Summer 8-2022

Leadership Practices in Urban High Schools that Decrease Dropout Rates

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LEADERSHIP PRACTICES IN URBAN HIGH SCHOOLS

THAT DECREASE DROPOUT RATES

by

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A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION
LOUISIANA TECH UNIVERSITY

August 2022

LOUISIANA TECH UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE SCHOOL

May 31, 2022
Date of dissertation defense

We hereby recommend that the dissertation prepared by

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entitled **Leadership Practices in Urban High Schools that Decrease Dropout Rates**

be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education, Educational Leadership Concentration

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the practices urban school leaders implement in daily school operations, how they form relationships with their students, and how these practices and relationships affect student initiative to engage in the high school experience and earn a diploma. High school students living in urban communities are often challenged by academic and societal deficits that separate them from their suburban counterparts. Students in these circumstances are more apt to drop out of high school. Leadership practices executed by urban school leaders to connect with their students are instrumental in motivating students to persist toward graduation.

This research was conducted as a qualitative phenomenological study of urban high school leaders; it was conducted under the scope of Ryan and Deci's Motivation Theory and Burns' Transformational Leadership Theory. Two urban high school leaders from a school district in a southern state participated in the study. Both leaders were interviewed and elaborated upon the strategies, instructional planning, and use of resources in daily school operations. Data from participants' interviews were collected, transcribed, and analyzed to unveil an emergence of responses, patterns and themes. Coding procedures addressed the research questions and reinforced the theoretical framework for the study. The findings yielded emerging themes reflective of the leaders' practices including student motivation, relationships, data, guidance and assessments,

teacher support and feedback, college and career preparation, parental involvement, and community partnerships. The findings of the study revealed that the urban high school leaders' practices are effective in decreasing student dropout rates.

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated in loving memory of my maternal grandparents, Willie James and Lucile Lewis Matthews. Life's circumstances prevented you from completing your education. In turn, throughout my childhood you emphasized that I get mine. Many afternoons were spent at the kitchen table. As I sat doing my homework, I recall fondly your telling me, "Get that lesson." This writing has been the ultimate lesson. Mama and Daddy, I hope I have made you proud.

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Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.
Hebrews 11:1 KJV

This writing has been a test in patience, a test of personal growth, and a test in balancing responsibilities. Many people have helped me travail this path toward a new level of academic excellence, and I wish to extend my deepest gratitude. Foremost, I am forever thankful to my Heavenly Father, who led me on this journey, and reminded me that His Grace is sufficient. I am grateful to my committee chair, Dr. Bryan L. McCoy, whose wisdom made me look deeper. Thank you for pushing me farther than I thought I could go and consistently reminding me to "tell the story."

I thank my committee members, Drs. Joanne Hood and Lynne Stratton, for their thoughtful insight and direction. I will always cherish my former committee chair, Dr. Dawn S. Basinger (*retired*), who helped me stay focused on the "light at the end of the tunnel" on the days I thought it was broken. I am grateful to my advisor, Dr. Richard Shrubb, for his guidance and perspective. Thank you for helping me to shorten my title!

I am grateful to my friends and colleagues who completed this journey before me and were gracious enough to share their input. Drs. Frances Swayzer Conley, Latonyia O. London, Matthew and Carla Mitchell, Chanell Dove Cummings, Devonye Brown, Candice D. Webert, and Toya Tucker Graham: thank you for your support. I express profound gratitude to my psychologist, Dr. S. Webb Sentell. Thank you for your guidance, input, and stabilizing influence and for converting some our sessions into

writing discussions! Thank you to my brother in spirit and pastor, the Rev. Dr. Robby D. Williams. Your profound messages have sustained me and always inspire me to become a better version of myself.

My family and friends have been invaluable in supporting me; I love you dearly. To my husband, Ricky D. York, Sr., I thank you for your unwavering strength and love throughout this process. You always have my back; I love you now and always. My father, Murad Rahman Sr., has a drive and pursuit of knowledge and has cheered me on continually. Thank you, Daddy. Emma L. Matthews has been a lifelong model of meekness and grace and has supported me in ways that forever fill my heart with gratitude. I love you Mommy; thank you.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background

At-risk students are defined as students who are in danger of not graduating from high school (Schargel et al., 2007). This danger exists because students meet one or more criteria: (1) a history, either immediate or long-established, of underperformance in reading and or math, often resulting in low grade point averages, being at least one grade level below their peers; (2) an established pattern of school absenteeism/truancy; (3) a pattern of disciplinary issues and conflict with teachers and administration; (4) a lack of engagement in the educational process and a general disconnect from the importance of completing school; (5) students living in impoverished conditions and classified as lower socioeconomic status, which qualifies them for free or reduced lunch; and (6) typically only one parent living in the home. These criteria can be further compounded by teen pregnancy or involvement in criminal activity, which can generate a cycle of these problems. For some students, they descend from multiple generations of these adverse behaviors; this set of circumstances reinforces the label of at-risk and only compounds the burden of removing it. Numerous initiatives have been implemented to address the needs of at-risk students (Louisiana School-to-Prison Reform Coalition, 2009). There is limited research regarding the strategies urban high school leaders in southern municipalities use to effectively decrease dropout rates and incentivize students to

graduate high school (Evans-Brown, 2015; Piña, 2020). The purpose of this study is to examine the role school leaders play in keeping students determined to engage and motivating them to earn diplomas.

The paths of students who have difficulty remaining on course academically are often fraught with challenges that typically overshadow the learning experience. These challenges are an accumulation of prior classroom events, a derivation of external influences, or a combination of both (Ormrod, 2008). Such adversities compound the abilities of these students to fully and consistently participate in instruction and learning, often leading to disengagement and ultimate self-removal from the learning environment (Burrus & Roberts, 2012; Evans-Brown, 2015).

While many adverse living conditions are outside the control of school leaders, it is possible for school site leadership to adopt leadership practices that create learning environments that will help at-risk students be resilient. These leadership practices can decrease school dropout rates and motivate students to earn high school diplomas (Schargel et al., 2007).

The effects of students dropping out of high school are widespread. When a student drops out of school, it not only impacts the student personally, but this event also infiltrates the school system and community with effects that can last for years (Burrus & Roberts, 2012; Dianda, 2008; Levin & Rouse, 2012). These effects include, but are not limited to unemployment, underemployment—typically in minimum wage jobs, reliance on public assistance, criminal activity and incarceration, and increased physical and mental health issues (Herbert, 2017).

Educators in school districts across the United States have proposed and implemented numerous initiatives in ongoing efforts targeting dropout prevention from the 1990s to the present; various school improvement models have been initiated to reach the at-risk student. Some of these programs include: (1) career academies, (2) early college high schools, (3) First Things First, (4) High Schools that Work, and (5) talent development high schools (Shannon & Bylsma, 2005). Initiatives implemented do not always reach every student, or they do not reach the student without guidance and encouragement from a school leader (Brown & McVee, 2012). In urban school settings, the school leader must craft and model standards for excellence that effectively motivate students to engage and excel. The current study seeks to gain insight on: (1) the leadership practices urban high school leaders utilize to form relationships with students and promote student engagement and (2) how these practices instill self-determination in their students, motivating them to graduate high school.

The Role of the School Leader

The specific role and duties of a school leader are detailed by individual school districts. However, the template job description remains the same. School leaders are charged with creating and implementing visions of scholastic achievement for their campuses. School leaders bear the responsibility of conveying these visions to their stakeholders, those individuals who have vested interest in the successes of schools. Stakeholders often include students, teachers and staff, parents, school district leaders, and business and community partners. It is the responsibility of school leaders to charge and inspire teachers to impart rigorous instruction that meets the academic needs of students. Leaders must cultivate school environments that are welcoming, promote

learning and engagement, and make students and staff feel safe (Schargel et al., 2007). School leaders must establish standards of academic excellence in accordance with district and state guidelines and promote a positive climate and culture that challenges students to strive for their greatest potential while assuring these students feel an integral part of the school community (Evans-Brown, 2015; Piña, 2020; Wallace Foundation, 2013).

The school leader is at the center of school operations, bearing the responsibility for the success or failure of a school (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2013; Piña, 2020). The school leader is often viewed as an agent of change (Brown, 2012). While this is a challenge for any leader when the school environment is ideal with high-performing students, content-and-standard-aligned instruction, and positive input and support from stakeholders, the challenge rises when the school leader is faced with struggling or under-performing students, less than stellar standardized test scores, or limited input from parents. This plight is common in urban schools (Curwin, 2010; Milner, 2012).

Students in urban schools often face difficulties academically and socioeconomically that statistically categorize them as at risk for dropping out. This risk increases as students get older. Hence, as students in urban high schools have lower levels of motivation and become decreasingly engaged in the instructional and learning process, they are more subject to drop out of high school (Piña, 2020). School leaders in these environments face greater obstacles of cultivating environments that instill academic excellence. These leaders must identify the reasons for student dropout and seek and implement research-based strategies of prevention (Booker, 2011; Kuhns, 2014; Shannon & Bylsma, 2005).

The onus for the success or failure of a school rests in the hands of school leaders. This is a daunting task when academic circumstances and school resources are ideal. School leaders in urban school settings face acute challenges. The needs of at-risk students can be complex and require consistent attention. These students must be validated in the pursuit of learning. Effective school leaders shape the holistic learning environments that are focused upon excellence and meet the scholastic and individual needs of learners.

Significance of the Problem

This study is significant because high school students living in urban communities are often challenged by academic and societal deficits that separate them from their suburban counterparts. Further, educators in urban schools bear the responsibility of preparing and motivating students to learn, which is made more difficult by the issues these students face (Burrus & Roberts, 2012). Students in these circumstances are more apt to drop out of high school before graduation (Kuhns, 2014; Piña, 2020). Leadership practices executed by urban school leaders to connect with their students are a key component in motivating them to persist toward graduation (Curwin, 2010; Schargel et al., 2007). The current study sought to examine how urban school leaders form relationships with their students and promote student engagement. The study discussed how these leadership practices instill self-determination in students and motivate them to graduate high school. The study discussed the impact of self-determination and its connective elements of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and amotivation upon students' desires to learn. This research sought to examine how urban school leaders work to transition students from levels of amotivation toward motivation and how this affected

the initiative to engage in learning and persevere until graduating from high school. The school leaders in the study also discussed the role of student self-efficacy and how it functions in generating student motivation and engagement. Previous studies have shown that students leave high school before graduation because they do not feel motivated to learn or engage in instruction (Burrus & Roberts, 2012; Dianda, 2008; Levin & Rouse, 2012). This lack of motivation may be caused by multiple factors, occurring within the school setting or within the home or local community. However, the previous studies examine the reasons for student dropout after dropout has occurred. The current study seeks to examine the strategies urban school leaders implement to encourage students to persist in the high school experience until they earn diplomas.

Many urban students meet the criterion of a student at-risk based on socioeconomic status. This status is often defined by falling within a certain economic threshold and/or having only one parent living in the home (Bulger & Watson, 2006). The American Psychological Association (2019) defines socioeconomic status accordingly:

> Socioeconomic status (SES) encompasses not just income but also educational attainment, financial security, and subjective perceptions of social status and social class. Socioeconomic status can encompass quality of life attributes as well as the opportunities and privileges afforded to people within society. Poverty, specifically, is not a single factor but rather is characterized by multiple physical and psychosocial stressors. Further, SES is a consistent and reliable predictor of a vast array of outcomes across the life span, including physical and psychological

> health. Thus, SES is relevant to all realms of behavioral and social science, including research, practice, education, and advocacy. (p. 1)

The Association describes how the relationship among education, race and ethnicity and socioeconomic status is intricately intertwined. Race and ethnicity in terms of stratification often determine a person's socioeconomic status (American Psychological Association, 2019). African American and Latino students are disproportionately impacted by poverty. In the United States, 39% of African American children and adolescents and 33% of Latino children and adolescents are living in poverty, which is more than double the 14% poverty rate for non-Latino, White, and Asian children and adolescents (National Kids Count, 2014). Children from lower socio-economic status (SES) households who have been exposed to adversity are more likely to have decreased educational success (Sheridan & McLaughlin, 2016).

The effects of dropping out are not contained within the academic setting; rather, they permeate numerous areas of the student's life and society as a whole. Students who do not complete high school lack critical skills, which hinders their employability. On average, high school dropouts earn $9,245 less annually than students who graduate high school (National Dropout Prevention Center, 2020). Over a lifetime, the earnings difference totals $200,000; between dropouts and college graduates, the difference is five times greater at $1 million (Herbert, 2017). High school dropouts are also three times more likely to be unemployed than college graduates (Burrus & Roberts, 2012). Each group of 18-year-olds who fails to graduate forfeits $156 billion in lifetime earnings and costs the nation $58 billion in lost income tax revenue. This problem not only impacts local, state, and national unemployment rates, but also it systematically adds to the cycle

of poverty. The inability to provide self-sustenance often leads to homelessness, which typically cycles back to the pattern of substance abuse, human trafficking, and a life of criminality. Criminal activity brings with it a slight to the communities and the individuals involved and makes it difficult for city leaders to attract businesses. When businesses do not choose to locate in a particular community, the community suffers an economic drain because there are no jobs to sustain it. An inability to secure employment continues the cycles of unemployment and poverty. It is estimated that each high school dropout who turns to drugs or crime costs the United States anywhere from $1.7 million to $2.3 million over his or her lifespan (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Literacy, the ability to read and write, forms the basis for attaining an education. Students with low literacy skills often underperform in class and on standardized assessments. This creates a pattern of frustration and amotivation, which often leads to dropout. Low literacy costs American businesses and taxpayers more than $225 billion annually through lost wages, unemployment, welfare and other government assistance (Literacy Source, 2018).

Student Discipline and Zero Tolerance

The difficulty of a high school's dropout ability to seek and maintain consistent employment is indeed an economic deficit upon society. Yet, this is an issue that occurs post dropout. The path toward dropout often begins early in the academic process and is replete with gaps and detours that increase the likelihood of occurrence. One such detour that occurs with frequency is that of student discipline. The school-to-prison pipeline profiles a direct correlation between harsh discipline policies in schools as they are applied to minorities and students with disabilities, and how the discipline impacts student engagement and performance in the classroom. This ideology operates on the

premise of zero tolerance, a concept of discipline that implements stringent consequences for major and minor disciplinary infractions and removes students from the school environment through suspension and expulsion. Zero tolerance goes further by introducing these students to law enforcement at a young age. In response to a rise in school shootings in the 1990s, the zero tolerance policy was created to enforce a zero tolerance of students who brought guns or explosives or attempted to commit arson on school campuses (Wilson, 2014). Students who violated this policy were arrested, expelled, and tried in the courts. At the same time, many schools introduced school resource officers (SROs) to their campuses. These officers serve as law enforcement officers with their local police or sheriff departments; they provide an additional measure of security and discipline. SROs work in their official capacities and are obliged to remove or arrest students when they violate the law. However, some school administrators have abdicated authority and look to SROs to discipline students for infractions of school rules. In doing so, students are harshly disciplined and or arrested, creating an early introduction to the criminal justice system. It is this pattern of discipline that creates a criminalization of student misbehavior; student instruction often becomes the sacrifice in the effort to promote a safe and secure school climate. Minorities and students with disabilities—primarily male—have become the target of this pipeline. Minority students tend to be suspended or expelled 3.5 times more often than White students, even when they have committed the same infractions. Students with disabilities, while comprising 8.6% of the school population, make up 32% of youth in juvenile detention centers. Minority students are also more likely to be suspended multiple times. According to the Louisiana Department of Education, more than 74,000 children received

in-school suspension in school year 2018-2019, an average of 9.9% of the total population. More than 58,000 students, or 7.8% of the population, received out-of-school suspensions (Louisiana Department of Education, 2014). A 2014 Department of Justice report, as explained by Talamo (2016), indicates that time spent outside of the classroom adds up to higher likelihoods of students further acting out, dropping out, and running into trouble with the juvenile justice system. Students who are not in the classroom cannot engage in instruction and learn valuable skills. The constant disruption of learning further alienates students, creates a greater divide between them and school, and ultimately fosters the decision to drop out of school. Ironically, the very policies that schools adopted to manage behavior and increase achievement are fostering failure and feeding the school-to-prison pipeline (Christie et al., 2005).

Research Purpose

The purpose of this study is to investigate the practices urban school leaders implement in daily school operations, how they form relationships with their students, and how these practices and relationships affect the students' initiatives to engage in the high school experience and earn a diploma.

Research Questions

The following research questions were developed to guide this inquiry:

Research Question #1: What leadership practices do school leaders utilize to form relationships with students and motivate them to graduate high school?

Research Question #2: How do these practices influence student self-determination and motivate students to graduate high school?

Methodology

This research was designed as a qualitative phenomenological study. This method was chosen to gain perspective of issues from investigating them in their own specific contexts and the meaning that individuals bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). School leaders chosen to participate in the study served in a southern school district. The leaders considered for this research were selected because of their positions and the student populations they serve.

A standardized 14-question open-ended interview was conducted with the participants. Participants were asked identical questions and provided open-ended answers. This open-endedness allowed the participants to contribute as much detailed information as they desired, and it also allowed the researcher to ask probing questions as a means of follow-up (Gall et al., 2003).

