school has not changed since he was put out of his other high school, but he was better able to manage obstacles. Not only did Jerome take responsibility for his success, he didn't let anything stand in his way. Schools can work on encouraging grit so that students do not give up on their goals too easily.

More questions have also emerged from this study. How can schools ensure every student connects with a staff member? What is an effective way to change someone's mindset? How can one teach grit as it relates to school and the pursuit of one's own educational goals? How can schools help students be passionate about school?

The educational system must continue to find ways to re-engage dropouts in education. Failure, for many reasons, is not an option. This study exposes the struggles that these young men have faced in trying to get a high school education in this country. There is hope in these stories, as well as sadness. But in their struggle, they are not quitting. In their own way, they are committed to their survival and the survival of their families the best way they know how. Schools owe them the same.

CHAPTER SIX: AFTERWARD

While this project came to an end, the young men and their journeys have not. Corey attended ACEC in the Fall of 2012 and was enrolled in the dual enrollment prep class so that he could attend junior college classes and high school classes in Spring 2013. However, he stopped coming to school in November and I have not seen him since. No phone numbers that we have on record work. No members of his family have come to the school as sometimes happens and no students seem to know the name. I don't know where he is and if he finished high school.

Rashawn has attended classes at Chicago City College off and on. I have not heard from him in over a year. He has moved from down the street from the school. The last time I saw him there was a problem with money he owed the school for some books and he wasn't allowed to enroll. He seemed optimistic about straightening it out. He seemed to be plugging along as usual.

Nino came by the school in the Spring of 2015. The first thing I noticed was that he looked almost exactly the same, boyish. He told the Dean of Students that he had been in jail for a year and was ready to start a different life. He came to get an ID because he needed to get his social security card to start a job training program. Last that the Dean heard, Nino was working in a warehouse and living in an apartment with a friend.

I see Jerome a few times a month. He is living off and on in a house two blocks from ACEC. He has not finished his degree at Northeastern. A year ago he got picked up by police, accused by some other young men of using a gun to threaten them. Jerome said he didn't own a gun and he had an alibi. But the arrest and time in jail caused him to fail

his classes for that semester. Two professors gave him Incompletes instead of failures for the classes. He was placed on Academic Probation. He tried to make these up and take other classes. During this semester, he had to attend court and fight the charges. All charges were eventually dropped and he has no police record. By Spring of 2015, he had failed out of school. Now, he is on the block. This Fall he came to tell us that two more family members had been shot and killed and his brother was in jail. He has never held a job for any significant period of time. When I see him, I tell him to come by school to fill out job applications and he has yet to come in.

They are not easy stories to tell. They are not neat or happily ever after stories. They are the reality of the students that attend ACEC, a school that tries to give students a second chance at high school and another opportunity for them to follow their dreams.

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APPENDIX A

12- Item Grit Scale

Directions for taking the Grit Scale: Please respond to the following 12 items. Be honest – there are no right or wrong answers!

1. I have overcome setbacks to conquer an important challenge.

- Very much like me
- Mostly like me
- Somewhat like me
- Not much like me
- Not like me at all

2. New ideas and projects sometimes distract me from previous ones.*

- Very much like me
- Mostly like me
- Somewhat like me
- Not much like me
- Not like me at all

3. My interests change from year to year.*

- Very much like me
- Mostly like me
- Somewhat like me
- Not much like me
- Not like me at all

4. Setbacks don't discourage me.

- Very much like me
- Mostly like me
- Somewhat like me
- Not much like me
- Not like me at all

5. I have been obsessed with a certain idea or project for a short time but later lost interest.*

- Very much like me
- Mostly like me
- Somewhat like me
- Not much like me
- Not like me at all

6. I am a hard worker.

- Very much like me
- Mostly like me
- Somewhat like me
- Not much like me
- Not like me at all

7. I often set a goal but later choose to pursue a different one.*

- Very much like me
- Mostly like me
- Somewhat like me
- Not much like me
- Not like me at all

8. I have difficulty maintaining my focus on projects that take more than a few months to complete.*

- Very much like me
- Mostly like me
- Somewhat like me
- Not much like me
- Not like me at all

9. I finish whatever I begin.

- Very much like me
- Mostly like me
- Somewhat like me
- Not much like me
- Not like me at all

10. I have achieved a goal that took years of work.

- Very much like me
- Mostly like me
- Somewhat like me
- Not much like me
- Not like me at all

11. I become interested in new pursuits every few months.*

- Very much like me
- Mostly like me
- Somewhat like me
- Not much like me
- Not like me at all

12. I am diligent.

- Very much like me
- Mostly like me
- Somewhat like me
- Not much like me
- Not like me at all

Scoring:

1. For questions 1, 4, 6, 9, 10 and 12 assign the following points:

5 = Very much like me

4 = Mostly like me

3 = Somewhat like me

2 = Not much like me

1 = Not like me at all

2. For questions 2, 3, 5, 7, 8 and 11 assign the following points:

1 = Very much like me

2 = Mostly like me

3 = Somewhat like me

4 = Not much like me

5 = Not like me at all

Add up all the points and divide by 12. The maximum score on this scale is 5 (extremely gritty), and the lowest score on this scale is 1 (not at all gritty).

Duckworth, A. L., Peterson, C., Matthews, M. D., & Kelly, D. R. (2007). Grit:

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APPENDIX B

Interview Questions for Factors for Successful Re-Engagement of Drop-Outs

By Anne Gottlieb

1. Tell me about where you went to high school and your experience there.
2. Why did you drop-out of high school? What were the circumstances?
3. How long were you out of school?
4. Why did you decide to come to Austin Career Education Center?
5. Talk about what you liked and didn't like about coming to school here.
6. What was going on outside of school while you were attending ACEC?
7. Did you ever feel like giving up at ACEC? What stopped you?
8. When did you know what you were going to do after high school?
9. Why do you think that you made it graduation the second time around?
10. What are doing now?
11. What are your future plans?
12. How did you decide what to do?
13. What kind of obstacles will you have before you reach your goal?
14. How will you handle them?
15. Is there anything else that you want to tell me or I should know?