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Trauma, Trust, and Academic Achievement Stories Shared by High School Dropouts

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Trauma, Trust, and Academic Achievement

Stories Shared by High School Dropouts

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctorate in Education.

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

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Reader: Dr. Constance I. LaCombe
Reader: Dr. Irina Makarevitch

Dedication

To my husband and best friend Bill for his love, encouragement, music expertise,

and life-long partner in Argentine Tango, ballroom dance, and world travel.

Thanks to my dissertation committee

To Hamline professors Dr. Vivian P. Johnson, Dr. Irina Makarevitch,

and Dr. Connye I. LaCombe, my friend and former teaching associate.

Special Acknowledgements

To all former students and their parents, thank you for being part of my life.

To former students, continue to learn by stepping outside your comfort zone.

Recall the poster on the band room wall?

"Whether you think you can or whether you think you can't, your right".

Epigraph Quotations

"All social change requires radical thought, and the value is defined by the survivors."

Andrea Lerner, New York Times Magazine, January 3, 2016.

"The really compelling reason to volunteer a truth is so that other people have,

and can act on, a proper understanding of the world."

Kwame Anthony Appiah, New York University

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CHAPTER ONE

Road to Dissertation Topic and Research Questions

Introduction

During more than 40 years in education, I was a White female instrumental music teacher

and band director. I taught students Western woodwind, brass, string, and percussion

instruments, in grades six through twelve. At times I team-taught with the choral director, to

block musicals and choreograph the swing and show choir. My students represented multiple

ethnicities, religions, socio-economic groups, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer

or questioning (LGBTQ) families. I learned more about the war in Vietnam from the Asian

parent community than printed in any newspaper or history book. The African-American parents

gave me an education in traditional jazz and Rhythm and Blues, not available at any college or

university. I retired from the St. Paul Public schools in 2009. I loved my job.

During my career, I made myself available to any student who just wanted to talk.

Several felt safe to share they were gay. Eventually, with the support of a school nurse and social

worker, the student community learned the high school band room was a safe place for LGBTQ

students. Many of my students experienced family trauma, such as those with 2nd, 3rd, or

multiple foster care placements or had been adopted out of foster care. Several were domestic or

international adoptees. They wanted-needed to share their stories. All expressed anxieties that

materialized in multiple ways, and many did this by shutting down to the learning community.

At times I could negotiate their thoughts back to academic achievement, but for the most part, I

found it common for these students to "not seek contact when distressed, communicate distress

or vulnerability, and avoid becoming emotionally close" to their teachers or school social workers (Bergin, 2009, p. 143). Unfortunately, regardless of the educational opportunities given to them, many did not connect to education for their own sake. I wondered how many would graduate from high school on time. These thoughts led me to explore my research topic-increasing my understanding of how adults made sense of their experience of leaving high school without earning a diploma. I found an adult learning center willing to let me implement this research project using the following questions.

The Primary Question: How do adults earning their high school diploma describe what stopped them from graduating on time? The Secondary Question: Who did they trust in their family or at school to ask for advice or help with any issue? While probing, the participants will be asked to change places, be a parent, teacher, and share what should have been done to help them graduate on time?

The primary, secondary, and probing questions were developed from Rumberger's (2011) definition of relational trust; "a reciprocal social exchange among all organizational members [that] includes respect, personal regard to others, and integrity" (p. 247). Rumberger's (2011) studies found "children are less likely to drop out of school when their parents are actively involved with their child's education" (p. 13). As the participants respond to the question about trust, I also hope to learn if education policies such as if the 1995 Zero Tolerance may have played a part in their experience.

Overview: Road to Dissertation Questions

I can follow my family's association with the profession of musical performance and music education back to the village of Neuren in Southern Bohemia in 1791. Family members have belonged to both the American Federation of Teachers and the Musicians Unions. By the time I

entered college I knew the working fundamentals of all wind instruments and a plethora of teaching-coaching strategies. Schmitt Music Company hired me out of high school to teach private lessons. After auditioning for Dr. Daryle Gibson Sr. and Ruben Haugen I was accepted at MacPhail College of Music in Minneapolis Minnesota. After three years MacPhail closed, and I completed my undergrad degree at Mankato State University. Moving forward I added two master's degrees, a paralegal certificate, and in 2020 a Dr. of Education.

At the University of Michigan (summer Interlochen), I earned a minor in stage acting, theater, and operetta production. I have been an intermittent ballroom dancer since high school. These experiences were invaluable when applying for a teaching position because I was qualified to team-teach with the choir director. I helped block musicals and choreographed swing and show choirs. I went on to earn a Master of Arts in Arts Administration (MFA) at St. Mary's University Minneapolis and learned valuable marketing strategies. I also earned a Master of Arts in Education (MAED) at Hamline University in St. Paul and learned political activism.

The MFA program included an internship in the marketing department of the Minnesota Orchestra. From this, I gained a professional network and developed school-to-business partnerships. The Harding High School band opened the Prairie Home Companion live on MPR at the Fitzgerald in 1995. The Murray Junior High 8th-grade jazz band opened live for BB King at Orchestra Hall in 2005, was recorded for Minnesota Public Radio (MPR) Leigh Kamman's The Jazz Image, was the first school jazz band to perform at the *new* Guthrie Theater prior to the opening of the Christmas Carol (a continuing tradition) and performed live at the Dakota Jazz Club in Minneapolis. With a lot of help from parents, we raised fifty-thousand dollars. This funded the Murray 8th-grade jazz bands 3-day tour of New York City in 2009. Forty 8th grade

jazz band students performed on the campus of Lincoln Center, and afterward, walked around the 9/11 site before reconstruction started.

The MAED taught me to search below the surface, as I wrote my capstone on the 8 by 2 Block schedule. The Block was being implemented in high schools across the country. To learn if the glowing reports were true, I called high school band directors in several states, during their prep hour. I learned the reports were false. Band directors told me that Block reduced enrollment in the band, orchestra, choir, foreign languages, and complicated the learning of students with disabilities. Sharing the research with associates, teachers were able to make an informed decision and stop the implementation of the 8 by 2 Block in two local high schools.

In 1991, I was invited to join the first Education Advisory Committee established at the new Ordway Theater. I proposed the All-City High School Honors Concert and this became an annual tradition. I was also the Education Chair on the board of directors of the Twin Cities Jazz Society. When I retired, I thought it prudent to have a basic understanding of the United States court and legal system, and by 2011 earned a paralegal certificate. I appreciate having a basic understanding of legal writing and research.

Looking back at my career I wondered if more could have been done for students experiencing trauma to better help them achieve academically. These students could be defiant to follow through with classroom assignments - this meant they had a higher probability of not earning their high school diploma.

For this research words that express family trauma can include divorce, separation, domestic violence, addiction, mental or physical health issues. Terms used by family courts or the public social welfare system to describe family separation include foster care, out-of-home

placement, adoption out of foster care, infant adoption, or rehoming. This led me to consider questions such as: How does any trauma affect the academic achievement of students in America's K-12 schools? How have interactions with the legal system influenced families and their children's academic achievement? Should I be examining education policies, public laws, or both?

The website DoSomething.org published a report written for the U. S. Department of Education by Tony Miller (2015), titled *Partnering for Education Reform.* Miller stated that every year, over 1.2 million students drop out of high school in the United States alone," (¶. 6) this is about 7,000 a day. An analysis of the prison populations published by Mitchell (2014) identified 68% of prison inmates had not completed high school (p. 330). There is a lot of information reporting the negative outcomes of dropping out of high school. However, in my review of the research literature, I found only a few scholars directly asking the dropouts to describe relationships with teachers or probing questions about their family support system. Therefore, it is the purpose of this dissertation to fill that gap.

The participants in this study will be probed to find the origin or root causes of leaving high school without earning a diploma. Using ethnographic, qualitative, semi-structured interviewing, and open-ended probing questions, adults returning to school to earn their high school diploma will be asked the following questions: First, what stopped you from graduating on time? Second, what parent, teacher, or social worker did you trust to go to when you needed advice about any issue? A probing question will be: switch places; be your parent, teacher, social worker, or the principal, and describe, what would you have done differently to make sure you

graduated on time? From the stories of these participants, my goal is to learn the origin of what stopped them from graduating on time.

Theoretical Foundations for Framing the Research Questions

The one-on-one conversations with my students helped me discover how much-unresolved anger children can hold, and how anger can continue for years to erode a student's trust in any adult holding a position of authority. In the end, I believe anger takes a toll on a student's desire to achieve academically. Bachman, Green, and Wirtanen **(**1971**)** research found that "dropping out of high school is overrated as a problem in its own right--it is far more appropriately viewed as the end result or symptom of other problems which have their origin much earlier in life" (as cited in Rumberger, 2011, p. 148). This directed me to look for *the origin* of the drop out problem. Is the origin the same or different for each dropout? Research by Christi and David Bergin (2009) implies that the concept of trust and academic achievement is linked to relationships prior to entering Kindergarten.

Christi and David Bergin's (2009) report is specific: "a trustful relationship between a parent and child is primary to achieving academic success" (p. 141). As the trust factor between parent and child became more evident, Simpson (2007) suggested that the origin of the dropout problem may be formed during early childhood. Therefore, I will ask probing questions about early family life. Simpson (2007) states that the "sense of trust is the strongest fundamental factor in achieving academic success at all levels" (p. 264). Simpson (2007) emphasized that despite its great theoretical importance" the research showing "how and why trust develops [and] is maintained is limited because 'trust is a complex, multidimensional construct mak[ing] it difficult to measure and interpret' " (p. 264). For this paper, I will ask participants this direct

question: "While in school, did you have a parent or teacher you trusted to go to when you needed help with any issue?"

Several other researchers elaborate on the construction of trust, and the challenges of diagnosing it. In an article written for *Psychology Today* magazine published online March 25, 2014, Peg Streep offers how constructs of who people trust in their community are not only difficult to understand, but also admits constructs are difficult to measure and interpret. Trust cannot be identified using a 0 to 10 scale. The author explains why trust is both difficult to understand and measure in the following quote;

> This is because the human capacity for trust and trust isn't meted out on an equal basis; Some people are able to trust more easily than others. Or, they are better at being trustworthy and judging trustworthiness. Once again, the nature of the attachment to our caregivers in childhood (whether it's secure or insecure, and, within the insecure category, anxious or avoidant) may influence how trusting we are, because these early attachments provide a model of how we see the world and the people in it. (Streep, 2014, ¶. 4).

Here again, the construction, measurement, and interpretation of trust examine the many ways researchers can identify early attachments.

In the book titled *Translating Codes of Practice*, edited by Yvonne Thackery (2017), the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson states that the "development of basic trust is the first state of psychosocial development occurring, or failing, during the first two years of life" (p. 162). Erikson's writings encouraged me to continue my original concept. The probing questions during the interview will be to reverse engineer the lives of the participants to pre-Kindergarten. The

research included in this section of Chapter One directs the path to the research in Chapter Two.

Professional Interest in the Concept of Relational Trust

As a former music educator, my primary assignment was to teach instrumental music. However, at times I was assigned to teach a non-performing elective music class titled General Music History. This was a traditional classroom with desks. Students would take notes during lectures, discuss the lives of musicians, their music, read assignments in music history books, and take notes while viewing videos of famous performers. Student notebooks were graded at the end of each week. For their final paper, each could choose their favorite musician or style of music and write a detailed paper. To encourage parent participation, students were encouraged to ask their parents for recommendations, such as "who is the greatest rock and roller of all times"?

The hardest part of teaching General Music History was to convince students who have experienced childhood trauma, especially primary family separation, that I was (or any teacher is) committed to their well-being and learning. From my perspective, a lack of trust in teachers can reduce a student's opportunity to learn regardless of their intellect or their teachers' efforts. However, if these same students were enrolled in a band or orchestra class, they did achieve.

Students enrolled in any of my group performance classes such as band, orchestra, or swing and show choir, who had or were experiencing family trauma, view the music director as a secondary advisee and fellow students as their primary advisees. In my experience as a teacher, I found students experiencing trauma will trust the gang they hang with. Bands, orchestras, and choirs are well-respected academic tribes within K-12 learning organizations. The sense of community found in a school band or orchestra can become an adolescent's trusted emotional support system.

For example, traditionally, and since the beginning of the civilized world, instrumental music production, choir, and dance has always been a social and academic inclusion system, because all group performances are choreographed to strive for success through collaboration. Everyone is accepted, expected to share information, and learn from another person's perspective. I have seen band students (from all ethnic groups and socioeconomic levels) remain close friends through high school, and at times, enroll in the same college or university so they can continue their relationship through music.

DeVries (1997) discussed Piaget's social theory, about how we develop self-respect and our place in this world, by agreeing that interpersonal relations are the context of an individual's construction of self, of others, and subject-matter knowledge (pp. 4-17). Group rehearsals and performances are the active processes that Piaget describes as interpersonal relations, and from my teaching experience, the outcome of this process integrates all cultures and ethnic groups into one collaborative learning community. Even if the student is enrolled in the class for only a few months, very few will shut down and refuse to learn, most will actively participate. Racism? Misogyny? Not really. I found diversity in the performing arts innately offers a sense of gender respect and social justice. This is my experience as a veteran music educator teaching in an urban city with great ethnic and socio-economic differences. Friends asked why I chose not to direct my dissertation to music education. I chose not to because similar studies [thousands] are available and the research is not valued. Music education programs in K-12 continue to be cut regardless of studies such as the following.