The protocol of using scripted interview questions was used to ensure reliability. Manual verbatim transcription was used to transcribe the school leader interviews. This method was used to record participants' responses as directly quoted and capture the full context of each interview. Intelligent verbatim transcription was applied to clarify responses and remove colloquialisms. Participant interviews were transcribed and analyzed through a series of coding processes; these processes were assembled to unveil an emergence of responses, patterns, and themes. Coding procedures addressed the research questions and reinforced the theoretical framework for the study. Interview transcripts were coded using First Cycle coding processes. The data collected and analyzed in the First Cycle prompted further coding during the Second Cycle (Saldaña, 2009). This cycle presented patterns and themes that provided more in-depth insight into

the mindsets of the participants. Pattern Coding identified emergent themes, groups, and closely related patterns, which underlie the data in the research (Saldaña, 2009).

Theoretical Framework

The research was examined through the lenses of Ryan and Deci's Motivation Theory and Burns' Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Motivation is an incentive or inducement to act (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Students given an increased level of motivation and belief in their abilities will be encouraged to remain in school and earn a high school diploma. School leadership has a significant role because of the personal competencies—the actions, behaviors, and dispositions—a leader can bring to the position, enabling him/her to use strategic practices to transform the learning environment and bring forth positive change (Hitt & Tucker, 2016). These leaders recognize that student growth results from a balance between high expectations and appropriate support; they insist on high-quality learning experiences for all students, regardless of their backgrounds (Meyers & Hitt, 2017). These leaders also recognize that in order to most effectively connect with and reach these students, they must implement sometimes nontraditional methods to invigorate students' self-determination and motivate them to graduate from high school (Anderson & Anderson, 2010; Bolman & Deal, 2010).

Limitations

Because this is a qualitative study, neither cause and effect nor correlation can be claimed for this research. Neither can external validity be claimed for this study.

However, readers of this research may make naturalistic generalizations by comparing this study in its context to contexts with which they are familiar.

Delimitations

The research is limited to urban high schools in a southern state. Responses given may not be reflective of high schools in similar circumstances. The research is limited to the practices of urban high school leaders. The study did not include district leaders, teacher leaders, professional school counselors or students by grade level.

Definition of Terms

American College Test (ACT): An entrance exam used by most colleges and universities to make admissions decisions. This exam measures a high school student's readiness for college.

At-risk student: An at-risk student is one who meets certain criteria that put him or her in danger of not completing high school. These criteria typically include low school attendance, poor academic performance, and lower socioeconomic status (Moore, 2006).

Dropout: A dropout is a student who, generally after an extended period of sporadic school attendance, feels that there is little value in pursuing an education and voluntarily withdraws from the academic experience (Burrus & Roberts, 2012).

Engagement: Engagement involves actively showing an interest in classes and instruction, participating in the learning process, and performing with enthusiasm because a value is placed upon success (Great Schools Partnership, 2016).

Motivation: Motivation may be seen as what influences one to pursue an action or make a decision to act in a particular way. There are three types of motivation:

(a) *Amotivation*: Students are not compelled to act at all; no meaning is associated with actions and outcomes**.**

(b) *Intrinsic*: Coming from within oneself; an inherent desire to succeed or achieve.

(c) *Extrinsic*: Being stimulated by external factors; a desire to succeed as a means to an end. (Ryan & Deci, 2000, pp. 56-61)

School climate: School climate encompasses the norms, values, and beliefs embodied by students, teachers, and administrators that promote an atmosphere conducive to learning. The focus is on the physical environment, the emotional needs of students, and the academic tools and services required to provide quality instruction (National School Climate Center, 2021).

School culture: School culture embodies beliefs, perceptions, and relationships held by stakeholders about a school beyond its physical structure and safety. It is the undertone of the school, establishing expectations for learning and student achievement (Kane et al., 2016).

School leader: An individual employed by a local education agency who is charged with shaping a vision of academic success for students; creating a safe climate; fostering a culture of shared leadership; and managing people, processes, and data to promote school improvement (Wallace Foundation, 2013).

Self-determination: Individuals naturally and actively orient themselves toward growth and self-organization (Legault, 2017).

Socioeconomic status (SES): A person's income, educational attainment, financial security, and subjective perceptions of social status and social class (American Psychological Association, 2018).

Title I: Of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESEA) provides financial assistance to local educational agencies for children from low-income families to help ensure that all children meet challenging state academic standards (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019).

Urban school: A school located in a metropolitan area that serves students of diverse ethnicities, varied socioeconomic status, and multiple levels of academic achievement (Milner, 2012; Welsh & Swain, 2020).

Summary

Premature withdrawal from high school is a pervasive issue that affects not only the student but also society as a whole. Students face factors that hinder their abilities to complete high school. These factors may be further compounded by a lack of motivation and determination to fulfill academic requirements. School leaders who are committed to student success can make positive impacts on these students' determination to focus, engage and graduate. This qualitative study examined the effects of Ryan and Deci's Motivation Theory, Burns' Transformational Leadership Theory, and the influence of school leadership on urban high school students, examining how school leaders motivate them to remain in school until graduation.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study was to investigate the practices urban school leaders implement in daily school operations, how they form relationships with their students, and how these practices and relationships affect the students' initiatives to engage in the high school experience and earn diplomas.

In urban school settings, students who consider not completing high school often have been encumbered by difficult life events for extended periods. The stress of these events, coupled with the rigor of maintaining academic responsibilities, becomes too much to handle. When students reach this point, they lose incentive and capacity to engage in classroom instruction (Ormrod, 2008). Responsive school leaders recognize the struggle these students endure and seek to support them. These leaders are cognizant that they may endure additional challenges in reaching these students. The strategies school leaders in urban schools utilize do not always conform to the traditional standards of school leadership (Brown & McVee, 2012). This occurs because urban school leaders recognize that the circumstances for students at risk of dropping out have gone beyond traditional interventions. Effective urban school leaders recognize that, to transform academically endangered students, they must become transformational in their methodologies. Through the theoretical framework, the current study sought to assess

how transformational leadership practices affect students' motivations to persist and graduate from high school.

Theoretical Framework: Transformational Leadership Theory and Motivation Theory

Leithwood and Riehl (2003) describe school leadership as two sides of a coin. "Scratch the surface of an excellent school and you will find an excellent leader. Conversely, look into a failing school and you will find weak leadership" (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003, p. 1). According to research, leadership has a significant effect on student learning, second only to the effects of the quality of curriculum and teachers' instruction (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Schargel et al. (2007) state that excellent leaders are those who firmly believe that *all* children can succeed, schools can effectively meet the needs of nontraditional learners, and educational communities do not give up on their at-risk students.

School leaders in pursuit of excellence must embody principles and execute practices that go beyond established guidelines and seek to reach all learners in ways that they are motivated to achieve the goal of graduating from high school. Excellent leaders must transform in their leadership styles most effectively the needs of their students, particularly those at risk (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2013). The framework for this study is transformational leadership and motivation, and the roles they have in re-directing students at risk of dropping out to persist in learning until they earn high school diplomas. Transformational leadership practices by urban high school leaders serve to influence students' at-risk motivation to graduate from high school.

Burns (1978) introduced the concept of focusing on relationships between political leaders and their followers. Burns would develop his research into the theory, transforming leadership. Burns changed the direction and conversation in leadership studies from leaders who possess a certain set of political and character traits to the consideration of political leadership as the opportunity to transform. He also transformed the view of leadership by insisting upon the moral dimensions of great leadership (Harrison, 2011). In 1985, Bernard M. Bass further extended Burns' research and examined the psychological mechanisms that support leadership styles. Burns' theory would later be referred to by Bass as transformational leadership. Bass and Ronald E. Riggio continued research into this theory, examining how it is applied in school settings (Bass & Riggio, 2006). At its essence, transformational leadership is a leadership style that creates valuable and positive change in the followers with the end goal of developing followers into leaders (Mora, 2013). According to Bass and Riggio (2006), "Leadership must address the follower's sense of self-worth to engage the follower in true commitment and involvement in the effort at hand" (p. 4). Transformational leadership embodies four characteristics: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Idealized influence occurs when transformational leaders behave in ways that allow them to serve as role models for their followers. The leaders are admired, respected, and trusted. Followers identify with the leaders and want to emulate them; leaders are endowed by their followers as having extraordinary capabilities, persistence, and determination. These leaders espouse inspirational motivation when they behave in ways that motivate and inspire those around them by providing meaning and challenge to their followers' work (Reza, 2019). Team

spirit is aroused; enthusiasm and optimism are displayed. In the third characteristic, intellectual stimulation, transformational leaders stimulate their followers' efforts to be innovative and creative by questioning assumptions, reframing problems, and approaching old situations in new ways. Individualized consideration takes place when transformational leaders pay attention to each individual follower's needs for achievement and growth by acting as a coach or mentor (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Urban schools often strive to educate students with fewer resources, limited staff or under-certified teachers, and less parental support. Urban school leaders seek to function and serve in capacities that most effectively meets the needs of their students (Kimball & Sirotnik, 2000). To enact a vision of a learning climate that promotes rigorous instruction and engagement, transformational school leaders cannot and do not always submit to the traditional norms of school operations. The effective urban school leader must transform established leadership styles to best address the needs of learners. Such a leadership style must meet students where they are and guide them toward the desired vision and goal of academic excellence. Transformational leaders encourage risk taking as an accepted part of the organizational culture. Transformational leaders are innovative thinkers that plan with the end in mind, predict unintended consequences of decision-making, and empower employees to gain relevant experiences that are both aligned to their personal goals and the overarching goals of the organization (Bolman & Deal, 2010). Risk taking and out of the box thinking are encouraged as a means to break continued cycles of flat lined results. Transformational leaders attract various talents to the organization that will add a variety of perspective and character to the think tank. Innovative people and fresh ideas will enhance the opportunity for continuous

collaboration and innovation to emerge from the collective knowledge of the organization (Anderson & Anderson, 2010).

Schargel et al. (2007) defined at-risk students accordingly because they are in danger of not graduating from high school. This danger arises because, whether singularly or in tandem, circumstances have impacted these students in such a way that they can no longer associate the value of a high school diploma with the effort required to earn it. These circumstances, coupled with a perception that they do not belong, no one cares about them, or their efforts do not matter, detour students from the desired path of graduation to the cratered road of dropping out (National Research Council, 2004). Whether a student chooses to deviate toward a path that seldom has positive outcomes or persevere toward graduation may be determined by the guidance and support students receive (Belfield & Levin, 2007). It is at this critical juncture that the transformational leader makes a difference. The school leader, in serving students at risk of dropping out, may employ sometimes unconventional measures to make a connection. In the effort to reach the students and help them change course, the leader must develop a clear understanding of the students' mindsets in order to redirect their thinking. To do this, school leaders must do what is considered one of the most vital elements of transformational leadership: form relationships with their students (Center for Promise, 2015). In order to most effectively serve their students, school leaders must understand how students think, feel, and are compelled to act. These leaders must have in-depth understanding of what motivates their students (Bryk & Schneider, 2003).

Motivation, a theoretical construct, explains the initiation, direction, intensity, persistence, and quality of behavior, especially goal-directed behavior (Murphy &

Alexander, 2000). Motives are hypothetical constructs used to provide general reasons for why people do what they do. Motives typically refer to relatively general needs or desires that energize people to initiate purposeful action sequences. In the classroom context, the concept of student motivation is used to explain the degree to which students invest attention and effort in various pursuits. Student motivation is reflected in the motives and goals they strive to achieve and is rooted in their subjective experiences, especially those connected to their willingness to engage in learning activities and their reasons for doing so (Rumberger & Ah Lim, 2008; Wentzel & Brophy, 2014). Leaders who have consistent relationships with their students—involving dialogue, guidance, and ongoing support—create a lifeline that students at risk of dropping out need and seek to catapult them onto the desired graduation path (Anderson & Anderson, 2010). The student/leader relationship serves as the catalyst for reducing or eliminating amotivation and igniting new levels of motivation, whether intrinsic or extrinsic. The emotional investment of the school leader is often a vital link between students and classroom engagement (Schargel et al., 2007).

Factors Associated with Student Persistence

"Dropping out of high school is the last step in a long process through which students become disengaged from school. Dropping out has serious consequences…" (National Research Council, 2004, p. 25) Students who consider dropping out of high school do so because they encounter many difficulties. These difficulties—whether caused by issues in the classroom, home, or community—can seem so overwhelming that the goal of graduating becomes a lost cause. Students who choose to persist and ultimately graduate from high school do so because of multiple factors. Student

motivation is used to explain the degree to which students invest attention and effort in various endeavors (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Self-determination, a meta theory of motivation, is the intent of individuals to strive for a goal or pursue self-development despite any obstacles that may occur. Three constructs of motivation are formulated from self-determination. Intrinsic motivation is the focus upon being inherently stimulated to complete a task or engage in an event; the reward comes from within because the goal was met (Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 2005). Extrinsic motivation is achieved when there is an external incentive for meeting an outcome. Engaging in an activity is a means to an end (Ormrod, 2008).

When no incentive effectively stimulates a desire to engage, amotivation is the result. The polar opposite of motivation, amotivation is the complete lack of motivation. Amotivation arises when students have been overwhelmed by a series of events that have distracted them from the learning experience (Deci & Ryan, 1985). To become focused upon learning and instruction, students must resolve to participate. Student engagement takes place when students deliberately take part in classroom activities and appreciate the joy that results. Engagement occurs when students place value upon the instructional practices and strive to overcome any challenges that may arise (Kuh et al., 2007). Before students become motivated to engage in learning, they must believe that they are capable of learning. Self-efficacy is the belief in one's capabilities to comprehend and apply what is presented during the learning process; it is the foundation of motivation and student engagement (Bandura, 1994). These factors build upon one another; their culmination is student endurance to persist beyond obstacles and graduate from high school (Bryant, 2017).

Students at risk of not graduating may face numerous challenges in their pursuits of high school diplomas. These challenges can be so consequential that graduating from high school becomes an endangered vision. Students who overcome these obstacles do not do so without effort, grit, and focus. These students must establish plans of action and resolve to persevere in their pursuits until they graduate from high school. This resolve comes from within (National Research Council, 2004, p. 2). Through the current study the researcher sought to gather awareness of the function self-determination has in inspiring students at risk of dropping out to endure until they graduate and how school leaders influence students' endurance.

Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory (SDT) is a meta theory of human motivation, personality development, and well-being. It is based on the fundamental humanistic assumption that individuals naturally and actively orient themselves toward growth and self-organization; people strive to expand and understand themselves by integrating new experiences. They seek to cultivate their needs, desires, and interests and to establish connections with others and the outside world. This theory postulates a set of basic and universal psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness and their necessary roles in well-being and growth (Legault, 2017; Ryan, 2009). Autonomy refers to the need to feel free, independent, and self-directed. Competence refers to the need to feel effective. Relatedness is the need to connect closely with others. If these basic needs are unmet, there can result feelings of being controlled, fragmented, and alienated; self-motivation becomes diminished. Self-determination theory explains human motivation and behavior on the basis of individual differences in motivational orientations,

contextual influence on motivation, and interpersonal perceptions. Within SDT, learning is an active process that functions optimally when students' motivation is autonomous for engaging in learning activities when they feel that they are competent in the activities being performed and feel that what they are doing is related to their own goals or ambitions (Fernandez, 2011).

Motivation is often perceived as a single measurable experience, one that varies from very little motivation to act to a great deal of it. Yet, even brief reflection suggests that motivation is hardly a single experience. People have not only different amounts but also different kinds of motivation. That is, they vary not only in level of motivation (i.e., how much motivation), but also in the orientation of that motivation (i.e., what type of motivation). Orientation of motivation concerns the underlying attitudes and goals that give rise to action; that is, it concerns the why of actions (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Self-determination theory focuses on three main types of motivation: (1) intrinsic, (2) extrinsic, and (3) amotivation. This study explores the principles of each and how they impact students.

Intrinsic motivation serves as the first component in the motivation triad. Intrinsic motivation arises from a desire to learn a topic due to its inherent interest for self-fulfillment, enjoyment, and achieving a mastery of the subject. Students who are intrinsically motivated may eagerly engage in an activity because of a personal interest and internal pleasure (Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 2005). As such, intrinsically motivated students do not seek or expect rewards for completing tasks. Intrinsic motivation is associated with deeper understanding of concepts and perseverance with difficult tasks (Barkoukis et al., 2008). Although intrinsic motivation is clearly an

important type of motivation, most of the activities people do are not, strictly speaking, intrinsically motivated (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This is especially the case after early childhood as the freedom to be intrinsically motivated becomes increasingly curtailed by social demands and roles that require individuals to assume responsibility for non-intrinsically interesting tasks (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Ryan and Deci (2000) observe that, in schools, intrinsic motivation becomes weaker with each advancing grade. Whereas younger children typically bubble with enthusiasm and motivation, this tends to change as students enter middle school. Often encumbered with the physical, psychological, and emotional challenges of puberty, adolescence, peer pressure, and societal trends, students at this stage sometimes feel less motivation to academically excel and more motivation to gain acceptance from their peers and a need to fit in. By the time students reach high school, they have developed the capacities to think analytically, sometimes challenging established views and norms (Ford & Roby, 2014). At this point the need for motivation often increases. Yair (2000) posits that students' intrinsic motivation is highly correlated with the structure of instruction, suggesting that the more choices students have, the higher their enjoyment and interest in learning. Additional research supports this stance:

> Another strategy for increasing student motivation in the classroom is to give students more autonomy (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000; Pintrich, 2003; Turner & Patrick, 2004). Hidi and Harackiewicz (2000) argue that providing students with more control over their own learning can be a way of enhancing situational interest that may develop into more long-term and stable interest. Similarly, Turner and Patrick (2004) note that when teachers allow students to make decisions about their own work, students are more likely to be interested in the

> work. Students who are given choices tend to exhibit more persistence, goal-setting, and other self-regulated learning behaviors. (Lai, 2011, p. 2)

In the urban high school setting, there can be and often are more distractions that make becoming intrinsically motivated more challenging (National Research Council, 2004). The current study sought to gain insight on the role urban school leaders may have in accelerating students' motivation to graduate high school.

