

*A Phenomenological Exploration of Academic Re-engagement
for High School Completion*

by
Viva L. White

A DISSERTATION
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Social Welfare
Wurzweiler School of Social Work
Yeshiva University
New York

May 2, 2022

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| Chapter One: Dissertation Overview..... | 5 |
| Chapter Two: The Study Problem..... | 9 |
| Subheading A The contributing factors that influenced decisions to leave high school before completion | |
| Subheading B Link between leaving high school and service-learning | |
| Subheading C Social work involvement | |
| Chapter Three: Literature Review | 14 |
| Subheading A Educational processes and outcomes | |
| Subheading B Service-learning programs | |
| Subheading C Redefining graduation | |
| Subheading D Conclusion | |
| Chapter Four: Theoretical Framework | 39 |
| Subheading A Resilience Theory | |
| Subheading B Critical Race Theory | |
| Subheading C Systems Ecological Theory | |
| Chapter Five: The Research Questions and Related Hypotheses | 43 |
| Chapter Six: Methodology | 46 |
| Subheading A Data and subjects | |
| Subheading B Procedures | |
| Subheading C Measurement | |
| Subheading D The interview guide | |
| Subheading E Data and analysis | |
| Subheading F Ethical consideration and connections to social work | |
| Chapter Seven: Results | 57 |
| Subheading A Demographics | |
| Subheading B Themes | |
| Subheading C Individual themes and sub-themes | |
| Subheading D Staff group themes and sub-themes | |
| Subheading E Individual and staff group shared themes | |
| Chapter Eight: Discussion | 79 |
| Subheading A Demographics | |
| Subheading B Themes | |
| Subheading C Duration | |
| Subheading D Limitations | |
| Subheading E Conclusion | |
| References | 90 |
| Appendix A IYO Research Study Permission Letter | 96 |
| Appendix B Participation Agreement | 97 |
| Appendix C Participant Demographic Sheet | 100 |
| Appendix D The Interview Script | 102 |

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I dedicate this research study to my three sons, Anthony, Ramon, and Malcolm, for their understanding of the times I was "busy working" and giving my time and attention to completing this study. Secondly, this is dedicated to my family and circle of friends who encouraged, supported, and reminded me to stay in the fight to ensure I finished strong. Thirdly, to Carolyn Wallace, founder of the International Youth Organization, and the participants, thank you for your willingness and openness to share a part of your life story with me.

It was my advocacy, activism, and organizing on behalf of the children in the United States public education system attending schools in marginalized, under-resourced, underserved, impoverished, and violent communities that inspired me to pursue this effort of acquiring a Ph.D. in Social Welfare. Upon its completion, I am reminded of these words attributed to Frederick Douglass, "It is easier to build strong children than repair broken men." I will continue fighting for educational issues from this foundational premise.

Abstract

This study uses a qualitative methodology in a phenomenological exploration of academic re-engagement for high school completion. An investigation was conducted of those who left before graduation and chose a service learning program for high school completion. New Jersey Youth Corp members (n=3) and alumni (n=12) participated in individual interviews and the staff (n=6) participated in a focus group. Resilience Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Systems Ecological Theory constitute the theoretical framework. The study sought to answer: "What were the personal lived experiences of high school students who chose to complete high school using a service learning program?" Participants shared the challenges of their lives with attending school. Findings include that some said it was boring, teachers considered it a job, and support was missing to address their challenges outside of school so they could remain in the academic environment until graduation. The social work profession ultimately is the profession to advocate for public education students in marginalized, underserved, impoverished, and under-resourced communities to policy makers and legislators.

The committee for this doctoral dissertation proposal consisted of
Advisor's Name Dr. Ronnie Glassman
Committee Member Dr. Stefanie Pilkay
Committee Member Dr. Okaikor Aryee-Price

Chapter One: Dissertation Overview

This study examined academic re-engagement and the choice of service learning for high school completion. This was a qualitative study, as defined by Creswell (2007), "to hear silenced voices...share their stories" (p. 40). Data were collected from New Jersey Youth Corps (NJYC) current program members and alumni at International Youth Organization (IYO) in Newark, NJ using individual interviews and a staff focus group. The data, individual interviews and staff focus group, were analyzed using Microsoft Excel and Google Sheets (Payne, 2017).

The research participants were NJYC current members who were 18 years old and NJYC alumni between the ages of 18 and 48. IYO granted permission to the researcher in August 2020. There were nine questions asked of the interview participants and five questions were asked of the NJYC staff. Data were gathered via telephone and in-person face-to-face interviews with a cohort of three current members and 12 alumni from the NJYC. Also, an in-person face-to-face focus group interview was conducted with six staff members. For this type of research method, it was an appropriate sample size to gather data for analysis. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention coronavirus guidelines were followed during the in-person face-to-face interviews.

The main question the research sought to answer was, "What were the contributing factors to completing high school by acquiring a GED or high school diploma while participating in a service-learning program?" This study asked: "Why do students leave high school before graduation?" and "What were the personal lived experiences of high school students who chose to complete high school using a service-learning program?" The research question inquired about leaving high

school before graduation, resilience, academic re-engagement, and service learning as a choice for high school completion. The qualitative method led to findings that were useful to the social work profession. These findings were participants sharing their lived experiences to leave high school, academic re-engagement, and use of service learning for high school completion. Studying students who left school before graduation and their choice of service learning for high school completion has little history although the social work profession has a history of working with students who are determined to be disabled under special education regulations or 504 plans according to the *Rehabilitation Act of 1973* which protects students from discrimination based on their disability (Rehabilitation Act, 1973). This research was consistent with the NASW Code of Ethics (NASW, 2017) as it came from the values of dignity and worth of the person and service.

First and foremost, the social worker aims to provide services by helping people address the social problems they experience. A social worker treats each person they encounter respectfully to resolve conflicts between the client and broader society. Self-determination is enumerated in the NASW Code of Ethics (NASW, 2017) as 1.02 clarifies the social worker supporting the client with achieving identified goals. The researcher and others must better understand the choices individuals determine for themselves.

The topic of this dissertation was essential for others to better understand those individuals who left high school before graduation, re-engaged academically, and chose service learning for high school completion as well as the role of resiliency as both a motivator and a protective factor. The topic, research question, and qualitative

approach fell within the purview of social work concerns. The personal lived experiences of students in the study who left high school before graduation were found to be due to environmental factors. The study also showed that a service learning program facilitated high school completion. Leaving high school before graduation is an event that creates barriers to upward mobility; therefore, the lack of an individual's upward mobility has a domino effect on their interaction with various societal institutions. The societal institutions are education, labor, health, and family (Bloom & Haskins, 2010; Campbell, 2015; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007; Hendron & Kearney, 2016; Suh & Suh, 2007; Swanson, 2007). This phenomenon was appropriate to study by a member of the social work profession. The participants shared their own lived experiences to humanize the issue (Barrat & Berliner, 2016; Schwartz, 2014). The contributing factors of individuals leaving high school before graduation, re-engaging academically, and choosing service learning for high school completion were essential to share. The qualitative method provided a manner for the participants to share their personal lived experiences.

The main challenge related to informed consent was the New Jersey Youth Corps members' willingness to participate in the study and their understanding of the impact of their participation. There were some limitations to the study in that it only included those in a service learning program who acquired a GED. The study did not include other students who left high before graduating. Despite the limitations, the qualitative method gave the study a viable method for examining participants' shared personal lived experiences.

The research was poised to give examples of individuals who shared their lived experiences of adversity and resilience, put forth

an effort to overcome struggles despite various obstacles to progress, and demonstrated awareness of available options for completing their high school education. The study also verified the identification of social supports to complete high school and action steps taken to complete high school by attending a service learning program. Increased investment in the NJYC program will provide sustainability for continued success that benefits all stakeholders, such as teachers, legislators, government, community, and the research participants themselves.

Historically, the profession of social work has worked with people who were marginalized and considered insignificant. This study can help social workers formulate and implement change on the micro, mezzo, and macro practice levels. Macro social work practice includes fostering systemic change in communities, organizations, and government. Change on the mezzo practice level involves change within institutions and managing social organizations. Micro level social work practice makes changes directly on the individual, personal level. Social work involvement in education facilitates change related to individuals leaving high school before graduation and their choice of a service learning program for high school completion (Bloom, 2010; Hendron & Kearney, 2016). The research participants expressed that support from professionals was needed to help them implement and complete their service learning program.

Chapter Two: The Study Problem

This section will discuss the problem to be studied which focuses on certain students who leave high school before graduation, and those who choose service learning as a course of study leading to high school completion. The researcher describes some of the lived experiences of

individuals who leave high school before graduation and the risk factors that contribute to leaving high school before completion. Next, racial demographics of high school completion in New Jersey are presented. The need for social work involvement to support the marginalized and the resolution for leaving high school before graduation is also discussed.

Contributing Factors that Influence Decisions to Leave High School before Completion

The contributing factors to leaving high school before completion are inequitable resource allocation, insufficient investment in academic material, lack of highly qualified teachers, and minimal support to address issues that interfere with academic success (Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007; Hendron & Kearney, 2016; Suh & Suh, 2007).

There appear to be multiple factors associated with students leaving high school before graduation. These students are negatively impacted in every social institution such as health, education, and labor with a subsequent domino effect leading to under employment and loss of upward social mobility (Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007; Kim, 2013). According to the literature, urban areas and communities that experience violence were the most affected by the problem of those who leave high school before completion and the students who live in the affected communities also had poor academic performance and low socioeconomic status (Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007). Additionally, students who reside in urban communities experiencing violence are disproportionately Black or Latino (Goldner, Peters, Richards, & Pearce, 2013; Jobs for the Future, 2014; Thompson & Massat, 2005).

The *New Jersey Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate* data are clear for 2020. Ninety-one percent of all students who started the 9th grade

graduated from high school statewide (New Jersey Department of Education, 2021). However, when looking at the percentages of students in New Jersey who left high school during 2020, the largest are Black and Hispanic, with 14% Black and 15% Hispanic students leaving high school before completion.

While the overall Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate was high, when race is considered, there are disparities in the graduation rate within New Jersey. By way of illustration, the 2020 data from the City of Newark, which has a majority Black population, showed Newark had a graduation rate of 81%, far lower than the overall 91% rate for New Jersey (New Jersey Department of Education, 2021).

Link between Leaving High School and Service Learning

High school presents academic challenges due to poor preparation for it by earlier educational experiences along with insufficient support for students, so some choose to leave before graduation (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Burke-Morison, 2006). While there are several avenues for students to complete high school, some students who leave high school before graduation choose service learning for high school completion (Bloom, 2010). Enrollment in a service learning program supports students' learning in a non-traditional fashion.

Service learning provides a self-determined alternative for high school completion. It includes simultaneous academic instruction and training (Bloom, 2010). Intellectual learning happens in a classroom setting while practical learning happens outside of the classroom. The instruction in a service learning program is tailored towards specific academic subject areas based on the needs of the individual (NJYC Handbook, 2018). Training provides a change from the academic routine by way of the individual helping the community. Involvement in this

type of program allows one to focus on learning intellectually and practically. Engagement in learning and training simultaneously meets the needs of students who prefer non-traditional educational models.

Social Work Involvement

Historically, the profession of social work has worked with people who were marginalized and considered insignificant. When social workers provide support to this population, they demonstrate a commitment to facilitate self-determination for those who leave high school before graduation. As indicated in the *NASW Code of Ethics* (2017), the social worker's role is to promote clients' self-determination while seeking to help them address their own needs. Social work has a mandate to advocate for and support the development of various educational models that meet the educational needs of marginalized students.

The research question investigated leaving high school before graduation, resilience, and service learning choice for high school completion. This project asked: "Why do students leave high school before graduation?" and "What were the personal lived experiences of high school students who chose to complete high school using a service-learning program?" The research question offered a way to understand the personal lived experiences of high school students who left before graduation and chose service-learning for high school completion.

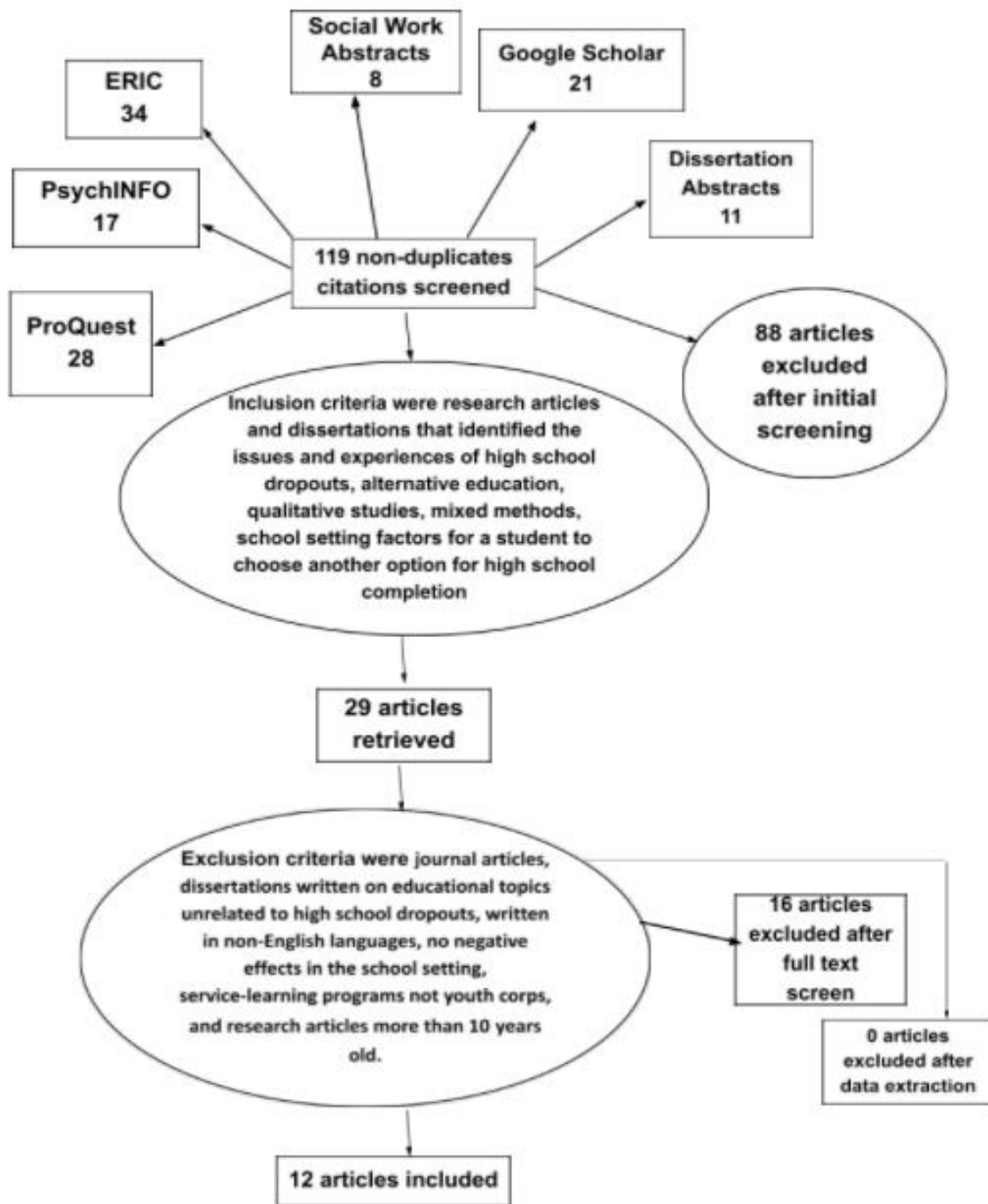
Chapter Three: Literature Review

The researcher conducted a review of the literature using the search terms "high school dropouts," "service-learning programs," "GED," "community violence," "resilience theory," "critical race theory," "resilience and dropouts," "systems theory," "ecology theory," and "youth corps." These are the databases the researcher used to search the terms and the number of results: ERIC (34), Social Work Abstracts (8), Google Scholar (21), Dissertation Abstracts (11), ProQuest (28), and PsychInfo (17). Figure 1 depicts the literature search.