Catterall, et al. (2012) compiled a report for The National Endowment for the Arts titled, *Arts and Achievement in At-Risk Youth*. The researchers focused on teenagers and young adults from the lowest socioeconomic backgrounds and found:

> . . . eighth-graders who had high levels of arts engagement from kindergarten through elementary school showed higher test scores in science and writing than did students who had lower levels of arts engagement over the same period, [they were also] more likely to complete calculus, [and in high school] achieve a slightly higher grade-point average in math and more likely to aspire to college. (pp.1-28)

This research by Catterall et al. (2012) describes how students with traumatic experiences can achieve academically when engaged in arts education. For example, even as students experience multiple foster care placements, as musicians, they are automatically a member of a band or orchestra community. Musicians of any age can find and join a community anywhere in this world.

Given the community options available to musicians I ask the question: how do policymakers design American K-12 schools to raise the graduation numbers for students who are not engaged in a respected school subculture? By asking adults who they trusted to go to for advice when they needed it, my goal is to create a better understanding of how relational trust applies to academic achievement. It is possible participants could offer ideas and recommendations to increase the graduation rates. Their responses may find evidence to validate Bachman's et al. (1971) research suggesting some children may be entering Kindergarten predisposed to not trust adults.

Significance of this Research

This research is potentially significant for three reasons. One, it could shed light on whether or not some children entering Kindergarten are pre-conditioned or pre-determined to not trust adults? Secondly, it is also significant to learn what effects public education policies and or public social policies have on student-faculty relationships which can also influence their academic achievement. Probing questions will be necessary to remove the layers of this complex issue. In the end, the biggest significance of this research is how it can potentially help school districts graduate more students on time.

Summary and Introduction to Chapter Two

The twelve adult participants are English speaking citizens enrolled at a public school adult learning center to earn their high school diploma. The narrative of each volunteer participant will be investigated and probed, to identify the origin of their dropping out. Bachman, 1971 as cited in Rumberger, (2011) said that dropping out is "the end result or symptom of other problems which have their origin much earlier in life" (p. 148). Chapter Two starts with the economic statistics of dropping out of high school, then proceeds to reverse-engineer child development to identify the origins of how the human brain forms the concept of trust at conception and continues to develop neurologically and socially, between birth through adolescence. Chapter Two ends by investigating if social and public policies reinforce normal childhood development or reinforce adverse childhood experiences.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter investigates assertion that "dropping out of high school is overrated as a problem in its own right--it is far more appropriately viewed as the end result or symptom of other problems which have their origin much earlier in life" (Bachman, 1971, as cited in Rumberger, 2011, p. 148). Using my hypothesis about trust and Bachman's discussion of "symptom and origin" helped frame the research questions: 1. How do adults earning their high school diploma describe what stopped them from graduating on time? 2. Who did they trust in their family or at school to ask for advice or help with any issue? While probing, the participants will be asked to change places, be a parent, teacher, and share what should have been done to help them graduate on time?

Chapter Two starts with an Overview of the Drop Out Issue in the United States; next addresses how the human brain develops a biological preference of trust during Early Childhood Attachment experiences, and how a Lack of Academic Success can be pre-determined prior to entering Kindergarten. The next part allows the reader to understand how the outcomes of being disrupted from the primary family can be viewed during Observations in Early Education, then summarizes the evidence of how adverse childhood experiences can create Complex Trauma DSM-IV. The next part examines the intersection between leaving high school without a diploma and the implementation of the Zero Tolerance Policy and ends the chapter with the Summary.

Overview of Drop Out Issue in the United States

In 2019, the Alliance for Excellence in Education (AEE) published the most recent data from the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics describing three negative outcomes for dropouts: decreased earning capacity; increased involvement in the criminal justice system; and poorer health outcomes. For example, the report stated that high school dropouts earn $8,000 a year less than high school graduates, and approximately $26,500 a year less than college graduates (AEE, 2019, ¶ 3). However, the report also notes that if the United States graduation rate could be raised to 90% for just one year, that 65,700 jobs could be created and raise the national economy by as much as $10.9 billion (AEE, 2019, ¶ 10). High rates of high school dropout involvement with the criminal justice system was another focus of this report.

The 2019 Alliance for Excellence in Education report indicated that high school dropouts constitute 67% of inmates in America's state prisons, 56% in federal prisons, and 69% in local jails (¶ 6). The Alliance predicts that lowering the high school dropout rate would decrease the annual incidences of assault by nearly 60,000; larceny by more than 37,000; motor vehicle theft by more than 31,000; and burglaries by more than 17,000. It would also prevent nearly 1,300 murders, more than 3,800 occurrences of rape, and more than 1,500 robberies (¶ 7).

In addition to an increased probability that high school dropouts will have involvement in the criminal justice system, another major conclusion of the report is that high school dropouts are less healthy and die earlier. According to the report, reducing the dropout rate by half would save Medicaid $7.3 billion annually (AEE, 2019).

In 2019, The National Center for Education Statistics published the 2016-2017 adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGE) for public high school students was 85 percent, the highest it has

been since the rate was first measured in 2010-11. Asian/Pacific Islander students had the highest ACGR (91 percent), followed by White (89 percent), Hispanic (80 percent), Black (78 percent), and American Indian/Alaska Native (72 percent) students" (¶ 1). Another report published in September of 2019 and authored by Bustamante predicted that in the 2019-2020 school year approximately 3.6 million public school students are projected to graduate with high school diplomas. This is a graduation rate of 84.6%" (Bustamante, 2019, ¶ 3).

Cumulatively, the reports from the 2019 Alliance for Excellence in Education, the 2019 Center for Education Statistics, Bustamante's prediction of 84.6% in 2019-2020 school year, the 2011 report by Rumberger, and the 2006 Gates Foundation Survey, not only continues to raise concerns about relationships between parents, teachers, and students but also about the economic status of the United States.

While the reports of improved high school graduation rates are encouraging, those who drop out add challenges to the United States economic system. High school dropouts disproportionately burden the mental-physical health care facilities and are disproportionately involved in the criminal justice system. The negative outcomes of not earning a high school diploma justify the need for continued research regarding how to further reduce the dropout rate. The origin of this research starts with the impact of early childhood attachment and academic achievement.

Early Childhood Attachment and Lack of Academic Success

One of the first theories of trust was published by Erikson (1963, as cited in Simpson 2007), who wrote that "psychosocial development is built on the premise that higher levels of *trust* in relationships early in life [are the] psychological foundation for happier and

better-functioning relationships in adulthood" (p. 264). Ken Robinson's (2009) theory states that "early experiences deeply affect how we evolve as individuals and how our brains develop" (p. 199), and C. Bergin and A. Bergin's (2009) theory states that a "trustful relationship between a parent and child is primary to achieving academic success" (p. 141). The research of Erikson (1963, as cited in Simpson 2007), Robinson (2017), and C. Bergin and A. Bergin's (2009) can be followed back to conception.

Stage one of brain development: pre-birth to age 3. Perry et al. 's (1995) research reports that the trauma of early separation "determines the organizational and functioning status of the mature brain," and how emotional "dissociation become [s] a [permanent] maladaptive trait" (Abstract). This alters the "the limbic area responsible for attachment, affects regulation and aspects of emotion" (p. 274). Perry's et al (1995) supports the later findings of Hofer (2006), Schore (2001a.b., 2003a.b.), and Sunderland (2015).

Hofer (2006) explained that infant-maternal attachment is formed in the womb as a biological function establishing a preferential response to maternal scents and sounds that the infant expects to continue experiencing after birth. Analyzing infant brains using magnetic resonance imaging (MRI's), Schore (2001a.b., 2003a.b.) reported that early separation from the gestational caregiver to be the genesis of adult personality disorders. According to his theory the origin of a person's motivation of who to trust, bond, learn, and emotionally attach to is set biologically in the limbic/right side of the brain (Schore, 2001a.b, 2003a.b.).

Hofer's (2006) and Schore's (2001a.b., 2003a.b.) research was simplified by Dr. Paul Sundersalnd's 2015 Youtube lecture titled "Adoption and Addiction." In the lecture the researcher describes how a newborn infant with a 9-month relationship inside one person

recognizes this person by voice, heartbeat, feel, taste, and smell, and is expecting this relationship to continue after birth (Min. 3-4). If it does not, with no understanding of the separation, the infant's brain goes into a state of trauma and grief (Min. 3). Without language to express concerns or ask questions, life begins with trauma. Even though the grief cannot be recalled it is permanently encrypted in the brain . . . there is no pre-trauma life (Min. 4); the brain understands that "the first person in their life is not trustworthy" (Min. 5). This process sets a fundamental personality trait, for life, how a person is emotionally available to others. Dr. Sunderland (2015) found clients with this experience to be "massively overrepresented in therapy" (Min. 4-5). Using a different research technique Fallon (2013) provides additional support for the impact of early trauma.

Analyzing human brains using positron emission tomography (PET) scans, Fallon (2013) found that "stressors occurring close to the time of birth can have the greatest deleterious effects . . . [because they release] the hormone cortisol [into the brain] which transfers methyl and acetyl from donor molecules onto DNA (pp. 96-97). Fallon resolved that parent "abandonment [up to the age of two] is far more deleterious to a child's [brain] development and [effects] later behavior as a teen or adult than abandonment at age six or ten" (2013, p. 97).

Expanding on Fallon's (2013) research is Teicher (2018) at Harvard Medical School, whose research focused on chemical transfers. Teicher (2018) reported how the "studies in epigenetics [are now] enhancing our awareness of the molecular mechanisms underpinning the long-term, neuropsychiatric consequences of traumatic stress" (Abstract, ¶ 1). Bringing in Perry, B., Pollard, R., Blaikley, T., Baker, W., Vigilante, D. (1995) research stating "the *limbic* area [of the brain is] responsible for attachment, regulation, and aspects of emotion" (p. 274),

explains what Sunderland (2015) found during counseling sessions that "the first person in their life is not trustworthy" (Min 5), and considering Fallon's (2013) findings that if maternal separation occurs during the first two years of life, a person's concept of trusting others and being trustworthy in return is biologically set for life by age 2. However, there is one researcher extending the first stage of brain development up to age three. Komisar (2017) said that "for those who believe any caretaker will do the first three years of life believes in a myth" (p. 17).

Perry B., Pollard, R., Blaikley, T., Baker, W., Vigilante, D. (1995) wrote that "Adults [in general] interpret the actions, words, and expressions of children through the distorted filter of their own beliefs," and adding "It is an ultimate irony, that at the time when a human is most vulnerable to the effects of trauma--during infancy and childhood--adults generally presume the most resilience" (p. 271).

Stage two of brain development: Childhood and Adolescence. Adolescence is a period of rapid biological, cognitive, and social change. A diagnosis of early maternal attachment disorder can predict a number of health-related problems including depression, eating disorders, substance abuse, substance dependence, antisocial and delinquent activity [leading to] school dropouts (Moretti & Peled, 2004, Abstract). According to Schore (2017), boys are more at risk than girls in regards to right-brain attachment disorders, because a "stress-regulating male brain matures more slowly than that of the female in the prenatal, perinatal, and postnatal critical periods" (Abstract, ¶ 1). Hughes et al. (2017) also elaborate on the impact of changes to a person's neurodevelopment.

Chapter Five of the textbook *Forensic Child and Adolescent Mental Health* describes how "childhood neurodevelopmental impairments [include] physical, mental or sensory

functional deficits caused by a disruption in the development of the central nervous system"

(Hughes et al., 2017, p. 68), and the "relationship between neurodevelopmental impairment,

social and environmental risk is most apparent in relation to education" (Hughes et al., 2017, p.

72). This information made me suspicious that students could enter Kindergarten pre-disposed to

not trusting adults. And the reason why during the participant interviews, I will probe for early

disruptions in relationships with primary family.

Zills Observations in Early Education

A 2015 report written by Khazan for *The Atlantic* reported psychologist Nicholas Zill's

longitudinal behavior study of 19,000 kindergarten and first-grade students that was started in

1998 by the National Center for Education Statistics" (p. 4). In this study, teachers were asked to

evaluate the behavior and tests of children who were adopted early and currently in secondary

homes. The report concluded these children "tend to have worse behavioral and academic

outcomes in kindergarten and first grade" and are also "more likely to get angry easily and to

fight with other students" (Khazan, 2015, p. 4). Also, that "these children are less likely to pay

attention in class, less eager to learn new things" and they "didn't persist as long on challenging

tasks" (Khazan, 2015, p. 5) when compared to children at the same age living with primary

caregivers. In addition to Kanzan's (2015) research, Howard (2011) also explored the impact of

living in a secondary home. Howard, K., Martin, A., Berlin, L. & Brooks-Gunn, J.'s (2011)

research found that being separated "a week or longer within the first two years of life [is]

related to higher levels of negativity [opposition] by age 3 [and] aggression at ages 3 and 5"

(Abstract). Another researcher, Lawrence (2006), also explored the impact of living in a

secondary or foster home, generalized that "children placed into [unfamiliar] care showed higher levels of internalizing problems [than] in familiar care" (Abstract).

Also supporting Perry B., Pollard, R., Blaikley, T., Baker, W., Vigilante, D.'s (1995) conclusion that if "the bond with the birth parent was disrupted or never fully formed," then this "early trauma can affect the parts of the brain that control mood and learning" (p. 5). Zill (2015a.b.) found that disruption of the bond with the birth parent leaves the child a person psychologically vulnerable in adulthood and more prone to have "problems regulating their emotions and managing conflicts" (Zill, 2015b, p. 5). This observation will form the background context for understanding the participant's in this research answer to the question of who they trusted in their family. The participants' answers may parallel Zill's longitudinal study, that children can enter Kindergarten predisposed to not trust the counsel of adults. Further, the evidence Zill found does highlight how schools were not prepared (at the time of Zill's study) to teach students that have experienced a traumatic family disruption and or pre-age 3 maternal dissociation with the primary caregiver.