While intrinsic motivation examines the internal stimuli that prompt the desire to learn, its counterpart, extrinsic motivation—as its name infers—does the opposite. Extrinsic motivation, the second component of the motivation triad, is a desire to perform and succeed for the sake of accomplishing a specific result or outcome. Extrinsically motivated learners are motivated to perform a task as a means to an end, not as an end in itself (Ormrod, 2008). Extrinsic motivation to learn is characterized by the desire or intention to engage in a learning activity because it has positive outcomes or can help the learner to avoid negative outcomes; these outcomes have nothing to do with the learning activity itself or the topic of study (Artelt, 2005). Whereas students who possess intrinsic motivation look within themselves and draw upon internal stimulation to perform, students who are extrinsically motivated seek stimulation from people, things, or anticipated rewards or events (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Numerous studies have been conducted to examine the role motivation plays in student dropout, or more specifically, what factors give rise to amotivation—the absence of motivation—among high school students. One such study was conducted among 225 high school students in the Cape Fear Region of North Carolina. These students, ages 14-18, were administered the High School Amotivation Survey based upon a 7-point Likert

scale with responses ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Questions reflected students' interests in school, their value of school, and perceptions about learning and their abilities to perform. The survey results yielded that most of the participants strongly disagreed with the notion that school is not important (46%), studying is not valuable (37%), and there is no good reason to study (34%). However, the participants strongly agreed that they did not have what it takes to do well in school (32%), and they did not have the knowledge required to succeed in school (35%). An equal percentage of the participants (31%) were at the extremes of the scale when asked , *I realize I have not done my part to be motivated internally.* From this group, 25 students also participated in group focus interviews, answering questions about intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and their perceptions of (their) teachers' roles in stimulating their interest. The focus group members were presented with seven questions about their feelings for their favorite teachers, their feelings of motivation when in school, and their opinions of who should motivate them. The participants responded that they knew when teachers noticed how they were feeling and when teachers disregarded them. The students spoke of some teachers not treating their classes equitably; elective courses were given less regard than core courses. Some of the participants felt motivation should be shared between the teacher and student. Others referred to goals of college and wanting to make their parents proud (Ford & Roby, 2014). In a study conducted by Bridgeland et al. (2006), interviews were conducted with a focus group of high school dropouts. Interviews with the participants allowed for in-depth discussions and responses given addressed motivational characteristics. Respondents revealed primary reasons for dropping out included boredom at school, the need to work, disconnection from teachers, and low motivation. The

interviews further reflected that the participants actually had high value for school and regretted their decisions to drop out. Bridgeland et al. (2006) found that participants' reasons leaving school were multi-faceted, spanning across familial, academic, and societal lines (Moulton, 2011). The current study sought to determine how leadership practices influenced students' extrinsic motivation and how this affected the student initiative to graduate from high school.

Wherein motivation demonstrates an incentive to act, amotivation is the antithesis. Amotivation is the relative absence of motivation and serves as the third component of the motivation triad. It is defined as a state where individuals cannot perceive a relationship between behavior and that behavior's subsequent outcome (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Amotivated individuals cannot predict the consequences of their behaviors, nor can they see the motive behind them. There is a feeling of disintegration or detachment from action; individuals in this state invest little effort or energy in completing the action. They lack the intent to engage. Amotivated individuals perceive their behaviors as outside their control. Amotivation yields the experience of a lack of control and is often compared with learned helplessness (Abramson et al., 1978). Individuals in this state constantly doubt their actions and are likely to ultimately give up making an effort (Legault et al., 2006).

According to Ryan (1995), amotivation stems from not valuing an activity. When the task is not an integral component of a student's life or if it is not important to the student, amotivation may result. Even if extrinsic in origin, when an undertaking is valued, it is internalized and thus executed out of willingness and adopted with a sense of volition.

If there is no inner-acceptance of the activity, the student will not integrate the behavior as an expression of self. Thus, activities that are incongruent with self-expression are more difficult to maintain, and academic amotivation may be characteristic of school activities that are not expressions of one's self or of one's values. The act of devaluing school may lead to a serious motivational deficit. Academic amotivation is defined as a complex phenomenon. This is in part because the boundaries of it transcend the education domain, reaching into the broader context in which a student may be situated. Along this continuum, it has been documented that students who interpret their environments as conveying negative information about the value of school are more likely to develop motivational problems (Murdock, 1999).

Legault et al. (2006) conducted a three-tier study to examine amotivation in high school students. In tier one, the researchers sought to provide preliminary evidence of the four-factor structure of the academic amotivation construct by means of an exploratory factor analysis. Questionnaires from the Academic Amotivation Inventory were administered, and data were collected from 351 Canadian students ages 12-18. The self-reported data reflected initial findings that students were amotivated across the four components of amotivation: 1)ability beliefs; 2) effort beliefs; 3) characteristics of the task; 4) and value placed on the task. In tier two, researchers sought to reinforce the validity of the amotivation construct with respect to the four components of amotivation. Participants for this study were selected from a pool of students who displayed a moderate to high level of amotivation. These students were asked a single question, *How often do you find that you do not want to study or do school work?* Students who scored at mid-point or higher using a 5-point Likert scale were retained for the next segment of

the study. This pool of students completed the questionnaire that was used in the tier one study. As hypothesized, all four dimensions of academic amotivation were associated positively with detrimental behavioral and psychological constructs. In the final tier, the researchers examined how parents, teachers and friends of students might contribute to the amotivation found in the previous tiers. The researchers sought to determine whether interpersonal deficiencies play a role in amotivation. Participants were Canadian students ages 12-18, who completed a two-part questionnaire. The results revealed that, as hypothesized, correlations among all dimensions of social support are negatively associated with all types of amotivation and that amotivation subtypes are negatively related to adaptive academic outcomes and positively related to detrimental academic consequences. Students with low-self beliefs across all levels of amotivation had negative interpersonal relationships with parents, teachers and friends.

Brown-Wright et al. (2013) conducted a study, which examined the association among home-school dissonance, amotivation, and classroom disruptive behavior among 309 high school juniors and seniors at two urban high schools in the southern region of the United States. This study referenced the aforementioned study (Legault et al., 2006), noting that a potential source of amotivation, home-school dissonance, was not explored. Participants completed a 28-item self-report measure from the Academic Motivation Scale—College Version. The subscales correspond to various levels of motivation. In the self-report measure, researchers were interested in whether one aspect of the classroom environment, home-school dissonance, was statistically associated with reports of classroom disruptive behaviors among low-income, rural, and urban high school students. In addition, to further explore another possible source of classroom disruptive behaviors,

researchers examined reports of amotivation and whether these were statistically predictive of classroom disruptive behavior. Finally, in an attempt to examine the psychological process that precedes classroom disruptive behaviors for high school students, it was believed that amotivation scores would mediate the relationship between home–school dissonance and academic cheating.

Hierarchical regression analyses determined significant associations between each of the variables of interest. Particularly, home-school dissonance predicted amotivation and classroom disruptive behaviors; amotivation was also predictive of classroom disruptive behaviors. However, the findings suggest that there is no significant difference between home-school dissonance, amotivation, or classroom disruptive behavior reports among African American and European American junior and senior high school students. Gender differences in classroom disruptive behaviors did emerge and were consistent with the literature suggesting that male high school students engage in such behaviors significantly more than female students. Once gender controls were implemented in the multi-computations, students reported that perceptions of dissonance between their home and school experiences are linked to reports of amotivation in school and their reports of classroom disruptive behavior, irrespective of gender, race, or class rank (Brown-Wright et al., 2013). The researchers report that the nature of this study was correlational, and causality cannot be implied. Further, students self-reported and likely underestimated their degree of engagement in disruptive behaviors (Legault et al., 2006).

Brown-Wright et al. (2013) posit that more anecdotal input from administrators and teachers is warranted. While the dissonance between home and school was found to be in distinct cultural values, the data collected do not reflect what those values are. The

researchers state that future studies might include subscales to more accurately assess cultural values. Finally, it is believed that better aligning learning activities with students from varying ethnic backgrounds might mitigate the dissonance between home and school (Brown-Wright et al., 2013).

These studies both provide in-depth analyses of amotivation and how it affects the learning experience. However, the second study is more closely aligned with the participants included in this research. Amotivated students have lost—or have never sought—the desire to be an active part of the learning environment (Brown-Wright et al., 2013; Legault et al., 2006). These students often confound educators on how to most effectively connect and instill interest in the academic process (Legault et al., 2006). This study sought to assess how the practices of urban school leaders metamorphose student amotivation into motivation.

Student Engagement

"One might distinguish between 'engagement' and 'motivation'—with motivation as the precursor (the reason for being engaged) and engagement as the psychological experience or behavior" (National Research Council, 2004, p. 31).

Together with motivation, engagement is viewed in the literature as very important for enhanced learning outcomes of all students. Motivation is seen as a prerequisite of and a necessary element for student engagement in learning. Student engagement in learning is not only an end in itself, but also it is a means to the end of students achieving sound academic outcomes. This is important because authentic engagement may lead to higher academic achievement throughout student life (Saeed & Zyngier, 2012).

While motivation focuses on what initiates action, engagement goes further by examining actively participating in an activity or event, and the feelings of enthusiasm that evolve as a result (National Research Council, 2004, pp. 31-33). Kuh et al. (2007) posit that student engagement is the participation in educationally effective practices, both inside and outside the classroom, which leads to a range of measurable outcomes. Student engagement, a phenomenon that cannot be directly observed (Schlechty, 2002), is a process that facilitates learning (Turner & Patrick, 2004), and increases academic success (Marks, 2000). Engagement is an important predictor of success. The more students engage themselves in academic activities, the more they will be successful (Harbour et al., 2015). An engaged student dedicates himself to the subject and performs with enthusiasm and care during the learning process because he attributes a value to it. Even when faced with challenges while doing the assignment, a student continues to study and finds a personal value and meaning in his assignment (Schlechty, 2002). Student engagement also means a student's enthusiasm to engage in the learning process gives him a need to learn, voluntary engagement in learning, and the will to succeed (Bomia et al., 1997). Along this same continuum, engaged students make psychological investments in learning. They try hard to learn what school offers. Students take pride not simply in earning the formal indicators of success but in understanding the material and incorporating or internalizing it in their lives (Newman, 1992). Engaged students have the skills to work with others and know how to transfer knowledge to solve problems creatively. The most engaging work allows for creativity, sparks curiosity, provides opportunities to work with others, and sparks feelings of success (Schlechty, 2002).

Strong support systems—at home and at school—are essential for high school students to achieve academic success. When these are not firmly in place, disengagement can occur. When disengagement becomes consistent or a part of the student's routine, it can eventually lead to dropout. As students progress by grade level, the personal connection and individualization of instruction typically decrease; this pattern is seen more frequently in students from impoverished backgrounds (Felner et al., 2007). This decreased connection, coupled with the transition from middle to high school, is often challenging for students. Students who do not garner support from family, teachers, and school leaders or successfully acclimate to the high school experience become disengaged. This disengagement leads to decreased motivation, ultimately making them stronger candidates for dropping out of high school. The Center for Evaluation & Education Policy at Indiana University regularly conducts the High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSE) (Yazzie-Mintz, 2007).

The survey is designed to identify the types and levels of engagement students experience across the country. Although not designed with dropouts in mind, the survey provides some insight into some of the factors that might prompt students to drop out. Of the respondents, 22% reported that they considered dropping out of high school. The main reasons given were *I didn't like the school* (73%), *I didn't like the teachers* (61%), and *I didn't see the value in the work I was being asked to do* (60%). Of students who reported considering dropping out, 24% responded that there was not a single adult at school who cared about them. Students who skipped school regularly were more likely to have considered dropping out many times (Yazzie-Mintz, 2007). While much attention is placed upon the education gap and the opportunity gap, the authors note that yet another

gap exists: the engagement gap. This gap seemingly disadvantages those students already at greatest risk of dropping out (Yazzie-Mintz, 2007). The survey results revealed that, by gender, girls felt more engagement than boys. By ethnicity, White and Asian students felt more engagement than students of other races (Yazzie-Mintz, 2007).

The authors found that disengagement was a factor in students removing themselves from the learning environment. Further results showed that students reported being less engaged in each successive grade from 9 to 12 (Erwin, 2018; Yazzie-Mintz, 2007). This study is a strong reflection of why students often disengage. However, the responses rendered are a small sample of the reasons that students feel compelled to drop out of high school. Further, the study does not denote the number of survey participants (Yazzie-Mintz, 2007).

As previously stated, the survey was not designed to specifically focus upon high school dropouts. Nonetheless, its findings are plausible enough to provide school leaders discernment of the student perspective of the learning environment and make necessary changes to enhance student engagement (Yazzie-Mintz, 2007).

Student Self-Efficacy

Before one can be stimulated to pursue a goal, there must be a belief from within that the goal can be achieved. Exerting effort toward an activity or event that may ultimately be futile voids an individual of the desire to invest in that effort. Self-efficacy is the basis for how people are motivated (Burney & Beilke, 2008).

> Researchers have shown that self-efficacy influences learning, motivation, achievement, and self-regulation. In educational settings, self-efficacy can affect learners' choices of activities, effort expended, persistence, interest, and

> achievement. Compared with students who doubt their capabilities, those with high self-efficacy participate more readily, work harder, persist longer, show greater interest in learning, and achieve at higher levels. (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2016, p. 34)

As students are driven by the motivation to succeed, they can also be driven by belief in their personal abilities to achieve goals. “Perceived self-efficacy is defined as people’s belief in themselves about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives. Self-efficacy beliefs determine how people feel, think, motivate themselves and behave” (Bandura, 1994, p. 2). How one perceives himself is a powerful and pervasive influence; this thought pattern has the potential to empower the person to push past challenges or obstacles to achieve the desired outcome. High self-perception stimulates intrinsic interest and elevates engrossment in activities. Conversely, it serves as the hurdle to be overcome, sometimes being seen as too insurmountable to even attempt. Self-efficacy often serves as the driving force for motivation for students. When students believe they are capable of producing results, they are then motivated to do the work necessary to produce those results The lack of self-efficacy, in turn, stimulates amotivation. The students tend to ask themselves, *Why should I try when I know I am going to fail?* (Bandura, 1994)

Four major types of experiences are the impetus behind self-efficacy: (1) mastery, (2) vicarious, (3) social persuasion, and (4) physiological reactions. Mastery experiences are considered the most influential source of self-efficacy beliefs because they are predicated on the outcomes of personal experiences (Schunk & Meece, 2006;

Zimmerman, 2000). According to Bandura (1994), “Successes build a robust belief in one’s personal efficacy. Failures undermine it, especially if failures occur before a sense of efficacy is firmly established” (p. 2).

Vicarious experiences are created when individuals see other individuals successfully perform. The successful persons then become models for the observers. In comparing themselves, the observers conceive self-beliefs that they too can succeed. Social persuasion offers verbal confirmation to individuals that they can succeed. This experience relies heavily upon the credibility of the persuader and is considered a less impactful source of self-efficacy, particularly when those being persuaded harbor self-doubt and focus upon personal deficiencies (Bandura, 1994). In the final experience, physiological reactions, self-efficacy is reactive to one’s physical state at the time. If the body is experiencing anxiety, fatigue, arousal, stress, or changes in mood, self-efficacy is gauged accordingly. Positive physical and emotional reactions create higher self-efficacy beliefs, whereas adverse reactions diminish them. It is not the reactions, themselves, that affect self-efficacy; rather, it is how individuals perceive themselves in the physical state at the time that facilitates their levels of self-efficacy. Those individuals with low self-efficacy are more likely to perceive tasks and goals as too difficult to achieve, causing stress and depression, while high self-efficacy leads to an increased sense of confidence when approaching difficult tasks (Pajares, 1996).

Schunk and Pajares (2002) discussed how self-efficacy might operate during academic learning. At the start of an activity, students differ in their beliefs about their capabilities to acquire knowledge, perform skills, and master material. Initial self-efficacy varies as a function of aptitude and prior experience. Personal factors such as

goal setting and information processing, along with situational factors (e.g., rewards and teacher feedback), affect students while they are working. From these factors, students derive cues signaling how well they are learning, which they use to assess efficacy for further learning. Motivation is enhanced when students perceive they are making progress in learning. In turn, as students work on tasks and become more skillful, they maintain senses of self-efficacy for performing well.

Additionally, there is research on students' learning strategies, systematic plans that assist encoding of information and task performance (Weinstein & Mayer, 1986). Learning strategies improve achievement on the task at hand and generalize beyond the learning context (Kurtz & Borokowski, 1985). Strategies are typically viewed as aids to learning, but they may also influence self-efficacy and motivation (Corno & Mandinach, 1983). The belief that a strategy has been learned that improves learning can instill a sense of control over achievement outcomes, which raises self-efficacy and leads the learner to apply the strategy diligently (Corno, 1989, as cited in Zimmerman & Schunk, 1989). To the extent that strategy use improves task performance, a student's efficacy is substantiated and he continues to apply the strategy (Schunk, 1991).

