

# PERSISTENCE IN FIVE-YEAR HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family. To my husband, Michael Gelfand, for his love and support over these many years that we have been together and the many more to come. To my daughter, Devra Gelfand, for her continued love, support, and patience. I especially appreciate the time she provided, as she volunteered to transcribe the many interviews I conducted.

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And finally, though he will never know the support he gave me, I would like to thank Regulus, my granddog, for his love and support of my efforts. He walked with me when I needed to clear my head, and kept my feet warm while I wrote. He puts the grand in granddog.

## ABSTRACT

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### PERSISTENCE IN FIVE-YEAR HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES

Students who fail to graduate do not reach their full potential as contributing members of society with exorbitant costs to both them and the nation. The intended purpose of this study was to understand persistence in five-year high school graduates that did not have any type of break in their education. Students that persist in school for a fifth year to earn their high school diplomas do so for various reasons. A qualitative phenomenological approach to three case studies of five-year high school graduates was conducted. The three participants were selected from the same urban school in a Midwestern state. Semi-structured interviews were conducted regarding their school experiences and decisions to persist to graduation. The ethic of care, additional social capital and resilience all contributed to participants' persistence. Care was provided by family, school personnel, and friends. This care was reciprocated by the participants. Care led to additional social capital. Social capital allowed the participants to gain the educational asset of a high school diploma, and to improve on their futures by either attending college or entering the military. At the same time the participants became resilient "by means of human activities, including thought and action." The participants set goals for themselves deciding that they wanted careers and not jobs. They matured realizing that they had wasted time and took school more seriously. Family finances also was a part of the decision making process. The participants did not want to live pay check to pay check. The results demonstrated that there is not one reason, but several reasons that the participants persisted.

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## CHAPTER 1

### OVERVIEW OF STUDY

#### **Introduction**

Over the last few years schools, states, and the federal government have discussed the “epidemic” of low graduation rates and the need to reverse this trend. Stillwell (2010) reported that the average graduation rate for school year 2007-08 was 74.9% and the overall dropout rate was 4.1% (p. 3). That same year, Chapman, Laird, and KewalRamani (2010) reported a national completion rate for 2008 of 89.9% (p. 10), and a national dropout rate of 3.5% (p. 5). Secretary of Education Arne Duncan (2010) reported 27% of high school students are dropouts (p. 4). Whichever statistic one wishes to believe, the dropout rate remains high.

Students who fail to graduate do not reach their full potential as contributing members of society with exorbitant costs to both them and the nation. The *Schott 50 State Report* (2008) stated that “For each student the U.S. fails to educate, there is a cost to the individual and to taxpayers that runs into the hundreds of thousands of dollars” (p. 10). Pinkus (2006) in a report for the Alliance for Excellent Education reported that “Over his or her lifetime, a high school dropout earns, on average, about \$260,000 less than a high school graduate and about \$1 million less than a college graduate” (p. 2). Another report by the Alliance for Excellent Education (2009) stated that “if the students who dropped out of the Class of 2009 had graduated, the nation’s economy would have benefited from nearly \$335 billion in additional income over the course of their lifetimes” (p.1). It continued that had Indiana graduated all of their dropouts from the Class of 2009, the “Total Lifetime Additional Income” would have been \$6,087,640,000 (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009, p.5). This figure does “not take into account the added

economic growth generated from each new dollar put into the economy” (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009, p.3). Although there have been other studies utilizing various dollar figures may vary, the risk to the student and the nation does not vary.

Given the costs, it is unsurprising that policy makers have turned attention to increasing the graduation rate and to increasing student achievement. To this end, President Bush signed into law the No Child left Behind Act of 2001 on January 8, 2002, reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). President Obama has been working on reauthorizing the ESEA, however as of today (2013) it has yet to occur. In the ESEA reauthorization the President wants to have all high school students graduate, ready to succeed in college and the workplace by 2020. To support the President’s 2020 goal, three support goals have also been introduced: “raise standards,” “reward excellence and growth,” and “increase local control and flexibility while maintaining the focus on equity and closing achievement gaps” (Duncan, 2010, para.9).

The President’s goal, with the three supporting goals, is laudable. Nonetheless, if a student fails to stay in school, the President’s goal will not be met. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan testified before the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee and the House Education and Labor Committee on March 17, 2010 to announce that the White House had begun working on the blueprint for reauthorizing ESEA. As Secretary Duncan began his testimony, he stated that “27% of America’s young people drop out of high school. That means 1.2 million teenagers are leaving our schools for the streets” (para 4). Secretary Duncan did not address how the Administration seeks to prevent students from dropping out of high school in the first place.

To address dropout prevention, it is helpful to understand who is and who is not considered a high school graduate in Indiana. Indiana Code (IC) 20-26-13 deals with high school

graduation rate determination. Starting with the 2005-06 graduating class (IC 20-26-13-9), the graduation rate would be calculated as the “percentage of students within a cohort who graduate during their expected graduation year” (IC 20-26-13-6), that is, in four years (IC 20-26-13-10). It is the four-year graduation rate that is utilized as part of Indiana’s ‘A-F School Accountability’ grading system, a system that gives letter grades to all schools based on that school’s performance (A-F Accountability, 2011, para. 4). Students who earn a general education development (GED) certificate are not considered graduates (IC 20-26-13-5(b)). Of interest, besides four-year cohort graduates, there are also five-year cohort graduates and under IC 20-26-13-10.2, a formula for a five-year graduation rate is provided. Though these students figure less prominently in state accountability policies, better understanding of why these students remained for a fifth year may figure significantly in prevention strategies.