Specifically, the inclusion criteria were research articles and dissertations that identified the issues, professionals' practices in the academic setting, experiences of high school dropouts, alternative education, qualitative studies, mixed methods, and school setting factors for a student to choose another option for high school completion. Excluded criteria encompassed dissertations written on educational topics unrelated to high school dropouts or written in languages other than English, no adverse student experiences in the school setting, service-learning programs that are not youth corps, and research articles more than ten years old. There were 12 research articles in total after the exclusion process. Three studies were quantitative, with one based upon a secondary data set; four studies were qualitative; three studies were mixed-method; and one study was quasi-experimental. There was one guide for completing a segmentation analysis. The themes that emerged were educational processes and outcomes, service-learning programs, and redefining graduation.

Figure 1

Search flow chart



Educational Processes and Outcomes

The 10 studies in this section discuss the educational processes and outcomes for students who left high school (Suh & Suh, 2007; Ludwig & Warren, 2009; Schwartz, 2014; America's Promise Alliance, 2014; Putzu, 2015; Chu & Ready, 2018; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Maynard et al., 2014; Durm, 2016; Perez, 2019). The researchers presented various issues such as professionals' practices in the academic setting "...when teachers show interest in students...they directly...nurture students' level of school engagement (Fall & Roberts, 2012, p. 795)"; risk factors identified "...academic failure, low socioeconomic status, and behavioral problems...impact on the decision to drop out of school (Suh & Suh, 2007, p. 302)"; "...numerous efforts to address the dropout crisis...the efforts derived from educational models rather than...public health models (Maynard et al., 2014, p. 297)"; and the events that encouraged students to choose a service learning program for high school completion "...supportive staff...positive environment...sustained patterns of motivation to change...(Smith, 2013, p. 159)."

The study's purpose by Suh and Suh (2007) was to identify the factors contributing to leaving high school, the impact of those factors upon the likelihood of not completing high school, and the extent of a combination of multiple risk factors that contributed to the probability of students leaving before graduation. The study's hypothesis was to identify effective prevention strategies for at-risk adolescents with different sources of risk.

The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth used a secondary data set from the US Department of Labor database for the quantitative portion of the study by Suh & Suh (2007). The qualitative data consisted of personal interviews with eligible youth and their parents.

The study's sample size was a total of 9,000 participants between 12 and 16 years old. The data excluded 2,792 students from the sample since they did not complete high school or left school before graduation. For the qualitative section, the study participants annually completed interviews for a total of five interviews. There were 3,111 male participants composed in the final sample of 6,192. These demographics helped to identify risk factors and levels of risk for those who left high school before graduation (Suh & Suh, 2007).

The three risk factors identified to have a substantial effect were academic failure, socioeconomic status, and behavioral problems (Suh & Suh, 2007). The study's results identified multiple intervention methods to help students remain in school, and the interventions were more effective when students displayed fewer risk factors (Suh & Suh, 2007).

Suh and Suh (2007) reported that students' educational expectations have a critical impact on their decision to either continue or leave high school before graduation. The researchers suggested the need for additional research to understand better factors beyond the academic setting that impact those who left high school before graduation. Additionally, the research participants' risk factors and students' at-risk status were irrelevant to their educational expectations.

Suh and Suh (2007) identified a few limitations regarding their study. One of the significant limitations was that it only identified school counselors to help address those who left high school, excluding social workers. There was no mention of community support, formal legislative policies, or support in the school setting to address the study problem.

Ludwig and Warren (2009) examined the relationship of two putative school-based protective factors, student connection with school and students' perceived teacher support. They presented the results of a quantitative study from 175 urban youth between the ages of 14 and 19 and between 9th-12th grades who had community violence exposure. There were four scales: Community Violence subscale, School Questionnaire, Teacher Support scale, and Hope scale for a total of 79 questions. The study sample consisted of 90 females and 85 males, students from various racial/ethnic categories, 27% Black or African American, 8% Haitian or Haitian American, 35.6% Latinos, 13.1% Asian or Pacific Islander, 0.6% Cape Verdean, 6.3% White, 9.2% or other ; 36.8% 9th grade, 34.5% 10th grade, 4.6% 11th grade, and 24.1% 12th grade.

The study hypothesized higher levels of violence exposure in students would be associated with adverse psychosocial outcomes, students who reported higher identification with school and perceived support from teachers would endorse more positive psychosocial outcomes, and identification with school and perceived teacher support would moderate the relationship between violence exposure and psychosocial outcomes (Ludwig & Warren, 2009). In the study, the researchers inquired about the relationship between exposure to violence, identification with school, and psychosocial outcomes. Ludwig and Warren (2009) used a theoretical resilience framework to help explain the participants' rebounding from adverse life events.

Pearson correlations of the combined sample in the study demonstrated that exposure to violence was significantly related to higher ratings of internalizing personal factors, externalizing situational factors, and psychological symptoms (Ludwig & Warren, 2009). Internalizing personal factors are processes within the self,

externalizing situational factors are processes in the environment such as adverse childhood experiences, and psychological symptoms are abnormal functioning that indicate mental pathology. The Pearson correlations of the female sample and the exposure to violence were significantly related to more internalizing and externalizing psychological symptoms. However, Pearson correlations conducted in the male sample showed that exposure to violence was significantly related to total psychological symptoms and externalizing symptoms. Violence and exposure to violence symptoms in females were personal and situational while in males it was related to personal, psychological, and situational factors (Ludwig & Warren, 2009).

Missing from the study by Ludwig and Warren (2009) were factors besides the school to address the study problem. The other missing issues were other violent experiences, the lack of family support, and programs in the school setting to solve leaving high school. Additionally, there was no mention of the social work profession to assist with addressing the problem. The study examined exposure to community violence using resilience as the theoretical framework (Ludwig & Warren, 2009). Research participants sharing their own stories via a qualitative method provided an opportunity to understand contributing factors better.

The purpose of the study by Schwartz (2014) was to reclaim the GED and position GED programs as a counter-space in response and opposition to young men's previous school experiences. Schwartz (2014) defines counter-space as a new space created to escape discrimination. A counter-space is created for purposes of healing and affirmation from environments of disparate treatment. The qualitative study was from an ethnography perspective and acquired data through group interviews

about students who left high school. The 16 study participants were African American and Hispanic males between the ages of 16 and 25 enrolled in an urban GED program. The theory used in the article is Critical Race Theory. This theory asserted that race was a consistent factor with any discussion of education as well as part of major societal institutions, and the disparity in education is an issue of race, civil rights, and social justice (Schwartz, 2014).

Schwartz (2014) reported that traditional academic settings consisted of venues which reflected many issues of concern such as emotional, physical, and environmental safety; excessive rules; neglect; chaotic climate; racial profiling; and inappropriate special education placement. As reported by the study participants, the counter-space was an alternative GED program with characteristics contrasting the traditional academic setting, a safe healing space that provided the opportunity for expression and connection with others.

There were several conclusions identified by Schwartz (2014), including that these results strategically and intentionally embrace both voice and silence while learning, creating counter-space by engaging previously marginalized youth. Embracing both voice and silent facilitates active self-expression in the learning environment which provides a quiet counter-place that is suitable for reflection. Gaps in the study included not having females, no mention of community or social workers' support, and limited parental involvement (Schwartz, 2014). The individuals in the study who left high school benefitted from alternatives to the traditional path for high school completion despite increased high school graduation rates (Schwartz, 2014).

In 2014, America's Promise Alliance from the Center for Promise at Tufts University completed a research study report. The study's

purpose was to fill in the gaps between the differences of those young people who left high school despite the reported increase in graduation rates. The study utilized an exploratory sequential mixed method with the qualitative portion completed from the phenomenological perspective which explores the conscious lived experiences of the subjects. There were focus groups, interviews, and surveys to gather data regarding the young people's lived experiences of leaving school. The sample size consisted of 200 participants and 30 groups who were from 16 high schools. The group interviews had 212 participants between the ages of 18 and 25 with 117 males and 95 females from various racial backgrounds included.

America's Promise Alliance (2014) avoided the term "dropout" in the report. Those who participated in the study described themselves differently and reengaged in programs to complete their education. In the study, disengagement from school is considered the outcome of dynamic relationships, risk factors, and contextual factors affecting both the individual and academic settings. According to the report, the students' disconnection from the educational environment is a long-term, gradual process, not a sudden event.

The study's theoretical framework was resilience, defined as a dynamic process of a positive adjustment to adversity (America's Promise Alliance, 2014). Some of the factors the researcher identified contributing to leaving high school were caregiving roles in the family, the pursuit of unhealthy intimate relationships, and destructive human connections. The other identified factors were two environments, school and the adult social world that created conflict for the student (America's Promise Alliance, 2014).

A few factors missing from the study by America's Promise Alliance (2014) were identifying the proper time to address academic matters to prevent failure and social workers assisting the students and families. Social workers' involvement would help identify if any of the adverse experiences started before high school enrollment.

The main goal of the study by Putzu (2015) was to determine whether the services varied on a systems-level concerning students' characteristics and outcomes, gain a better understanding of Level Two services, and acquire knowledge of the connection between service provision and the end of the academic year outcomes. The Communities in Schools Central Texas affiliate used a secondary data set for the qualitative study. There were 437 participants, with 239 (54.7%) female, 198 male (45.3%), 261 (49.4%) being Hispanic, 91 (20.8%) American Indian and Hispanic, 73 (16.7%) African American, 46 (10.5%) White, and 11 (2.5%) Other. The study participants were in grades 6th through 8th at 16 middle schools. The study aimed to prevent students from leaving high school before graduation; however, the researchers studied middle school students. The designed intervention services addressed the issues presented in the academic setting.

Resilience was used as the theoretical framework to help support the purpose of the study (Putzu, 2015). Putzu (2015) indicated every individual has the capacity for resilience in the context of high risk with the appropriate level of support and protective factors implemented consistently. It would be essential to conduct an exploratory study regarding building resilience to stop high school students leaving before graduation.

The study results by Putzu (2015) based upon the measures were student outcomes, student characteristics, and service categories.

Students received 3 to 12 types of Communities in Schools services, such as student support for positive student outcomes in the academic setting, and most students received 10-39 service hours during the focal year. The variation of service provision is unrelated to student characteristics. Students who had an early warning indicator and received more hours of distinct service types, received more hours of services aimed at developing competence and confidence. As mentioned by the researcher, programs and interventions must target both the academic and non-academic factors that can impede a student's success in school to address leaving high school before graduation (Putzu, 2015).

The study by Putzu (2015) used secondary data instead of interviewing people to study. Also, it compared two programs instead of two different local education districts. Additionally, it failed to identify community support or family support for students or those who left high school before graduation. Academic outcomes are a probability predictor for future advancement and it is essential to understand the contributors to those academic outcomes.

Chu and Ready (2018) conducted a quasi-experimental longitudinal study on public school students in New York City to understand the connections between suspensions and short-term and long-term academic outcomes. The study followed a single cohort of 70,130 students from 322 high schools. The suspended students had weaker attendance, academic failure, and an increased likelihood of leaving high school before graduation. Based on the research by Chu and Ready (2018), previous suspensions foretell future suspensions, are associated with poor educational outcomes, increase the possibility of a juvenile's criminal behavior, and effortlessly continue racial and ethnic

achievement gaps. These discipline policies harm long-term academic outcomes and disproportionately affect many already marginalized student populations. Chu and Ready's study (2018) suggests that suspensions used to address problem behaviors may worsen the same behaviors the school is attempting to address and remediate.

This study by Chu and Ready (2018) focused only on discipline (suspension and expulsion) and failed to identify a timeline when discipline became an issue in the school setting. Besides discipline, it missed out on showing the other problems that impacted discipline, such as teacher attitudes and school climate. Also, positive behavioral supports to adequately address the discipline issues and an identified individual in the school to implement those supports such as a social worker were missed. Studying issues through time allows issues to be assessed instead of a snapshot of the issues given.

The study's purpose by Fall and Roberts (2012) was to address the limitations of research on engagement and leaving high school before graduation. The researchers conducted a quantitative longitudinal study for eight years. There were several items the researchers sought to assess, such as how indicators of social context, self-systems, and engagement related to academic achievement and leaving high school. The theoretical framework used was the Self System Model of Motivational Development (SSMMD). The SSMMD asserts that individuals possess an innate need to connect with others and interact effectively with their environment. The study provided empirical support for SSMMD as applied to the problem of leaving high school before graduation.

Fall and Roberts (2012) completed the study using a 2002-2004 secondary data set from the National Center for Education Statistics of the trends about a 10th-grade cohort's experiences progressing through

high school. The sample size was 752 high schools and consisted of 15,362 students, 13,488 parents, 14,081 teachers, 743 principals, and 718 librarians. From the sample, 7,472 were female (50.6%) and 7,890 were male (49.4%), 8,459 (57%) were White, 2,126 (14.4%) were Hispanic, 1,962 (13.3%) were African-American, 1,401 (9.5%) were Asian, and 833 (5.6%) were American Indian or mixed race.