Self-efficacy in the adolescent is, at its best, a challenge to cultivate. Developmentally, adolescents are experiencing rapid changes both socially and physiologically. Studies show that as the prefrontal cortex, the seat of executive function, begins to mature, students' self-perceptions begin to become "more abstract, multidimensional and hieratical" (Schunk & Meece, 2006, p. 77). As students enter middle school and, later, high school, the degree of self-regulation, including goal-setting, help-seeking, organization, time management, and immediate gratification delay

become critical to success in an academic environment that includes multiple teachers and expectations, more academic rigor, as well as more work to be completed outside of school hours (Zimmerman & Cleary, 2006). In secondary education, adolescent students' senses of self-efficacy become more influenced by the successes or failures of their peer group (Schunk & Miller, 2002). Zimmerman and Cleary (2006) point out that as prior performance is the single most important predictor of self-efficacy, failure to increase self-regulatory behaviors at this juncture can lead to an academic downward spiral.

Self-efficacy is primarily examined through the spectrum of the regular education student. However, the impact of self-efficacy on special education students cannot be overlooked. Special education students are those individuals categorized with one or more disabilities or learning exceptionalities that affect how they process material and engage in learning. This label can be a stigma for students, hindering their self-efficacy beliefs for success or deepening their beliefs for failure. Special education students generally learn at a slower pace than their regular education counterparts. When the learning outcomes of special education and regular education students are compared, disparities may occur. Special education students can internalize the stigma from this unbalanced comparison; the result can be an avalanche of decreased self-efficacy, motivation, and adverse behavior. It is important when analyzing academic achievement of students that educators establish equity to maintain the integrity of data. This not only creates desired learning outcomes, but also it promotes a learning environment that is fair, unbiased, and where students feel they can learn without the fear of being perceived as less capable than their peers simply because they do not learn in the same way or at the same rate (Rhew et al., 2018).

Feedback from adults also contributes to students' self-efficacy. Attributional feedback is hypothesized to have important effects on efficacy and motivation (Bandura, 1986). Effort feedback for prior successes supports students' perceptions of their progress, sustains motivation, and increases efficacy for learning. The timing of feedback is also important. Early successes signal high learning ability; feedback for early successes can enhance learning efficacy. Effort feedback for early successes should be more credible when students have to work hard to succeed (Schunk & Pajares, 2002).

Self-efficacy can be perceived as being just as important as self-determination, if not more so. In order to form the determination from within to achieve a goal, there first has to exist a belief that the goal can be achieved. High school students' self-perceptions fluctuate consistently, and sometimes uncontrollably. These perceptions are constantly being influenced by peers, social media, societal trends, parents, and teachers. When students believe they can accomplish goals, whether based on fact or fallacy, they are motivated to perform. The motivation in turn filters into their determination to accomplish the goal. The connection among these constructs establishes a pattern that, if the student is truly capable, can lead to academic success and prevent dropout (Kuhns, 2014).

Summary of Factors Associated with Student Persistence

Students at risk of dropping out can face many hurdles in high school. These hurdles—whether academic, personal, or societal—can seemingly be insurmountable. To endure and conquer these hurdles to earn a high school diploma requires vision and diligence. Multiple factors are associated with student persistence. Self-determination, a meta theory of human motivation, presumes that individuals instinctively pursue self-

growth and self-organization (Ryan, 2009). This theory focuses on three different categories of motivation: (1) intrinsic, (2) extrinsic, and (3) amotivation. Intrinsic motivation occurs when there is an inherent desire to master a subject or accomplish a goal. Internal pleasure is derived from engaging in an activity (Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 2005). Intrinsically motivated students do not seek or expect rewards for completing tasks. While intrinsic motivation is important, most individuals do not possess this attribute. In the converse, extrinsic motivation takes place when focus on achieving a goal to meet a specific outcome. In the classroom, learners who are extrinsically motivated perform as a means to an end, rather than an end in itself (Ormrod, 2008). The desired outcomes these learners seek often have nothing to do with the classroom activity (Artelt, 2005). The contrast of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is amotivation. Amotivation is the absence of motivation; individuals cannot form a connection between their actions and the consequences of those actions (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Ryan (1995) posits that amotivation rises from not placing value upon an activity; when a task is not vital to a student, amotivation may occur.

Where motivation centers upon what compels one to act, engagement delves into the active participation in an activity, and the enthusiasm it yields (Saeed & Zyngier, 2012). Kuh et al. (2007) contend that student engagement occurs when an individual participates in educationally effective practices both inside and outside the classroom, leading to measurable outcomes. Students who engage do so because they attribute value to the learning process despite any challenges associated with that process (Schlechty, 2002). Student engagement facilitates learning (Turner & Patrick, 2004) and increases students' academic success (Marks, 2000).

Students who engage in learning do so because they are determined to achieve a goal; thus, they are motivated to learn. To become motivated, students must believe they can accomplish the tasks set before them; this is referred to as self-efficacy (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2016). “Self-efficacy beliefs determine how people feel, think, motivate themselves and behave” (Bandura, 1994, p. 2). Self-efficacy is a force behind student motivation. Students who believe in their capabilities are typically more motivated to engage in learning. Students who lack self-efficacy often become amotivated (Zimmerman, 2000). These factors, while individually important, work collaboratively to impact the initiative of students at risk of dropping out to persist and earn a high school diploma (Schunk & Meece, 2006, pp. 79-81).

Role of School Leaders in Urban School Settings

It is incumbent upon students at risk of dropping out to be persistent in their missions to graduate from high school. However, these students should not feel they are pursuing this mission in isolation. Students at risk of dropping out require additional support from the adults charged with educating them. Heading this charge are school leaders, who bear great responsibility in guiding these students past any learning obstacles and are encumbered with preparing them for academic success. School leaders, using sometimes transformational measures, must meet students at risk of dropping out where they are and guide them academically and emotionally where they need to go to fulfill the goal of graduating from high school (Evans-Brown, 2015; Piña, 2020).

School leaders are charged with instilling a school climate and culture that is safe and inclusive, promotes learning and engagement, and meets the needs of all learners. Students who feel they do not fit into this environment or that school leaders are

inadequately meeting these responsibilities begin contemplating dropout. It is incumbent upon school leaders to address the concerns of these learners and make a concerted effort to reverse their mental course in order to prevent student dropout. This becomes more emergent in the urban high school setting (Kane et al., 2016).

Brown (2012) examined two inner-city high schools in north Alabama to assess the responsibilities school leaders bear in preventing student dropout. The purpose of the study sought to address two questions: (1) Does a change in leadership at these selected high schools affect the dropout rate? and (2) Does the principal, as suggested by the state board of education, serve as the single agent of change? The study began in school year 1999-2000 and concluded in school year 2006-2007. The first school, referred to in the study as School A, was analyzed over a 5-year period.

The enrollment at the beginning of the study, 1999-2000, was 657 students; the dropout rate was 31.74%, and the graduation rate was 94%. In the last year of the study, 2003-2004, student enrollment was 598 students, creating a 9% decline from the beginning of the study. The graduation rate fell to 73.45%. The researcher noted that School A had a habitual change in administration; the school received a new principal every 2 years, going through four principals in an eight-year period.

The second school in the study was referred to as School I. In this 4-year study, the beginning enrollment was 1,131 students; the projected dropout rate was 18.45%, and the graduation rate was 63%. In the final year of the study, 2006-2007, enrollment was at its highest with 1,221 students; the dropout rate was at its lowest at 3%, and the graduation rate was 97.5%.

The researcher in this study concluded the principal has a significant impact upon the dropout and graduation rates; consistency in administration is vital to consistency in student enrollment and dropout prevention. This was evident with School A, which underwent an administration change every 2.3 years. However, the researcher also noted that the principal is not the single agent of change; there exists a support system of teachers, parents, and community leaders to prompt students to engage in instruction and the academic experience. The researcher concluded that in this district leaders should focus upon motivating school leaders to cultivate climates for learning for both students and teachers; teachers should be allowed and encouraged to collaborate to assess students' abilities and needs and design instruction with these in mind. Principals must establish a foundation of trust in order to build the climate and culture desired to promote student efficacy and prevent dropout (Brown, 2012).

In another study of urban schools, the researcher sought to establish the relationship between leadership and reduced dropout rates. Specifically, Evans-Brown (2015) examined the link between school leadership and dropout prevention programs and how this collaboration affected student dropout. The researcher conducted a mixed-methods study of Castle City School District, an urban school district in New York. The district has a poverty rate of 50.6% for children under age 18. In 2010, this district had a 47% graduation rate. The study included two high schools, ranked as two of the lowest performing schools in the district. Evans-Brown (2015) sought to address in a mixed-methods study these research questions: (1) What influences young people to stay in school? and (2) What is the relationship between school leadership and reduced high school dropout rates? As part of the research, Evans-Brown (2015) conducted

open-ended interviews with the principals of the schools. The researcher sought to discern the principals' lengths of service, leadership styles, and strategies utilized to prevent student dropout and increase academic achievement. Principal A was an African American female with 10 years of leadership experience and was serving in her third year as principal. This principal believed in a collaborative leadership style, often seeking input from her leadership team.

Principal A had a focus on building partnerships that focused on students at risk of dropping out. Visibility among students and staff was a critical component of her leadership style; she also believed structure, high expectations, and consistency guided her students to remain in school. The principal and her leadership team, comprised of the school administration, teachers, parents, and community stakeholders, held monthly meetings to review academic plans, discuss student attendance, and initiate support services. This leader and the school administrative team regularly sought to identify students who were at risk of dropping out. Principal B was a Caucasian male in his fourth year with 14 years as a school leader. Unlike Principal A, Principal B believed in a dominant distributive leadership style; some elements of leadership should be shared, and there should be a delegation of the workload.

Principal B took a different approach with students at risk. Rather than focus upon dropout prevention, students were approached in an effort to motivate them and encourage them to remain engaged until graduation. The leadership team for the second school conducted home visits with a social worker and attendance officer. Both schools shared the challenge of garnering parental involvement.

While Principal A sought strategies to increase parental involvement, Principal B wished his parents would become more involved and supportive of their students. Where Principal A welcomed and embraced the support of her leadership team, Principal B was more critical of his team, as well as his district leaders, in some instances casting blame for not having the necessary support to implement desired initiatives. Additionally, both principals partnered with community dropout prevention programs to address the needs of their students at risk of dropping out.

No school leaders lead their schools identically. However, they must share the commonality of having a vision for motivating students to consistently engage and achieve academic success. Leaders must seek to establish relationships with their students, teachers, parents, and community partners. Having a supportive leadership team is a major component in establishing the mission and vision of school programs; leadership styles must be clearly defined to successfully implement these missions and visions. Strong community partnerships are also integral for the support and growth of academically successful students. Successful leaders maintain high visibility among the students, staff and parents they serve, and work to balance the challenges with the successes (Rice, 2006).

As part of the study, Evans-Brown (2015) also conducted quantitative research with a targeted group of predominantly African American students ages 13-20. The researcher sought to identify: (a) why students stay in school, (b) what influences students to stay, and (c) students' awareness of the importance of completing high school. Using purposive sampling, the researcher selected a sample of 200 students from the total population of approximately 1,000. The sample was further divided between students

who were actively participating in a dropout prevention program and those who were not. Participants completed a survey questionnaire designed by the researcher to address the research questions regarding the students. A total of 195 students completed a 25-question survey designed on a Likert scale of 4-strongly agree, 3-agree, 2-strongly disagree, and 1-disagree. Questions 1-24 employed the Likert scale, while question 25 was an open-ended question allowing students to write in their own responses. Evans-Brown (2015) categorized student responses by program participation as well as responses to the research question, What influences young people to stay in school? Some responses varied by program participation, while others reflected a greater consensus. Some students from both schools across all categories have considered dropping out of school; the greatest of these students were enrolled in a dropout prevention program. The greatest consensus was shown by students recognizing the importance of obtaining a high school education. Most of the students from both schools also felt their parents are involved in their high school careers. This contrasts with the opinions of the school and dropout prevention program leaders. A parallel exists between the responses; approximately one-third of the students in all groups stated their parents attend school events. The responses from the open-ended questions showed that approximately two-thirds of all the students stated work responsibilities prevent parental attendance at school meetings. Many of the students feel comfortable speaking with an adult about personal and academic issues.

According to research, leadership has a significant effect on student learning, second only to the effects of the quality of curriculum and teachers' instruction (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Strong school leaders must be prepared to assume the role of

leadership. They must be prepared with the necessary skills to assume the rigor and demands of the profession (Schargel et al., 2007). Schargel et al. (2007) assert that initially businesses and the military were the only professions that trained their leaders. They note that principals are selected from the ranks of good teachers, good classroom managers, or superior teacher mentors. These authors also contend that the consideration of the skills, attitudes, and characteristics is essential to effective and instructional leadership.

As Principal B asserted, strong support from the district level is also essential. As the success or failure of a school is placed solely upon the principal, it is incumbent upon district leaders to prepare school leaders with the necessary resources to effect the desired levels of change. Kimball and Sirotnik (2000) argue that there is always a political agenda when it comes to blaming fault for disproportionate concentrations of minorities' school failures. Political and corporate leaders tend to focus on school leadership instead of the lack of resources actually going into the schools. The need for improved administrator preparation programs is warranted. Students do not always see or understand the intricacies of daily school operations; in most instances, they do not care. What is most important to them is having environments that focus upon learning and instruction, focus upon safety, and allow them to feel involved and accepted. Schargel et al. (2007) posit that successful schools with evidence-based practices include schools that truly believe all students can learn. The successful school leader must be able to instill in students a desire for success that motivates them to learn and engage, or find and ignite the inner spark to create this same motivation.

According to Leithwood and Jantzi (2008), transformational leadership in education is effective. Transformational leadership in schools works "because it fits better the way in which schools are organized and work and because of its ability to tap higher levels of human potential" (Sergiovanni, 2007, p. 72). In a 2008 study, Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) found that transformational leadership has a significant effect on teacher satisfaction and organizational health. Additionally, they found transformational leadership to be related to student achievement. In a quantitative study, Blatt (2002) found a significant relationship between transformational leadership and school climate ($r = 0.569$, $p < 0.01$). This relationship was further supported by research conducted by Marzano et al. (2005). These findings, although encouraging, do not provide adequate detail of leadership practices to establish a connection to student success. In a study on transformational leadership and school culture among teachers, Quinn et al. (2015) found that school leaders could create school cultures motivating teachers to work collaboratively to improve overall school performance. Consequently, the inspiration and motivation of a principal developed the growth of their followers to become change agents, which in turn influenced student achievement (Metz et al., 2019, p. 392). Although transformational leadership highlighted the need to inspire followers to increased energy and commitment, research showed creating an inspired vision and motivating others was not enough to produce results that led to increased student achievement (Hutton, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2017).

The results of this study, while providing insight on the importance of a school leader's creating a vision for positive school culture, lack insight on the direct correlation between leadership and student success (Hutton, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2017).

In a case study using a semi-structured interview format, Sahin et al. (2016) investigated the causes of chronic student absenteeism and subsequent dropout at primary and secondary school sites. Data from interviews with 64 principals were organized into significant categories regarding absentee students and dropouts, including influences from family factors, administrator and teacher behaviors, school setting, students themselves, and environmental factors. In addition to the major categories, some themes encompassed the scope of the category, which contained the dynamics of home, school, and community. The researchers highlighted how daily attendance significantly impacted academics, test scores, graduation rates, college acceptance, and career opportunities. However, Sahin et al. (2016) concluded the schools had systems in place to successfully address this crisis.

Sahin et al. (2016) provided guidance in addressing the causes of absenteeism in all grade levels that could eventually lead to dropout before graduation from high school. In their responses to the research questions, the administrators considered all the environmental elements impacting a student's success. Consequently, there emerged correlations in the answers that encompassed school, home, and community. Prior studies only highlighted how the student attendance and completion of school were impacted by the school, family, and the student. However, these researchers explored how relationships between school personnel and students also influenced student success (Duhart-Toppen, 2020).

The length of time school leaders, particularly urban school leaders, are vested in their schools is a vital component of students' academic successes. Motivating students to graduate is more difficult in schools with high principal turnover; inconsistency in

leadership renders a lack of trust from students and teachers in school principals' abilities to lead and motivate. Bryk and Schneider (2003) call trust the "lubricant" for a school community. In urban schools, when there are issues of poverty, race, and violence, trust takes longer to develop and can break down more quickly. Trust is often the first thing that disappears when there is a change in leadership. Sebastian and Allensworth (2012) sought to examine the influence of principals in high school classrooms, specifically in urban school settings. Prior studies found by the researchers showed numerous results on the elementary level. The results showed that, despite the increased complexity of high school leadership—assistant principals, department chairs, and the like—high school principals still made a difference. High school principals strongly affected student achievement by establishing safe, college-focused environments. These college-focused environments meant that the most effective high school principals were able to influence the classroom through their support of teachers in their academic demands of students and in their support for orderly classrooms (Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012).

Summary

In urban school settings, school leaders must be willing and able to adapt to cultivate learning climates that promote rigorous instruction and engagement (Schargel et al., 2007). Enacting this vision may require not conforming to traditional norms; instead, the effective urban school leader must transform established leadership styles to best address the needs of learners. Such a leadership style must meet students where they are and guide them toward the desired vision and goal of academic excellence. Transformational leaders encourage risk taking as an accepted part of the organizational culture. Transformational leaders are innovative thinkers who plan with the end in mind,

predict unintended consequences of decision-making, and empower employees to gain relevant experiences that are both aligned to their personal goals and the overarching goals of the organization (Bolman & Deal, 2010). Risk taking and out of the box thinking are encouraged as a means to break continued cycles of flat lined results. Transformational leaders attract various talents to the organization who will add a variety of perspective and character to the think tank. Innovative people and fresh ideas will enhance the opportunity for continuous collaboration and innovation to emerge from the collective knowledge of the organization (Anderson & Anderson, 2010).