Zill (2015a) found that "by eighth grade, half of these children have been diagnosed with a disability" (p. 4). In 2018 Zill and Wilcox published a list of the most common diagnoses as being "36% attention deficit disorder; 23% specific learning disability; 16% speech impairment; 15% developmental delays," and reported that "by eighth grade, one-third of [these] students have been suspended" (p. 4). Zill (2015b) explains that while secondary caregivers can be well-meaning and willing to be involved with a child's life, "all need to be well-informed prior to becoming secondary parents or guardians, to expect these children to have lifelong challenges" (p. 5). In addition, Cook et al. (2005) found that repeated "loss of caregivers meets

the diagnostic criteria for complex trauma from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders" (p. 390).

Complex Trauma DSM-IV

Van der Kolk (2005) stated, "children exposed to complex trauma" are at risk for "cumulative impairment from childhood through adolescence and into adulthood," and in his study described the impact of this loss in detail (¶ 2). One outcome is "when the caregiver relationship is the source of the trauma . . . 80% of these children develop insecure attachment patterns" (Van der Kolk, Abstract, ¶ 5). Van der Kolk (2005) also describes how these patterns will manifest itself in survival-based behaviors that are rigid, extreme, dissociative, and can revolve around themes of abandonment, betrayal, failure, dejection, or even resulting in coercive control techniques such as blame, rejection, intrusiveness, or hostility. This also creates a lifelong risk of physical disease and psychosocial dysfunction (Cook, A., Spinazzola, J., Ford, J., Lanktree, C., Blaustein, M., Cloitre, M., DeRosa, R., Hubbard, R., Kagan, R., Liautaud, J., Mallah, K., Olafson, E., & van der Kolk, B. 2005, Abstract, ¶ 6).

Newton et al. (2000) also found that "multiple placements in out-of-home care are associated with immediate and long-term negative outcomes" (p. 1364). Since "children entering the foster care system are likely to experience a large number of placement changes" they are also more "likely to experience difficulties trusting adults or forming attachments with adults and children" (Newton et al., 2000, p. 1364). The negative impact of multiple foster care places can also be triggered when an individual lives with their primary family but changes schools frequently.

For example, Feldman et al. (2017) found in his research, immediate and long-term negative outcomes when some high school dropouts "attended five or more schools from kindergarten through early high school" and described how "the painful loss of friendships as social groupings shifted over time" (p. 61). As a former teacher, I saw students continuously lose and rebuild a sense of self within a student community, this takes time and effort. Not only socially, but academically. Adding to this, not having a parent or teacher advocate, maybe the reason some students just stop trying to accomplish both and drop out of high school. The primary question may address this issue.

There is also a reason to investigate if any school policies cause students to drop out of high school. The research regarding the outcomes of the Zero Tolerance Policies has come to the attention of educators and lawmakers alike and does need to be considered as a reason why some students do not believe learning organizations are their emotional trust system. The first and second questions could reveal school policies as the cause of leaving school without a diploma.

Is Zero Tolerance Policy One Cause?

On March 31, 1994, President Bill Clinton signed The Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994 into law. This act "mandates the expulsion, for a period of not less than one year, of students who bring a firearm to school." To receive federal funding to implement the program, each state was "encouraged to write their own laws," known today as Zero Tolerance Laws (law.cornell.edu, 1994). To examine the outcomes of Zero Tolerance in 2017, this paper applies research from experts in the field of education, Constitutional law, and sociology.

 In May 2003, a conference was sponsored by the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University and the Institute on Race and Justice at Northeastern University on the concept of the

school-to-prison pipeline. During the conference Wald and Losen (2003) reported on the impact of inappropriate behavioral interventions resulting from the implementation of a Zero Tolerance policy:

> the failure to provide appropriate behavioral interventions may be contributing to delinquency among students with disabilities; following removal from school, many students experience enormous difficulty in reentering school; and effective interventions and programs that reduce risk and enhance protective factors for youth at risk for delinquency. These studies clearly suggest that the school-to-prison pipeline is preventable, but harnessing the political will is difficult (Wald & Losen, 2003, Abstract).

Neitzeg (2009) also describes the intersection of Zero Tolerance policies, the 14th Amendment and the school to prison pipeline.

According to a report by Neitzeg (2009), policies that encourage "severe penalties for even minor student misconduct do not reflect the safeguards of the 14th Amendment, and that the expansion of the Zero Tolerance policies has been attributed to the mass incarceration of juveniles" (p. 2). Neitzeg (2009) was emphatic that

> while the school to prison pipeline is facilitated by a number of trends in education, it is most directly attributable to the expansion of zero-tolerance policies. These policies have no measurable impact on school safety but are associated with a number of negative effects racially disproportionality, increased suspensions and expulsions, elevated drop-out rates, and multiple legal issues related to due process. (Abstract, 2003)

The rights of the students are quoted in the Supreme Court decision in *Goss v. Lopez* (419 U.S.
565, 1975), in which the court applied the 14th Amendment and ruled that students have a
legitimate entitlement to public education as a property right.

Berger (2003) in the *Criminal Justice Review*, applied the presence of security guards in
schools in terms of social assimilation. The author explains how the outcomes of Zero Tolerance
policies have created a "greater police presence and restrictive school security measures," and
opened the door for "potential harm . . . (especially) . . . to the learning environment,"
and most specifically, "to accept racial insensitivity around the relationship between urban police
and people of color" (Abstract). Mitchell (2014) added, that with the daily presence of the police,
"we (are) criminalizing childhood and creating the next generation of disenfranchised citizens"
to rely on "the underground economy" (p. 317), rather than trusting the adults in the learning
organization to be their primary support system.

The Wald and Losen (2001) paper also reported that "black students are punished more
severely for lesser offenses, such as disrespect, excessive noise, threat or loitering, than their
white peers" (p. 3). The negative impact of Zero Tolerance Policies reinforces the need to ask the
participants in this research a direct question regarding who they trust.

As the researcher, I find these reports to show that the Zero Tolerance Policies could
incubate the culture of the school-to-prison pipeline for two reasons. One, these reports describe
how states have broadened the scope of Zero Tolerance to include extreme punishment for
nonviolent acts. Two, as a former educator, I would prefer using any situation as a teaching
moment for the student and family. My position is supported by counselors who say "that
cognitive and social changes can be consolidated into [whole] family learning and cause less

anxious or ambivalent children" (Moretti & Peled, 2004, p. 551). If reconciliation or restorative

justice is not used, I understand how the Zero policy could further undermine the trust

citizen-students-parents have in their learning environment, their teachers, school administrators,

school security, the courts, and even the juvenile judicial system.

Given the negative impact of Zero Tolerance Policies reported in the research literature

Siman (2005) prefers restorative justice because experts have theorized and demonstrated a

variety of harms associated with suspension and expulsion. For example, Siman's (2005)

describe how experts agree that suspension and expulsion result in not only the loss of learning

and educational time, poorer academic performance but also an increase in the likelihood of

special education placement and found these outcomes resulted in students having poor

attendance and an increased risk of dropping out of high school. Siman (2005) also wrote how

the "emotional outcomes are expressed as punishments and psychologically damaging . . .

causing frustration, lower self-esteem", and a "distrust of authority, adding that this policy has

not only increased referrals to law enforcement authorities but has also become the conduit

leading to the juvenile justice system" (p. 327). As a researcher, if the stages of human brain

development are applied to the outcomes of school policies, implementing the Zero Tolerance

Policy has created a student backlash, a distrust in the adult teachers, and the entire

teaching-learning community. Mitchell (2014) wrote that "from the lexicon and practice of

educational discipline" (p. 318), the outcomes show that "the absurd results of suspending or

expelling students for non-threatening and childish behavior (should) be gone," (p. 318). He

continued that in place of suspension, "allow instructors to exercise discretion and utilize a

student's misconduct as a teachable moment" (Mitchell, 2014, p. 318).

Alternatives to Zero Tolerance Approach

Two formidable high school student surveys have been published. First, a broad state student survey in 2006 by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (Bridgeland, et al., 2006), second, a narrow survey in 2011 by Rumberger in the Chicago public schools. Student recommendations were similar.

In 2006, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (Bridgeland, et al., 2006) published the outcome of a multiple state survey regarding high school dropouts. Fifty-nine percent of the students reported their parents were involved with their learning, but not to the level of commitment the students believed they needed. Seventy-one percent reported that communication between high school staff and parents should be more frequent (Bridgeland, et al., 2006).

In 2011, Rumberger implemented a single in-depth city survey in the Chicago public schools. He found that students want "better communications between parents and teachers" and reported *trust* as missing in the culture of their school system (Rumberger, 2011, p. 247). His definition of r*elational trust* is a "reciprocal social exchange among all organizational members [that] includes respect, personal regard to others, and integrity" (Rumberger, 2011, p. 247).

Summary

Chapter Two describes research supporting the idea that pre-age 3 child-maternal dissociations can neurologically create a person less motivated to trust others *prior to entering Kindergarten*. This evidence supports the idea that there is a negative effect on the mental and physical health of these children, lasting a lifetime. One conclusion that can be drawn from this review of the research literature is that if the negative experiences accumulate through

adolescence, and if K-12 schools have not used restorative practices, America will continue reporting a high number of students who drop out of high school.

In 1995, Dr. Bruce Perry, Pollard, R., Blaikley, T., Baker, W., Vigilante, D., reported that "Adults [in general] interpret the actions, words, and expressions of children through the distorted filter of their own beliefs [ideologies]" (p. 271), emphasizing this problem, he stated that "it is an ultimate irony that at the time when the human is most vulnerable to the effects of trauma--during infancy and childhood--that adults generally presume the most resilience" (p. 271). Only as recently as 2018 have legislatures and policymakers started considering the science of child development when writing public policy.

Introduction to Chapter Three: Methodology

Chapter Three describes the decision to use a qualitative approach to this research. It will also describe the decision to use a semi-structured interview for data collection. The qualitative interview asked the following questions. 1. What stopped you from graduating on time? 2. Who did you trust in your family or at school to ask for advice or help with any issue? To continue probing, the participants are asked to put themselves in the position of their parents or teacher, and asked: What would you have done (or should have been done) to help you graduate on time? And the last two questions will be 1. What is best about this adult learning center? 2. Can you recommend how this learning center can be better? Chapter Three describes how the interview transcripts were analyzed, a description of the participants, and the limitations of this research design.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Introduction and Overview

Chapter Three describes the qualitative method and the semi-structured open-ended questions used for this research. Further, the author explains how the responses to the open-ended questions create opportunities to probe for descriptions of relational trust in association with family and teachers. Relational trust is defined by Rumberger (2011) as a "reciprocal social exchange among all organizational members [that] include respect, personal regard to others, and integrity" (p. 247).

The Primary research question is: How do adults earning their high school diploma describe what stopped them from graduating on time? The Secondary research question is**:** Who did you trust in your family or at school to ask for advice or help with any issue? The probing question is: Trade places, be a parent, a teacher. What would you have done differently?

Chapter Three starts by describing the Research Design, interprets the Technical and Practical Aspects Influencing the Research Design, and also gives the author's Reasons for Using a Qualitative Approach. Chapter Three offers a Description of Participants and the Design of the Qualitative Interview and depicts the Data Analysis Approach and Content-Inductive Data Analysis. This is followed by describing Interview Logistics, the details of the Three Limitations of the Research Design, the conclusion to Chapter Three, and the Introduction to Chapter Four.

Research Design

Following the recommendation of the faculty where the research was conducted, the researcher volunteered as a teacher's aid from September 2019 through March of 2020. This gave the researcher time to share the project with the adult students, and time for the adult students to decide if they wish to participate. The participants were also given the questions in advance to determine if they were comfortable answering them. The interview questions were:

The Primary Semi-Structured Qualitative Interview Questions

1. What stopped you from graduating on time?

2. Put yourself in the position of your parents or teachers. What would you have done (or should have been done) differently to help you graduate on time?

3. Probing: Who did you trust in your family or at school to ask for advice or help with any issue?

The Secondary Qualitative Interview Questions

1. What is best about this adult learning center?

2. Can you recommend how this adult learning center can be improved?

Technical and Practical Aspects Influencing the Research Design

One of the technical factors influencing the research design was the decision to audio record the interview. The recording device is critical in this interview process for two primary reasons. First, this is because it liberates the researcher from taking notes, and the recordings can be transcribed into hard copy and read at a later time. But also what I prefer, is that I can listen to the recording at any time to recall a sense of each participant's emotions.

Dictionary.com (2020) defines probing as a way "to search into or examine more closely." In other words, the interview probes should support the interview responses in being as revealing as possible. In addition to probing, Block (2009) found that participants will reveal a great deal if the researcher "creates conversation and social space," (p. 148). To facilitate conversational and social space recommended by Block (2009) the researcher became a volunteer at the research site.

The researcher began volunteering in September 2019, two months prior to implementing the interviews in November 2019. It was essential the student community trusted the researcher in advance of the interviews. During those two months, the research project, the associated questions, and cookies were shared with potential participant volunteers. Sharing the questions gave participants time to consider how detailed they may be willing to respond. The goal was to have the participants share their experiences regardless of their level of trauma. Since I was a teacher aid, the potential participants viewed the researcher as part of their educational support system, giving the participants time to consider volunteering for the project. The 12 interviews were completed the last week of February 2020.