In the study by Fall and Roberts (2012), leaving high school status was used from the second follow-up student sample of 14,781 when the students were in 12th grade. A hypothesis was that higher levels of support from teachers and parents would positively influence students' self-perception, academic engagement, and academic achievement. High levels of support from teachers and parents would also positively impact students' self-perception, academic engagement, and academic achievement to lessen students' likelihood of prematurely discontinuing their high school education.

The study results by Fall and Roberts (2012) confirmed the existence of latent constructs via confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The first CFA model was a five-factor model that specified and also verified the school engagement structure in terms of behavior and academic. The second CFA model was a two-factor model that specified and verified teacher support and parent support structure. A measurement-only model, equivalent to fitting a CFA, allows all factors to correlate with one another, and the measurement model showed an excellent fit to the data. In the structural equation, student perceptions of teacher and parent support predict students' perceptions of control (self-regulation) and identification with school, which predict students' behavioral and academic engagement and academic achievement, which in turn predict students' high school completion.

Fall and Roberts' (2012) study has a narrow focus since it was only one model. First, there was missing data of events before a student entered high school. Secondly, any community factors or social workers supporting students in the academic setting were missing. Third and last, using a model to examine individuals' issues for leaving high school can identify factors with long-term adverse outcomes on future employment prospects.

Maynard et al.'s (2014) goal was to compare those who left high school to those who graduated high school concerning substance use, mental health, and criminal behavior within the developmental context of emerging adulthood. The researchers examined the distribution of substance use, mental health, and criminal behavior among those who left high school from a nationally representative sample of young adults between 18 and 25 years old in the US and compared them with high school graduates. The study was quantitative with a secondary data set from the 2010 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH). In the sample, there were 19,312 individuals: 10,028 females, 9,284 males, 11,652 White, 2,541 Hispanic, 3,338 African American, and 1,773 Other. The researchers used a framework derived from a transdisciplinary viewpoint that saw solving complex issues by relying on a multi-level cell to society approach for the study.

According to the study by Maynard et al. (2014), approximately 10% left high school. For those who prematurely discontinue their education during emerging adulthood, there are consequences. The individuals who left high school before graduation were two to three times more likely to report attempted suicide, adverse behavioral health conditions, arrested for theft, assault, drug possession, or drug sales. Ultimately, implementing a collaborative public health

approach would be beneficial since the information would be provided across diverse systems to reduce high-risk behaviors worsened by leaving high school.

A limitation of the study by Maynard et al. (2014) was the inability to apply the findings to specific populations such as disabled students or gifted and talented students since it was generalized. The sample was focused on persons in the emerging adulthood developmental stage and excluded adolescence. An alternative plan to the traditional path for high school completion is created by identifying the missing information.

The study conducted by Durm (2016) was a mixed-methods approach that explored racial identity with of Black males in the sixth grade. The theoretical framework for the study was Critical Race Theory. There were two aims of the research. The researcher first wanted to know the potential implications for assisting elementary teachers in determining if social studies instruction could be used to enhance Black students' perceptions of themselves as students, citizens, and future leaders and gain insight relative to how teachers of Black male students facilitate their growth and development through curricular and pedagogical means. Also, the researcher wanted to understand how Black students viewed themselves within the contexts of self-worth as a person, student, and citizen.

Durm (2016) acquired participants using a homogenous, convenience sample for the eight students and two teachers from two private schools for Black students. One school's social studies curriculum was affiliated with a religious denomination. The other school was an accredited institution and used a different social studies curriculum. There were eight males in the 6th grade between the ages of 11 and 12

and two teachers, one male, and one female, between the ages of 20 and 40. The data were collected using surveys and focus groups for both the students and teachers. Quantitative data was collected using three surveys: one was adopted by the researcher to assess students' attitudes and beliefs towards social studies, a revised Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity-Teen, and Social Studies Curriculum and The Black Male Student, a survey created to measure the teacher's beliefs about the curriculum. Qualitative data was collected using focus groups and individual interviews. There were three questions asked to the students to understand their self-perspective: "What situations in 6th grade, private school, elementary social studies classes are influencing Black males' self-identity?" "How, and to what extent do these influences occur?" "What are the experiences of teachers that are related to Black male students' development of self-identity?" Teacher interviews included questions that examined the educator's beliefs and attitudes toward Black male learners.

Some results from the study by Durm (2016) are first from the teacher's survey. The results were private school curricula, Black historical moments or Black people studied, promoting a positive self-identity through the social studies, dispelling myths and historical relevance, and high accountability. Results from the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity-Teen survey measured levels of Black identity. Measures were 62.5% of students believe they have a "strong sense of belonging to other Black people," 87% of respondents "feel good about Black people," and 75% disagree with "most people think that Black people are as smart as people of other races." There were high scores associated with assimilation resulting from greater contact with Whites and less contact with African Americans. The sixth-grade male

students strongly disagreed with most assimilationist questions such as ethnocentrism, being viewed as non-American and belonging, and separated from the dominant culture. Although the students' survey results included more students, the students' interview results only had six students.

The students' interview results in Durm (2016) were from six students, three from each school, who shared their general thoughts about the social studies curriculum. Their thoughts were of three topics: Subject as Black Males, the amount of time spent on Black History, and curricular knowledge. All the students agreed the curriculum they studied had a positive influence on their self-identities and the world needs to know Black History. Combining the two schools of thought, teachers and students shared many overlapping thoughts such as curricular deficits, dispelling myths, accountability, social studies empowerment, distrust of outsiders, dislike of assimilation, and Black history curriculum. Teacher interview results were split about private school curricula regarding social studies, consensus about Black historical moments, or the presence of Black people in textbooks. However, both had strong feelings about promoting a positive self-identity through the social studies curriculum especially during a heightened political year, dispelling myths and historical relevance, and high accountability. There were some recommendations by the researcher based on the results from the teachers and students.

Durm (2016) concluded that the plight of Black males extends beyond the bounds of the classroom. Therefore, the environment should be considered with an attempt to forge relationships with potential school systems early in the process. Durm (2016) recommended the

extension of the study to public school settings so it can be determined if students in public schools have lower views of themselves than their private school counterparts. Additionally, Durm recommended extending the study to the collegiate level to see what measures colleges and universities are taking to expose their students to diverse histories and educational stakeholders to join the cause of helping these young Black men find purpose in education and life. Despite the recommendations, there were limitations identified by the researcher.

Limitations of the study included dismissed high school experiences, the exclusion of the social worker's impact upon Black male identity, the exclusion of impediments to completing high school with regards to the academic curriculum, and the manner to re-engage students who were disengaged with the academic curriculum during the study (Durm, 2016).

The study by Perez (2019) highlights social work faculty in their training were not given the tools to understand the pervasive influence race has in social work education in higher education programs. Although this study does not directly address the processes by which race is considered in secondary education, there are potential implications in all levels of education for how the impact of racial factors are considered within the learning process. It is important to consider the implications although further studies would need to be conducted about the institutional factors that prepare professionals who work with marginalized populations. Nothing about race was explicitly asked in the current study given the students were primarily African American and Latino. It certainly brings to our attention the

need to consider implicit biases and the meaning of race to those students.

Perez (2019) completed a qualitative study with undergraduate social work faculty about Critical Race Theory being examined in social work undergraduate educational programs. The purpose of the study was to investigate the experiences of undergraduate social work educators who teach to encourage the development of students' knowledge, values, skills, and cognitive and affective processing to engage in anti-racist social work praxis.

Some findings from Perez (2019) demonstrated how Critical Race Theory framed the choice of a semi-structured interview guide with participants from varied program locations to gather data that permitted analysis of power arrangements. The power arrangements impacted course delivery, implicit curriculum, and uncovered multiple voices from marginalized social institutional locations such as adjuncts, tenure-track faculty, and faculty of color. The topic of privilege was one of the most difficult topics of the study. The explicit curriculum in this study demonstrated how the participants made calculated choices about what gets taught, therefore, what was valued in their presentation of race, racism, and antiracist content. The challenges identified by Perez (2019) in the study were that teaching race and racism were difficult for a variety of reasons. The participating professors unanimously agreed it was challenging to help students get to an antiracist perspective due to the impact of faculty racial identity, the emotional toll of teaching about race, students' opposition to the content, and lack of or perceived lack of institutional support.

Perez (2019) discussed in this study how Critical Race Theory (CRT) offered a unique opportunity for social work researchers and educators to explore and respond to the challenges of the prevailing multicultural framework used in social work curricular approaches. One limitation of Perez's study (2019) is that it did not look at the impact of social work practice on marginalized groups. Another limitation is the small number of faculty subjects representing those who experience racism, oppression, and marginalization. Yet, the study is important to the present research because it suggests that Critical Race Theory may also impact secondary and primary education. Perez's study suggests the implementation of further similar research that focuses on secondary education.

Educational processes and outcomes discussed the lived experiences of students in the academic setting and facilitated the process for determining an alternative for high school completion. Service-learning programs provide a non-traditional option for students to receive training and academic instruction simultaneously. Ultimately, it creates a pathway for students to conclude their high school education and is discussed in the next section.

Service Learning Programs

There is one study, Smith (2013), about service learning programs. Service-learning programs have roots in the Civilian Conservation Corps created by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933. Smith (2013) discussed the continued benefits of Corps programs where people graduated from a second chance high school while performing services that benefit the community.

Smith (2013) aimed to understand the lived experiences of individuals in the study who chose an alternate route for high school

completion and sought to promote social justice by inviting former high school dropouts who re-engaged with school and graduated. The researcher conducted a qualitative study of 14 participants between the ages of 17 and 26, 12 males and 2 females. The study participants were members of a Corps program in a charter high school, randomly selected, and individually interviewed to gather data. It also conveyed the personal lived experiences that reflected the participants' voices. So, the researcher understood the risk and protective factors of choosing a service-learning program to complete high school.

Bronfenbrenner's bioecology theory of human development was used as a theoretical framework to facilitate Smith's (2013) study. The researcher also used the Process-Person-Context-Time Model to understand individual experiences, environmental impacts, and time processes. These individuals completed the Corp program and graduated. As a result of conducting the study, the researcher identified nine categories with 34 subcategories that answered the research questions. The categories were change because of self, change in exposure to barriers, future plans/outcomes, giving back outcomes, job/life skills outcomes, program factors, peers/family factors, and factors related to specific motivating events/interactions. There were several subcategories identified. They were positive attitudinal, positive behavioral, positive intrapersonal, negative behavioral, negative attitudinal, and program improvement recommendations.

The study by Smith (2013) focused on the developmental process. It failed to discuss the positive outcomes of pursuing the GED and only mentioned the negative aspects. Lastly, there was no mention of events after the completion of the program. Identifying events after completion would demonstrate the benefits of service-learning programs.

The continued success of service-learning programs provides evidence for legislators and policymakers to continue supporting others who want to choose an alternative for high school completion. Legislators and policymakers can redefine graduation so one can remain engaged in the academic setting until graduation instead of leaving prematurely.

Redefining Graduation

The following three studies, America's Promise Alliance from the Center for Promise at Tufts University (2014), Jobs for the Future (2014), and Schwartz (2014) proposed alternative perspectives regarding high school completion. Policy formulation and policy implementation are two unconventional methods to change the meaning of high school completion on a broad scale. A public health approach to high school completion and programmatic changes in the academic setting is also beneficial for modifying pathways for graduating from high school.

A couple of these changes mentioned in the study by America's Promise Alliance (2014) built on evidence-based practices that helped young people stay in school until completion and re-engage in the academic setting as well as facilitated the navigation of barriers created by life events to ensure school attendance. Therefore, it is necessary to re-examine policies that create alternative opportunities for students to stay in school or to quickly re-engage the academic setting. The local school districts which have solution-oriented connections are academic settings that foster academic success.

There are some recommendations besides the above-proposed policy changes in the study by America's Promise Alliance (2014). A proposal was listening to young people so there can be a better understanding of the circumstances impacting their decision to stop attending school. Support for this recommendation was young people's involvement in

taking on leadership roles to help formulate their peers' achievement such as peer mediator, student leader, or peer liaison with school administration. It is essential to have an early warning system indicator, so extra support can be provided in the school setting to identify students with attendance issues. Another recommendation was to create a network with various community-based organizations (CBOs) to provide the necessary support to students affected by adverse life events. This network of CBOs would give a holistic approach to address the identified needs appropriately. However, identifying key people to support students in the school and the community is missing from the study.

Jobs for the Future (2014) wrote a guide regarding the use of segmentation analysis to plan for students who are likely to require an alternate education plan to graduate high school. Johns Hopkins University produced this guide with funds from the United States Department of Education. Segmentation analysis helps agencies assess the number of students who are not on track to graduate high school at the expected time. The purpose of segmentation analysis is for a Local Education Authority to identify students with issues such as attendance, discipline, academic achievement, and insufficient credits for high school completion. The analysis will also provide data on programmatic types to turn the school around, improve students' outcomes, and create a school district's strategic plan.

Some limitations presented in the guide by Jobs for the Future (2014) were policy changes to support both students and schools to prevent leaving high school before graduation. It is the local school district's responsibility to assess and analyze the data without any support from the state for administrative changes to address leaving

high school before graduation. The administrative changes are service-learning programs to be considered as an option for completing high school. Students may require alternative spaces to complete high school although the analysis identified non-traditional academic settings for high school completion as a problem area.

There were a few conclusions from the study by Schwartz (2014) to be considered for future policy formulation and implementation regarding high school completion. Data from students who left high school were acquired for a qualitative study from an ethnographic perspective via group interviews. The 16 study participants were African American and Hispanic males between the ages of 16 and 25 enrolled in an urban GED program. The purpose of the study was to qualify counter-spaces for GED programs in response to young men's adverse school experiences. The intentional creation of counter-spaces with a progressive approach is necessary as an option for high school completion.

Conclusion

The above articles discussed educational processes and outcomes, service-learning programs, and graduation redefinition for high school completion. The various issues presented were risk factors in the academic setting, programmatic changes in the school setting due to those identified risk factors, institutional factors that prepared professionals who work with marginalized populations, and alternative perspectives for high school completion. An additional issue presented in the summarized research includes events that facilitate the choice for a service learning program and the continued benefits of Corps

programs where people chose to pursue their GED while performing services that benefit the community.

There were some gaps in the literature addressed by this study. One of the gaps was the reason for leaving high school before graduation. Another was the need for social work involvement to address the problem of leaving high school before graduation and developing unconventional methods for students to complete their high school education via service learning programs besides creating a counter-space. Another gap addressed by this study was identifying laws and policies that impeded the academic success of students and misallocation of resources from the community and school environment to facilitate high school completion. Use of the term dropout was avoided in the dissertation because of the negative connotations associated with it. The participants chose to leave high school before graduation and chose to complete their education in a non-traditional manner by using a service learning program. In fact, the service learning program demonstrated its commitment to education by using a viable alternative for completing it.