In order to most effectively serve their students, transformational school leaders must understand how students think, feel, and are compelled to act. These leaders must have in-depth understanding of what motivates their students (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). In addition to the input and support provided by school leaders, multiple factors are associated with student persistence. These factors have a pivotal role in students at risk initiative to earn high school diplomas. Motivation is a theoretical construct used to explain the initiation, direction, intensity, persistence, and quality of behavior, especially goal-directed behavior (Murphy & Alexander, 2000). Motives are hypothetical constructs used to provide general reasons for why people do what they do. Motives typically refer to relatively general needs or desires that energize people to initiate purposeful action sequences. In the classroom context, the concept of student motivation is used to explain the degree to which students invest attention and effort in various pursuits, which may or may not be the ones desired by their teachers and school leaders. Student motivation is reflected in the motives and goals students strive to achieve and is rooted in subjective

experiences, especially those connected to their willingness to engage in learning activities and their reasons for doing so (Wentzel & Brophy, 2014).

As motivation serves as a precursor to student action, engagement centers upon active participation in an event and the enthusiasm that ensues. Student engagement facilitates learning (Turner & Patrick, 2004) and increases academic success (Marks, 2000). Engagement is an important predictor of success (Saeed, & Zyngier, 2012). Harbour et al. (2015) assert that the more students engage themselves in academic activities, the more they will be successful. Engaged students invest academically because they assign value to the tasks put before them. Even when challenges arise, students continue to study and find personal value and meaning in the assignments (Schlechty, 2002). In order to become motivated to engage in an activity, there must be a belief in one's self-capability to effectively perform the activity. Self-efficacy serves as the foundation for how people are motivated (Burney & Beilke, 2008). "Self-efficacy beliefs determine how people feel, think, motivate themselves, and behave" (Bandura, 1994, p. 2). In educational settings, self-efficacy impacts learners' choices of activities, effort expended, persistence, interest, and achievement. Compared with students who doubt their capabilities, those with high self-efficacy participate more readily, work harder, persist longer, show greater interest in learning, and achieve at higher levels (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2016). These factors, in intricate formation and in collaboration with the efforts of school leaders, avail students at risk of dropping out of the scholastic collateral essential to persevering until graduation from high school (Anderson & Anderson, 2010; Bolman & Deal, 2010).

The review of literature was guided by Transformational Leadership Theory and Motivation Theory. Transformational leadership addressed the practices and processes urban high school leaders undergo daily to serve their students (Bass & Riggio, 2006). An examination was conducted of the requirements leaders must maintain to form relationships with their students, cultivate school climates of academic rigor and engagement, and guide students to believe in their abilities to graduate from high school. In conjunction with transformational leadership, an examination of motivation was done to assess the core of individual thought and decision-making, seeking the causes of what compels people to think and act as they do. A meta theory of the Motivation Theory, the Self-Determination Theory, focused on how individuals pursue personal growth, seek connection with others, and purposefully enrich their lives. Self-efficacy guides the pursuit of self-development and enhancement (Ryan & Deci, 2000). How people perceive their abilities to perform and achieve goals heavily influences their actions; these perceptions serve as either insurmountable hindrances or as agitators for change and self-improvement (Legault, 2017; Ryan, 2009).

The researcher found multiple studies addressing student dropout and school leadership practices in urban high school settings. Few studies addressed students' rationales for considering dropout before doing so. This chapter contains descriptions of studies conducted among urban high school students and their reasons for being motivated or amotivated. The results found varying reasons, placing responsibility upon themselves, their teachers, and school leaders.

A study of student engagement revealed that female students have a higher rate of engagement than male students. This same study showed higher levels of engagement

among Caucasian and Asian students than those of other races; the study also revealed that levels of student engagement decrease with each advancing grade from 9 to 12 As a correlation exists between motivation and engagement, it extends to include self-efficacy (Erwin, 2018; Yazzie-Mintz, 2007). Schunk and Miller (2002) postulate that in secondary education adolescent students' senses of self-efficacy become more influenced by the successes or failures of their peer group.

High school is demanding and challenging for most adolescents. For urban high school students, this level of challenge is often increased by socioeconomic factors, home environments, and societal events (Bulger & Watson, 2006). Students either draw upon these events to become motivated to perform or utilize them as reasons to consider dropping out of high school. Students who drop out of high school are often fraught with economic instability (National Dropout Prevention Center, 2020). Lacking a high school diploma makes it difficult to attain employment that pays livable wages. The anxiety that occurs from functioning under adverse circumstances can lead to indulgence in illicit behaviors, criminal activity, and incarceration. There also exists the potential for developing physical and mental health issues. The literature revealed that dropping out of high school can lead to a life of struggle and a potentially shorter lifespan (Rumberger, 2013).

Many factors affect a student's decision to drop out; according to Booker (2011), studies have been conducted to examine students' rationales for early withdrawal from high school. Numerous studies have also been conducted to discern the influence of school leaders upon their students' decisions to remain in school and persevere toward high school graduation. Urban school leaders have a formidable responsibility in the

delivery of effective school management. The needs of urban students are great and often complex. Further analysis of the urban high school experience is warranted to develop a richer understanding of how urban school leaders effectively reach their students to inspire them to learn, engage, and remain on course until graduation.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Cropley (2021) states, “The task of all research is enlarging knowledge and understanding” (p. 6). Presented in this chapter are the purpose of the research, the research methods and protocols, participants, procedures, instruments used, data collection and analysis, and the role of the researcher. The literature review revealed that further research of urban high school leaders was warranted. The purpose of this study was to investigate the practices urban school leaders implement in daily school operations, examine how leaders form relationships with their students, and assess how these practices and relationships affect the student initiative to engage in the high school experience and earn a diploma. Through the current study, the researcher sought to answer the following questions:

Research Question #1: What leadership practices do school leaders utilize to form relationships with students and motivate them to graduate high school?

Research Question #2: How do these practices influence student self-determination and motivate them to graduate high school?

The current study sought to investigate the knowledge, skills, and beliefs of urban high school leaders.

Research Method

The qualitative phenomenological methodology "places emphasis upon exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human. problem" (Creswell, 2014, p. 4). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) describe this approach as gaining a perspective of issues from investigating them in their own specific contexts and the meanings that individuals bring to them. To best understand how urban school leaders connect with their students, it is important to examine the practices, actions, and thought patterns from the personal perspective. Phenomenology seeks to describe the essence of a phenomenon by exploring it from the perspectives of those who have experienced it. The goal of this research approach is to describe the meaning of this experience—both in terms of what was experienced and how it was experienced (Neubauer et al., 2019).

Research Site and Participants

The school district selected for the current study is in a metropolitan city with a population of 183,189 as projected by the 2020 U.S. Census. The city has been challenged in recent years with issues of poverty, high unemployment, and crime (World Population Review, 2022). The school district serves a population of 40,000 students; there are 58 schools located in rural, suburban, and urban areas of the metropolis. Each high school selected for the current study is centered in communities encircled by single-family homes and/or lower-income apartment homes; they serve students from a mix of lower and middle-income families. The Louisiana Department of Education documents enrollment, ethnic, and socio-economic data for all local agencies. The schools selected are classified as Title I schools; they serve populations of struggling learners and have a previous history of fluctuating school performance scores.

The high school leaders selected for this study serve in a school district in a southern state. The leaders considered for this research were selected because of their positions and the student populations they serve. These leaders have the time vested in leadership and have served at their respective schools for periods that allowed thoughtful insight and contribution to this research. All leaders included in the research are African American. No bias is intended by selecting only one ethnicity for this research; the school leaders expressed willingness to participate in the study and gave consent according to university protocols (Appendix D).

The school leaders participating in this study have invested much time and energy into the growth and transformation of their schools. The leaders recognize that school improvement is a continual process. The Louisiana Department of Education rates each school and assigns the school a report card to measure its performance. Each school is issued a report card, which reflects an overall letter grade on a scale of A-F, and a school performance score (SPS) on a scale of 0-150, which is based on a compilation of specific data and assessments. Table 3-1 reflects the SPS and letter grade earned by the schools participating in the current study.

Table 3-1

School Performance Scores and Letter Grades

School Year	SPS|Letter Grade—School A	SPS|Letter Grade—School B
2017-2018	D—53.7	D—56.6
2018-2019	C—67.6	C—64.5
2019-2020	**Data not available*	**Data not available*
2020-2021	B-89.0	B-82.0

*Data for school year 2019-2020 were not available.

In March 2020, the United States was stricken by the novel COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic completely changed the way schools served their students. Schools, by state government order, were closed for the remainder of the school year in March 2020. The Louisiana Department of Education requested and was granted a federal waiver of accountability, which exempted all school districts from the production of school and district performance scores (Louisiana Department of Education, 2021). The data shown above reflect that school leaders were successful in the transformational process. To yield a fair assessment, the data reflect the school years the leaders in this study were serving simultaneously at their respective sites. The schools' report cards also reflect letter grades for graduation rates and the value of a diploma, a measurement of how well high schools have prepared students for college or a career. These grades measure how well schools are preparing students for college or career and are rendered based on the following criteria:

- The rate at which students graduate high school within 4 years
- The rate at which students obtain college credit or an industry certification (Louisiana Department of Education, 2021).

Both Schools A and B have earned the letter grade "A" for graduation rates and strengths of diploma—the highest grade possible—for the school years reflected in Table 3-1.

Data Collection

The researcher followed human subject protocols as set forth by the Louisiana Tech University Institutional Review Board in conducting this research (Appendix A). Consent to conduct research was sought and approved by the school district

superintendent; an approval letter was issued to the researcher (Appendix B). Consent forms were submitted to participants with an explanation of the research and request for signatures. Consent forms were submitted to the Institutional Review Board and approval granted to the researcher to conduct research; consent was given by the participants. An approved exemption memo was issued to the researcher (Appendix D) with the approval to begin this study. The researcher conducted research individually with each participant at scheduled times, as agreed upon by researcher and participant. Data collected during each session were secured for analysis and kept confidential by the researcher.

The standardized open-ended interview is extremely structured in terms of the wording of the questions. Participants are always asked identical questions, but the questions are worded so that answers given are open-ended. This open-endedness allows the participants to contribute as much detailed information as they desire, and it also allows the researcher to ask probing questions as a means of follow-up (Gall et al., 2003). In the review of literature, an interview protocol for leaders who worked with economically disadvantaged students was found. The interview protocol accurately aligned with the purpose of the current study.

The interview questions chosen were designed to obtain a narrative of the urban high school experience and analyses of what practices urban school leaders initiate to form lasting relationships with their students, how they propel students to engage in learning, and how these relationships instill motivation and determination in their students to complete high school and graduate.

Data Analysis

The researcher used manual verbatim transcription to transcribe the school leader interviews. This method was used to record participants' responses as directly quoted and capture the full context of each interview. Intelligent verbatim transcription was applied to clarify responses and remove colloquialisms. Participant interviews were transcribed and analyzed through a series of coding processes; these processes were assembled to unveil an emergence of responses, patterns, and themes. Coding procedures addressed the research questions and reinforced the theoretical framework for the study.

Interview transcripts were coded using First Cycle coding processes, as denoted in Table 3-2. Hedlund-deWitt (2013) describes coding as a lower level of data analysis on the way to labels, categories, themes, and theory.

Table 3-2

First Cycle Coding Processes

Coding Process	Description
Attribute	• Notates specific participant variables including grade, gender, ethnicity • Assigns pseudonym to protect identity during study
Descriptive	• Summarizes the topic of a narrative
Initial	• Provides a first impression of the narrative • Dissects responses to discern similarities and differences • Yields patterns that prompt the second coding cycle
In-Vivo	• States the direct responses of the participants in their own words

Note. From *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (Saldaña, 2009).

In *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, coding is described as "the bones of your analysis…Integration will assemble those bones into a working skeleton" (Saldaña, 2009, p. 8). The First Cycle coding processes used included attribute, descriptive, in-vivo, and initial. Using Microsoft Word, a table was prepared, and the interview questions were entered into the table. In a separate row below each question, each participant's response was entered. Initial coding was applied to determine the number of like/similar responses as well as other clarifying information specific to each participant. A table of the responses was prepared, as denoted in Table 3-3. The table was then utilized to prepare a codebook (Appendix E), invoking the descriptive and in-vivo coding processes. The data collected and analyzed in the First Cycle prompted further coding during the Second Cycle. In the Second Cycle, Pattern Coding was used. The similar responses found in the First Cycle were further analyzed; responses were compared to denote similar terminology used and the practices of each participant.

Table 3-3

First Cycle Coding: School Leaders' Like/Similar Responses

School A		School B	
• Assessments • Feedback • Data • Relationships • Teacher Support • Preparation for college or career	• (Low) Parental involvement • Monitoring and intervention • Guidance • Remediation • Community Partners	• Preparation • Motivation • Relationships • Engagement • Data • Feedback • Guidance • Teacher Support • Community Partners	• Assessments • Parental Engagement/ Involvement • Communication • Rigor • Preparation for college or career • Reinforcement • Remediation

Validity

The instrument selected for the current study has been assessed to assure its validity. The creator of the instrument describes the process accordingly:

> The researcher took several steps to assure the study's validity. Prior to submitting for IRB approval, the researcher created purposeful interview questions and forwarded them to faculty and collegiate colleagues enrolled in the Educational Leadership Program at the Esteves School of Education at Russell Sage College to assess content validity. This process helped the researcher identify questions that needed to be reworked. After completing this process and beginning the virtual interviews, the researcher emailed the transcripts to the interviewees for member checking. According to Creswell & Creswell (2018) researchers use member checking to "determine the accuracy of the qualitative findings by taking the final report of specific description or themes back to participants and determining whether these participants feel that they are accurate. (Piña, 2020, pp. 200-201)

Another validity check the researcher used was expert paneling. The researcher used members of his pop team and provided them with research and interview questions. The researcher's pop teammates provided feedback. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), as cited in Piña (2020), a peer debriefer, "asks questions about the qualitative study so that the account will resonate with people other than the researcher" (p. 201).

The researcher for the current study prepared transcripts of the interviews; each participant was provided the transcript of his interview and verified given responses to assess validity. Descriptive validity was demonstrated in the reporting responses exactly

as they were dictated to the researcher. Theoretical validity was indicated as participants' responses showed consistency with the review of literature. Interpretative validity was shown in the researcher's ability to perceive each participant's values, beliefs, and feelings (Hayashi, et al., 2019).

Reliability

The protocol of using scripted interview questions was used to ensure reliability. Each participant was asked the same set of interview questions; participants answered with personal reflections. The responses collected were reviewed and coded through two cycles. Through the coding cycles emergent patterns and themes were revealed to show a correlation between the leaders' practices.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher was to conduct research on the leadership practices of urban high school leaders and construct a narrative from the leaders' perspectives. The researcher's own experience as a veteran educator and former administrator who has spent the majority of her career working with students in urban settings made her reflect on what she might learn during the open-ended interviews. It was incumbent upon the researcher to begin each interview with a clear mental slate and not impose any prior personal experiences upon the participants.

The researcher's responsibility was to make each participant feel as comfortable as possible in order to create the most authentic experience and collect honest reflections. Participants were provided with the purpose of the research and informed that personal

identities would remain confidential. Biases were reduced by ensuring trustworthiness—a verification of responses for clarity and confirmability was done in each interview.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

This qualitative research study examined the practices urban high school leaders implement in daily school operations, how they form relationships with their students, and how these practices and relationships impact the students' initiatives to engage in the high school experience and earn diplomas. This research was conducted using the theoretical framework of Ryan and Deci's Motivation Theory and Burns' Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The conceptual framework examined students defined as at-risk, or in danger of not graduating from high school because they meet established criteria including, but not limited to: (1) being at least one grade level behind their peers, (2) an established pattern of absenteeism or truancy, and (3) habitual disciplinary issues with teachers and administration. The research questions for the current study addressed:

Research Question #1: What leadership practices do school leaders utilize to form relationships with students and motivate them to graduate high school?

Research Question #2: How do these practices influence student self-determination and motivate students to graduate high school?

The findings of the current study reflect interviews conducted with two urban school leaders. The participants for this study represent a grades 9-12 urban high

school (referred to as School A) and a grades 7-12 combination middle/high school (referred to as School B). The school leaders will be referred to as Leader 1 and Leader 2. Leader 1 serves as a principal; he currently has 4 years of service in his present position. Leader 2 serves as an assistant principal. She has 30 years of service at her school site; she has served for 10 years in an administrative role.

Presentation of Results

The interview questions addressed specific practices leaders implement to form relationships with students and motivate them to graduate high school. Questions 6, 7, and 8 of the interview protocol address the leadership practices, policies, programs, and instructional planning. Leader 1 emphasizes building great relationships with all as a key leadership practice. Other practices include continuously tracking student progress, providing varied opportunities for college and career experiences, assisting in goal planning, offering resources on stress management and coping skills, and providing academic intervention. Leader 2 describes a model of support for students in the effort to motivate them. Leadership practices at School B include instruction that promotes rigor and challenges students to excel, prompts student focus and become motivated.

Each leader continued to address the procedures and programs they have in place to motivate their students. Leader 1 states that his staff works to motivate students. Additionally, the school uses Career Compass. This program has trained coaches to support the school by working one on one with seniors, equipping them with workforce and post-secondary information. The coaches also assist with exploring career options, Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion, college exam

registration, and college application preparation. FAFSA provides state and federal financial assistance for students entering college.