Reasons for Using a Qualitative Approach

As a researcher and former classroom teacher, I prefer face-to-face interviews. This allowed me to follow and interpret facial expressions and to use probes as recommended by Manning (1992). Manning (1992), wrote that probing reveals "information completely unanticipated by those soliciting input . . . can be collected" and "the resulting data are richly descriptive and faithful to students' perspectives" (¶ 3).

A major objective of this research design was to collect data that provides the richest description possible. Another reason I used qualitative interviewing is its long history in social science research.

According to Bogdan and Bilken (2007), the qualitative method was developed in 1932 by Willard Waller, a sociologist teaching at the University of Chicago referred to the importance of in-depth interviews, that include life histories, observations, diaries, letters, and personal documents. Bogdan and Bilken (2007) also believed anything that described the world of teachers and their students should be used as data. The purpose of this research was to get in-depth and honest descriptions of how participants remember their relationships with teachers, parents, and friends at the time they dropped out of high school. Capturing their stories in both the audio recordings and the interview transcripts did result in new ways of conceptualizing the phenomena of dropping out described in Chapter Four and Five.

Description of Participants and the Design of the Qualitative Interview

The researcher recruited 12 adult individuals who did not graduate from high school on time. Their ages range from 20 to 65. The participants were enrolled at a public adult learning center to earn their high school degree. None of the participants in this research project attended public or private elementary or high school in the suburb where the research site was located. Two moved into this state as adults from two different states. None of the participants attended a charter or religious school. In the data, the participants are identified only by gender and age. M for male, F for female, and a number for age. Example: M-29, F-32. The questions were shared two months in advance before scheduling interviews.

The first two questions are semi-structured. This allowed the researcher to follow the participant's conversation with questions that probed how families developed and maintained trustful relationships prior to and during the decision to drop out of school. The researcher also asked probing questions that expanded on the participants' relationships with teachers and social workers through high school.

As a researcher, one of my goals was to uncover if the participant's descriptions of their experiences reflected the findings in Bachman et al.'s 1971 (as cited in Rumberger, 2011) research. Bachman et al.'s wrote that "dropping out of high school is overrated as a problem in its own right--it is far more appropriately viewed as the end result or symptom of other problems which have their origin much earlier in life" (as cited in Rumberger, 2011, p. 145). During the majority of the 12 interviews, I probed for the "early origins" referred to by Bachman et al. (as cited in Rumberger, 2011) by asking about family structure. Also, during the interviews, as a researcher, I was probing for what C. Bergin and D. Bergin (2009) describe as a "trustful relationship between a parent and child" because it "is primary to achieving academic success" (p. 141). C. Bergin and D. Bergin reinforced my idea of asking the probing question about who they trusted.

McMillan and Schumacher (2014) wrote that it may be necessary to use additional probes that direct the participant to "focus on [their] experiences or behaviors, opinions and values, feelings, knowledge, sensory perceptions, and the individual's background [that] can be phrased in the past, present, or future time frame" (p. 357). During the course of the 12 interviews in this research, it was frequently necessary to probe to encourage the participants to dig deeper into their experience. However, even though the researcher had been a volunteer at the Adult

Learning Center prior to the interviews, and had explained the project and shared the questions in advance, it is possible that a participant was not willing to share the full depth of a traumatic experience even though the transcripts contain numerous descriptions of difficult situations such as parental divorce, participants' mental health issues, addiction, and domestic violence. My conclusion is that most of the participants were comfortable sharing descriptions of dropping out of high school.

Data Analysis Approach: Content-Inductive Data Analysis

A content-inductive analysis is a process used in management, marketing, health, and the social sciences to analyze written and verbal material (Hall, 2018) and was selected for this research. The Youtube video of Kent Lofgren (2013) describes a six-step, one-time process of coding when implementing a content-inductive analysis. This process helped discover and consolidate the common themes.

Lofgren's (2013) six-step process states to:

1. Read line by line: initial read through, document first impressions. Read again Slowly.

2. Coding: label what you believe is relevant. Labeling may include Words, phrases, sentences, actions, activities, concepts, differences, opinions, processes, and what the author considers important. Be open-minded to find superficial descriptions of an underlying pattern. Since the reader is the interpreter and author, phenomena should be highlighted that are considered important. Be unbiased.

3. After the first coding bypass, combine 2 or more codes to create categories or themes.

4. Label the categories/themes in order of importance that connects to the main query. Show there is new knowledge from a different perspective.

5. Ask: is there a hierarchy among the categories; is one more important than another?

Consider drawing a graph that could summarize the results.

6. Do not interpret results. Describe how the categories connect. (Lofgren, 2013)

At Step 5 of Lofgren's process, and on a large poster board, I created columns for the categories and themes discovered while using Lofgren's coding strategy. While cross-comparing the narrative's themes are consolidated, as researchers believe most themes seldom exist alone, and to find something new. To make the overall analysis easier in Chapter Four, a succinct paragraph was written for each participant to use as a reference. The next section describes the participants, the location of the venue, the sequence of the interviews, how the interviews were recorded, the service used to transcribe the audio, and the strategy used to ensure the accuracy of the transcription.

Interview Logistics

Twelve adults volunteered to be interviewed for this research project. Their ages range from 20 to 65 years. There were four men and eight women. Their first language was English. All participants were born in the United States. Eight participants were born in the state where the research took place but in cities or suburbs different from the location of the Adult Learning Center (ALC). Two participants were born in two different states. All participants had been enrolled in K-12 public schools. None indicated that they had attended a private charter or parochial school. In Chapter Four, the participants will be referred to only by gender and age, not ethnicity. The age tells me what years they attended high school revealing what education and social welfare policies could be applied to their decision to drop out. Not referring to the participant's ethnicity eliminates the chance the reader may be biased. Examples: Male age 29, Female age 32, will be identified in Chapter 4 as M-29, F-32.

The Adult Learning Center (ALC) where the research was conducted is located in the first inner-ring suburb of an urban metropolitan city of approximately three hundred thousand people. To enroll at this center the adults do not need to be residents of this suburb. All students are responsible for their own transportation. The adult learning center offers same-day walk-in private appointments or appointments. Each appointment is one-on-one with a teacher in math, social studies, English, or science. The student can receive assignments, get help with assignments, or turn in completed assignments to receive a grade. Approximately one-hundred adults frequent the center each year, some walk-in weekly, some walk-in sporadically. In general, the center graduates 40 students each spring.

To ensure the interview setting was comfortable, the interviews were held in an empty classroom with a window to the outside hall. The interview sequence began with the researcher explaining the confidentiality and informed consent contract and reading the directions before both parties signed. Each received a copy of the informed consent contract. The average length of each interview was 30 minutes (the contract allowed for 60 minutes). Each participant was given a $25.00 stipend and a Subway sandwich. The stipend and sandwich were two ways to demonstrate that value was placed on the participant's time and willingness to be part of the study. The audio of the interviews was transcribed by Wreally LLC, 3415 South Sepulveda Blvd, Los Angeles CA 90034 EIN 83-1101155. The transcriptions were read and scripted by the researcher. Before writing Chapter Five, the researcher listened to the recordings a second and third time to be reminded of each participants' emotions when telling their stories. The next section describes what may be considered a limitation and how those limitations might have impacted this paper.

Three Limitations to the Research Design

First, it was time-consuming to recruit the participants and conduct the interviews. To establish a working relationship with the students, I became a teacher's aid for two months before starting the interviews. During this time, each student learned about the research project and decided if they wished to participate. Few interviews were arranged according to a prescribed schedule. Most interviews occurred spontaneously.

This Adult Learning Center is open one day a week from 2 to 7 PM. A person wanting to complete their high school diploma will walk in the door and register with the secretary. Another administrator will contact their former school district to evaluate what credits they need to complete their degree. They are given a tour of the area, and the tables and computers students can use before or after they meet with a teacher. There are four teachers: Science, Social Studies, Math, and Literature/Reading. No faculty-student appointment is pre-set; therefore there is no way to determine who will walk into the school on any given day. When an adult student is prepared to bring in assignments, they show up.

First, each student will sign in on a primary attendance list. Then depending on which teacher or teachers they wish to meet, each will sign-in on the selected teacher or teachers waiting list. As each teacher completes the meeting with one student, the next student on the list will be called to the desk. During these one-on-one lessons, the students receive their assignment and return to the center when an assignment is completed.

Even though the researcher has been an active member of the support system, it was common for interviews to occur ad libitum. If a researcher prefers a fast track to their research this qualitative approach is not recommended.

Second, are 12 participants enough to create a quality study? Amrit Jumar Bhandari (2020) reports there is no absolute number for a sample size to be informative. It seems that while this sample size was small, all of the participants experienced the same phenomena, even though they resided in different states or cities when they dropped out of high school. A small sampling of 12 is valid to compare themes.

Third, the participants are volunteers **r**eceiving a stipend and a Subway sandwich. Is this considered a limitation? It is possible that some did not share their entire story because they did not want to recall unpleasant information. Alternatively, according to McMillan and Schumacher, (2014) the stipend may have encouraged participation.

Conclusion and Introduction to Chapter Four

The entire process of qualitative interviewing is enjoyable. Chapter Four of this study reveals how politics can influence public and education policies, and create a dysfunctional system when scientific evidence is not applied. As a youth, these adults lacked the necessary relational trust system to graduate from high school on time and found shifting into early adulthood a challenge. To search out and find this Adult Learning Center, and be persistent to complete the program, shows a great deal of personal grit, resilience, persistence, and a great deal of dedication from the faculty. In Chapter Four twelve participants tell their stories.

CHAPTER FOUR

Data Analysis

Introduction

In the Fall of 2019, the two months prior to scheduling the participant interviews, I became a volunteer teacher's aide at the Adult Learning Center (ALC). I was able to help students with their assignments and recruit for this project. It was important for every potential participant to understand the purpose and the value of truth in reporting; that their experiences are critical to helping learning organizations create better support systems for K-12 students, causing more students to graduate from high school on time.

Twelve volunteers participated in this study. Nine revealed early adverse childhood experiences (ACE) and shared the multiple layers of relational challenges that diverted their focus away from K-12 education. Three themes were unique to three of the 12 participants as undermining their efforts to graduate on time: "school building safety," "the family's priority was to pay the mortgage during the 2008 economic crisis," and the "constant moving of a military family". As the participants responded to the following questions, I looked for the presence of trust in their relationships with family members, teachers, and school social workers at the time they dropped out of high school.

The Primary: 1. How do adults earning their high school diploma describe what stopped them from graduating on time? Secondary: 2. Who did they trust in their family or at school to ask for advice or help with any issue? Probing: What recommendations can these adult students offer to help students graduate from high school on time?

The Gap in the Research Literature

Each year the National Center for Education Statistics (2019) publishes the adjusted cohort high school graduation rate (ACGR). Each year the Alliance for Excellence in Education (AEE) (2019) publishes the data from the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics. The data published by these organizations is followed by educators and politicians to learn if the current curriculum and teaching strategies are working. However, what the National Center for Education Statistics 2019 and the AEE 2019 does not contain is a clear picture of why they dropped out of high school before graduating.

The first clue about potential factors that contribute to dropping out of high school was a paper written by J. Bachman, S. Green, & L. Wirtanen, L. (1971) **(**as cited in Rumberger, 2011) for the Ann Arbor Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan. He found that "Dropping out of high school is overrated as a problem in its own right--it is far more appropriately viewed as the end result or symptom of other problems which have their origin much earlier in life" (as cited in Rumberger, 2011, p. 148). The second clue was from C. Bergin and D. Bergin (2009) who wrote that a "trustful relationship between a parent and child is primary to achieving academic success" (p. 141). To explore if the participants would describe other problems that have their origin much earlier in life (Bachman et al., 1971 as cited in Rumberger, 2011, p. 148) or trusting relationships (Bergin, C. & Bergin, D., 2009), the researcher decided the first probing questions should be framed around early relationships with immediate family, siblings, and parents.

Supporting the decision to explore early relationships were the results of a survey in the Chicago public high schools spotlighting relational trust (Rumberger, 2011). According to the

author, one of the major findings shows students wanted "better communication between parents and teachers" (Rumberger, 2011, p. 247), and that *trust* is missing in the culture of their school system. The author defined r*elational trust* as a "reciprocal social exchange among all organizational members [that should] include respect, personal regard to others, and integrity" (Rumberger, 2011, p. 247). As I applied the research in Chapter Two to my original hypothesis, believing that some students have lost trust in the counsel of adults, led me to frame the interview questions from the perspective of "what happened to you?" rather than "what's wrong with you?" The primary question I asked adults returning to school to earn their high school diploma became, "What stopped you from graduating from high school on time?"

Description of the Adult Learning Center and the Participants

The adult learning center where the research was conducted offers same-day walk-in private appointments. The school calendar is from September to May and follows the national holidays. Normally the district runs summer school during June and July with no classes in session during August. Upon entering the building, each student signs the attendance sheet on the desk of the faculty they wish to meet. The faculty will call the names of each student in the order they signed up. Each meeting is one-on-one with a teacher in math, social studies, English, or science, to receive assignments, get help with assignments, or to turn in completed assignments. The faculty is licensed with the state and holds undergrad and graduate degrees in their field. Approximately 100 adults frequent the center each year, some walk-in weekly, some walk-in sporadically. The adult learning center graduates approximately 40 students each spring.

During the 2019-2020 school year, the participants range in age from 20 to 65 years. Twelve adults volunteered to participate, four men and eight women. The Adult Learning Center

is located in the first inner-ring suburb of a large urban city with a population of approximately 350 thousand. To enroll in the adult learning program, the participants are not required to live in this suburb. Each is responsible for their transportation.