The researcher built upon current knowledge of leaving high school before graduation and academic re-engagement in this study by identifying supportive resources for high school completion that were required along with necessary alternatives to complete high school successfully. The GED is a promising alternative for high school completion. Service learning programs started by the Civilian Conservation Corps provide training to acquire skills for employment and self-sufficiency. Decision-makers must allocate resources appropriately to address the problem in urban communities so inhabitants can have an adequate quality of life and become productive

members of society. The environment, inside and outside of the school, impacts the outcome of high school completion.

Chapter Four: Theoretical Framework

This section will discuss the three theories which guided the study about students leaving high school before graduation. The three theories are: Resilience Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Systems Ecological Theory. Studying the phenomenon using the three theories also provided knowledge and a better understanding for stakeholders to resolve the problem.

Resilience Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Systems Ecological Theory enhanced understanding of the crucial factors that impacted leaving high school before graduation. The theories also identified students' ability to bounce back from a setback, and shed light on students' use of service learning for high school completion.

Resilience Theory

Resilience Theory explains the ability one possesses to keep going despite a personal setback. The adverse event can be life-changing, and the response to the event identifies an individual's characteristics such as strength, commitment, and perseverance. According to Jenson and Fraser (2016), resiliency is an adaptation to adversity. Also, resilience includes developing skills in rebounding from adverse events (Payne, 2014). Having the ability to recover is also a protective factor against other negative life occurrences. When someone is resilient, it is like an elastic band; they are stretched to a limit but bounce back to the middle and return to their purpose. Besides an inner quality, the environment an individual inhabits also supports their resilience from adverse experiences (Jenson & Fraser, 2016).

Resilience Theory provided an increased understanding of individuals' adverse experiences who left high school and how they

rebounded from those experiences. The experiences impacted individuals developmentally, mentally, and emotionally. The theory supported examining those who left high school before graduation and chose high school completion from the student's perspective. Resilience was a factor contributing to their tenacity in choosing a service learning program for high school completion.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory identifies the way race permeates institutions such as legal and education institutions (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Perez, 2019). The theory started in the legal field as a critique of civil rights issues in the United States and how White people mostly benefit from civil rights legislation. The theory transitioned to understanding racial inequities in the US educational system. Ladson-Billings (1998) discussed how whiteness became a concept and was seen as the norm when considering terms such as "school achievement" (p. 9). School achievement is not a problematic term but it is associated with race. The concept of academic achievement may be implicitly connected with race because whites are expected to have high academic achievement. Concepts that do not equate to whiteness are oppositional and illegitimate; therefore, they are considered inferior and detrimental.

Critical Race Theory facilitated an analysis of the educational institution in predominantly Black and Hispanic communities. These are the neighborhoods where an increased percentage of students leave high school before graduation and choose service learning for high school completion. This study allowed individuals to share their lived experiences in educational settings, "stories provide the necessary

context" (p. 13) and storytelling is an aspect of Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

Systems Ecological Theory

Systems Ecological Theory considers how a person works within that system from a mental process position. When considering education, it was vital to keep in mind the system's design regarding academic instruction, multiple support systems in the school building, and appropriate allocation of resources. It was essential to know if the educational system created a path for each student to thrive by completing their education in the 12th grade or to leave high school to pursue high school completion using a service learning program or any other type of program that leads to high school completion.

Systems Ecological Theory will help others understand better the educational system's contribution to an individual's decision to leave high school. Also, Systems Ecological Theory points to examining how structures inhibit or assist a student's success in the academic setting. Additionally, it allows examination of what systems or social structures facilitated students completing their education using a service-learning program without leaving high school.

Education systems represent a vast social institutional set of structures used to help individuals learn. However, the school's locale is a determining factor for successful learning. Systems Ecological Theory examined the environmental impact upon an individual developmentally, biologically, and mentally. When thinking of a school building's physical location, the surrounding community was considered, such as socioeconomic status or levels of violence in the community. The happenings outside the building have an impact on the experiences inside the building (Kozol, 1991). According to Jenson and Fraser

(2016), Systems Ecological Theory connects the dynamics between individuals and conditions in the environment. Regarding this study, the data were the participants' personal experiences regarding the school system and the living environment that the participants inhabited.

Chapter Five: The Research Questions and Related Hypotheses

The main question the research sought to answer was, "What were the contributing factors to completing high school by acquiring a GED or high school diploma while participating in a service learning program?" It was a phenomenological exploration into the specific circumstances that contributed to leaving high school before graduation and returning to complete high school (Bloom & Haskins, 2010).

Asking questions was essential for others to know the factors that contributed to leaving high school before graduation and choosing a service learning program for completing high school. Although this was a qualitative study, a combined deductive and inductive analysis approach provided an opportunity to predetermine some themes that the researcher believed would emerge from the data. Since predetermined themes were like hypotheses, they were included in this section with the research questions. The questions the researcher answered from conducting the study were as follows:

1. Were several attempts made to leave high school before graduation and your choice to pursue your GED?

Theme 1a. The process for leaving high school before graduation was gradual.

Theme 1b. The participants created an individual plan for high school completion.

2. How was pursuing a GED or high school diploma different from remaining in high school until graduation?

Theme 2a. Pursuing a GED provided the flexibility for students to complete high school.

Theme 2b. The GED created an opportunity to focus on academics.

3. What was the decision-making process for choosing a service learning program?

Theme 3a. The participant considered the service learning program to provide employment skills.

Theme 3b. The participant consulted another person who completed the program.

4. Were there multiple efforts at completing one's education?

Theme 4a. The participants attempted to complete their education the traditional route before choosing the GED.

Theme 5b. The participants attended multiple schools searching for a supportive academic setting.

5. Did the research participant view the GED differently than a high school diploma?

Theme 5a. The participant viewed the GED as a method to complete high school.

Theme 5b. The participant considered the GED to have the same value of the high school diploma since both achieve the same outcome.

6. What type of benefit was considered for acquiring a GED or high school diploma while receiving training simultaneously?

Theme 6a. The participant considered the benefits of acquiring both a GED and the training provided by service learning to be more advantageous than solely completing high school.

Theme 6b. The participant reported options were created with pursuing the GED and receiving training at the same time.

7. Did support provided by adults make a difference?

Theme 7a. The staff identified that positive interactions with the New Jersey Youth Corps (NJYC) members helped the corps

members make better decisions that positively impacted their life.

Theme 7b. The NJYC members identified that involvement with International Youth Organization (IYO) and the service learning program helped them make better decisions and the corps members believed they mattered to others.

Chapter Six: Methodology

The study used a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach to better understand the shared living experiences of individuals who left high school before graduation and chose academic re-engagement for high school completion. There were individual interviews with New Jersey Youth Corps (NJYC) current members and alumni and a focus group with NJYC staff. This chapter provides a road map for the completion of the research study inclusive of the research design, measurement, and procedures.

The Research Design

The study sought to understand why the participants left high school before graduation, why they reengaged academically and chose service learning for high school completion by conducting a phenomenological exploration (Payne, 2016). The phenomenological approach is one of five qualitative methods (Creswell, 2007; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2004; Padgett, 2017). The qualitative method aimed to develop themes based on the participant's feedback (Creswell, 2007; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2004; Padgett, 2017). The qualitative method allowed the acquisition of information regarding the multiple realities of an individual's personal lived experiences.

Data & Subjects:

The sample size was 15 participants, 3 currently enrolled in the NJYC service learning program and 12 alumni, from the NJYC program along with 6 NJYC staff members (Padgett, 2017). The study NJYC member and alumni participants were those who left high school before graduation, reengaged in an academic program, and chose a service learning program for high school completion. There were 8 in-person face-to-face interviews with 3 current NJYC members and 4 alumni, and 7

telephone interviews completed with the alumni NJYC members. The 6 NJYC staff members were included in the study when the NJYC Coordinator requested a group due to the program ending the fiscal year 2021 for lack of funding from the State of New Jersey for the fiscal year 2022. An in-person face-to-face focus group was conducted with the staff to gather data. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) coronavirus protocols were used during all of the in-person face-to-face interviews such as a six-foot social distance, wearing a mask, and hand sanitizer available.

Microsoft Excel and Google sheets were the applications used to analyze the data upon completion. The increased knowledge of the various factors that influenced participants' decisions to leave high school and the staff members' support in the academic re-engagement process will broaden stakeholders' knowledge base. These stakeholders include the researcher, educators, advocates, social workers, and policy makers. Knowing the risk and protective factors provides the stakeholders with additional information to resolve the problem of leaving high school before graduation.

Measurement

NJYC member and alumni participants were asked nine open-ended questions and NJYC staff were asked five open-ended questions in total. Open-ended questions were beneficial since they allowed participants to respond with more information, articulate their thoughts, and share their personal experiences on the matter (Padgett, 2017). The purpose was to ensure the researcher gathered a diverse amount of data from the interviewees. Receiving the information from the study participants was done by developing a bond. The qualitative method phenomenological approach focused on the deeper meanings of lived experiences through inquiry (Padgett, 2017). The researcher collected data by conducting

interviews in-person face to face or virtually via telephone. The researcher collected data from those who were informed of the study, signed written consent forms, provided verbal consent, and completed a participant demographic sheet.

Procedures

The researcher sent a letter to the Executive Director, Carolyn Wallace, of the International Youth Organization in Newark, NJ, with a copy sent to the Board President asking for permission to conduct a study of the New Jersey Youth Corps Program (NJYC) for Essex County, NJ. participants. Permission was granted to this writer to conduct research with the NJYC members in August 2020. The parameters for completion of the study were participants who were 18 years old or older with approval from Western Institutional Review Board (WIRB).

For this study, the phenomenological approach acquired information by conducting in-person face-to-face and virtual interviews via telephone. Each participant had three options to choose from, virtual via video platform, virtual via telephone, or in-person. The study participant's preference determined their choice for virtual via video platform, virtual via telephone, or in-person interviews. When the interviews were conducted to gather data, the coronavirus global pandemic was a safety concern. During the in-person face-to-face interviews and focus group, the researcher and study participants wore a mask, maintained a 6 ft social distance, and had hand sanitizer available according to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) protocols (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Cleaning protocols were implemented according to CDC guidelines upon completion of the in-person face-to-face interviews. The researcher recorded interviews with the Atlas ti voice recorder for face-to-face in-person

interviews. The telephone mobile application, Google voice, was used to record telephone interviews. Neutral identifiers in the study protected human subjects since the identifiers were indeterminate of the study participant. An information sheet gathered demographic information from each participant, gender, age, race, ethnicity, employment status, highest grade completed in school before leaving, GED or high school diploma, number of children, and residential status. The demographic information was only known to the researcher. The participants received a written explanation of the study stating both the study's benefits and disadvantages, and the description also included a paragraph requesting consent from each participant.

The matter of confidentiality was addressed in the consent form in a paragraph with the following statement: This information is for research purposes only, the researcher will not share identifying information with others, and the researcher used neutral identifiers such as the first letter of the first name, the first letter of the last name, and year of birth for each participant of the study. This information was changed in the data analysis to a sample identifier such as Participant 1, 2 until the total number of participants reached for individual interviews and the staff was identified by their job title for the staff focus group. The identifier was put on the demographic sheet to correspond to the participant for identification purposes.

The major obstacle in the study was an insufficient number of current corps members who were 18 and over in the same cohort enrolled in the service learning program. This obstacle was overcome when the NJYC Coordinator reached out to alumni and acquired their permission for providing their name and telephone number to the researcher for

contact. The researcher contacted the alumni and scheduled a time for the interview with alumni to gather data. There were more alumni in the number who completed interviews than the current corps members enrolled in the service learning program. Each interview was completed with participants at a mutually agreed time, method, and location to answer the questions completely.

Data Analysis

The study participants shared their reasons for choosing an alternative route for high school completion which provided anecdotal information such as needing employment, taking care of family, poor social support, or the coronavirus global pandemic. Responses from the questions provided the study participant's perspective of the problem, contributing factors to the problem, probable solutions to the problem, and information to share with stakeholders. Information was gathered from the participants using a confidential method.

After the interviews, the audio recording files were saved to Google Drive which is an application in the researcher's academic institution Google suite platform for students. The files were transferred to a flash drive and uploaded to the Amazon Web Services online program for transcription. The study data were stored in multiple places known only to the researcher and maintained in a safe and confidential way to prevent loss.

The qualitative analysis consisted of hierarchical coding, (Friese, 2014). The researcher listened to the interviews multiple times, identified recurring themes based on the interview questions, and used Google sheets to identify patterns based on each participant's responses. Microsoft Excel was used to identify shared themes between the corps member individual interviews and staff focus group. The

systematic way of bringing together the various parts of the data provided a conceptual analysis. Themes arose for identification and coding based upon the analyzed data.

A search among the data was done concerning coding to identify connections for organizing (Padgett, 2017). The personal lived experiences of the participants were selected and considered for broader reflection. Deductive coding happened first to identify text that fit with the expected themes previously outlined with the study research questions. A second inductive coding analysis was completed to identify unknown themes. The choice for inductive coding was to provide an unbiased and thorough examination of the themes for interpretation. Hierarchical codes (Tracy, 2013) provided a systematic organization of the themes. There was a continual analysis of the data until saturation was achieved (Padgett, 2017). As the researcher kept at the data inquiry, there was more coding or sub-coding. Descriptive statistics were conducted on the sample.

Ethical Considerations and Connections to Social Work

There were ethical considerations and connections to address when the research was conducted (Padgett, 2017). The participants knew the purpose of the study and the reasons they shared their personal lived experiences. Informed consent was foundational for providing treatment as well as conducting research. The research participants agreed, permitted the study to acquire information, and shared it within parameters. Some of those parameters were confidentiality, the researcher's identity, voluntary participation, and the ability to withdraw from the study at any time. Besides receiving permission from the research participants, it was necessary to have consent from an

organization that provided resources to conduct the study, whether it was space or access to research participants (Padgett, 2017). If or when issues arose due to sharing lived personal experiences, the researcher had a referral process to address those issues. Ultimately, it was essential to maintain the learner's role as this helped the researcher avoid boundary issues.

There were ethical guidelines that directed expected behaviors involving any social work practice level for the social work profession. The proposed study recognized two ethical principles for guidance, beneficence (Beauchamp & Childress, 2001; Murdach, 1996; Sweifach, Linzer, & LaPorte, 2015), and self-determination (Abramson, 1985; NASW, 2017; Rothman, Smith, Nakashima, Paterson, & Mustin, 1996). These principles recognized individuals' inherent values and demonstrated social workers functioning within their purview of providing service to others. Also, it facilitated the process of people who told their own stories and shared their personal lived experiences as demonstrated by these two core values, dignity and worth of the person and service (NASW, 2017), which were applicable when thinking of this population.