Leader 2 also discussed bringing in external support; School B works with counseling agencies to provide assistance to students who have issues with attendance, discipline, or conflict resolution.

Administrators at School B have a plan in place to contact students when they miss school; Leader 2 emphasized that it is important that students feel like they were missed when they are absent.

Assessment of policies, procedures, and programs is an important measure to both school leaders, as addressed in question 8 of the interview protocol. Leader 1 stated that he, along with the district, traces the completion of the FAFSA for every senior to ensure that the school and Career Compass are successfully graduating students. Leader 2 stated that administration and teachers have grade level meetings to address the needs of students and identify strategies that are effective in getting students on track academically and behaviorally. Data meetings are also held assess students' progress.

In addition to the policies set in place, data have a vital role. In Question 9 of the interview protocol, the school leaders were asked how they use data to drive decision making to motivate students. Question 10 asked how instructional strategies are imparted to teachers to motivate disadvantaged students; Question 11 addressed the analysis of evidence of the instructional strategies. Leader 1 relies on data from students' grades, Louisiana graduation requirements, earned industry-based credentials, formative assessments, and LEAP/ACT/WorkKeys test scores. Leader 2 also utilizes state test data, ACT scores, and formative assessments, along with data from diagnostic tests and the

Standardized Test for the Assessment of Reading (STAR) program. The leaders recognize that providing teachers with the necessary instructional strategies is an essential component in motivating economically disadvantaged students.

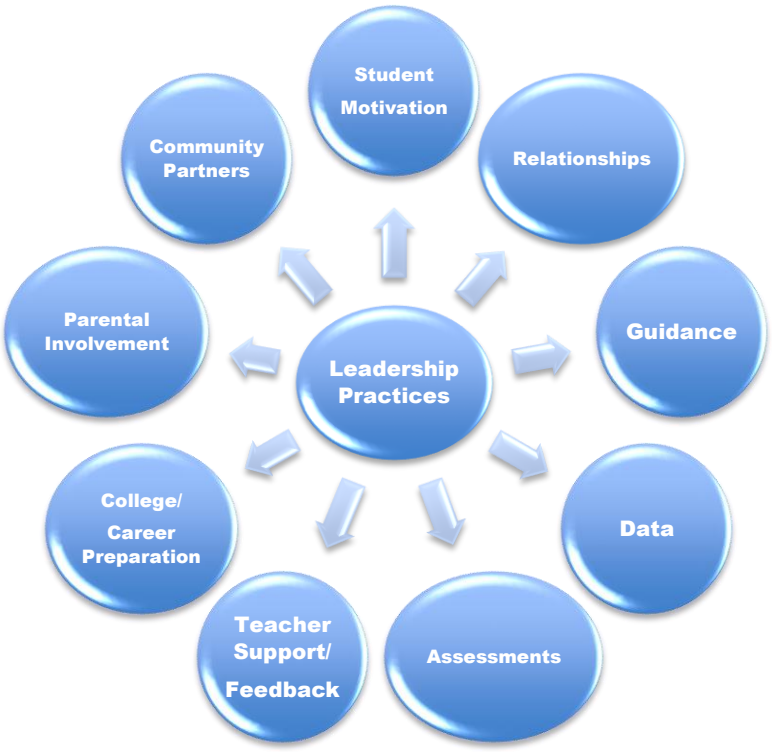
Analyzing instructional practices helps leaders determine which methods are effective in motivating students to engage. This analysis is a regular practice at both schools. Leader 1 examines evidence gathered "through formative common assessments and analyzing student work in professional learning communities. Administrators conduct weekly walkthroughs and provide feedback to teachers." Leader 2 also addressed how administrators perform walkthrough observations and meet with teachers in cluster meetings to discuss classroom observations, analyze data, and share instructional practices to enhance instruction and increase student engagement.

Efforts to motivate economically disadvantaged students are not met without challenges. Both school leaders describe homelessness, hunger and food insecurity, and low parental involvement or parental absenteeism as challenges that some students experience. The leaders work with parents and collaborate with community partners to address the needs of their students.

Several codes, patterns, and themes emerged during the school leader interviews. The coding process revealed similarities in thoughts and processes of both school leaders. From these similarities themes emerged that reflect a parallelism in the leadership styles of these urban school leaders. Figure 4-1 reflects these themes that shape the matrix of urban high school operations.

Figure 4-1

Emergent Themes



Theme 1: Student Motivation

The first theme to emerge from this research was student motivation. This theme is the driving force for the school leaders. The effort from leaders is to stimulate students to look within or to provide an external stimulus to prompt students to consistently engage in instruction and the whole academic experience. Leaders strive to keep students motivated to engage and earn a high school diploma. Leader 1 spoke of how student motivation serves as a strong influence upon his leadership practices: "[We are] building great relationships with all, [we] continuously track student progress, provide varied opportunities for college and career experiences, assist in goal planning, offer resources

on stress management and coping skills, [and] provide academic intervention." Leader 1 also emphasized the activities in place to support and motivate students:

> We have countless activities and events to motivate students to graduate. We have college and career fairs annually. Students take tours sponsored through the school their junior and senior years. [We have] lunch visits from colleges and military recruiters.

Leader 2 spoke of specific strategies her administrative team uses with the students at School B:

> The first year that we took a group of 8th graders and we targeted them and let them take Algebra I. We had a 100% pass rate; we had four that did approaching basic, which is a pass for them in high school, but the rest of them passed; they were proficient. And so, this year, to get them there, our students have to stay on the second floor, which is where middle school is. High school is on the third floor; everybody wants to get to the third floor and see what's going on, 'cause you can't go. So, the teacher got permission 'cause she teaches high school Algebra on the third floor. So, she has to teach it first period for middle school because after that she has to go upstairs and teach her own kids. So, she got special permission to take the kids up there who were in Algebra because it's a high school course. And so, the kids got bragging rights. 'You don't take the high school class? Yeah, we're in high school!' And they did remarkably well. Now, you know, they were telling the other kids how it went. And so now they get to march on to Geometry as a high schooler, so they've earned that.

Leader 2 addressed a second initiative used with students at School B: “And one of the major motivations is when you get to the 10th grade, we want them taking the ACT test, so that they can prepare to go on to college.”

Theme 2: Relationships

The second theme that emerged from this research was relationships. Forming and maintaining relationships with students is a critical component of maintaining student motivation. Leaders recognize that connecting with their students helps them to perform because they are aware that cares about them and their success. Leader 1 spoke of the importance of building relationships with all his students. Connecting with the students and getting to know them personally, influences how he responds. What fits one student may not work for another student. He strives to connect in such a way that he provides the resources that are most appropriate for each student’s situation or circumstances. Leader 2 described a specific instance that illustrates she connects with her students:

> A lot of our kids—disadvantaged, parents---they don’t know what it is to get your money together for college. I always tell them, unless your parents are Rockefellers, you’re gonna need some money. I then use the example: Even Snoop Dog needed financial aid because he wanted his child to get the same scholarship money! They didn’t want him to have it because he was Snoop Dog! He had all this money. And that money could’ve gone to somebody else! But Snoop was fighting ‘em for his scholarship, you know, his child’s scholarship! So, when you talk about Snoop Dog, they understand! But any way we can get and motivate them to get to the finish line, we do.

Leader 2 also spoke of an additional initiative used at School B demonstrates the importance of connecting with students and how it impacts student motivation:

> So when they're out, they're missing a couple of days, we have somebody call and say, Hey! What's been going on? What's the problem? It's bad when a child comes to school every day and he finally misses a day or two and nobody cares, nobody misses him…he's just gone. So we try to keep up with all of them, at least know what happens. Do a little investigation, just a little extra time. So when they get back, we can say Hey! We missed you! What's the problem? Make sure we can keep an open line of communication.

Theme 3: Guidance

The third theme that emerged from this research was guidance. Guidance is an important part of the high school experience. Students must be given the necessary information and resources to help them prepare for instruction, as well as life beyond high school. Leaders must assemble an appropriate team of school and community professionals with the necessary skills to assist students in reaching their goals and potential. Leader 1 discussed some of the strategies used at School A:

> In addition to the work of the staff at [school's name] we also use Career Compass— Trained coaches support [school's name] by working one-on-one with our seniors, equipping them with workforce and post-secondary information. They also assist with exploring career options FAFSA completion, college exam registration and college application preparation.

Leader 2 also discussed how guidance is administered both internally and externally:

> We bring in outside people because we have issues…the [Name of local advocacy organization] people. They come in and…[also] [Name of local behavior management agency]. We pull those kids that my boss calls 'EGR students.' EGR is *extra grace required*. We look at if they're having problems being coded out of the classroom, attendance, the academics…just if they're put in that category, we don't wanna lose 'em. And so, we bring them in; we have motivational speakers to talk to them, different ones and we have peers—we have peer tutors that help them out. Anything we can do to keep them in school.

Theme 4: Data

The fourth theme that emerged from this research was data. Data are a critical factor in decision making for school leaders. The leaders obtain data from multiple sources and analyze them thoroughly to make the most informed decisions to effect the best outcome for their students. To inform his decision making, Leader 1 relies on data gathered from students' grades, state graduation requirements, earned industry-based credentials (IBCs), formative assessments, and test scores from state assessments as well as the ACT/WorkKeys college and career readiness assessments. Leader 2 discussed at multiple intervals how data influence decision making:

> We have data meetings—looking at the data of a student. The state test data are used. We just got through doing the diagnostic tests. We use I-Steep. We use STAR Reading. We use ACT. And of course, we use regular test grades in the classroom, regular assessments, daily assessments.

Leader 2 further discussed how assessment data help administration determine how academic supports will most effectively serve her students:

> Students, sometimes they need additional support. So, we do the RTI (response to intervention). And, with that, I had to pull kids out of their PE classes if they didn't hit that certain score. So, it was based on the I-Steep scores.

Theme 5: Assessments

The fifth theme emerged from this research was assessments. Assessments serve as a measurement of students' knowledge and performance. Formative and summative assessments given in the classroom, diagnostic exams, state assessments, college entrance and military assessments provide the leaders with the required data for analysis of students' performance. Assessments serve for the leaders as an additional tool for guiding school operations. Both leaders, in addressing the function of data in theme four, discussed how assessments serve as one of the various components they rely upon to make decisions and support students. Leader 1 addressed measuring students' performance: "We use…formative assessments and LEAP/ACT/WorkKeys test scores." Leader 2 also spoke of using assessments: "We use regular test grades in the classroom, regular assessments, daily assessments."

Theme 6: Teacher Support and Feedback

The sixth theme emerged from this research was teacher support and feedback. The leaders acknowledged that providing their teachers with the proper support is necessary in order to effect rigorous classroom instruction and engagement. The leaders perform regular classroom walkthrough observations to ascertain whether teachers are being effective and informing them on how they can improve. The leaders strive to share with teachers' tools for strengthening their craft, and assistance as needed through

modeling and guidance. Feedback helps teachers redirect in order to better reach and support the students. Leader 1 expounded on this theme:

> Using our Data Driven Instructional practices has allowed our teachers to maximize their students' achievement. Our teachers focus on the core academic skills that students need the most, strengthen relationships/make connections with students, remediate and use targeted interventions when necessary, and set high goals and reward them when they show growth and reach their goals.

He continued by explaining how he and his administrative team consistently analyze evidence of instructional practices. "[We analyze evidence] through formative common assessments and analyzing student work in professional learning communities. Administrators conduct weekly walkthroughs and get feedback to teachers." Leader 2 also stressed the importance of providing support and feedback to teachers:

> We have cluster, and when we come into cluster, things we roll out, they have to go and practice it in the classroom. Then they have to bring samples of their work back. When they bring in samples, we look at it, we analyze it, we talk about what went wrong, what didn't go right, how did you roll it out. If you felt yours was very shaky and you want to go and watch another teacher model it, you can go and do that. We'll make time for somebody to watch your class and you go see that other person; [department] chairs go in and help out when there's an issue with that, and we kind of build on whatever the strategy is we're working on.

Leader 2 elaborated on the strategies used at School B to provide support and feedback:

> Instructional practice—we go in and we do walkthroughs. We try to do daily walkthroughs. And we do it in different ways. It means something to different

> people as we observe the teaching process. We may go into the beginning of a lesson, you may go to the middle of a lesson, [or you] may go to the end of a lesson—it just depends on what you want to see or what you're looking for. Or what did I see when I walked in there; I'm not sure that that's really what they meant.

Leader 2 continued to discuss how support and feedback are provided at School B:

> Or you were supposed to have [specific items], so I'll go back again. I may go in and I may record a snippet, or I might write down something that I need the teacher to talk to me about. What was going on? What did I see? Were the students engaging? Did I see them engaging? You know a quiet class may not be a good class. A noisy class may not be a bad class. So, it just depends on what we see or what we're looking for. If the student is learning, that's what we're looking for. Even when the teacher is lecturing—what are they getting from it, or what does the teacher expect them to get from it? We're analyzing, we're pulling them in for post-conferences with the walkthrough. The observation shouldn't be 'I got you.' We try to stress that to teachers, even though they don't always believe you. Uh, we're here to support you as much as we can, and we want to.

Theme 7: College and Career Preparation

The seventh theme emerged from this research was college and career preparation. This theme drives why the leaders do what they do daily. They work diligently to equip students with the proper skills required to enter college or the workforce after graduation. These leaders are fully aware of the expectations that will be placed upon students once they graduate. They know that an educated student is better

prepared for the demands that will be placed upon him once he graduates. These leaders feel it is incumbent upon them to ensure that students have access to every resource available to empower them for success upon high school graduation.

Leader 1 spoke on events and activities held at School A and how they serve to motivate students:

> We have countless activities and events to motivate students to graduate. We have college and career fairs annually. Students take college tours sponsored through the school their junior and senior years. [We have] lunch visits from colleges and military recruiters.

The leader also referred to back to the collaboration with Career Compass and how the coaches work with senior students to prepare them for graduation from high school and post-secondary endeavors—entering college, the workforce, or the military.

Throughout her interview, Leader 2 referred to several initiatives the administrative team executes at School B. As she described in her discussion about student motivation, the school leaders begin early to create a mindset of college and career readiness in their students. The ACT is administered to sophomores in the effort to help students develop an understanding of college entrance exams and reinforce the importance of preparing for college. The other initiatives she discussed included:

> We do the dual enrollment. They were trying to get performance arts to integrate with [a community college] so the kids can use performance arts and have a degree, a two-year degree when they leave. So that's a good start to their future so if you feel comfortable doing it at the high school and you graduate, you could go on even further. So that's another thing they're trying to motivate them with. I

> know one thing: They have to have financial aid, and they try to figure it all out. So, they have financial aid night. And I guess that it's…it's good because parents don't like their information shared with the school. So, you have to try to get them to come up and meet with the coaches, and they have someone there to tutor them. In helping them to find it out that night, they can get them all, get it all done, so it can be turned in. So, it helps us get our points, and the child can enter college, be on their way. We have senior night; that's motivating. Ooh! We have boot camp. Boot camp's always fun! We have boot camps for the state test, and we'll have a boot camp for ACT. We have after school tutoring for all grades, and we do it for most of the year starting in October. We'll start that. Guest speakers—a lot of times they're motivational. They do college tours. We'll let the military come in and talk to them. They'll take the ASVAB test.

Theme 8: Parental Involvement

The eighth theme that emerged from this research was parental involvement. Both leaders spoke to the issue of low parental involvement in the urban high school. Parental support can often make the difference in a student's academic success. Parental support can be challenged by the parents' limited education or the reliance upon irreputable sources of information. Leaders note they have to work harder to reach these parents and keep them informed.

Leader 1 spoke of the challenges students experience and how parental involvement is linked to them:

> [Students face] high mobility due to homelessness. [They also] face hunger and food insecurity. Another problem we deal with is parents who are not involved or

> absent. However, we work hard with those parents who are involved and work to support their students and our mission to help them become successful.

Leader 2 addressed several instances of how parents seek to become involved in their students' academic experiences. She described different issues she faces. Some parents are highly involved in instructional practices: "…Some parents want their kids to take the ACT in the 8th grade, or they may want them to take it in the 9th grade. It may be way before we require them as juniors to take the ACT." As she discussed the strategies used to motivate students, Leader 2 addressed how parents have become involved in supporting their students. Specifically, she referred to 8th graders taking Algebra I, and how parents became involved:

> You know, she (the teacher) just beefed them up and you would've thought they could obtain the world, the way she did it. And parents started bragging! 'Your child is not…they're not in the honors class? ('Cause she (the teacher) called it the honors class.) The honors class? In high school? Really? Why not?' They really started to buy into it.