None of the participants in this research project attended public or private elementary or high school in the suburb where the ALC is located. Two moved into this state as adults from two different states. None of the participants attended a charter or religious school in any state. In the data, the participants are identified only by gender and age. M for male, F for female, and a number for age. Example: M-29, F-32.

Initial Responses to Primary Question #1

These first responses to the initial interview question did not reveal the origin of the problem but started the investigation that led to probing questions. The responses start with the oldest participant to the youngest.

F-65: I just dropped out, my parents didn't care; F-55: My parents and I agreed dropping out was necessary to stay alive, teachers and students were being attacked by other students; F-32: My parents were always addicted to meth. When I came of age I got a job to support myself; M-29: It was 2008. I quit to get a job to keep my parents home; M-28: I didn't drop out. I walked through spring graduation services, knowing I had one credit to finish during the summer. I didn't enroll that summer to take that last credit; F-26: I have been on my own since I was about 6 or 8. I dropped out to get a job and take care of myself; M-26: I just quit. I was angry at an administrator; F-23: I didn't have a way to get to school. Work had priority; F-22: I didn't have enough credits to graduate; F-21: Got into a fight the last week of my senior year.

Zero Tolerance policy dictated I was expelled; F-21: I skipped a lot of classes. Need 10 credits to graduate; M-20: I quit in my senior year when I learned I didn't have enough credits to graduate.

The participants' initial response helped define the probing questions to move forward and reverse engineer the multiple layers of family challenges. As the layers were peeled back, many participants shared their family had 'lots of problems', and many parents separated. Few shared the specific reasons for the disruption or separation, but when sharing, they expressed great anger at the adults involved. For most, the anger started in elementary school, lasted through high school, and their anger remains unresolved today. Unresolved anger forced the participants to focus away from achieving academically and led to not graduating on time. In general, for the participants in this research the K-12 learning organization lacked an appropriate emotional support system (school social workers or psychologists) and was either non-existent or in some way not adequate.

First Probe Responses to Question One

Additional probing questions revealed that primary family separation led to diverse living arrangements. Nine (of 12) participants experienced family separation between early childhood and adolescence. When describing these family separations, the participants used language that estimated their ages, such as "I was real little," "really young," or in "elementary school." Participants spoke of parents and selves being addicted to drugs such as alcohol, heroin, and marijuana. Only one admitted they or someone in their family was a victim of domestic violence. No one labeled their multiple caregivers as "foster care," but called them "unrelated families or friends."

In addition to diverse living arrangements, three participants spoke of their association with the legal system and probation officers regarding addiction and rehabilitation. Three participants spoke of being assigned counselors in elementary school for anger and depression. Two spoke of anger management counselors in high school. Reflecting on these transcripts, it stood out that the age of the participants during the family separation overlapped with what scientists describe as the first and second stages of brain development. Nine of the twelve participants described experiencing more than one of the following living arrangements:

- Rotated living between two parents;

- Separated from both parents;

- Lived with one biological parent;

- Lived with biologically related families;

- Lived with non-biologically related families; or

- I moved into a city homeless shelter (junior-senior year).

Eight participants (F-22, F-23, F-25, M-22, F-28, M-20, M-22, M-21) expressed on-going anger when speaking about their parents. Two participants (M-21, M-22) were assigned anger management counselors in elementary school. It should be noted that the anger management counsel support for M-21 was assigned only for the year he was enrolled in one of his three schools before entering grade six, then assigned an anger counselor in high school. When he (M-21) experienced an altercation in his junior year, he was transferred to a different high school. For reasons M-21would not share, he requested a transfer back to his first high school. The administration denied his request, so "I just quit school in my senior year." He was on track to graduate on time.

Like M-21 and M-22 get angry at small things. During the last week of his senior year, M-22 reported to his high school anger counselor of a potential altercation with another student. He was hoping the counselor would call both students into the office and discuss a solution. The counselor did not intervene in time, the threat continued, and the student (M-22) decided to "take care of it myself." At the time of this incident, Zero Tolerance was a standard procedure in schools, and M-22 was expelled one week prior to graduating from high school. The analysis of the interview transcripts provided ample support that most of the participants expressed on-going anger at their parents' inability to negotiate their families' situation, and their learning organization's inability to strongly address their family issues. While it is common for schools to have social workers, it is difficult to fund enough to serve all the families that need support.

As a former teacher and witness, I am well aware of how anger diverts students' attention away from classroom activities. Moretti and Peled (2004) confirm what can be a negative outcome when anger is diverting attention from learning. Their research links a child's anger to being **"**diagnosed as an early attachment disorder and can predict a number of health-related problems including depression, eating disorders, substance abuse, substance dependence, antisocial and delinquent activity [leading to] school dropouts" (Moretti & Peled, 2004, Abstract). Nine of the participants' stories included how they experienced depression, substance abuse, and delinquent behaviors.

In the interview transcripts, nine of the twelve participants described rotating living arrangements. For example, six of the participants (F-22, F-23, F-25, F-26, M-20, M-22) rotated frequently between parents, relatives, friends, while attending multiple elementary or high schools. M-20, changed living arrangements each year of high school; a different small town, a

different high school, and a different drug rehab center, sometimes with a family, sometimes with other teens living on their own, and ended up in a homeless shelter. M-20's experience and that of the other eight participants who described family disruptions/separation prior to dropping out of high school is described by scientists as a traumatic experience.

According to a report in Psychiatric Annals (Cook et al., 2005), "traumatic experiences are multifaceted" and can "interfere with the development of a secure attachment within the caregiving system" (pp. 390-398). Even if the adults in charge had good intentions, the sciences of neurology and psychology find this act permanently alters the way a developing brain learns how to approach or frame negotiations with people. Psychological research has found that changing living arrangements affect growing children by "result[ing] in a loss of core capacities for self-regulation and interpersonal relatedness" (Cook, et al., 2005, Abstract, ¶ 3). As a middle school teacher for over 40 years, I can attest to how important it is for students to practice self-regulation and interpersonal relatedness to stay focused on high school graduation. According to van der Kolk 2005 (as cited in Cook, et al., 2005,) how these characteristics develop will "extend from childhood through adolescence and into adulthood" (Abstract ¶ 2). The information shared in these interviews are examples of the negative impact of losing self-regulation and interpersonal relatedness.

Three participants, F-22, F-26, and M-20, shared their stories about multiple living arrangements. Participant F-22 reported, "I lived from house to house, I don't even remember how many different schools." F-26 reported living with multiple families until she was 15 when she moved in with a boyfriend. M-20 lived with four different families while attending four different high schools, in four different small towns. Today M-20 lives in a homeless shelter.

M-20 and F-26 became addicted to heroin by the age of 15 and were in trouble with the law. In general, the participants reported that in addition to alcohol, street drugs helped reduce symptoms of depression and feelings of being alienated by their primary family and school social groups. The DSM-IV describes a potential negative impact of losing primary family connections.

According to psychologists, children exposed to loss of caregivers can meet the criteria from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders, fourth edition (DSM-IV). This includes depression, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), conduct disorder, anxiety disorders, eating disorders, sleep disorders, communication disorders, separation anxiety disorder, and reactive attachment disorder (Cook, et al., 2005, Abstract, ¶ 3). Based on these DSM-IV definitions, the participants in this study have a high likelihood of being assigned a diagnosis of Complex Trauma. Much of what is found by other researchers can also be defined using the DSM-IV definitions, such as the research by Newton et al. (2000) finding that "multiple placements in out-of-home care are associated with immediate and long-term negative outcomes" (p. 1364), these outcomes include addiction, depression, and a lack of focus to academic achievement. During the interviews, three participants (F-26, M-20, M-22) reported an early addiction to street drugs to suppress anger, depression, and symptoms of ADHD. Participant M-20 started using alcohol in the 8th grade and heroin by age 15. He is now drug-free. Participant M-22 is still using a street drug to modify his ADHD. F-26 used alcohol and heroin by age 15 and has been drug-free for a year.

 Unlike the other nine participants in this study the families of F-65, F-55, M-29, had not separated and the participants have not moved away from parents to live with related or unrelated families. F-65 was a member of a military family and moved often. There is a lot of

current research on military families and the impact of frequent moves. In a magazine called *Military Spouse* on February 27, 2019, author Stacy Hulsman wrote that "We sorted through a dozen studies, stats and spoke to professionals to recap the real impact moving has on our families" (¶ 4). The authors reported that military "kids 12 to 17 who had moved [a lot] . . . require[d] emergency mental health visits," with symptoms of "attention deficit, conduct disorders, self-injury, and suicidal behaviors" (¶ 9). This research can be used to explain the impact on F-65, and the frequent relocations of her military family. In 2020, the military is better prepared to support military families, still moving frequently does not encourage children to consider attempting to include themselves in the classroom society.

There are six participants in this study not associated with the military, F-22, F-23, F25, F-26, F-32, M-20, that also reported attending multiple schools between the elementary and high school, and even during high school. Feldman et al. (2017) found that attending "five or more schools from kindergarten through high school" can result in "the painful loss of friendships as social groupings shifted over time" (p. 61).

Another two participants attributed leaving high school without a diploma to situations that were very different from the other participants. For example, F-55 attended school in Washington, D. C. in the 1970s, and described her school as too dangerous to continue attending. According to F-55, at 17, her parents took her out of high school and enrolled her in the Job Corps to finish her GED. Recently, her records confirming she graduated could not be found by the Job Corps. M-29 attributed his leaving high school to losing their home during the Great Recession of 2008. M-29 was 16 at the time when he and his brothers dropped out of school to work full-time in an attempt to save the family home. The Recession included the sub-prime

mortgages, adjustable-rate mortgages (ARM) commercial mortgage-backed securities (C.M.B.S.), and collateralized debt obligations (C.D.O.).

Five participants self-parented and removed themselves from their environments as soon as it was legally possible. For example, upon reaching age 15-16, (M-22, F-32, F-26, M-23, M-20) became employed, three moved to live independently, two moved in with a boyfriend. Another positive is that all 12 participants in the study are self-directed and currently on track to graduate in 2020.

Second Probe Responses to Question One: Identify the Origin of Family Disruption

Nine of the 12 participants shared vague to specific reasons for the family disruption that made it clear each situation was different, but not unique. M-20 shared that in Kindergarten, (first or second grade?) his Dad moved in with a girlfriend sending his Mom (and young self) into a deep depressive state. He rotated living between Mom, Dad, and girlfriend.

F-21 shared that her parents divorced when she was in the 11th grade. She did not share the reason, but said: "a lot was going on." She was angry about the situation and started skipping school. Eventually, her mother sent her to live with an aunt in Florida. She continued skipping and just dropped out when she came of age.

M-21 shared his Dad is an alcoholic. No details. But M-21s first anger management counselor was assigned in elementary school, he's had several; his anger is not resolved.

F-22 shared her mother divorced her younger brother's Dad when she was seven. Only sharing the family was "dealing with so much stuff, I don't even remember how many different houses I lived in or how many elementary schools I attended."

M-23 shared her parents split when she was in elementary school. Her Mom worked nights to support two kids and slept during the day. "Mom worked too hard" and could not spend time with her children. The two kids were on their own to get to school, eat breakfast, dinner, do homework, etc. She doesn't know if anyone from school checked on them. When she came of age (15-16), she quit school and got a job.

M-22 shared his parents divorced when he was really young. He and his mother lived in different homes, so she could follow work. He was assigned an anger management counselor in one of his three elementary schools, continues to suffer from depression and symptoms of ADHD, and is dependent on a street drug to reduce the symptoms. He is working with an anger management counselor. At the time of his interview, M-22 was working full-time and supporting his Mom.

F-26 shared when she was about eight years old, her parents' split. She has been pretty much-taken care of herself since that time. She lived with multiple families until she turned 15 when she became addicted to Heroin while living with a boyfriend. Then she chose to walk away from everything, quit school, and got a job.

F-28 shared only her Dad lived at home. If there was contact between her Dad and teachers, she is not aware of any of it. Teachers in her small rural farm community told her she was hard-working, but a slow-learner. Now 10 years later, she is living and working in a large metropolitan city. In 2019-2020, the year F-28 was a participant in this research she reported that her six-year-old daughter was tested at school and diagnosed as dyslexic. F-28 also described how this was the first time her daughter was tested and found to be dyslexic.

F-32 shared her parents have always used meth. At times when she was little, her parents would strap her in the car seat then close the car doors and do meth in the house. Her parents had several probation officers who would visit her in school. When turning 15, she got a job, dropped out of high school, and moved away from her parents.

Initial Responses to Second Primary Question: Who Do You Trust?

The participants interviewed in this research paper were asked if there was a person, either in their family or school community, that they trusted to ask for help? The final count found three participants trusting their parents and family; Nine participants did not trust a family member, a teacher, or any adult in the learning organization.

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary (n.d.), trust is a "support system is a network of people who provide an individual with practical or emotional support" (Online). Another definition of trust from Dictionary.com (2020) is the reliance on the integrity, strength, ability, surety, of a person or thing; confidence; confident expectation of something; hope (Online). A breakdown of the participant's responses to the probe regarding trust follows.

The Yes responses are presented first: M-29. Trust? Yes. I trust my parents and my family. The school had no input on my dropping out. F-55. Trust? Yes/No. I trusted my parents. They enrolled me in the Job Corps. Not my school. My high school was not safe. M-26. Trust? Yes/No. My Mom, Yes. Not in school. Mom had no control over Zero Tolerance.

It is worth noting that in listening several times to the transcripts, there was no hesitation in responding and it was punctuated with emotion. Their responses follow: F-65. Trust? No. My parents and teachers didn't care. F-32. Trust? No. No one in my family or in school. I only trust myself. F-28. Trust? No. No teachers. No parent.F-26. Trust? No. Only myself. F-23. Trust? No.