Beneficence is an ethical principle defined as when others regard the client's best interests (Murdach, 1996) and a practitioner's balance of the advantages and disadvantages for the best outcome related to an individual's situation (Beauchamp & Childress, 2001). The social work profession facilitates change by providing an opportunity for participants to share their personal lived experiences. This study provided an opportunity that was an asset to the individual and society simultaneously.

Self-determination is one of the social work profession's prevailing ethical principles where it is considered a client's right to be respected by the practitioner (Abramson, 1985; NASW, 2017; Rothman, Smith, Nakashima, Paterson, & Mustin, 1996). According to Abramson (1985), self-determination is when an individual's behavior emanates from their own choices and decisions. Self-determination is about what the individual wants instead of what another proposes. Choosing a service learning program to complete one's education was a concrete example of self-determination. The position of the social work profession was to respect the participants' choices to complete their education. Allowing the participant to choose what impacted their own life demonstrated the social work professional's position to support the participant's right to self-determination. Just as ethical principles guide behavior, core values provide a model for all social workers to execute successfully (NASW, 2017).

In the Code of Ethics (NASW, 2017), core values are aspirational for all social workers. Since the core values of the NASW (NASW, 2017) are action-oriented, there is a source of accountability and an evaluative tool to measure actions (Linzer, 1999). Core values are foundational to the profession of social work. Since there was a power distinction in the dynamic between the social worker and client system, it was imperative to ensure prominence of social work's core values and to pay attention to the power difference between the worker and the client. For the study, the core values of service and dignity, and worth of the person were discussed (NASW, 2017).

The first core value listed in the Code of Ethics is service. The ethical principle states, "Social workers' primary goal is to help people in need and to address social problems" (NASW, 2017). This

study demonstrated that value by being a channel for others to share their personal lived experiences to address leaving high school. Discontinuing high school before graduation is a social problem and a public health issue since it impacts multiple areas of an individual's life often creating a negative domino effect requiring an urgent response (Campbell, 2015; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Frudenberg & Ruglis, 2007). Practitioners must utilize their professional resources to help others address social problems above their self-interest. Service is the core value and the ethical principle that demonstrates the social worker facilitates change regarding all levels of social work practice, micro, mezzo, and macro.

Another value consistent with service is the dignity and worth of the person. Inherent in the value of dignity and worth of the person is the concept of self-determination (NASW, 2017). This concept encouraged the social worker to treat the client with respect while creating opportunities to identify and address their own needs. This core value connected the practitioner with the client in a personable manner from a humane perspective.

Limitations

There were limitations of the study. A qualitative method interviews study participants with open-ended questions and consists of a smaller sample size than a quantitative method which uses scaled closed-ended questions usually via a survey. High school in the United States (U.S.) comprises the 9th through 12th grades. Since the study examined academic re-engagement, pursuing high school completion, and service learning simultaneously, the results only apply to those who acquired a GED or high school diploma while in a service learning program such as NJYC or Job Corps. The study participants resided in

an urban area in the northeastern region of the United States; therefore, study participants living in a rural area in the northwestern part of the country may have a different experience regarding leaving high school before completion. The study findings were limited to one program, which is a community-based non-profit agency. The coronavirus was an unexpected life-changing event and became a global pandemic that impacted the health and safety of individuals. This created a challenge for enrollment in the NJYC program for high school completion. The study proposed to interview current NJYC enrollees only and not alumni; however, an insufficient number of current NJYC enrollees necessitated the interview of NJYC alumni. The questions focused only on the events that led to leaving high school before completion and not previous adverse academic experiences such as middle school which could have impacted their high school experiences. Lastly, it would be advantageous to create questions for those who have yet to take a high school equivalency test (HSET) for high school completion. Despite the findings' inability to be generalized to other groups, they can guide future research.

The results of the research study will provide a glimpse of the participants' lived experiences of completing their education using a service learning program and the support from the staff of the service learning program to achieve that goal.

Chapter Seven: Results

The results provided a snapshot of the participant's shared living experiences that led to academic re-engagement with using a service learning program for high school completion. The research questions, demographics of the New Jersey Youth Corps (NJYC) participants and staff are presented first. Next, themes are provided based on the individual participants' interviews, sub-themes based on participants' interviews recommendations, and staff group discussion.

Research question

The main questions the research sought to answer was, "What were the contributing factors to completing high school by acquiring a GED or high school diploma while participating in a service learning program?" "Why did students leave high school?" and "What were the personal lived experiences of high school students who chose to complete high school using a service learning program?" The research questions inquired about leaving high school before graduation, resilience, academic re-engagement, and service learning as a choice for high school completion.

Themes

1. Were several attempts made to leave high school before graduation and your choice to pursue your GED?

Theme 1a. The process of leaving high school before graduation was gradual.

Yes, the process was gradual with disengagement from the academic setting, intermittent attendance, attending school daily but missing classes.

Theme 1b. The participants created an individual plan for high school completion.

The student participants created an individual plan after leaving high school and was recommended to International Youth Organization (IYO) for the NJYC program.

No, several attempts were not made before leaving high school. One participant reported attending an alternative high school before being expelled. After the expulsion, he went to IYO seeking a high school completion program.

2. How was pursuing a GED or high school diploma different from remaining in high school until graduation?

Theme 1a. Pursuing a GED provided the flexibility for students to complete high school.

Yes, the NJYC program was 16 weeks long. The program was three days for academic instruction and two days for training such as community service. It was short-term and divided the tasks between academic instruction and training.

Theme 1b. The GED created an opportunity to focus on academics.

Yes, the NJYC program provided individual attention by the teachers, student participants completed assignments based on their academic proficiency level, and smaller class size.

Yes, student participants reported attending NJYC at IYO was different. The staff participants were supportive and concerned about their outcome and well-being.

3. What was the decision-making process for choosing a service-learning program?

Theme 1a. The participant considered the service learning program to provide employment skills.

Yes, the training would help get a job.

Theme 1b. The participant consulted another person who completed the program.

Yes, the student participant was recommended to the program by a friend and the community college.

Yes, the student participants reported a reactive decision-making process for choosing a service learning program.

4. Were there multiple efforts at completing one's education?

Theme 1a. The participants attempted to complete their education the traditional route before choosing the GED.

Yes, the student participant remained on the traditional path before choosing the GED.

Theme 1b. The participants attended multiple schools searching for a supportive academic setting.

No, the student participants attended one school. One participant attended an alternative high school before leaving.

No, the student participants reported disengagement from the academic setting. One student participant reported attendance at an alternative high school.

5. Did the research participant view the GED differently than a high school diploma?

Theme 1a. The participant viewed the GED as a method to complete high school.

Yes, the reason for enrolling in NJYC was to complete high school.

Theme 1b. The participant considered the GED to have the same value of the high school diploma since both achieve the same outcome.

Yes, both lead to high school completion.

6. What was the type of benefit considered for acquiring a GED while receiving training simultaneously?

Theme 1a. The participant considered the benefits of acquiring both a GED and the training provided by service learning to be more advantageous than solely completing high school.

Yes, the student participants believed they would be more prepared for employment and continue their education.

Theme 1b. The participant reported options were created with pursuing the GED and receiving training at the same time.

Yes, the participants reported learning more about their community, increased connection to the community, learning new things, and helping others.

7. Did support provided by adults make a difference?

Theme 1a. The staff participants identified that supportive interactions with the corps members helped the corps members make better decisions that positively impacted their life.

Yes, the staff participants reported confronting corps members negative behaviors to provide direct feedback and help them learn lessons so they can make positive changes. The staff participants reported visiting homes and gaining a better understanding of corps members' current plight.

Theme 1b. The student participants identified that involvement with IYO and the service learning program helped them make better decisions and the corp members believed they mattered to others.

Yes, the student participants reported feeling very connected to IYO, called them family, the staff was genuine with wanting the best for them, the staff talked to them, and the staff would say they share the same interests so they may know corps members better.

Yes, the student participants reported the support provided by adults made a difference with intimate discussions, group discussions, and demonstrated a genuine interest in their development and well-being.

There were 9 questions for the individual interviews that produced 28 themes and 3 sub-themes. The 5 questions for the staff group produced 16 themes.

NJYC members individual interview themes

The currently enrolled corps members and alumni answered 9 questions from individual interviews. From the nine questions asked of the study participants, 29 themes were identified and the questions are listed in the order asked of the study participants.

1. "What impacted your decision to complete your high school education?"
family responsibilities (n=4), self-improvement (n=6), and employment opportunities (n=5).
2. "How is completing your high school education and training at the same time helpful to you?"
employment (n=2), community (n=6), academic preparation (n=2), and personal growth (n=3).
3. "What were your experiences for leaving high school before graduating?"
COVID 19/pandemic (n=3), academic interaction (n=10), school environment (n=3), and personal issues (n=6).
4. "How has your support changed since you left high school?"
personal improvement (n=2) and organizational/institutional (n=3).
5. "What things can you identify that could have avoided you from leaving high school?"

people (n=6), institutions (n=1), and COVID 19/pandemic (n=1).

6. "What factors impacted you to consider not returning to complete your high school education?"
personal issues (n=5), family/other people (n=2), and institution (n=2).
7. "How would you compare the value of the GED to the high school diploma?"
GED is the same (n=1), GED is different (n=1), and GED is better (n=1).
8. "What were your reasons for selecting the New Jersey Youth Corps (NJYC) to complete your education?"
recommended by another (n=4), opportunities offered (n=5), and location (n=1).
9. "How has completing your education made a difference in your life?"
employment (n=4), academic (n=1), and personal growth/connections (n=5).
10. recommendations
money for IYO (n=1), expand beyond 24 y/o (n=1), and older people can benefit from the program (n=1).

New Jersey Youth Corps Staff focus group themes

New Jersey Youth Corps (NJYC) Coordinator requested a group for the staff members due to the current NJYC program ending since the State of New Jersey did not allocate program funding for the fiscal year 2022. The NJYC focus group participants' job titles were NJYC Coordinator, 2 Teachers, Case Manager/Worksite Supervisor, COVID-19 Monitor/Worksite Supervisor, and Transitional Office. There were 5

questions the researcher asked the staff in a group and 16 themes arose without any recommendations.

1. "Share your experience of helping the corps members complete their education."
part of the change (n=9), teacher as a student (n=4), and identifying ways to help (n=5).
2. "How are 16 weeks helpful? Challenge/benefits"
different ways people learn (n=4), time (n=4), valued as a person (n=6), helping with life (n=3), and the whole picture (n=2).
3. "In what ways do you see yourself as helping others change their lives?" identifying their needs (n=5) and support (n=4).
4. "What advice would you give to the decision-makers about education? service learning?"
understanding different ways of learning (n=4), practical outcomes (n=2), and institutions (n=2).
5. "The program is scheduled to end 6/30/21, share some thoughts about it?"
set up for success (n=5), discriminatory outcomes (n=3), and bureaucracy (n=4).

The corps member individual interviews and staff focus group were asked different questions; however, there were overlapping themes and sub-themes based on the questions asked by the researcher.

New Jersey Youth Corps members individual interviews and staff group shared themes

There were shared themes between the individual interview participants and the staff focus group despite the different questions asked by the researcher of the study participants. A theme, institution, was shared between both the individual interview

participants and the staff focus group. Community was an identified theme and sub-theme between the individual interview participants and staff focus group.

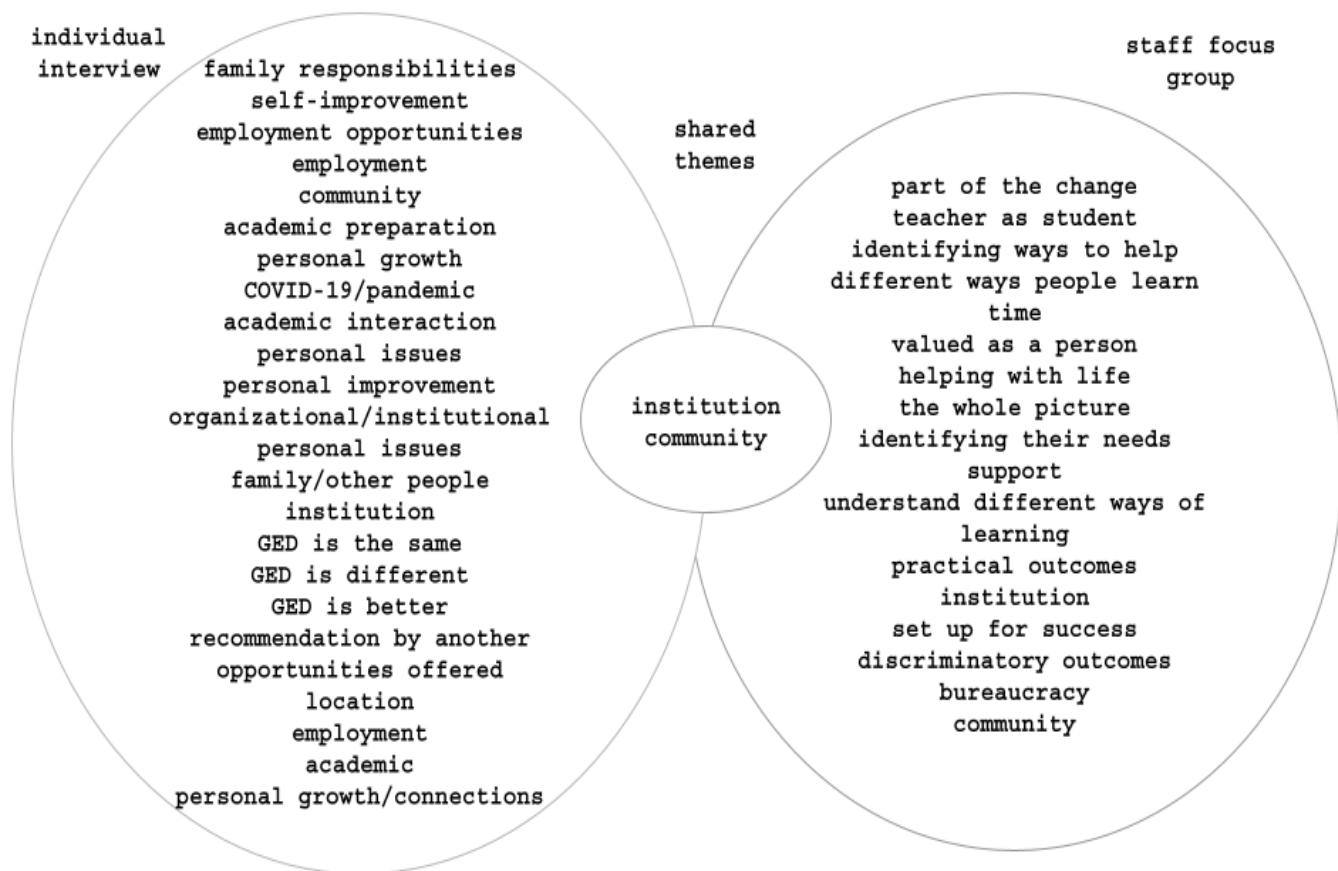
Shared sub-themes of the individual interview participants and the staff focus group identified were employment, opportunities, personal issues, personal growth, self-improvement, identifying their needs, helping others, learning, social support

The interviews and focus group required time to gather the information and it demonstrated the commitment of all the participants to share their lived experiences. Each time the researcher gathered data, the duration varied depending on if it was in-person face-to-face, virtual interview via telephone, or facilitating the focus group.