Leader 2 shared an instance during her discussion of giving teacher support and feedback that modeled to teachers how to solicit parental involvement:

> We have grade-level meetings where we pull them in and we discuss… If it's a 9th grade meeting, then all the core teachers from the 9th grade come in and we talk about things that are going on with that student. So, if somebody's having problems with little Johnny, and maybe they're having problems in one class but not another class. So, it gives the teachers a chance to see what works for you. Sometimes, talking about some of the things that students do—it's not talking

> about them in a bad way. It's talking about them in relation so they can be helped. And that's what's all about. And sometimes it really does work. Or sometimes, it'll come up, 'Well I had that problem with his sister, but if you call dad, he'll come up and you won't have that problem anymore.' Make sure you talk to him and sometimes dad will come up and that will help. He'll meet with you and after that, that'll be all she wrote. Whereas if you've been calling mom, and that's the one he prefers you call, but daddy's really the disciplinarian, call him that one time instead of mom. You'll find out all these things…

Leader 2 also discussed challenges that parents face, and how they (can) impact student motivation:

> Uneducated—that is a challenge for us where the parents only go by the news they hear, which may be word of mouth. It may be on social media—they get a lot of their entertainment and news from [here], and that's not good because it's not always real; it's word on the street. And now we're feeling the effects—the people that won't take the shots or they get the virus and they don't… They'll come to school and continue to be around people because they don't believe they can catch it. But they'll have it and don't think about anybody else or the parents will send them anyway… So that's a big issue. When the parents don't know, it does affect their chance of graduating because they'll depend on the school and they can't really help them. So, it helps them fall behind. When they were at home and they didn't really plan for them to come to school and take the state test, then these kids are in jeopardy of not graduating because they needed the test. So that's

another opportunity for them to take the test that has failed. They've fallen behind.

Theme 9: Community Partnerships

The ninth theme emerged from this study was community partnerships. Both leaders utilize members from the local community to partner with their school. These partners share with students their knowledge and expertise, and serve as yet another resource to prepare students for graduation and life beyond high school. Community partners share insight and guidance and are able to motivate students because they serve as role models of professions that the students seek to enter. The partners also provide services to students who may lack motivation, in the effort to re-direct and help them gain focus on the importance of staying in high school and earning a diploma.

Leader 1 addressed how School A collaborates with community partners:

> We collaborate with community members and organizations that help motivate and expose our students to various opportunities throughout high school and after. We partner with local businesses to help students get jobs and gain skills that will serve them for a lifetime. We work with our students who may be in transition due to homeliness. We've had students become homeless because of their parents' financial struggles, they've lost their home in a fire…we try to protect and help our babies as much as we can. We have a school clothing closet so students in need can privately pick out clothes, shoes, hygiene items…whatever they need. Our partners in the community—local churches, businesses, the universities, members of the Greek organizations—they give us huge support on behalf of our students.

Leader 2 also discussed how School B partners with members of the community to support students:

> We get private donations to help us with uniforms. There's an organization that helps with shoes, so kids won't be made fun of for the shoes or the uniforms when they don't have fresh ones. We'll get a little note that says 'Hey, look around and see if anyone looks needy of shoes.' We even look for donations to help with the ACT, to help our 10th graders take the test. We want them to take it a little bit earlier. We do Miles for Smiles, where the dentist will come in and get their teeth straight. They do Talent Search through [university's name].

Leader 2 elaborated on how community partners are an essential part of helping students prepare for college and career readiness:

> We do job fairs…career fairs. We bring in colleges for that. So, when they see what you can do with a degree, a lot of times, it turns them around. Uh, I think this year for the first time we're planning a…it's a career fair, but it's an alumni career fair. To get students to know that it's [school's name] 50th year and so the alumni are trying to do a lot of different activities to give back to the school. So [on] the first day of school they had put out…you know how they have that big happy birthday banner, they put out in front of the school 'Happy birthday (*school's name*),' a cake, and they had alumni members, as the kids got off the bus—they sang happy birthday to them. So as a motivation, you're not the last, you're here to motivate, to keep our school going. So, that's our community trying to give back and so when they do this career fair, it's to show that "Hey, we came from right where you are and look where we are." They have quite a few,

> they have lots of successful people come through, but kids don't really know them or they can't relate to them. 'Cause if you ask them, what do you wanna be? All they know is a basketball player or a football player or a hairstylist. And it's nothing wrong with being a hairstylist. In fact, I pay a lot of money out on mine. But you gotta [have to] know how to run your business; else you'll always end up in your home running your beauty shop. So, just…the business parts of it, but kids are not told that or not taught it, but once they see it, you know, where they can go. So you're trying to get to the educational line, but just use what you have. And you can graduate and you can go out in the world. Nobody says you have to go to college; there are some good things out there. Just finish—get your high school diploma.

Summary

This research examined the leadership practices of two urban high school leaders, and how those practices influence students to become and remain motivated to graduate from high school. The research revealed that the leaders of the schools are committed to empowering their students for success. The leaders recognize that reaching students to motivate and encourage them to engage requires establishing and maintaining relationships. Leaders must also provide instructional as well as emotional guidance. The leaders implement instructional practices that support the academic needs of their students and facilitate rigorous instruction. Teachers are given support and feedback to enhance instructional practices. The leaders utilize data from multiple sources and thoroughly analyze it to discern students' strengths and determine what instructional supports that are needed. Multiple themes emerged from the interviews with the school

leaders. The interviews showed that the themes are intricately linked to one another. As school leaders implement practices, these practices overlap and influence numerous aspects of students' academic and personal experiences. Chapter 5 provides an-depth analysis of these findings.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

This qualitative study examined the practices urban high school leaders implement to decrease student dropout, increase student motivation, and keep students engaged in the academic experience until they earn high school diplomas. Students who drop out of high school develop issues that affect them socially, economically, and physically. These issues not only affect the dropout; they place a strain on society-at-large. High school dropouts cost U.S. taxpayers billions in earnings and lost taxpayer revenue, further stimulating a cycle of poverty.

This research was conducted under the scope of Ryan and Deci's Motivation Theory and Burns' Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Two urban high school leaders agreed to participate in the study. Using a standard interview protocol consisting of 14 questions, each leader elaborated upon the strategies, instructional planning, and the use of resources in daily school operations. Multiple themes emerged from the research. The discussion of findings reflects the responses given by the study participants in conjunction with these themes and examines how they answer the research questions.

Finding 1: Early and consistent initiatives by school leaders stimulate students' motivation, self-determination, and self-efficacy to succeed.

The efforts taken by the school leaders re-direct students' initiative to engage in classroom instruction. Students who show progress may recognize that it is occurring because they are receiving the necessary academic supports. This recognition increases self-efficacy, which stimulate students' self-determination and ultimately increase motivation to persist in learning until they earn a high school diploma. At School B, students enrolled in Algebra I have an early opportunity to earn high school credit. This stimulates students' self-efficacy and self-determination that they can potentially graduate high school on an earlier timeframe, motivating them to remain engaged in learning.

Findings from previous research show mixed results. In a 2008 study, Leithwood and Jantzi found that transformational leadership has a significant effect on teacher satisfaction and organizational health. Additionally, they found transformational leadership to be related to student achievement. In a 2002 quantitative study, researcher D. A. Blatt found a significant relationship between transformational leadership and school climate ($r= 0.569$, $p< 0.01$). This relationship was further supported by research conducted by Marzano et al. (2005). These findings, although encouraging, do not provide adequate detail of leadership practices to establish a connection to student success.

Sebastian and Allensworth (2012) sought to examine the influence of principals in high school classrooms, specifically in urban school settings. The results showed that, despite the increased complexity of high school leadership, high school principals still made a difference. These findings reflect the need for further research on the link between school leadership and increased student motivation.

Finding 2: School leaders who form and maintain relationships with their students facilitate motivation and engagement.

School leaders invest time and energy into their students because they can appreciate the anticipated outcome for them. Students need to feel valued; they must feel that someone cares about them. When students recognize that someone believes their ideas, thoughts, and opinions have merit, they become motivated because they can see that they have the necessary support to accomplish their academic responsibilities. Making an emotional connection with students and relating to them on their level creates a shift in their mindset. Knowing that someone is expecting the best of them creates a shift in self-efficacy. When self-efficacy is increased, students become determined to achieve the goals set they have personally set or those they believe have been established for them. This generates the capacity to plan for the future because students believe they can attain what may lie ahead—college, career, or military service. School leaders who form and maintain strong relationships with their students ultimately influence students' self-determination and motivate them to graduate from high school.

The findings of the current study are supported by prior research. Evans-Brown (2015) conducted a study of two urban high schools in New York to establish a link between school leadership and dropout prevention programs, and how this collaboration affected student dropout. The study also included a sampling of urban high school students at risk of dropping out to identify what influenced them to stay in school. The researcher found in her study that the practices of the school leader played a critical role in preventing student dropout. School leaders who made a proactive effort to motivate

students and encourage them to remain engaged until graduation found their efforts to be successful.

The study results also showed that students who felt school leaders cared about them and their outcomes were more subject to pursuing initiatives of dropout prevention. A separate study conducted by Brown (2012) of two inner-city high schools in Alabama sought to address the role of school leadership in preventing student dropout. The findings showed two outcomes:

(1) Consistency in school leadership is a vital component in student dropout prevention;

(2) The school leader does not serve as the single agent of change. There must be a support system among school leaders, teachers, parents, and community leaders to direct students toward engagement and persist until graduation.

While this study did not specifically address forming relationships, the inference exists that school leaders who form and maintain relationships with their students facilitate motivation to remain engaged in the academic experience until they graduate from high school.

Finding 3: Guidance that addresses the diverse needs of learners contributes to students' academic achievement.

School leaders recognize that students at risk of dropping out may face issues on many fronts—academic, home and family, or societal. They must handle these students with care. Shifting these students to a higher level of academic achievement means students must receive varied facets of support. Leaders know that they alone do not have

the capacity to fulfill this vast responsibility to their students. Support must be solicited from within the school system and from external entities who hold a vested interest in the outcomes of these students. The partnerships Leader 2 and School B hold with the local non-profit and the behavior management agency exemplify this effort. Students in need of services from the non-profit too often walk the path leading to the *school to prison* pipeline. Identifying these students' specific needs and deficits, providing support, and re-directing them toward classroom engagement can increase their self-efficacy and self-determination, catapulting them closer to the goal of earning a high school diploma. The behavior management agency works with individuals and families with mental health issues or who do not have the home stability desired and necessary to facilitate functioning at optimal level in the home or school settings. Students who lack the capacity to cope with academic and personal challenges or properly express themselves become distracted and are less likely to be motivated to engage in classroom instruction. Learning to appropriately channel feelings and address mental health concerns are key elements in helping students to be more effective in their academic development. Nurturing these students toward their potential stimulates self-determination because they learn that they have the ability to perform and seek to maintain the new level of achievement. Students are thereby motivated, and strive to achieve the goal of graduation from high school.

The literature review revealed no findings directly pertaining to student guidance. In a 2015 study on transformational leadership and school culture among teachers, Quinn et al. found that school leaders could create a school culture motivating teachers to work collaboratively to improve the overall performance of the school. The inspiration and

motivation of a principal developed the growth of their followers to become change agents, which in turn influenced student achievement. Although transformational leadership highlighted the need to inspire followers to increased energy and commitment, research showed creating an inspired vision and motivating others was not enough to produce results that led to increased student achievement (Hutton, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2017). More research showing a direct correlation between guidance from school leaders and increased student achievement is needed.

Finding 4: Data analysis and providing teacher feedback facilitate instructional practices, which guide student motivation and engagement.

Data analysis is an essential element in shaping instructional practices. School leaders must be aware of where students are academically in order to guide them toward desired levels of performance. Developing an awareness of students' abilities and deficits helps school leaders provide the necessary instructional supports and resources to teachers, who have a direct link to students. When teachers have the appropriate supports and resources available for instruction, they are able to create and teach lessons that stimulate self-efficacy and engagement. When these elements are sparked within students and remain consistent, students become motivated to perform. Their motivation feeds self-determination; hence the goal of graduating from high school is fulfilled.

Limited research supports these findings. Sahin et al. (2016) conducted a case study which examined the data of chronically absent primary, secondary, and high school students, and how the absenteeism led to subsequent dropout. Data from interviews with 64 principals were organized into significant categories regarding absentee students and dropouts, including influences from family factors, administrator and teacher behaviors,

school setting, students themselves, and environmental factors. The researchers highlighted how daily attendance significantly impacted academics, test scores, graduation rates, college acceptance, and career opportunities. This study showed that principals considered all the environmental elements impacting a student's success. The findings revealed correlations in the answers that encompassed school, home, and community. This research reflects the importance of data analysis in school leaders' decision-making. However, more specific research on this topic is needed.

Finding 5: School leaders' efforts and initiatives hold a critical role in students' transitioning to life beyond high school.

The ultimate goal high school leaders set for their students is that they be empowered for success and have the necessary skills to enable them to enter college, pursue a career, or honorably serve in the military. These leaders recognize that it is not enough to want this goal for their students; they must empower students to want success for themselves. A mindset for success must be created or stimulated. Collaborating with individuals and organizations that can help prepare students for entry into post-secondary endeavors helps students visualize their potential and the opportunities that are available to them. Students become determined to achieve because they desire to become part of the new entity, whether it is college, the workforce, or the military. The determination to reach this destination motivates students to persist until they graduate from high school.

The study conducted by Sebastian and Allensworth (2012) showed that the influence of high school leaders makes a difference upon their students. The findings also revealed that high school principals strongly affected student achievement by establishing safe, college-focused environments. These college-focused environments meant that the

most effective high school principals were able to influence the classroom through their support of teachers in their academic demands of students and in their support for orderly classrooms. This study reflects the importance of school leaders setting standards for academic excellence and providing ongoing support for students and teachers. It does not discuss any focus upon students who require career preparation for direct entry into the workforce after high school. While it is necessary to engage students and prepare them for college, the needs of all students must be considered to help them become motivated to graduate and transition to life beyond high school. Further research on the correlation between school leadership and student preparation for college and career success is needed.

Finding 6: School leaders recognize that there is a correlation between parental involvement and students' academic engagement and success.

Parents entrust their most valued assets to educators daily: their children. The importance of educating and sharing with students the knowledge and skills necessary to be successful in life is not lost upon school leaders. These leaders know that these awesome responsibilities cannot be accomplished in isolation. Parental support is a critical component. For a myriad of reasons, parents become encumbered by challenges in life. These challenges can and often deflect their attention from their children; they become less involved in their students' academic engagement or abdicate responsibility altogether. As a result, school leaders assume the task of ensuring students have the supports needed to be emotionally stable and successfully engage in learning. These practices are essential keeping students engaged in the learning experience and motivated to graduate from high school. Parents who are consistently involved in their students'

education make the effort because they know that partnering with school leaders help students become successful. For this reason, school leaders consistently solicit parental support and involvement.

Some research supports these findings. Brown-Wright et al. (2013) conducted a study which examined the association among home–school dissonance, amotivation, and classroom disruptive behavior among 309 high school juniors and seniors at two urban high schools in the southern region of the United States. Participants completed a 28-item self-report measure from the Academic Motivation Scale—College Version. The researchers examined whether one aspect of the classroom environment—home–school dissonance—was statistically associated with reports of classroom disruptive behaviors among low-income, rural and urban high school students. The data revealed that dissonance between home and school was distinct among cultural values; however, the data collected do not reflect what those values are. While this study does not specifically mention parental involvement, the use of the term "home" infers influence in some capacity from the home upon the students' learning experience. In her research, Evans-Brown (2015) noted that the school leaders and dropout prevention program leaders lamented about the lack of parental involvement. However, in the student sampling, the student consensus was that their parents were very involved in their high school career. This dynamic reveals a sharp contrast in perception of parental involvement.

Finding 7: School leaders recognize that preparing students for success is a collaborative effort, and external support from community partners is important.

The African proverb “It takes a village to raise a child” is most applicable with community partnerships. School leaders in the current study collaborate with individuals, businesses, and organizations in their local communities to create a network of support for their schools. These partners provide a physical presence, financial and emotional support, and academic enrichment where needed. As with parental involvement, the school leaders recognize that community partners can provide support and resources that may not be available within the school setting. Community partners have a vested interest in the outcome of students; they recognize that as future adults the responsibilities they will bear, as well as the civic and economic contributions they will make. Individuals and organizations recognize the value of an education and understand the consequences that occur when students do not graduate from high school and earn a diploma (Burrus & Roberts, 2012; Dianda, 2008; Levin & Rouse, 2012). Dropouts cost society in lost income, underemployment, incarceration, and mental health issues (Herbert, 2017). In the effort to prevent these consequences from becoming reality, these stakeholders are sought to provide insight and assistance to school leaders.

The leaders of Schools A and B solicit input from external entities because they provide links to opportunities that prepare students for success during high school and after graduation. Community partners may engage in professions that students seek to attain; thus, the partners model for students the potential for what is possible. Leader 2 spoke to her school’s alumni hosting a career fair with this goal as their vision. Having a visible representative of an aspiration and the ability to form relationships with these persons serve as motivation to persist. The partners have the opportunity to form mentorships with these students, sharing insight on the importance of engaging in

instruction and how it links to being successful in the desired profession. When students recognize their abilities and potential, this motivates them to excel. The school leaders remain cognizant of this shift in students' mindsets, and work to retain the community partnerships in order to reinforce students' self-determination to graduate from high school.

Prior research supports this finding. In her research, Evans-Brown (2015) found that both school leaders held well-established partnerships with community stakeholders. In the study, the school leader at School A actively sought a collaborative leadership style to focus upon students at risk of dropping out. This leader and her administrative team held regularly scheduled meetings with community partners to assess students' needs and determine courses of action that would best fulfill those needs. In the study, both school leaders collaborated with community dropout prevention programs to target students at risk of dropout, strengthen their academic deficiencies, and provide necessary supports to put them on course for high school graduation. While this study demonstrates the value of community partnerships, further study to reinforce this finding is needed.

The findings of this research elicit recommendations for leadership practices and future research. Recommendations for leadership practices are meant to suggest strategies for enhancing instructional practices. These strategies may serve as additional sources of student motivation and reinforcement of self-efficacy, thereby increasing student engagement. Recommendations for future research would suggest solicitation of input from additional school personnel who have direct and more extensive contact with students. These educators would provide insight in another capacity on how to form relationships with students at risk of not graduating, advise on how they connect with

these students, and share practices used that motivate students to engage and persist in the learning process.