Not my Mom. Not at my school. Lately, boyfriend and his Mom. F-22. Trust? No. Not my parents. School? LOL. Lately my brother. F-21. Trust? No. Not my family or school. M-21. Trust? No. Not at school. Not family. M-20. Trust? No. Not my family. No way. Based on these responses my conclusion is that three participants trusted their parents and family; nine participants did not trust a family member, a teacher, or any adult in the learning organization.

Responses to the Probing Question: Trade Places

The participants were asked to trade places, as if they were in a position of authority (parent, principal, teacher), and asked; "What should have been done by a parent, teacher, or social worker to help you graduate from high school on time? Again, the responses were different, but as the participants took layers off to self-probe their own story. The responses are from the oldest to the youngest participant.

F-65: Parents should take the time to parent their kids. F-55: Students need safe schools. F-32: My family needed mental health counseling. M-29: Safe mortgages. F-28: Early elementary school testing for learning disabilities. F-26: Be a responsible parent. M-26: I don't know. Hands-on learning. Be supportive, help those who need it. F-23: Social workers could help working students to get free bus cards. F-22: Send a marriage counselor to my home to talk to my parents. M-21: I needed someone to listen to me when I needed help. F-21: Social workers could have been more aggressive with my Mom. M-20: I don't know. Mom was depressed all the time. Mom got me into drug treatment.

Reasons for Earning a High School Diploma

Growing up and learning how to navigate this world and fit into it, is a challenge even when a child lives in a seemingly stable family community. For these participants to have

survived their experiences and trust schools a second time to facilitate their high school education shows their strength and persistence to achieve academically. When asked why they want to earn their diploma, here are their responses from the oldest to the youngest.

F-65: My daughter is a college graduate. I haven't told her I do not have a high school degree. I would like to earn a two-year certificate in computer science. F-55: I want to retire; take business classes at a junior college and publish my cookbook. M-29: I have two daughters. I want to be their example, education is important. F-21: I am applying for custody of my child, I need an income. M-21: I am working full time. It's time to complete my degree. F-22. I want my degree to move on with my life. F-23. I need to take care of my daughter. I want to attend college and become a pharmacist. M-26: I want to be a certified car mechanic. To enter the program I need my high school diploma. F-26: I take care of my invalid Dad and work full time. I want a better paying job. F-28: I want a college degree in chemistry. F-32: I have a child. I want a better life for us both. M-20: I want to enter the seminary. I need an undergrad degree first. I need to apply for loans.

What is Best about this Adult Learning Center?

Most participants learned of the adult center by word of mouth, the remaining from a job counselor, a religious counselor, or by calling public school districts. All participants were appreciative of the individual attention they received. F-32, and F-26, specifically mentioned how they really enjoyed the "face-to-face and one-on-one conversations" with teachers. Direct quotes include "someone is interested in what I have to say," and "someone listens to me." M-20 shared, "I will miss coming here because these teachers are my best friends." Another shared that "at first I stayed away because I didn't understand an assignment. When I decided to come in,

the teacher said," "don't stay away from us, we are here for you. We will show you how, and you can do your homework here with our help." Several spoke with a great deal of enthusiasm, of the extended conversations they had with the teachers about assignments. "It was like the parenting, teachers, or smart friends I wish I had."

M-20 shared that he "was assigned to read a college graduation speech. The lecturer spoke of one teacher that changed his life. We had a long discussion about it. I believe reading the assignment and our long conversation changed my life." F-55 was assigned to read the life of Malala Yousafzai, the youngest Nobel Prize winner and Palestinian activist for the education of women in India. The participant believed she gained a whole new perspective on the importance of women being well-educated. She wants to take business classes at a community college and learn how to publish her cookbook when she retires. Several students have been connected to special services. "They have connected me to services to deal with my anger, ADHD, and depression, and I am trying to stop using [drugs]." Others have talked about how the administration has helped find their high school records to confirm the number of credits they need to earn. M-21 stated several times and in several different ways, that the "people here are pretty nice."

Participants Recommendation: Adult Learning Center

The recommendations are in order of importance: The most frequent response is: Open the learning center in the morning or stay open later. Second: Be open one more weekday or add one half-day. Third: Mental health/drug counselors on site. Fourth: Transportation (bus) vouchers. Fifth: Could a family member or friend pick up homework when a student is ill?

Highlights From Individual Stories

   F-65. F-65 responded "When I dropped out of high school "my parents didn't care." Her father was in the military during Vietnam. The family with five daughters moved often. As a result, it was F-65's impression that teachers did not check on missing homework or follow up if she skipped school, because of the likelihood that the family would be in the district only a short time. She did a lot of drugs and got into a lot of trouble. When asked what should have been done differently, F-65 replied, "my parents should have been parents. Prior to our interview F-65 reported sharing the interview questions with a sister, who responded, "our parents never helped us with homework." "I parented my daughter. She graduated on time, and is debt-free with a college education."

   Author's Analysis: The research by Rumberger (2011) and the Gates Foundation (Bridgland et al., 2006), found students wanting more parent-teacher communication. Feldman et al. (2017), reported that some high school dropouts came from a two-parent family, but "attended five or more schools from kindergarten through early high school" and described "the painful loss of friendships as social groupings shifted over time" (p. 61). Taking into consideration F-65 responses to the interview questions, especially the multiple school placements and loss of friends, her description meets Cook et al. (2005) criteria as "the diagnostic criteria for complex trauma from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders (p. 390). P. Van der Kolk stated, "children exposed to complex trauma" are at risk for "cumulative impairment from childhood through adolescence and into adulthood" (cited in Cook, p. 390).

F-55. F-55 responded to Question #1 by sharing she grew up with both biological parents in Washington D. C. and attended high school during Vietnam. At that time the city was known for violent protests in the streets and in schools. She dropped out of school with her parents' permission because "we were afraid for my life."

Her parents enrolled her in the Job Corps with the understanding she would complete her GED and gain skills. She thought she completed the program more than 30 years ago. Today she is married with grown children and planning her retirement from a union job. She wants to enter a two-year business degree program at a local community college, in preparation to write, publish, and sell her cookbook. Her Job Corps records could not be found. Her public high school records determined she would need 9 credits to earn her GED. She will complete these 9 credits soon and enter the community college. Responding to Question #2, F-55 replied, "schools in D.C in the 1970s needed security. And where are my Job Corps records?"

Author's analysis: The 1970s decision made by the parents of F-55 was not in response to an academic issue, but a choice to ensure their daughter's physical safety. Today, K-12 schools have metal detectors, cameras, and some hire security personnel to increase student safety. The current level of security in schools can be found in an article published in the *American Journal of Criminal Justice,* (Perumean-Chaney & Sutton, 2012) is titled: Students and Perceived School Safety: The Impact of School Security Measures.

F-32. F-32 responded to Question #1 by showing a great deal of maturity regarding her aggressiveness to self-parent. "My parents have always been addicted to meth." As soon as she was old enough to find a job, she walked away from school, family, and her parents harassing probation officers. She was able to get a job at a daycare, had a child, and continues to work at

the daycare today. She explained that between ages 6 and 12, all family in her emotional support system died. This included her grandmother, aunt, cousin, and best friend. She added, during this time, her older sister experienced domestic violence. She responded to Question #2, by sharing, "all schools should have mental health services for families that are dealing with drug addiction."

Author's analysis: C. Bergin and D. Bergin (2009) found that "a trustful relationship between a parent and child is primary to achieving academic success" (p. 141). In the story of F-32, she never had a family support system, found no support at school, only on-going harassment from her parent's probation officer. She decided to take care of herself. When she became of age she found employment and moved away from her family.

M-29. M-29 responded to Question #1 by saying "I quit school (and brothers) to find a full-time job to save my parents house during the 2008 mortgage debacle. We still lost the house." He is married, his wife is a nurse and they have two daughters. Responding to Question #2 he said, "my parents, school social workers could do nothing about this. I was on track to graduate on time. This could only be described as banking practices that hurt mainstream families."

Author's analysis: M-29 was on track to graduate and his family was intact. There are no statistics reporting on how many students in the United States did not graduate on time because of the 2008 mortgage meltdown.

F-28. F-28 responded to Question #1 by saying "I didn't quit or drop out." She said teachers considered her a "slow student." She never missed handing in an assignment, but she had difficulty taking tests. When she entered high school, she was told she was behind. So in addition to attending day school in the 11th and 12th grade, she enrolled herself in evening

classes in grades 11 and 12 to ensure she would graduate on time. The principal allowed her to walk with her class during graduation services with the understanding she had one credit to complete during summer school. She did not attend summer school, and ten years later, is now enrolled at this adult learning center to complete her last credit. Her response to Question #2 was revealing. She was raised by a single father living in a farm community. When she asked him to speak to her teachers, he just responded in anger. She now lives in a large urban city, is married, and recently she and her 6-year old daughter have been diagnosed with dyslexia. The school district in her small rural farm community did not identify her learning disability. She is earning her last credit and has applied to several colleges to study chemistry.

Author's analysis: F-28 did not elaborate on her relationship with her mother. She did share being raised in a small farm community by a single father who was not involved with her education and did not want to be. Her teachers thought she was hard-working but a slow learner. She did not share the last 10 years of her life. At the age of 28, and while living and working in a large urban city, she learned of her disability when her 6-year-old daughter was tested for dyslexia. She was not tested for a learning disability during K-12. In 2017, C. H. Johnson published The Impact of Dyslexia in Rural Minnesota Communities.

F-26. F-26 responded to Question #1. "I dropped out of school because I had to work to support and take care of myself." Question #2. "Be a parent. A child is their responsibility." Her mother had custody of her. She thinks she was separated from her parents before or by age eight and lived with multiple families until she was 15. At 15, she got a job, quit school, and moved in with a boyfriend. Together for five years, they were addicted to heroin which resulted in legal trouble. Finally, "I decided I had enough and moved away from everyone I knew, got clean and

stayed that way." She works full time, has reunited with her father who is ailing, and lives with him while earning her diploma.

Author's analysis: Her story fits the description of Complex Trauma in the DSM-V. In addition to Moretti and Peled (2004), if she was eight years old, F-26 was in stage two of brain development. F-26 story would likely qualify her for a diagnosis of early attachment disorder that "can predict . . . depression, substance abuse, substance dependence, and dropping out of school" (Moretti & Peled, 2004, pp. 551-555). Newton et al. (2000) reports that people with this history are "likely to experience difficulties trusting adults" (p. 1364) which was the case for F-26. This participant reported no family or school support system available to facilitate her education, but as a teen, she sought help from the county and was able to get into a drug treatment program. As F-28 in this report, F-26 is self-parenting and has chosen to return to school and earn a high school diploma.

M-22. M-22 responded to Question #1. "I just quit. My Mom was OK with it because I could get a full-time job at a relative's car repair garage." To enroll in a certified mechanics program and join the union, M-22 needs to earn a high school diploma. Question #2. "When you get into trouble, the assistant principal and principal just 'bend you' when you do shit. How about showing they are willing to help you?" He shared that "hands-on learning would be a good idea. No teacher ever said I was doing a great job." The participant explained that while enrolled at one elementary school, he was assigned an anger management counselor. He tells his story: Dad moved in with a girlfriend, and he and his Mom lived in different places so she could follow work. Work was hard on her, and he attended three different elementary schools before the 6th grade.

In his junior year in high school, he had an altercation with a student and was transferred. He didn't like the new school and asked if he could return to his former school. The administration denied his request. "So I just quit." He will complete his GED this spring (2020) at the time when this research was being conducted. He continues to suffer from depression and symptoms of ADHD. His symptoms are reduced when using a street drug. He would like to be less dependent on the street drug, and administrators at this center have helped him find services.

Author's analysis: Today, M-26 continues to express great anger toward his Mom having to work overtime, living in multiple places, and changing schools a lot. He was assigned a social worker at one elementary school but moved soon to another school. Feldman et al. (2017), found children that "attended five or more schools from Kindergarten through early high school" described the "painful loss of friendships and social groups" (p. 61). According to the research of Bartels, et al., (2007), when a child moves frequently they are "much less motivated to act prosocially" (Par. 5), which suggests they have "much less reason to be good" (Par. 1) which is what appears to have happened to M-22.

F-23. F-23 responded to Question #1 by saying, **"**I didn't have a way to get to school, no transportation. I was living too far away from school with my boyfriend and his family. They help take care of our baby. It was difficult to figure out a work-school schedule because work prioritizes school."

The participants' parents separated. She did not share her age. "Mom had no financial help, worked nights, and slept during the day, to support two kids." She rarely spoke to her mother, but got herself off to school every day. When the participant reached age 15-16, she found a job and worked as many hours as she could to help support the family. She tried to rotate

living between home and her grandparent's house, but "it was hard to figure out transportation. Work came first so I missed a lot of classes." She became pregnant and moved in with her boyfriend, his mother, and siblings. "We live even further away from school, and recently the family has a lot of unexpected hospital bills that we can't pay. We work two full-time jobs, take care of our daughter, and are trying to catch up. It is really hard." (at this point she is crying).

Question #2. What should have been done (by anyone) to help you graduate on time? Her reply: "free bus cards. Transportation vouchers for students. Social workers could have helped find free daycare." Unlike her Mom, she wants a relationship with her daughter while she is growing up. "My boyfriend takes Tuesdays off to babysit and drives me to school." A job counselor told her about this adult learning center. She needs to attend college to become a pharmacist. F-23 reported because her single mother worked at night they had no relationship. If anyone (teacher, social worker, counselor) attempted to contact her mother, she does not know.