The shared theme between the individual interview and staff focus group study participants was an institution. This shared theme indicates a macro-level issue that impacts academic re-engagement for high school completion. Blame for students leaving high school before completion is placed upon the individual but this theme puts the responsibility on the institution. Education is a major social institution that all school-aged children encounter and there are punitive laws for children who are not enrolled in school (NJAC 6A:20). The educational system is the institution to make the necessary changes to facilitate students remaining engaged instead of leaving before graduation.

Figure 2

Shared themes



Demographics

The individual interview study participants' demographics are gender, age, race, and ethnicity along with their status as current corps members, alumni corps members, high school completion with a GED or diploma, and employment as full-time, part-time, or unemployed. Following the individual interview study participant's information is the NJYC staff demographic information. The staff's demographics are too provided such as gender, age, race, ethnicity, highest grade, high school graduation status, and employment status as full-time, part-time, or unemployed. Themes are presented based on the individual interview questions to the enrolled and alumni corps members, staff focus group questions, and shared themes between the corps members and staff.

The NJYC individual interview participants for the study included seven males and eight females and they were in the age range of 18-48 years, with the mean age being 28.4 years (SD 8.64). Between the current enrolled corps members and alumni, the mean age was 18 years (SD 9.65) for the corps members and 31 years for the alumni (SD 8.37) NJYC participants represented three ethnicities African-American, n=13; Latino from Cuba, n=1; and West Indian from Guyana, n=1. Three of the participants were current NJYC members, one was an NJYC alumnus and current staff member, and the remaining 11 were NJYC alumni. The NJYC staff in the study were four males and two females, who were in the age range of 27-63 years with the mean age being 51.2 years (SD=12.33). All the staff represented two ethnicities, African American, n=5, and Latino from Puerto Rico, n=1. One of the NJYC staff members was an alumnus of the NJYC service learning program and participated as an individual interview participant.

New Jersey Youth Corps Members Individual Interviews

When the demographics were examined, they provided a variety of information about the research study participants. The individual interview study participants' demographics were gender, age, race, and ethnicity along with their status as current corps members, alumni corps members, high school completion with a GED or diploma, and employment as full-time, part-time, or unemployed.

Gender and Age

Most individual interview study participants were alumni who were older than 18 when compared to the enrolled NJYC members. Current NJYC members were two males and one female, and all were 18 years old. The average age of the NJYC alumni was 31 with more female study participants than males.

Participant 4 was a 20-year-old female who left high school in the 10th grade. Her son was present during the interview and there were a few breaks because he was behaving like a 3-year-old. She gave him her phone to preoccupy him so she could complete the interview. She stated she had to make a choice "if I was going to eat or take that test." To the interviewer, it was striking she literally meant there was not food in the home for her to eat so she had to find food somewhere, obviously test-taking became a secondary not primary goal. It was sad to hear this as a choice to make in the academic setting. She said, "if my father was there, I believe I would have stayed in school." At the time of the interview, she reported part-time employment and living with her brother.

Race and Ethnicity

All the individual interview research participants were of the same race but different ethnicities. They identified racially as

Black, but the three different ethnicities were African American, Latino and West Indian. One participant was an immigrant from Guyana, another participant identified Cuban heritage, and the remaining were born in the United States (U.S.). Newark City inhabits a Black racial majority but different ethnicities who emigrated from a variety of U.S. regions and countries.

High school completion and employment

Out of the 15 study participants, six were employed full-time and five of them acquired their GED while one received a diploma. Those who acquired a GED for high school completion, left high school in higher grades, 10th through 12th grades, than the one who received a diploma, 9th grade. Two of the study participants who are employed full-time continued their education beyond the GED, one has a baccalaureate degree and the other completed one year of college. There were five study participants who were employed on a part-time basis. Of the five who were employed part-time, two acquired a GED and the remaining three did not complete high school. The unemployed study participants totaled four and left high school between the 9th and 11th grades. Half of the part-time employed study participants completed high school with one acquiring a GED and the other receiving a diploma. The remaining two did not complete high school. There were five individual interview study participants in total who did not acquire a GED or receive a diploma but all of them completed the NJYC program.

Participant 13 reported he remained in high school until his senior year but did not graduate so he decided to leave. He stated he was preoccupied with "the girls" and only decided to complete his education to acquire a "job." However, he reported completing high school was not a requirement for a job because "none of them asked if I

completed high school." Since he's pursuing an exterminator's license from the State of New Jersey, he realized the necessity of completing high school. He has a high school diploma instead of a GED.

Following the individual interview study participant's information is the NJYC staff demographic information.

NJYC Staff focus group

The staff's demographics were also provided such as gender, age, race, ethnicity, highest grade completed, and full-time or part-time employment status.

There were six NJYC staff who participated in the staff focus group. Each of the staff members had a variety of life experiences, performed several functions in their roles, and worked for IYO as NJYC staff for a different number of years.

One of six staff focus group participants was also an alumnus of NJYC and an individual interview study participant. His position with NJYC is a Site Coordinator and has worked for IYO with NJYC for 18 years. He participated in the staff focus group for the last 10 minutes due to addressing a family responsibility. However, the other five staff participated in the focus group for the duration of the group.

The NJYC Coordinator worked for IYO and NJYC for 18 years. He has two years of college and reported his commitment to NJYC participants. Americorps is another service learning program in which he participated. He participated in two different service learning programs with different training experiences. The Americorps experience was more professional in nature since he tested water at an Essex County Park in New Jersey. He only reported employment at IYO in the NJYC program.

Table 1 below identifies the individual interview study participants who left high school before graduation.

Table 1

Participant's Education Status

| Education status | | |
|------------------|----|-------------|
| | n= | grade level |
| least number | 2 | 12th |
| | 4 | 11th |
| most number | 5 | 10th |
| | 4 | 9th |

The least number, two, of the participants enrolled before leaving high school were in the 12th grade and the most number, five, were in the 10th grade. 9th and 11th grade both had four individual interview study participants who left high school before graduation. Out of the 15 individual interview study participants, eight have a GED, two have a high school diploma, and five do not have a GED or high school diploma. Of the five individual interview study participants without a GED or high school diploma, two were alumni and the remaining three were currently enrolled corps members. Two of the alumni individual interview study participants continued their education, one completed one year of college and the other has a baccalaureate degree. The individual interview study participants' employment status was six full-time, five were part-time, and four were unemployed. Just as the study participants' demographics were presented, the identified themes informed the researcher regarding the main question, "What were the

contributing factors to completing high school by acquiring a GED while participating in a service learning program?" Table 2 can be used to reference.

Table 2*Study Participant Demographics*

| Individual Interviewee | | | | | | | | | | | |
|------------------------|--------------------|-----|------|-----------|------------|---------------|-----|------------|-----------|------------------------|-------------|
| Gender Participant | Interview duration | Age | Race | Ethnicity | Emp status | Highest grade | GED | HS diploma | NJYC alum | In-person face to face | phone audio |
| M 1 | 7:49 | 19 | a | a | b | 11 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| F 2 | 7:51 | 18 | a | a,b | b | 9 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| M 3 | 10:16 | 28 | a | a | c | 10 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| M 4 | 20:49 | 20 | a | a | b | 10 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| F 5 | 14:09 | 48 | a | a | a | 10 (13) | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| M 6 | 23:17 | 34 | a | a | a | 10 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| F 7 | 20:07 | 27 | a | a | a | 12 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| F 8 | 29:07 | 38 | a | c | a | 11 (16) | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| M 9 | 10:25 | 20 | a | a,c | b | 10 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| F 10 | 24:24 | 37 | a | a | a | 12 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| F 11 | 17:38 | 18 | a | a | c | 9 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| M 12 | 19:11 | 38 | a | a | c | 9 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| F 13 | 27:17 | 34 | a | a | a | 9 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| M 14 | 32:17 | 29 | a | a | c | 11 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| M 15 | 18:04 | 18 | a | a | b | 11 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |

Key:

Gender: a=Male b=Female c=Transgender

Race: a=Black b=White c=Native American d=Pacific Islander
e=Asian

f=Mixed race

Ethnicity: a=African American b=Latino c=Caribbean
d=Continental African e=European f=Asian

Emp status: a=Full-time b=part-time c=unemployed

Other: 0=No 1=Yes

| Staff Focus Group | | | | | | | | |
|--------------------|--------------------|-----|------|-----------|------------|---------------|-----------|------------------------|
| Gender Participant | Interview duration | Age | Race | Ethnicity | Emp status | Highest grade | NJYC alum | In-person face to face |
| F 1 Worksite | 52:38 | 61 | a | a | a | 12 | | 1 |
| M 2 COVID | 52:38 | 61 | a | a | a | 12 | | 1 |
| F 3 Teacher | 52:38 | 27 | a | a | b | 16 | | 1 |
| M 4 Site Cdtr | 52:38 | 49 | a | a | a | 13 | 1 | 1 |
| M 5 NJYC Cdtr | 52:38 | 46 | a | a | b | 14 | | 1 |
| M 6 Teacher | 52:38 | 63 | a | b | b | 15 | | 1 |

Key:

Gender: a=Male b=Female c=Transgender

Race: a=Black b=White c=Native American d=Pacific Islander
e=Asian

f=Mixed race

Ethnicity: a=African American b=Latino c=Caribbean
d=Continental African e=European f=Asian

Emp status: a=Full-time b=part-time c=unemployed

Other: 0=No 1=Yes

Duration

There were 15 individual interviews with nine questions and one staff focus group with five participants. The longest individual interview duration was 32 minutes, the shortest was seven minutes which included both audio and in-person face-to-face individual interviews, and the average interview time was 19 minutes. Audio individual interview durations were longer than the in-person face-to-face interviews. The shortest time for the audio individual interviews was 17 minutes and the longest was 32 minutes. The longest time for in-person face-to-face individual interviews was 20 minutes and the shortest was seven minutes. The staff focus group had a total duration of 52 minutes with the average time for each question approximately 10 minutes.

Each interview was a different time frame based on the individual interview study participant, but the staff focus group was the same length of time.

NJYC Members' Individual Interviews

The individual interviews were conducted in-person face to face or virtually via the telephone. For the telephone interviews, they were longer because the informed consent and participant agreement were read. Some participants' responses provided more information than others and lasted longer. The same was true for the in-person face-to-face interviews with some being longer than others based on more information provided. There was one in-person face-to-face interview, Participant 11, in which the researcher read the research participant agreement based on an affirmative response from the interviewee when asked by the researcher. This interview consisted of very limited

responses from the study participant such as silence or one word. NJYC alumni interviews were longer in duration than the current NJYC enrolled participants.

Interview Participant 12 was one of the alumni participants who completed the NJYC program but did not pass the test for high school completion. Her dream is to be a 4th grade English teacher, but she has to pass the high school test for college admission. She left high school before graduation to take care of her chronically ill mother and worked at a fast-food restaurant. Support or services in the high school she attended were missing for her to remain enrolled until graduation. She cried during the interview because of her attachment to IYO and NJYC, "they are family to me." During the interview, she verbalized her desire to take a high school equivalency test (HSET)

Another study participant, Participant 8, is an alumnus who completed the NJYC program, acquired the GED, has a baccalaureate degree, and is currently employed full-time for the State of New Jersey with the Child Protection Service agency. He described a conversation he had with IYO Co-founder Mr. Wallace, who asked him during a car ride around Newark, "what do you want to do with your life". He told him that he wanted to be a "pastor" and he reported Mr. Wallace said, "I think you can do it...I believe in you...you're an ambitious person." He reported Mr. and Mrs. Wallace were very encouraging and supportive of his endeavors. Participant 8 emigrated from Guyana at age 22 to the U.S. where he left high school before graduation and benefited from the opportunities for high school completion in the U.S. He said he had more support and exposure to opportunities in the U.S. than in Guyana. The support was genuine, and it increased his motivation. He is now seeking to pursue graduate study in social work. Just as Participant

12 formed an attachment with IYO, he too reported an emotional connection to the agency and the NJYC program.

The duration of the individual interviews provided an opportunity for the study participants to share their lived experiences with the researcher. The one interviewee who attended school outside of the U.S. verbalized the same sentiment as other interviewees who attended school within U.S. borders, teachers did not care and only saw teaching as a job. Each interview varied in duration and the time length depended upon the amount of information provided. The NJYC staff focus group was the same time length although each study group participant varied the amount of time sharing their experiences as NJYC staff members.

NJYC Staff Focus Group

NJYC staff members shared their lived experiences in a focus group for nearly an hour about working with the NJYC enrolled members. There were five questions asked of the staff about the program and the lack of funding to start the fiscal year 2022 so the program can continue without interruption.

Five of the staff focus group study participants responded to four of the five questions and all the staff members answered the fifth and final question about funding. Question two produced the most themes since it asked about the benefits and challenges of preparing the corp members to pass the HSET in 16 weeks. The teachers shared their experience of test preparation since they provide academic support. They reported students who have recently left high school are better prepared academically to take the HSET than those who have been out of high school for more than two years. 16 weeks was considered insufficient time to prepare the corps members to take the HSET since

they present with multiple issues besides academic challenges. The last question, asking about funding, produced plenty of responses but few themes. Some of the responses were the State of New Jersey's poor investment into NJYC programs, make the NJYC state employees, similar practices as redlining, poor staff training, having the same issues as 1989, and poor budgeting by the State of New Jersey.

NJYC Individual Interviewee and Staff Member

One of the staff members was also an alumnus who participated in both an individual in-person face-to-face interview, Participant 5, and the focus group. He provided a unique perspective of his shared living experiences. However, his participation in the focus group was minimal. He completed two service-learning programs, NJYC and AmeriCorps, and is currently a staff member with the NJYC program, Worksite Supervisor. He stated he left high school due to attendance issues, was placed in an alternative high school before leaving, and was thrown out of the alternative high school due to an unsubstantiated statement from a school staff member about his behavior off school grounds.