Recommendations for Leadership Practices

Recommendation 1

The first recommendation from this study is to implement graduation coaches at campuses studied in this research. Students in urban high schools often have needs that can be more diverse than those of students in suburban high schools. Such needs can be more readily addressed by a graduation coach. The coach is an individual who identifies and works with students in danger of not graduating from high school. Graduation coaches specifically target these students, focusing upon academic deficiencies and/or personal issues that hinder the student from performing at their highest potential. Coaches determine the needs of these students and determine strategies considered to be most effective in helping them improve and re-chart their path toward a diploma.

Two schools in the district of study currently utilize graduation coaches; their efforts are a vital part of the academic success of the student bodies. Considering the hire of coaches at the schools included in this research would serve as an additional asset to the school leaders and enhance the strategies currently being used, ultimately further preparing students for successful lives beyond high school.

Recommendation 2

The second recommendation is to remediate students in areas of deficiency so they more fully engage in classroom instruction. A major contribution to the lack of student motivation is the inability to comprehend material. Some urban high school students suffer academic deficiencies in core areas, including reading and mathematics.

These deficiencies prevent students from fully engaging in classroom instruction. Students with academic deficiencies are at least one grade level below their peers. Unaddressed, students perform minimally or seek to disengage from instruction. Frequently, students are placed in courses designed to prepare them for future careers. However, they disengage because they find it boring. “Boredom” is actually a failure to understand because reading or math skills are insufficient for performance at an optimal level. The strengthening of these skills would increase self-efficacy and self-determination, stimulating students’ desire to engage in learning, complete the goal of high school graduation and prepare for a future career. Implementing reading and math programs that target students’ specific needs would help students embrace the importance of learning.

Recommendations for Future Research

Recommendation 1

The first recommendation is to include classroom teachers and professional school counselors in future research. While this study focused on the practices of urban high school leaders, it should be considered for future studies to include classroom teachers and professional school counselors. These educators also serve as a vital component in the academic development of the high school student. Teachers and counselors often see students on a more frequent basis and have insights into students’ abilities and needs that may extend beyond the immediate reach of the school leader. These educators can contribute valuable information and support toward the motivation of students to engage and provide feedback on hindrances to classroom engagement.

Recommendation 2

The second recommendation is to solicit student input for future research. This study, along with many studies examined by the researcher found responses given from the perspective of the school leader. It is important to seek the narrative of the school leader to discern effective strategies for motivating students to graduate high school. However, it would seem equally important to hear from the individuals who are the target of the leaders' missions: the students. Students are the heart of school operations. Every academic initiative developed is done so for the purpose of teaching students skills that will serve them for a lifetime. However, in striving to serve the students, they are not always heard. Students must be given a voice to share what motivates them to excel and engage, and what prompts them to disengage. Conducting a study on why students lose motivation and would consider dropping out of high school would render invaluable insight into the minds of the youth educators work so diligently to serve. Results yielded have the potential to re-shape the way school leaders serve their students as well as the way teachers teach.

Recommendation 3

The third recommendation is to conduct future research using a mixed-methods study. This research was limited to the study of two urban high schools using a qualitative design. The use of mixed methods employs both qualitative and quantitative approaches. While the qualitative approach enables hearing the voice of the participants through interviews, adding the quantitative approach would enlarge the scope of research. More leaders across more school districts could be included in the research, providing a more expansive breadth of input and experiences. Further, surveys targeting student

motivation, self-determination, and engagement might be included and analyzed to yield data that detail a greater number of strategies and methods used by urban high school leaders to motivate their students to graduate from high school.

Conclusion

High school dropout is a pervasive issue. Students who drop out create ripple effects that personally impact the students; the decision to drop out also permeates school systems and communities with long-term consequences (Burrus & Roberts, 2012; Dianda, 2008; Levin & Rouse, 2012). These effects include, but are not limited to, unemployment, underemployment—typically in minimum wage jobs, reliance on public assistance, criminal activity and incarceration, and increased physical and mental health issues (Herbert, 2017). The school leader bears the responsibility for the success or failure of a school (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2013; Piña, 2020). In urban high schools, this responsibility is greater. As students in these settings can have lower levels of motivation and become decreasingly engaged in the instructional and learning process, they become more subject to drop out of high school (Piña, 2020).

Effective school leaders cultivate the complete learning experience that focuses upon excellence and meet the academic and individual needs of learners. School leaders examine and implement multiple strategies to motivate students to engage in instruction and persist until they graduate from high school. Forming relationships with students is a vital part of increasing student motivation. Data analysis is essential to understanding students' needs and assessing how best to implement rigorous instructional practices. To do this effectively, school leaders must provide their teachers with ongoing support and feedback.

School leaders must also recognize that student support is not limited to the school setting. Soliciting support from parents and community partners is essential to developing students' academic potential; this potential may be targeted toward college, career, or the military.

Based upon the research conducted for this study, teachers, school counselors, and students should be included in future research. Teachers and counselors have daily contact with students and can directly assess their needs. Students can speak directly to their needs and experiences. Additionally, students with academic deficits should be remediated with a specific focus upon their areas of need. Creating an enhanced focus upon these areas would increase students' abilities to engage in classroom instruction. Finally, the use of graduation coaches should be expanded to additional urban high school campuses. These individuals have the skills to target students at risk of dropping out and can incorporate strategies to help motivate students.

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APPENDIX A

HUMAN USE APPROVAL APPLICATION

DEPARTMENT HEAD APPROVAL FORM

TO: Project Directors

FROM: Barbara Talbot, Office of Sponsored Projects
btalbot@latech.edu
318-257-5075 phone
318-257-5079 fax
http://research.latech.edu/

SUBJECT: HUMAN USE COMMITTEE REVIEW

Please submit this page, signed by yourself, and your Department Head or Dean, when submitting a proposal to the Human Use Committee for expedited approval.

Your signatures are stating that you are aware of this proposal and/or survey being conducted, and all aspects of the study comply with the appropriate University Policies and Procedures.

(Print or type below)

Curriculum, Instruction and Leadership
Department

Faculty Member Serving as Principal Investigator (Signature) — Date: 6/29/21

Karura R. York	Ed.D.	6.29.2021
Student Researcher (If applicable)	Academic Program	Date

Dustin M. Hebert, Ph.D.
Department Head Name (Print)

Department Head
(Actual Original Signature Required) — Date: 6/29/21

HUC 21-108

Do you plan to publish this study?	× YES □ NO
Will this study be published by a national organization?	× YES □ NO
Are copyrighted materials involved?	× YES □ NO
Do you have written permission to use copyrighted materials?	× YES □ NO
Researchers must comply with all training requirements from their funding agency.	
Are all Researchers Up to Date on Human Subjects Training? (attach certificates) Training is on www.citiprogram.org	× YES □ NO × YES □ NO
Do any Special Permissions Need to be attached? (School district, data holder, Agency)	×YES □ NO

STUDY/PROJECT INFORMATION FOR HUMAN SUBJECTS COMMITTEE

Describe your study/project in detail for the Human Subjects Committee. Please include the following information.

TITLE: Leadership Practices in Urban High Schools that Decrease Dropout Rates

PROJECT DIRECTOR(S): Karura R. York

EMAIL: kpr007@latech.edu; kraiyork@aol.com

PHONE: (318) 347.7056

DEPARTMENT(S): Curriculum, Instruction and Leadership

PURPOSE OF STUDY/PROJECT: The purpose of this study is to investigate the practices urban school leaders implement in daily school operations, how they form relationships with their students, and how these practices and relationships affect the student initiative to engage in the high school experience and earn a diploma.

SUBJECTS: The subjects will be four high school principals. Participants selected serve as leaders of urban high schools in the district selected for the study.

PROCEDURE: I will conduct a semi-structured interview with four selected participants. After consent is granted from the district and participants, the participants will answer 14 open and closed-ended questions related to their daily leadership practices. The interview questions are used with permission by the author, Dr. Ady A. Piña. Interviews are anticipated to last 30-60 minutes, but may run shorter/longer than the designated time. The interviews will be audio-recorded to ensure accuracy, and will be transcribed to authenticate their statements. Transcripts will be verified against the original recordings. Data collected will be analyzed to determine a relationship. Interviews will occur over a three-week span. Interview transcripts will be preserved by the researcher on a password-protected computer; she will have sole access. Interview records will be destroyed one month after completion of the researcher's degree.

INSTRUMENTS AND MEASURES TO INSURE PROTECTION OF CONFIDENTIALITY, ANONYMITY: Data will be de-identified, and pseudonyms/codes will be assigned to participants, the school and school district to protect identification. Further, I will utilize an Interview Protocol to direct the interviews.

RISKS/ALTERNATIVE TREATMENTS: Each participant will be informed that Louisiana Tech is unable to offer financial compensation. There is no inherent risk involved in participating in the study; Louisiana Tech will not assume costs of treatment should any injury occur during research.

BENEFITS/COMPENSATION: None

SAFEGUARDS OF PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING: This study involves no treatment or physical contact. All information collected from the interviews will be kept strictly confidential. Only the researcher will be able to access the interviews. Participants who feel any anxiety from the interview process may contact Dr. Dawn Basinger, Louisiana Tech University, College of Education, Associate Dean at 318-257-2977.

HUMAN SUBJECTS CONSENT FORM

The following is a brief summary of the project in which you are asked to participate. Please read this information before signing the statement below. You must be of legal age or must be co-signed by parent or guardian to participate in this study.

TITLE OF PROJECT: Leadership Practices in Urban High Schools that Decrease Dropout Rates

PURPOSE OF STUDY/PROJECT: The purpose of this study is to investigate the practices urban school leaders implement in daily school operations, how they form relationships with their students, and how these practices and relationships affect the student initiative to engage in the high school experience and earn a diploma.

SUBJECTS: The subjects will be four high school principals. Participants selected serve as leaders of urban high schools in the district selected for the study. PROCEDURE: I will conduct a semi-structured interview with four selected participants. After consent is granted from the district and participants, the participants will answer 14 open and closed-ended questions related to their daily leadership practices. The interview questions are used with permission by the author, Dr. Ady A. Piña. Interviews are anticipated to last 30-60 minutes, but may run shorter/longer than the designated time. The interviews will be audio-recorded to ensure accuracy, and will be transcribed to authenticate their statements. Transcripts will be verified against the original recordings. Data collected will be analyzed to determine a relationship. Interviews will occur over a three-week span. Interview transcripts will be preserved by the researcher on a password-protected computer; she will have sole access. Interviews will be destroyed one month after completion of the researcher's degree.

BENEFITS/COMPENSATION: None

RISKS, DISCOMFORTS, ALTERNATIVE TREATMENTS: The participant understands that Louisiana Tech is not able to offer financial compensation nor to absorb the costs of medical treatment should you be injured as a result of participating in this research.

The following disclosure applies to all participants using online survey tools: This server may collect information and your IP address indirectly and automatically via "cookies".

The participant understands that Louisiana Tech is not able to offer financial compensation nor to absorb the costs of medical treatment should you be injured as a result of participating in this research.
The following disclosure applies to all participants using online survey tools: This server may collect information and your IP address indirectly and automatically via "cookies".

I, _____ attest with my signature that I have read and understood the following description of the study, "(Leadership Practices in Urban High Schools that Decrease Dropout Rates)", and its purposes and methods. I understand that my (Or my Child's) participation in this research is strictly voluntary and my (or my child's) participation or refusal to participate in this study will not affect my relationship with Louisiana Tech University or my grades in any way. Further, I understand that I may withdraw (my child) at any time or refuse to answer any questions without penalty. Upon completion of the study, I understand that the results will be freely available to me upon request. I understand that the results of the material will be confidential, accessible only to the principal investigators, myself, or a legally appointed representative. I have not been requested to waive nor do I waive any of my rights related to participating in this study.

Signature of Participant or Guardian_____ Date _____

Name of child if Applicable_____

CONTACT INFORMATION: The principal experimenters listed below may be reached to Answer questions about the research, subjects' rights, or related matters.

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Karura R. York – kpr007@latech.edu

CO-INVESTIGATOR: Dawn Basinger – dbasing@latech.edu

Members of the Human Use Committee of Louisiana Tech University may also be contacted if a problem cannot be discussed with the experimenters:

Dr. Richard Kordal, Director, Office of Intellectual Property & Commercialization
Ph: (318) 257-2484, Email: rkordal@latech.edu

APPENDIX B

PROPOSAL CONSENT LETTER

CADDO PARISH SCHOOL BOARD

1961 MIDWAY STREET • SHREVEPORT, LOUISIANA 71130-2000
AREA CODE 318 • Telephone 603-6300 • Fax 631-5241

Theodis Lamar Goree, Ph.D.
Superintendent

July 7, 2021

Karura Rainey York
Doctoral Candidate at Louisiana Tech University

Dear Mrs. York:

I commend you on your efforts to pursue an advanced degree. Your study entitled *"Leadership Practices in Urban High Schools that Decrease Dropout Rates"* within the Caddo Parish School District has been approved.

Your project will be coordinated through the office of Melissa Mainiero, Director-Accountability and Grants, via e-mail at mmainiero@caddoschools.org.

Research participation of Caddo employees is strictly on a voluntary basis.

Approval of the research study does not mandate/require Caddo employees to participate.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Keith Burton
Chief Academic Officer

C: Melissa Mainiero, Director – Accountability and Grants

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Protocol

(Permission granted by Dr. Ady A. Piña, Author)

1) What is your name, position and how long have you been working in this school?

2) What is the mission and vision of your school?

3) What is the graduation rate of your school?

4) What is the graduation rate of the economically disadvantaged students of your school?

5) What challenges do your economically disadvantaged students experience that possibly affect their chances of graduating?

6) What leadership strategies and styles are you using to motivate economically disadvantaged students graduate from high school?

7) What policies, procedures and programs you have to help motivate economically disadvantaged students successfully graduate from high school?

8) What policies, procedures, and programs are assessed in relation to motivating economically disadvantaged students successfully graduate from high school?

9) What data is used to drive decisions to motivate economically disadvantaged students successfully graduate from high school?

10) What instructional strategies were imparted to teachers to motivate economically disadvantaged students?

11) How is evidence of instructional practice regularly analyzed?

12) What events and activities were created or support to help motivate economically students graduate from high school?

13) What resources were allocated to motivate economically disadvantaged students successfully graduate from high school?

14) Are there any other features you would like to share that you and your school do to help economically disadvantage students graduate?

APPENDIX D

HUMAN USE EXEMPTION LETTER

LOUISIANA TECH UNIVERSITY

Office of Sponsored Projects

EXEMPTION MEMORANDUM

TO: Ms. Karura Rainey York and Dr. Dawn Basinger

FROM: Dr. Richard Kordal, Director of Intellectual Properties
rkordal@latech.edu

SUBJECT: HUMAN USE COMMITTEE REVIEW

DATE: June 30, 2021

TITLE: "Leadership Practices in Urban High Schools that Decrease Dropout Rates"

NUMBER: HUC 21-108

According to the Code of Federal Regulations Title 45 Part 46, your research protocol is determined to be exempt from full review under the following exemption category(s): 46.104 (a)(d)(1)(2)(i)(ii).

(a) Unless otherwise required by law or by department or agency heads, research activities in which the only involvement of human subjects will be in one or more of the categories in paragraph (d) of this section are exempt from the requirements of this policy, except that such activities must comply with the requirements of this section and as specified in each category.

(d) Except as described in paragraph (a) of this section, the following categories of human subjects research are exempt from this policy:

(1) Research, conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings that specifically involves normal educational practices that are not likely to adversely impact students' opportunity to learn required educational content or the assessment of educators who provide instruction. This includes most research on regular and special education instructional strategies, and research on the effectiveness of or the comparison among instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management methods.

(2) Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

(i) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects;

(ii) Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation

Thank you for submitting your Human Use Proposal to Louisiana Tech's Institutional Review Board.

APPENDIX E

CODEBOOK

First Cycle Codebook

Assessments	Instruments administered to measure students' knowledge, either by a classroom teacher or state entity.
Communication	The exchange of information or ideas via verbal, written, or electronic means.
Community Partners	Individuals or organizations within a local community near a school that have a vested interested in the success of that school's students.
Data	A rendering of facts obtained from a source (assessments, demographics, etc.)
Engagement	The process of actively participating in a process or classroom instruction.
Feedback	Information provided in response a question asked or observation conducted in a classroom setting.
Guidance	The provision of academic and emotional input, direction and support.
Monitoring and intervention	The ongoing overseeing of student or teacher performance and the provision of feedback, resources and supports as needed.
Parental Engagement/Involvement	Participation by and support given from parents/guardians of a school's policies, procedures and norms to school leaders and classroom teachers/staff.
Preparation for college and career	The provision of knowledge, tools, and resources to students to ensure their readiness for post-secondary instruction or entry into the workforce upon high school graduation.
Reinforcement	The emphasis upon increasing knowledge of a concept or skill through the consistent repetition of instruction or application.
Relationships	The connection between individuals, (i.e., a school leader and student) whereby a level or trust is initiated, an exchange of communication and information occurs, and support is consistently provided.
Remediation	The provision of academic supports to a struggling learner to increase strength in knowledge of a concept or ability to perform a specific skill.
Rigor	The level of intensity given to instruction or academic process designed to stimulate or increase student engagement.
Teacher Support	Providing access to feedback, resources, and tools needed to help a teacher perform at an optimum level for instructing and engaging students.