Authors Analyze: Just as F-26, F-28 parented themselves, F-23 parented herself. Today she has a support system, family and school, that is working for her.

F-22. F-22 responded, "I didn't have enough credits to graduate on time. My mother divorced my younger brother's Dad when I was seven. The family was dealing with so much other stuff (crying, 'other stuff' not shared)." "I lived from house to house. I don't even remember how many different schools. First living with Mom, then aunt, then godparents, back to Mom, back to aunt. Not in one school long enough to make friends or get to know the teachers very well. I was too young to work. I didn't have clothes. I just couldn't focus on school. Didn't try." Her younger brother recently moved to this state and she joined him last month. They heard about this Adult Learning Center. The first time she tried to find this center she got lost on the

bus. Now her brother drops her off at the nearby mall and she walks the 3 blocks to school.

Question #2. What should have been done (by anyone) to help you graduate on time? "I don't know. I was always trying to figure things out on my own. I am hoping to get help at this ALC and graduate from high school."

Author's analysis: Just like F-26, F-28, this participant F-22 self parented. Adolescence is a period of rapid development. The "repeated loss of caregivers" meets the criteria of "complex trauma" in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders DSM-IV (Cook et al., 2005, p. 390) and the self-parenting done by F-22 likely would qualify her as having experienced complex trauma. Newton et al. (2000) found that those experiencing repeated loss of caregivers are "likely to experience difficulties trusting adults" (p. 1364). However, despite the prediction by Newton et al. (2000) F-22 does trust her younger brother, has moved in with him, and is enrolled at an adult learning center to finish high school.

M-21. M-21 responded to Question #1. "It happened the last week of school before graduating. I got into a fight. The administration followed the Zero Tolerance Policy law and I was expelled." The participant attended anger management classes and was not having a good day. "I get offended a lot, it doesn't matter if someone is just joking." Question #2. His parents were 16 and 18 when he was born. His alcoholic Dad split. He lives with Mom. He has full-time employment. The participant has received on-going anger management therapy since elementary school. Last week of senior year, he asked a social worker to intervene, in an attempt to stop an altercation with another student. Someone should have gathered information about the situation and questioned the other student. The intervention did not occur, and the students were disciplined for fighting. With a lack of support from school administration, M-21 had more

reasons "to experience difficulties trusting adults" in positions of authority (Newton et al., 2000, p. 1364).

Author's analysis: The administration applied the Zero Tolerance Policy and informed M-21 could not graduate on time with his class. He was expelled. His mother was on his side but had no control over how the administration applied the Zero Tolerance Policy.

F-21. The participant responded to Question #1. " I skipped a lot of classes. I need 10 credits to graduate." When she was in high school her parents separated. "I was really mad at both of them and started skipping classes." Her parents sent her to live in another state with a single aunt who enrolled her at an ALC school. But she continued to skip classes. When her aunt sent her back home she just quit attending school. Recently she had a child. Her boyfriend's family has taken the child and will not return it. Public social services and juvenile courts are involved. She responded to Question #2 by saying that "during my parents' separation a school social worker tried to keep me in school, but she was not aggressive enough."

Author's analysis: F-21's experience is duplicated in the 2006 Gates Foundation survey (Bridgland J. M., DiIulio J. J. Jr., & Morison, K. 2006) from multiple state high schools. For example, survey results indicated that fifty-nine percent of the students reported their parents were involved with their learning, but not to the level of commitment students believed they needed (2006, p. iv). The survey also noted that seventy-one percent reported that communication should be more frequent (2006, p. v). Both outcomes were consistent with F-21's narrative. Finally, moving children even between family members met the criteria of "complex trauma" in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders DSM-IV (p. 390), and

Newton (2000) reported a symptom of complex trauma is that they are" likely to experience

difficulties trusting adults" (p. 1364). Both of these outcomes apply to F-21.

 M-20. M-20 responded to Question #1. "I walked out when I learned I didn't have

enough credits to graduate on time." He could support himself. From the time he was of age, he

was employed in the fast-food industry. Question #2. "I don't know. My mom enrolled me in a

drug treatment center." The participant explained. When he was in Kindergarten or first grade his

Dad moved in with a girlfriend, and he rotated living between two homes. At age twenty he is

still angry. His mother continues to have regular bouts of depression. She did find early

counseling for herself and her son. In the 8th grade, the participant started drinking alcohol and

then became addicted to heroin. His mother's depression challenged her ability to deal with his

addiction, and she arranged for him to live with relatives. Each year, in grades 9, 10, 11, 12, he

rotated living with families in a different small town, attended a different high school, entered a

different treatment center, and continued using drugs. For a short time, the participant had a

girlfriend. She was attacked. A few days later, he attacked the attacker and was charged with a

5th-degree assault. This complicated the legal issues around his addiction and treatment. He now

lives in a homeless shelter in a large urban city and has connected with a religious counselor. He

has been drug-free for six months while completing his high school diploma. He wants to attend

college and enter the seminary.

 Author's analysis. Again, as in the lives of many in this study, M-20 experienced the

repeated loss of caregivers and grew up with no stable emotional support system in his life.

These multiple school placements meet "the diagnostic criteria for complex trauma from the

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders (p. 390). Van der Kolk (as cited in Cook,

et al., 2005) said, "children exposed to complex trauma" are at risk for "cumulative impairment from childhood through adolescence and into adulthood" (p. 390).

Conclusion

Chapter Two reports that separating a child from its gestational-maternal parent biologically changes the right side of the brain (for the child) to react in opposition to adult directions. This act also can create a multitude of mental and physical health problems. Chapters Three and Four identify the symptom of the problem as dropping out of high school, and identifies the origin of the problem, as family trauma. When parents are under stress or are traumatized, they cannot adequately advise or care for their children. Childhood trauma stems from family-parental trauma. From this evidence, it makes sense to develop public mental health and education policies that strengthen family and relational trust during rehabilitation.

In Chapter Five, in February of 2018, Congress passed H. R. 253, The Family Prevention Services Act. This Act requires public social workers to prescribe life-skill coaches to families that are being investigated by the public social system, to help the families heal, instead of separating the children from the parents (Kelly, 2018a). Also as of 2018, the Trauma-Sensitive Network is now available for K-12 faculty to learn how to teach children from families who are experiencing traumatic events and adversities.

CHAPTER FIVE

Final Reflections

Introduction

Dropping out of high school is the symptom of a problem. Commonly, the problem is family trauma. "The systemic level of the problem is when caregivers are stressed and traumatized themselves, they cannot provide adequate care to their children" (Haire, 2020, p. 4). How public social services and K-12 educational policies are implemented can add to or reduce the impact of relational trauma.

It has been a common policy for public social workers to separate children from parents, for a short term or permanently when a family is in distress. Today it is understood that all "secondary caregivers are well-meaning and willing to be involved with the child's life", but need to be well-informed prior to becoming foster parents, adopting, or becoming guardians, "to expect these children to have livelong [emotional and physical] challenges" (Zill, 2015, p. 5). To eliminate the trauma of family separation, counselors found that "working with the entire family unit and the community they live [scientists have found to be the best] way to treat trauma" (Haire, 2020, p. 4). The outcomes show that "cognitive and social changes can be consolidated into [whole] family learning and cause less anxious or ambivalent children" (Moretti & Peled, 2004, p. 551). In the end, the outcome of counseling families as a whole, "shows when parents

are engaged in the lives of their children [the children] are less likely to drop out of school"
(Rumberger, 1995, p. 13).

The Primary Dissertation Research Question is, How do adults earning their high school diploma describe what stopped them from graduating on time? The Secondary Dissertation Research Question is: Who did the student trust in their family or at school to ask for advice or help with any issue? The Probing question asks them to switch places. Be a parent or teacher. What recommendations can you offer schools to help students graduate on time? The researcher looked for the presence of trust in the participants' relationships with family members, teachers, and school social workers at the time they dropped out of high school. Nine of the 12 participants reported not trusting a parent, teacher, social worker, counselor to help them facilitate their K-12 education.

This qualitative study involved twelve adults returning to school to earn their high school diploma. Each participant volunteered to tell their story during a 30-minute audio-recorded interview. The analysis of the interviews is clear, policymakers and learning organizations need to rethink how to address the K-12 education of children experiencing family trauma.

Overview

Chapter Five starts with a discussion of the need to restore public trust in school leadership and public social services; a preference to maintain family units; a summary of participants' trust in adults; anger and academic achievement; concluding predictions. This chapter also introduces the Family First Prevention Services Act H.R. 253, passed in Congress in 2018; The California implementation of the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Survey, and

introduces the Trauma and Attachment Network. The last section recommends future studies and

a statement regarding the importance of writing public policies based on scientific evidence.

Restoring Trust in School Leadership and Public Social Services

A central assumption that I had at the start of this research was that students experiencing

secondary homes, in general, lacked trust in all adults. Reading the evidence presented in

Chapter Two, I now understand how children can enter kindergarten with neurological traits to

trust people less. This can only be addressed by H. R. 253, which is discussed below.

After learning about the first and second stages of early brain development, I decided to

examine K-12 education and public policies that may reinforce negative traits regarding who to

trust. And most specifically, what policies affect student-teacher relationships and academic

achievement. A review of education policies builds a strong case against the Zero Tolerance

policy (Mitchell, 2014), adding layers of trauma to a student's experiences. Public trust was

eroded further as citizens learned of the *"Kids for Cash"* scandal and the Civil Lawsuit "Stop

Child Protection Services From Legally Kidnapping".

According to a report written in the New York Post by Gertlin in 2014, the Zero

Tolerance policy created the "Kids for Cash" scandal. Between 2004 and 2008 the Pennsylvania

state Judicial Conduct Board received complaints about two juvenile court judges. The

investigation revealed that Judges Conahan and Ciavarella accepted money in return to ensure

occupancy at for-profit juvenile detention rehabilitation centers. In the end, the Supreme Court of

Pennsylvania overturned thousands of adjudications of teen delinquency. Class action lawsuits

were filed by individual parent-citizens against each judge. Ciavarella was sentenced to 28 years

and Conahan to 17. 5 years in federal prison. Feldman's (2014) study found those who

succeeded in their second attempt to earn their high school diploma were never involved with

criminal activity, and therefore did not experience detention centers. There was also a civil

lawsuit brought by Black families against the public social system.

In April of 2018, Chris Serres of the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* reported the filing of a

civil lawsuit for the family of a management consultant. The parent also created a support group

of 250 family's called "Stop Child Protection Services From Legally Kidnapping". The parents

accused state and county child protection agencies of wrongfully placing their 11-year old son in

a foster home for 22 months after receiving a spanking for stealing, not completing his

homework, and playing video games. The parents were not given visitation rights. The spanking

was reported to social services by the family's babysitter. When their son returned home after

22-months, the parents reported a change in his personality. The article did not report how the

child was treated while in the foster home. The parents described their son as a social and

gregarious child who loved soccer and skiing. Returning home, the son became increasingly

introverted and spent most of his time indoors. The article reported that "White families are

twice as likely to be placed on a family assessment track [unlike] Black families, state data

shows" (Serres, 2018). The attorney for the couple says this case "illustrates why children of

color are far more likely to be reported to the child protection system than White children"

(Serres, 2018).

A Preference to Maintain Biological Family Units

Bartels et al.'s (2007) definition of social exclusion is another primary factor why

choosing to maintain family units through rehabilitation offers many psychological benefits.

First, learning as a family unit strengthens relational trust. Separating children from their primary family adds another layer of trauma to an already traumatized family. Therefore, how humane is it when the legal system creates policies that amplify this trauma? According to the research of Bartels et al. (2007), when a child moves frequently in the foster care system they are "much less motivated to act prosocially" (¶ 5), which suggests they have "much less reason to be good" (¶ 1). "Empathy is another important mediator…[it] relies on emotion", and the ability to internalize the feelings of someone else (Bartels et al., 2007). If a person's "emotional system shuts down" because they have been excluded, a person will "translate [this] into a reduction in prosocial behavior" (p. 57, ¶ 4). Social scientists such as Bartels et al. (2007) explains how social exclusion decreases prosocial behavior. For example: "human beings perform...prosocial acts..encouraged by their culture, because...this enables them to belong to and enjoy its rewards." However, "if the rewards are perceived as unreliable, there is much less reason to be good" (Bartels et al., 2007, ¶ 1).

Peter van de Voorde (2018) predicted what happens when policymakers avoid the warnings related to scientific evidence, when he wrote: "history tells us that when . . . political leadership ignores all available warnings [it may be] virtually impossible to regain the trust and support of the civilian population to initiate the difficult programs necessary to restore a broken society into a healthy vibrant community" (van de Voorde, 2018, p. 249).

Who Is Trustworthy?

Nine of the twelve participants responded they did not trust a parent, a teacher, a social worker, or school administrator enough to approach them when they needed help or advice. Each participant told their story describing an adverse event that occurred early in their lives, that no

adult fixed. Because of these early adverse family experiences, these children described losing trust in the decisions of the adults in their families and the adults in their school community. They are a remarkably resilient group of adults who want to earn their high school diploma.

In Chapter Two, research scientists in the fields of neurology, biology, and psychology, reported how a child's sense of trust is initiated in the developing brain pre-birth and continues to develop reflective of the child's experiences during the first two-three years of life. If this maternal-child relationship is disrupted, the brain rewires for survival, and the child becomes a very different person. A child's earliest education in relational trust becomes a permanent trait and expectation before a child enters school.