Demographics, themes, and the duration of the individual interviews and staff focus group were presented. Just as the results were presented, discussion of the results is important to clarify and connect the contributing factors of leaving high school before graduation, academic re-engagement, and choosing a service learning program for high school completion.

Chapter Eight: Discussion

Each study completed is expected to provide a particular contribution to the profession of social work and society. The proposed research was poised to give examples of people sharing their lived experiences impacted by leaving high school before graduation. Also, it provided an opportunity for the researcher to highlight the mutual benefit of service learning programs for the government, community, and participants. Additionally, the social work profession can advocate for the marginalized to decision-makers for redefining graduation. The study will help others understand overcoming adversity by being resilient and increase awareness of available options for high school education completion.

Individuals who live in impoverished communities are faced with a plethora of issues, although each person may experience these problems differently (Campbell, 2015; Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Jobs for the Future, 2014; Schwartz, 2014). The research's aim was a phenomenological exploration of leaving high school before graduation, choosing service learning for completing high school, and the story shared by those who had those lived experiences. It was also essential to identify the factors that influenced the participant's decision to disengage from the traditional educational setting before completing high school (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Burke-Morison, 2006; Suh & Suh, 2007).

The study provided an opportunity to tell the story of the mutual benefit service learning programs provide to the government, community, and study participants. Service learning programs support a non-traditional method for high school completion while obtaining training simultaneously. Individuals who inhabit impoverished communities may

need a non-traditional path for high school completion (Jobs for the Future, 2014). The research results allowed the study participants to share their academic re-engagement choices for high school completion and supplied information for advocacy to legislators and policymakers. Demographics, themes, and interview duration presented data necessary to analyze and discuss for stakeholders to have a better understanding of the shared lived experiences of those who leave high school before graduation, academic re-engagement, and choosing service learning for high school completion.

There are a few things the results tell us about the phenomenological exploration of academic re-engagement for high school completion. One is there were a variety of reasons the participants left high school before completion. Secondly, the research participants identified limited support in the academic setting for them to remain until graduation. Thirdly, they realized completing high school was a pathway for success in life. Lastly, the New Jersey Youth Corps (NJYC) provided the opportunity for academic re-engagement, support, and training to move ahead in their life. There were some who completed the NJYC program but needed additional academic support for high school completion.

Academic re-engagement was necessary for high school completion and the study participants chose a service learning program to achieve their goal. NJYC members chose the program based on recommendations, location, and the opportunity offered by the program with training and academic support simultaneously. There are no alternative explanations for the findings, and the findings support the literature.

Theoretical Frameworks

Theoretical frameworks for the study supported the findings.

Resilience theory was the primary framework and was supported by the individual NJYC enrollees and alumni demonstrating a bounce back, like a rubber band, from their adverse experiences and choosing a service-learning program for high school completion. The adverse experiences encouraged the individual interviewees to leave high school before graduation. Protective factors were missing from the academic setting to support the individual interviewees remaining in school until completion. Systems ecological theory was supported by federal and state policies and laws in the educational system. The curriculum, attendance, and support in the academic setting are formally determined by policies and laws. Pathways, barriers, and resources identify what is available to facilitate successful high school completion. Critical race theory undergirded systems ecological theory regarding educational settings in marginalized, underserved, under-resourced, and urban communities. Also, critical race theory supported stories of the participants' shared living experiences.

The findings are consistent with past empirical studies regarding the need for increased investment in alternative settings with wrap-around services to support successful high school completion for students who live in marginalized, underserved, under-resourced, and violent communities.

The research results support the literature about the necessity to change policies for high school completion in marginalized, impoverished, urban, underserved, and under-resourced communities such as the benefits afforded to individuals enrolled in service learning programs for high school completion.

The participants' shared lived experiences were exemplified in the results as follows: caring teachers who demonstrate investment in

students' learning; an engaging academic environment makes a difference with students feeling valued; the educational system continues to permeate failure with a refusal to make radical changes; and students in marginalized, impoverished, urban, underserved, and under-resourced communities really do possess an interest in learning.

This knowledge conformed to my expected findings based on the literature review. However, the actual interviews were more than expected when one participant discussed making a choice of eating a meal at home or taking a test in school. The choice for the participant was due to the lack of support in the school setting to provide a meal and limited resources in the home for eating a meal.

Findings from the study contribute to theory affirmation in terms of resilience, the educational system, and critical race theory. The findings further inform resilience theory as it demonstrates the participants in NJYC were motivated to graduate high school and chose a service learning program to support efforts to complete their education. Systems ecological theory identified issues in the educational system with teachers' attitudes, social support missing in the academic setting, laws that required students to leave before graduation, and limited resources outside of school. Critical race theory was supported by identifying the systemic barriers that impeded students successfully completing high school in the traditional academic setting.

The findings contribute to knowledge building by the necessity to redefine graduation, remove the one size fits all template for high school completion, and allocate resources at the student level with wrap-around services to ensure the needs of the whole child are being adequately met. Aspects of the theory to consider are the ways

children who experience adversity bounce back from it with intrinsic motivation to create a positive outcome. The school environment needs to be considered as to how it nurtures students' academic growth, inhibits adequate learning with a cookie-cutter approach to educating students, and offers limited community participation in decision making processes for educating students. The practices that silenced the communities' voices in developing the school system, a curriculum that excludes community input, minimal embracement of cultural practices of students who attend the school, and the intersection of oppressive practices as it relates to the marginalized living in impoverished, under-resourced, underserved, and urban communities.

Implications and Contributions

The coronavirus pandemic unexpectedly required creative adjustments to collect data while conducting the individual interviews. The NJYC current enrollees who were interviewed reported leaving school before graduation due to remote learning that came about as an adaptation to the coronavirus pandemic. There were more NJYC current enrollees who may have left high school for the same reason but were not interviewed due to 18 years of age or older participant criteria.

Interviewing the students allowed the study participants to share their lived experiences in the academic setting and facilitating a staff focus group provided an opportunity of the challenges with supporting enrollees in a service-learning program. Social work must be involved in macro-level practice to address the systemic issues in the educational system. These issues have a domino effect on students, families, communities, and societies. When the person-in-environment approach is practiced, social work advocacy will increase for equitable

education in marginalized, impoverished, under-resourced, underserved, and urban communities.

Macro practice approaches can be used for changing policy to ensure alternative paths are developed for high school graduation that do not involve leaving high school. As well, protective factors for maximizing students' successful high school completion need to be implemented, and those previous practices that supported students remaining in high school until graduation need to be assessed and replicated. Segmentation analysis can be used to evaluate indicators that impact students completing high school with their cohort. Individual challenges to address in the academic setting prior to high school can be identified to facilitate high school completion.

The social work profession must empower the ethical concept of self-determination without reservations. Social workers being absent from the fight for educational equity in marginalized, impoverished, under-resourced, underserved, and urban communities appear to perpetuate oppression. Service and dignity and worth of the person are ethical values that must be practiced in deeds as much as words. It is right to ensure education is a right instead of a privilege.

The words attributed to Frederick Douglass, "it is easier to build strong children than repair broken men" (Damron, 2019). Service learning is a way to repair broken men, but we need to focus on building strong children from the womb. Education is a United States institution designed to build strong children to ensure preparation to be productive members of society. Social work's foundation is built on working with the marginalized, impoverished, under-resourced, underserved, and urban communities. Facilitating progressive change in these communities provides the opportunity for advocacy, creates a

pathway for self-determination by the inhabitants, and prompts policymakers to ensure equitable resources are allocated and distributed appropriately. There are failures in the U.S. educational system and social work involvement is necessary on all levels of practice to remedy them. After all, it's not up to us alone. Educators themselves have to be involved.

The systemic issues in the educational system require the social work profession's involvement as a probable resolution to the matter. This is because the social work profession is in a position to assess the person in environment factors that contribute to the educational system's success and failures. Who will address the educational system issues of inequity if social work fails to do it? So, it requires the social work profession to answer the call ensuring children have the necessary support to be productive members of society as they mature.

Future Research

There is sufficient literature identifying the failures of the educational system and their impact upon leaving high school before graduation. Despite the evidence, what is necessary to avoid students leaving school before graduation. Would the inclusion of service learning as a mainstream curriculum for high school completion help students remain in high school to ensure their academic success until graduation?

There are new factors important to control in future investigations such as inquiring about academic experiences before high school, the impact of global events upon remaining in high school, and the participant's age when interviewed as a determining factor of progressive lifestyle changes. The implication for improvements in design is to have at least half of the currently enrolled NJYC members

as participants in the study. The limitations of the study were to wait for another cohort to interview, interview the current enrollees who were above 18 years of age, or seek consent for individuals under 18 years of age.

Some things the researcher would do differently are to plan for interviewing the students and staff, create questions they both can answer, facilitate focus groups and individual interviews with the student and staff, and seek consent for enrolled NJYC members under 18 years.

Issues to examine in the future considering findings are to study individuals who remained in high school until graduation, interview students in alternative high school settings to identify issues in the traditional school setting that prompted their enrollment in the alternative setting, and study various states' legislation and policies that support students remaining in the school or seeking other means to complete high school.

Conclusion

The process of leaving high school before graduation, academic re-engagement, and choosing service learning for high school completion is complex and requires continual examination. The methodology for replicating this study in the future is to examine and compare the various programs people use to complete high school while acquiring training simultaneously through Job Corps, attending college, or having a job. A comparative analysis format can determine the successful outcome of those who earn a high school diploma or GED. A mixed-method study composed of qualitative and quantitative methods can identify students' protective factors as they approach life events. The other option is to gather data about students' lived experiences using a

quantitative method. This data gathering approach would also enhance dissemination of research results. Yet, another option is to conduct the study in the absence of a global pandemic to determine if the contextual factors from the pandemic will modify the peripheral factors such as interview dynamics and availability of enrolled Job Corps members above 18 years old. Lastly, the researcher can conduct another study utilizing a qualitative method to collect information about students who had life events without leaving high school before graduation.

Policy, legislative, and institutional changes are necessary to support students remaining in the academic setting until graduation. The singular curriculum that does not provide many options for addressing students' individual needs may inadvertently blame the student for not conforming to the traditional educational model rather than providing alternative options to meet the student's unique needs. Frequently alternative educational options may require additional funding. Nevertheless, additional funding allowing students to transition to a service learning program for high school completion benefits all community stakeholders. The issues are known to happen in marginalized, impoverished, underserved, and under-resourced communities. Education is one institution that contributes to the sustainability of a society. If it fails the young, it makes the old deficient in resources to fully engage as productive members of society. Inclusion in the workforce benefits society at large. Data show that high school graduates are more apt to enter the workforce than those who leave high school before graduation and that non-white students leave high school at higher rates than their white counterparts (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Within

one year, from October 2020 to October 2021, 449,000 youth left high school before graduation. Of those youth who did not graduate high school, 39.1 percent became participants in the labor force. Of those high school graduates who did not go to college, 69.1 percent became participants in the labor force (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Although social work function as a secondary profession in educational institutions, social workers are part of interdisciplinary teams in most educational settings. Therefore, social workers have an important role to play in encouraging and facilitating the development of educational systems that have the flexibility to meet the needs of a variety of students. This study points to the necessity for social work involvement in advocating for the inclusion of service learning options for high school completion. For instance, continuing education sessions can be developed to strengthen social workers' skill sets as partners with educators. As well, certificates in school social work embedded in MSW programs can provide important knowledge for new graduates. Education empowers individuals with an outcome that has generational impact. In the words of Malcolm X, "Education is the passport to the future, for tomorrow only belongs to the people who prepare for it today (Allah, 2013). Social workers must facilitate the preparation process for the future by ensuring the availability of resources today.

References

- Abramson, M. (1985, September). The Autonomy-paternalism dilemma in social work practice. *Social Casework: The Journal of Contemporary Social Work*, 66(7) 387-393.
- Allah, S. B. (2013, May 19). The Source remembers Malcolm X. The Source.
<https://thesource.com/2013/05/19/the-source-remembers-malcolm-x/>
- America's Promise Alliance, Center for Promise (2014). *Don't call them dropouts: Understanding the experiences of young people who leave high school before graduation*, 1-71.
- Barrat, V. X. & Berliner, B. (2016, November). *Characteristics and education outcome of Utah high school dropouts who re-enrolled* (REL 2017-206). Washington, DC: US
- Beauchamp, T. L. & Childress, J. F. (2001). *Principles of biomedical ethics*. (5th edition). New York, NY: Oxford University Press, Inc.
- Bloom, D. (2010, Spring). Programs and policies to assist high school dropouts in the transition to adulthood. *The Future of Children*, 20(1) 89-108.
- Bloom, D. & Haskins, R. (2010, Spring). Policy brief: Helping high school dropouts improve their prospects. *The Future of Children*. Princeton-Brookings.
- Bridgeland, J. M., Dilulio, J. J., & Burke-Morison, K. (2006, March). *The Silent epidemic: Perspectives of high school dropouts*. Civic Enterprises report in association with Peter D. Hart Research Associates for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.
- Campbell, C. (2015). The socioeconomic consequences of dropping out of high school: Evidence from an analysis of siblings. *Social Science Research*, 51 108-118.