Cook et al. (2005) reported: "When the caregiver relationship is the source of the trauma...80% of these children [will] develop insecure attachment patterns" (Abstract ¶ 5), and this "manifests itself in survival-based behaviors that are rigid, extreme, and dissociative...revolving on themes of helplessness (abandonment, betrayal, failure, dejection,) or coercive control (blame, rejection, intrusiveness, hostility). This also creates a lifelong risk of physical disease and psychosocial dysfunction" (Abstract ¶ 6).

Between 1998 and 2015, Zill "documented the behavior of 19,000 kindergarten and first-grade students for the National Center for Education Statistics" (p. 4). In this research, teachers were asked to evaluate the behavior and the tests of children who were in permanent homes but separated from their primary family prior to entering Kindergarten. The report concluded these children "tend to have worse behavioral and academic outcomes in kindergarten and first grade" and are also "more likely to get angry easily and to fight with other students" (Zill, 2015, p. 4). According to the scientific evidence in Chapter Two, it is the early pre-school

relationships that create a biological trait lasting for the duration of their lifetime. After writing Chapter Four, I returned to listen to the interview recordings a second and third time, to get a feeling of their situations.

Anger and Academic Achievement

Listening to the recordings a second-third time, each expressed anger. First, there was anger towards their parents' inability to facilitate the family situation, but also towards their adult teachers, social workers, anger management counselors, probation officers, or administrators, who only superficially tried to help them. This led me to search for articles addressing "anger" and "learning".

A paper titled, a "Correlation Study on Anger and Academic Achievement" (2011), by Dr. R. Roswiyani, from Radboud University in Nijmegen, Netherlands, found when a student is less capable of managing anger, the worse the anger impacts their academic achievement (Abstract, 2011). A second paper titled Anger in Relation to School Learning, by Monique Boekaerts (1994) cites a 1989 study by Berkowitz connecting anger to underachieving.

Berkowitz (cited by Boekaerts, 1994) described how anger is present in two ways: first when a person's identity is threatened or harmed; or second, when an unfairness has occurred. Either way, a person's anger stems from their belief that "someone has to be accountable" (Berkowitz, 1989, p. 271). From the analysis of the nine participants' interviews, their stories reveal they believe "an unfairness occurred " to them. They were underage children with no power to rectify the unfairness. They witnessed no adult in a position of authority take the responsibility to rectify the unfairness to help them. Nine responded they did not trust a parent, a

teacher, or a social worker to help them. They only trusted themselves to facilitate their education and their personal lives.

Future Predictions

Chloe Leary, the executive director of the Winston Prouty Center for Child and Family Development in Brattleboro, Vermont, wrote in response to a report released in early September 2019, by the Office of Inspector General for the Department of Health and Human Services regarding separating families. Leary (2019) wrote that

given what is known about the effect childhood trauma has on brain development and health over the course of a lifetime, cognitive development will be limited due to neural pathways developing more towards survival in parts of the brain vs the thinking part of the brain. (¶ 2)

For individuals who have experienced childhood trauma Leary (2019) recommends people in positions of authority should "design programs and policies that do not create or exacerbate [childhood] trauma", adding that, "we will reap what we sow" (¶ 5).

If we review the 2019 Alliance prediction, lowering the high school dropout rate may do the following:

decrease the annual incidence of assault by nearly 60,000; larceny by more than 37,000; motor vehicle theft by more than 31,000; and burglaries by more than 17,000. It would also prevent nearly 1,300 murders, more than 3,800 occurrences of rape, and more than 1,500 robberies. Raising the graduation rate would not only reduce crime but also save taxpayer money. The annual cost to educate one student is $12,643, the annual cost to incarcerate a person is $28, 323. Since high school dropouts are less healthy and die

earlier, reducing the dropout rate by half would save Medicaid $7.3 billion annually.

(pp.7-9)

The most devastating report regarding the common practices of public social policies and practices, I found a 2019 article written for the Marquette Law Review, titled "a Cure Worse Than a Disease? The Impact of Removal on Children and Their Families (Sankaran, Church, & Mitchell, 2019). The authors say that the system has haphazardly and needlessly removed children from parents. And this is driven by the convenience of the system and at the expense of families (Sankaran et al., 2019).

Moretti and Peled (2004) found that when public policies keep families together during counseling-rehabilitation, "cognitive and social changes can be consolidated into [whole] family learning and cause less anxious or ambivalent children" (Moretti & Peled, 2004, p. 551). Unresolved anger needs to be addressed by experts in the field of mental health working directly with the primary family. If Moretti and Peled's (2004) advice is followed, the work begins by keeping families together during mental health and associated rehabilitation services. The United States Congress has addressed this challenge by passing a new federal law that requires implementation by 2021.

H. R. 253 The Family First Prevention Services Act, 2018

In February of 2018, Congress passed H. R. 253, The Family First Prevention Services Act in response to the reports from experts in the fields of civil law, neurology, biology, psychology, human rights, and social justice. Congress' first attempt was in 1994 when the federal government wrote a policy titled the *Family Support and Prevention Program*. This policy authorized $930 million dollars in grants to give family preservation priority to prevent

family separation. In place of placing children in foster care, life-skills coaches are sent into the homes of distressed families. Unfortunately, without a specific directive to hire additional employees to implement, oversee, and evaluate the outcomes, this program has been used "ineffectively by social workers, lawyers, judges, and administrators" (Karger, 2014, p. 325). To restate the urgency of preserving primary families, lawmakers reframed the grant into a bill, and a bipartisan Congress passed the *Family First Prevention Services Act* in February of 2018. H.R. 253 took effect in October of 2019. Federal law H. R. 253 requires the public social welfare system to philosophically change its vision-mission and redirect funding to preserve original families.

On December 17, 2019, John Kelly, the editor of the *Chronicle for Social Change*, wrote an article describing "the IV-E Prevention funds for in-home counselors to treat and reduce substance abuse, offer mental health interventions, and in-home parenting-skills programs to prevent child-maternal separation" (¶ 4). In support of implementing this new law, and the needs of traumatized children currently in K-12 schools, an organization called the Trauma and Attachment Network, Inc. was created. The first conference was in 2018, the second conference was in 2019. The network's goal is to have a resource for parents, professionals, and educators, "to reflect the growing understanding [of truama] through neuroscience" (attachment trauma network.org. 2020).

In addition to the need for the implementation of H. R. 253 The Family First Prevention Services Act, 2018, this research also supports the continued expansion of designing K-12 policies and practices to align with the ideas of trauma-sensitive school environments.

California K-12 Schools Implement the Adverse Childhood Experiences Survey

In February 2019, I attended the second annual national conference by the Trauma and Attachment Network (ATN) held at the Hilton Hotel in Washington D.C. Over 1,800 teachers, school administrators, parents, and community leaders from the US, Canada, Australia, and Europe, attended to learn how to create trauma-sensitive schools. At this conference, I learned of the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Survey.

Adverse childhood experiences, known as ACEs, are traumatic events that occur during childhood (0-17 years) and can include any of the following: Experiencing violence, abuse, or neglect, witnessing violence in the home or community, having a family member attempt or die by suicide. The ACE also determines if the home environment undermines a child's sense of safety, stability, or bonding, leading to substance misuse, mental health problems, or instability due to parental separation or household members being in jail or prison. ACEs are linked in adulthood, to chronic health problems, mental illness, substance misuse, and negatively impacts education and job opportunities.

Dr. Nadine Burke Harris, California's Surgeon General, has now implemented the ACE statewide. Harris has also written articles in response to the harmful impact of the US government keeping immigrant children separated from their parents. According to Harris disrupting the child-maternal relationship is serious, because the trauma of not understanding the separation creates a high dose of hormonal toxin so potent it rewires a child's brain while erodes the immune system. The impact of this toxin has a tripling of the risk of heart disease and lung cancer and can reduce life expectancy by 20 years (Wolfson, 2020).

The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) survey has been so successful in identifying the mental health needs of families in the United States K-12 schools, that the survey is now

being used in Canada and Australia. In 2010 and 2013, the ACE survey was used in Albania, Latvia, Lithuania, Montenegro, Romania, the Russian Federation, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (Republic of North Macedonia) and Turkey (Bellis, 2014, Abstract). As the science of Epigenetics is shared with other countries, the TNN network is collaborating world-wide with teachers, parents, school administrators, and government leaders, to develop effective teaching strategies to help traumatized children achieve academically (Trauma-Sensitive School Annual Conference, 2020).

Seven Recommendations for Future Studies

Completing this dissertation research had led me to formulate Five recommendations for new research that potentially could be used to decrease the dropout rate. The first, second, and third recommendations are in response to the M-29, F-65, F-23 participant interviews. The fourth suggests a longitudinal study following the mental and physical health according to the science of Epigenetics. The fifth and last recommendation is a 5-year longitudinal study following the effects of H. R. 253 The Family First Prevention Services Act.

First recommendation. M-29. At age 16 he dropped out of school to find a job and help his parents pay the mortgage during the 2008 mortgage debacle. Les Christie, a CNNMoney.com staff writer, published a report by RealtyTrac on January 15, 2009: that from the 3.1 million foreclosures filings in 2008, a total of 861,664 families lost their homes. It is critical for the government to learn if there is a correlation between dropping out of high school and the 2008 mortgage debacle. The question is: How many students dropped out of high school or college in 2008-2009 because they were members of the 861,664 families who lost their homes to foreclosure? M-29 was on track to graduate, there were no adverse childhood experiences. What

stopped M-29 from graduating on time is related to federal and state banking policies. This dissertation is being completed in the middle of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. How many mortgages will go into foreclosure? How many homeless students will drop out of school?

Second recommendation. F-65 was one of five daughters and a member of a military family during the Vietnam war. The family moved often. No parent, teacher, or social worker noticed she skipped classes, used street drugs, or got into lots of trouble. During the Vietnam War, there was no internet to consolidate school records from high schools in different states. The first publication in support of military families is *The Military Child: Mobility and Education. Fastback 463* (2000)*,* authored by Mary M. Keller and Glynn T. Decoteau. This dissertation is being written and published in 2020. The United States has been at war since 2003. There is a need to continue research to support the academic achievement and mental health of children in military families. From the research in Chapter Two, Feldman et al. (2012) found students who dropped out of high school before earning their diploma, "attended five or more schools from kindergarten through early high school" describing "the painful loss of friendships as social groupings shifted over time" (p. 61).

Third recommendation. F-23 grew up in a rural farm community. Now living in a large city, she learned of her dyslexia the same time her daughter was diagnosed with dyslexia in the first grade. It seems some rural communities do not test students for learning disabilities. This fact and its impact on the economy of small communities have now been documented by Chris H. Johnson's research paper titled: The Impact of Dyslexia in Rural Minnesota Communities, published May 8, 2017. It is important for all states (and the Federal Department of Education) to

commission a study to learn if all small-town communities have qualified personnel to test for dyslexia or any physical or mental health learning disabilities.

Fourth recommendation. I would like to recommend a long-term study on 68% of the prison inmates that have not completed their high school diploma, to learn how criminal activity is associated with a lack of relational trust, anger, academic achievement, and learning disabilities such as ADD, PTSD, and ODD.

Fifth recommendation. I would like to recommend a foundation or university engage in a longitudinal epigenetics study of the mental and physical health of the 68% of the prison inmates that have not completed their high school diploma. An article written for Psychology Today, September 18, 2019, is titled The Epigenetics of Childhood Trauma. The author Dr. Diane MacIntosh explains that each of us inherits a set of genes. Between nature (the genes inherited from parents) and nurture (life experience), trauma can significantly change gene expression in regards to a person's physical or mental health. These genetic changes, good or bad, can be passed onto future generations. The University of Minnesota is now a leader in Epigenetic research. From the website, "Epigenetics is important for many areas of scientific inquiry, including neuroscience, cell development, psychology, epidemiology, cancer, and pharmacology" (epigenetics-consortium.umn.edu., April 25, 2020).

Sixth recommendation. Consider a five-year longitudinal study regarding the outcomes of H. R. 253, based on the research that keeping primary families together shows how "cognitive and social changes can be consolidated into [whole] family learning and cause less anxious or ambivalent children" (Moretti & Peled, 2004, p. 551). Each state could implement the Adverse Childhood Experiences survey to determine if the application of H. R. 253 reduced the effects of

childhood trauma, raise the level of relational trust between students, parents, social workers, and adult teachers. And to this end, increase the number of students who graduate from high school on time.

Seventh recommendation. I would like to know why some adults survive and are found to be resilient to childhood trauma by their own grit, while others become addicted to drugs, as described by Dr. Paul Sunderland in his 2015 lecture series Adoption and Addiction.

Conclusion

I started writing this dissertation in the spring of 2018 and it is completed in the summer of 2020. Citizens of this world are in the middle of a global pandemic, and the global trauma of the death of a Black Minnesota citizen by the police. As the world emerges from 2020, I hope to use my teaching experience and new title to become politically active in Minnesota K-12 education. First, to follow the implementation of H. R. 253 The Family First Preservation Services Act in Minnesota. Second, encourage Congress to pass the ERA after the 2020 election.

The challenge to K-12 education is America's pluralistic society, with bias in everyday habits and policies that in general the average citizen is not aware of. This has created America's caste system society. Sociologists explain that "we take into ourselves... the values and beliefs of our culture [and ideologies], as we learn what are appropriate ways of thinking and behaving in the society in which we live" (Green, Scholes, 2017, p. 37). If the government is responsible for writing public policies, lawmakers should be encouraged to read *America's Enduring Racial Caste System* by Isabel Wilkerson, in hopes all new policies will be written to change our current cultural practices, in which 68% of prison inmates are high school dropouts (Mitchel, 2014, p. 330).

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