- Caputo, R. K. (2014). *Policy analysis for social workers. Social work in the new century*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020, December 12). *How to protect yourself & others*. Retrieved from:
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/prevention.html>
- Chu, E. M. & Ready, D. D. (2018, August). Exclusion and urban public high schools: Short-and long-term consequences of school suspensions. *American Journal of Education*, 124 479-509.
- Christle, C. A., Jolivette, K., & Nelson, C. M. (2007, November/December). School characteristics related to high school dropout rates. *Remedial and Special Education*, 28(6)325-339.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches*. (2nd ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Damron, A. (2019, April 30). Fact check: Did Frederick Douglass say 'It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men'?
<https://checkyourfact.com/2019/04/30/fact-check-frederick-douglass-easier-build-strong-children-repair-broken-men/>
- Durm, T. S. (2016). *Critical race theory in elementary social studies: Exploring racial identity and stereotype threat for black males*, 1-108.
- Fall, A-M. & Roberts, G. (2012). High school dropouts: Interactions between social context, self-perceptions, school engagement, and student dropout. *Journal of Adolescence*, 35 787-798.
- Friese, S. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis with ATLAS.ti*. (2nded). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Frudenberg, N. & Ruglis, J. (2007, October). Reframing school dropout

- as a public health issue. *Preventing Chronic Disease: Public Health Research, Practice, and Policy*. 4(4) 1-11.
- Goldner, J., Peters, T., Richards, M. H. & Pearce, S. (2011). Exposure to community violence and protective and risky contexts among low-income urban African American adolescents: A prospective study. *Journal of Youth Adolescence*, 40 174-186.
- Hesse-Biber, S. N. & Leavy, P. (2004). *Approaches to qualitative research: A reader on theory and practice*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, Inc.
- Jenson, J. M. & Fraser, M. W. (2016). *Social policy for children and families: A risk and resilience perspective*. (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Jobs for the Future and Everyone Graduates Center, John Hopkins University. (2014, February). *Early warning indicators and segmentation analysis: A technical guide on data studies that inform dropout prevention and recovery*, 1-37.
- Kim, K. N. (2013). Career trajectory in high school dropouts. *Social Science Journal*, 50, 306-312.
- Kozol, J. (1991). *Savage inequalities: Children in America's schools*. New York, NY: Crown Publishers.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1998, January). Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education? *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, II(2) 7-24.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2013, March 26). Critical race theory-What it is not! from: *Handbook of Critical Race Theory in Education* Routledge.
- Linzer, N. (1999). *Resolving ethical dilemmas in social work practice*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

- Ludwig, K. A. & Warren, J. S. (2009). Community violence, school-related protective factors, and psychosocial outcomes in urban youth. *Psychology in the schools*, 46(10).
- Murdach, A. D. (1996, January). Beneficence re-examined: Protective intervention in mental health. *Social Work*, 41(1) 26-32.
- National Association of Social Workers. (2017). Code of ethics of the National Association of Social Workers. Washington, DC: NASW Press.
- New Jersey Administrative Code, Title 6A Chapter 16. (2014, February 18). *Program to support student development*.
- New Jersey Administrative Code, Title 6A Chapter 20. (2013, September, 3). *Adult education programs*.
- New Jersey Department of Education. (2014). *New Jersey Adult Education, Pathways to a high school diploma, GED*. Retrieved from <https://www.nj.gov/education/adulted/pathways/ged/>
- New Jersey Department of Education. (2015). DOE Data, *Dropouts*. Retrieved from <https://www.state.nj.us/education/data/drp/>
- New Jersey Department of Education, School Performance, Graduation & Postsecondary, Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rates. (2020). *Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rates, Cohort 2020 4-year adjusted cohort graduation rates by cohort group*. Retrieved from <https://www.nj.gov/education/schoolperformance/grad/ACGR.shtml>
- New Jersey Youth Corps, Newark/Essex County. (2018-2019). *Corpsmember handbook*.
- New Jersey Youth Corps, Phillipsburg. (n.d.). *Our roots and the history of NJ Youth Corps*. Retrieved from: <https://www.njycphillipsburg.com/njychistory>

- New Jersey Youth Corps Act, P. L. 1984, c. 198 § 1 (1984, November 27).
- Padgett, D. K. (2017). *Qualitative methods in social work research*. (3rd ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Payne, M. (2014). *Modern social work theory*. (4th ed.). New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Perez, E. N., (2019, October 14). *Using critical race theory to examine race and racism in social work education*, 1-170.
- Rehabilitation Act of 1973, PUb. L. No. 93-113, Stat. 1148 1973, October
- 1). <http://uscode.house.gov/statviewer.htm?volume=87&page=394>.
- Rothman, J., Smith, W., Nakashima, J., Paterson, M. A., & Mustin, J. (1996, July). Client self-determination and professional intervention: Striking a balance. *Social Work*, 41(4) 396-405.
- Schwartz, J. (2014, Winter). High school equivalency as counter-space. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 37-47. DOI: 10.1002/ace.20112.
- Scientific Software Development GmbH. (2016). *ATLAS.ti 8.1: Qualitative data analysis*. Berlin, Germany.
- Smith, J. E. (2013, May). *A consensual qualitative research study of the transformation from high school dropout to second chance alumni*, 1-250.
- Suh, S. & Suh, J. (2007, February). Risk factors and levels of risk for high school dropouts. *Professional School Counseling*, 10(3) 297-306.
- Swanson, C. B. (2007, April). Special report: Why students dropout. *Educational Leadership: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development*.
- Sweifach, J. S., Linzer, N., & LaPorte, H. H. (2015, Spring).

Beneficence vs. fidelity: Serving social work clients in the aftermath of catastrophic events. *Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*, 12(1) 1-12.

Thompson, T. & Massat, C. R. (2005, December). Experiences of violence, post-traumatic stress, academic achievement, and behavior problems of urban African American children. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*. 22(5-6) 367-393.

Tracy, S. J. (2013). *Qualitative research methods: Collecting evidence, crafting analysis, communicating impact*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Tuck, E. (2012, April/May). Repatriating the GED. *The High School Journal*, 4-18.

United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, Economic news Release, College

enrollment and work activity of recent high school and college graduates summary. (2022, April 26). Retrieved from:
<https://www.bls.gov/news.release/hsgec.nr0.htm#:~:text=Between%20>

0

ctober%202020%20and%20October,in%20college%20(66.9%20percent)

United States Department of Education, Disability Discrimination:

Overview of the laws. (2022, February 11). Retrieved from:

<https://www2.ed.gov/policy/rights/guid/ocr/disabilityoverview.htm>

1

United States Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, What Works Clearinghouse, Service and Conservation Corps. (2010, September). *WWC intervention report: Dropout prevention*.

Retrieved from:

https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/InterventionReports/wwc_youth_corps_09210.pdf

United States Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory West, 1-14. Retrieved from:

<http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs>.

United States Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Mid-Atlantic. (2021, August).

1-16. Retrieved from:

<https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/projects/project.asp?projectID=464>

6

United States Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education. (2013, November). *Federal adult education: A*

legislative history 1964-2013. Retrieved from

https://lincs.ed.gov/publications/pdf/Adult_Ed_History_Report.pdf

Appendix A



International Youth Organization

703 South 12th Street, James Wallace Plaza, Newark, New Jersey 07103
 Phone: 973.621.1100/Fax: 973.621.9120 www.iyo-newark.org - Email: admin@iyo-newark.org

James Wallace, Founder
Carolyn B. T. Wallace, Co-Founder
Wayne Smith, Chairman

Viva White
 784 Clinton Avenue, Apt. 21
 Newark, N.J. 07108

December 28th, 2018

Dear Viva White:

The International Youth Organization is pleased to provide to you the opportunity you need in order to conduct your research project and to provide all that is needed for the approval from the Institutional Review Board.

As discussed and agreed upon we must do all that we can to assure that the participants who participate in this research project, whether they are participants of the New Jersey Youth Corps or the IYO Community Service Corps, or any other programs that IYO administers has or will offer, will be protected. Therefore, for this project all participants must be 18 years old or over; that a neutral identifier be used instead of actual names, addresses or other forms of identity and that confidentiality rules & regulations will be observed.

Based on your agreement with these terms, and the signing of this document that all of these stipulations will be observed we look forward to this exciting activity. We also wish you the best in your pursuit in higher educational goals.

Sincerely

Carolyn B. T. Wallace, Co Founder

Policies Agreed Upon:

Signature:
 Viva White

CC: Elliott Garland, Coordinator
 Wayne Smith, Chairman
 Andrea McCray-Reid, Program Committee

Appendix B

Research Participant Agreement

PROJECT TITLE: A phenomenological exploration of high school dropouts who choose service-learning for high school completion.

INTRODUCTION: The purpose of this form is to provide various information regarding your agreement of YES or disagreement of NO to participate in this research study and to keep a record of those who agreed by stating YES. This study strives to better understand the reason(s) for individuals dropping out of high school and factors that support their return to get their General Education Diploma while enrolling in the New Jersey Youth Corp Program at the same time. The findings can provide information to various stakeholders such as educators, social workers, policymakers, elected officials to develop prevention supports, intervention strategies, and successful alternatives for high school completion.

RESEARCHERS: Viva White, a doctoral candidate at Yeshiva University, Wurzweiler School of Social Work Ph.D. program in Social Welfare, is the primary researcher. Dr. Urania Glassman is the principal investigator in this study.

DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH STUDY: The study duration is a maximum of 16 weeks or the length of time for each cohort of the New Jersey Youth Corp Program members to complete training. Nine open-ended questions will be asked of 10 research participants via face-to-face interviews remotely, phone, or in-person. The study's selection criteria are participants who have completed the required two (2) week orientation before starting preparation for the GED test and service-learning components.

The researcher, Viva White, will conduct face-to-face interviews with the participants remotely, phone, or in-person. The participant's confidentiality is protected by neutral identifiers when the researcher transcribes and analyzes interview questions' responses using Atlas ti.

The International Youth Organization will be known as IYO, and New Jersey Youth Corp will be known as NJYC.

EXCLUSIONARY CRITERIA: The participants are between the ages of 18 and 24, have dropped out of high school, completed the required two (2) week orientation, committed to complete the program, pursuing a GED, and participating in the NJYC program. These are necessary to be a part of this study.

BENEFITS AND RISKS:

Benefits: The main benefit to you participating in this study is helping to understand better high school dropouts who choose service learning for high school completion and the role of resiliency as both a motivator and a protective factor. The reason(s) individuals drop out of high school and factors that support their return to get their General Education Diploma while enrolling in the New Jersey Youth Corp Program simultaneously. Additionally, the findings can provide

information to various stakeholders such as educators, social workers, policymakers, elected officials to develop prevention supports, intervention strategies, and successful alternatives for high school completion.

Risks: If you decide to participate in this study, there is a risk of limited confidentiality if you disclose your study participation. The researcher will attempt to minimize that risk by including a confidentiality clause in the informed consent and neutral identifiers in the interview transcriptions.

PAYMENTS: The researcher cannot give you any payment(s) for participation in this study.

NEW INFORMATION: If there is any new information that may influence your decision to participate in this study, it will be made known to you.

CONFIDENTIALITY: All information obtained about you in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. Reports, presentations, and publications may use the study's results, but you will not be informed. The researcher will also use neutral identifiers in the interview transcripts and destroy all recorded data from the interview upon completing the transcription.

WITHDRAWAL PRIVILEGE: If your agreement is YES to participate in this study, you can disagree and say NO at any time during the study and withdraw from it. You are permitted to do so at your own will, and your decision will not affect your relationship with IYO and NJYC and any benefits/entitlements afforded to you as a participant in NJYC hosted by IYO. The observation of potential problems with your continued participation, the researcher/investigator, reserves the right to withdraw your participation in this study at any time.

COMPENSATION FOR ILLNESS AND INJURY: If your agreement is YES to participate in this study, your consent does not waive any of your legal rights. However, in the event of harm, injury, or illness as a result of this study, neither IYO, NJYC, Yeshiva University-Wurzweiler School of Social Work, and/nor the researcher can give you any money, insurance, coverage, free medical care, or any other compensation for such injury.

VOLUNTARY CONSENT: By signing this form, you are agreeing and stating YES to several things. You are stating you have read it, or it was to you, you are satisfied with your understanding of this form, the research study, and its benefits and risks. If you have any questions at a later time, contact the researcher to answer them.

Viva White, (862) 235-0828 or vwhite@mail.yu.edu

If you feel pressured to participate or have any questions about your rights or this form, you may contact the Institutional Review Board at Yeshiva University.

By signing below, you are agreeing by stating YES to participate in this study. The researcher will give you a copy of this form for your records.

| | |
|------------------------------------|------|
| Subject's Printed Name & Signature | Date |
|------------------------------------|------|

| | |
|---|------|
| Witness' Printed Name & Signature (if applicable) | Date |
|---|------|

RESEARCHER'S STATEMENT

I certify that I have explained the nature and purpose of this research to this subject, including benefits, risks, costs, and experimental procedures. The rights and protections afforded to human subjects were described, and I have done nothing to pressure, coerce, or falsely entice this subject into participating in the study. I am aware of my obligations under state and federal laws and ensure compliance. The participants' questions were answered, and I have encouraged him/her to ask additional questions at any time during this study. I have witnessed the above signature(s) on this consent form.

| | |
|---|------|
| Investigator's Printed Name & Signature | Date |
|---|------|

Appendix C

Participant Demographic Sheet

Please complete the form and do not put your name on it. This information will be used to describe the research participants' overall demographics. No specific information about each participant will be reported.

1. Please check your gender.
 - a. Male _____ b. Female _____ c. Transgender _____
 - i. If Transgender, please specify pronouns you prefer
 1. He, him, his _____
 2. She, her, hers _____
2. Please identify your age. _____
3. Please check your race.
 - a. Black _____ b. White _____ c. Native American _____
 - d. Pacific Islander _____ e. Asian _____
 - f. Mixed race
 - i. Specify _____
4. Please check your ethnicity.
 - a. African-American _____
 - b. Latino _____
 - i. Country _____
 - c. Caribbean _____
 - i. Country _____
 - d. Continental African _____
 - i. Country _____
 - e. European _____
 - i. Country _____
 - f. Asian _____
 - i. Country _____
5. Please identify your employment status.
 - a. Full-time _____ b. Part-time _____ c. Unemployed _____
6. Please identify the highest grade completed. _____
7. Do you have any children? no _____ yes _____
 If so, how many? _____ Ages _____
8. Please specify residential status
 - a. Alone/Head of household _____ b. Transitional _____

c. Shared living (specify: family, friends, roommate)

Appendix D**Interview Script**

Thank you for agreeing to help with this study. This research aims to improve the understanding of why students leave high school and join service-learning programs to complete their high school education. The interview should take approximately 30 to 45 minutes and will be recorded to ensure the accuracy of reporting your responses. There are nine questions about your high school experience, your reasons for leaving school, and your choice for service learning to complete high school. This study is entirely voluntary, and you may stop at any time or choose not to answer any question. Let us begin when you are ready.

Individual interviews

1. What impacted your decision to complete your high school education?
2. How is completing your high school education and training at the same time helpful to you?
3. What were your experiences for leaving high school before graduating?
4. How has your support changed since you left high school?
5. What things can you identify that could have avoided you from leaving high school?
6. What factors impacted you to consider not returning to complete your high school education?
7. How would you compare the value of the GED to the high school diploma?
8. What were your reasons for selecting the New Jersey Youth Corps (NJYC) to complete your education?
9. How has completing your education made a difference in your life?

Staff focus group

1. Share your experience of helping the corp members complete their education?
2. How is 16 weeks helpful? Challenge/benefits?
3. In what ways do you see yourself as helping others change their lives?
4. What advice would you give to the decision-makers about education? service-learning?
5. The program is scheduled to end 6/30/21, share some thoughts about it?

Thank you for your time and thoughtful responses. I appreciate you agreeing to participate in this study. Is there any additional information that I did not ask you about that you believe would benefit the research?