### **Problem Statement**

Indiana’s goal is to have “at least 90% of students graduate from high school in four years or less” (Indiana’s Graduation Cohort Rate). Though many leave school without graduating – and many will exit without a diploma with their cohort - some students will remain in school for five or more years to earn their high school diplomas. A report titled *Moving Indiana Forward: High Standards and High Graduation Rates* (2006), states that a small number of students who do not graduate in four years will graduate in five or six (p. 10). While this report specifically mentions the persistence of dropouts who earn their high school GEDs, it avoids the discussion of this same type of persistence in those who take that extra year or two to earn their high school diplomas. While these students are also counted as dropouts as they did not graduate with their cohort, there seems something qualitatively different and interesting about this group. They did not opt to drop out or to earn a GED.

A review of related research did not yield any studies dealing specifically with the persistence of five-year high school graduates who never dropped out of high school. According to Webster's New World College Dictionary (2001), individuals that persist are those that "refuse to give up, esp. when faced with opposition or difficulty" (p. 1074). Students that persist in school for a fifth year to earn their high school diplomas do so for reasons unknown to researchers. The reasons for persisting in school need to be studied.

### **Purpose of Study**

Additional research is needed to study those students who persisted in accomplishing one of the initial coming of age rituals, earning their high school diplomas. If we can understand why these students persisted in school, and apply this gained knowledge sooner, then possibly we may contribute to increasing the number of students graduating with their cohort resulting in diminishing the drop out problem. It is important that a qualitative study be done of these five-year high school graduates. It is necessary to listen to what these graduates have to say about this phenomenon and to understand their experiences. Let these students tell us the reason(s) they persisted in earning their diplomas, the reason(s) they remained in school a fifth year, the individual(s) that influenced the decision to remain, and the treatment they received during that additional year. In this study, I provided five year high school graduates the opportunity to answer these questions by allowing them to tell their stories in their own words.

I conducted a qualitative study utilizing an interpretive case study that draws on a phenomenological approach to describe the lived experiences of a sample of five-year high school graduates. These five-year high school graduates persisted in school for reasons yet to be understood. They remained in school realizing that they may suffer some embarrassment, but

deciding earning their high school diplomas was the most important thing they could do at that time as a step towards achieving their life goals.

The question posed to these graduates was a simple one: why did you persist in remaining in school a fifth year to earn your high school diploma? Once their experiences are detailed and understood, the possibility of utilizing the results to assist future students in graduating on time or preventing them from dropping out becomes realistic, and the President's 2020 goal of having all students graduate becomes achievable.

### **Research Design and Methods**

There have been several qualitative and quantitative studies dealing with high school dropouts, some studies that deal with dropouts who return to school, and other studies that attempt to determine the various reasons that contribute to some student's lack of achievement. Researchers' conclusions are also varied, from those that have determined that the addition of social capital may contribute to student achievement, to others that believe that resilience or even the ethic of care may have led to those that continue to achieve in school at various grade levels. However, life experiences do not necessarily fit neatly into categories or mathematical models. As Mertens (2010) stated, "researchers who focus on the reduction of a complex social phenomenon to one or more numbers that can be statistically analyzed run the risk of overlooking important variations" (p. 144).

I employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to three case studies of five-year high school graduates. It was an interpretive case study that allowed these graduates to explain what transpired while they were in high school and interpret what contributed to their persistence. "Phenomenological analysis seeks to grasp and elucidate the meaning, structure, and

essence of the lived experience of a phenomenon for a person or group of people” (Patton, 2002, p. 482).

The participants were selected from a large urban school district in Indiana. There are seven high/community high schools within the district with approximately 85% of the student body qualifying for free and reduced meals. Based on referrals from counselors from within the school district, I purposefully selected three eligible graduates. The three graduates earned their high school diplomas in five years without ever having dropped out of school. They were at least 18 years old, and classified as a regular education student.

I conducted semi-structured interviews regarding their school experiences and decisions to persist to graduation. Those interviews were transcribed for thematic analysis. Additional interviews were conducted, until saturation was reached, that being no new themes were discovered. To ensure trustworthiness of the research, three techniques were utilized: triangulation, member checks, and an expert audit.

### **Timeline**

As for this research, I sought IRB approval in the fall of 2013. Following IRB approval, I sought approval to conduct research within the selected school district. The senior counselor was contacted for referrals of seniors that qualified for this research project. Participants were interviewed, and those interviews were transcribed and analyzed. All of the data analysis was completed in the fall of 2016, with completion of this qualitative study in the spring of 2017.

### **Significance**

Regarding significance, Patton (2002) asked, “To what extent are the findings useful for some intended purpose?” (p. 467). The intended purpose was to further understand persistence in

five-year high school graduates. With such understanding, there is some likelihood that this research may contribute to reducing the dropout rate and increasing the cohort graduation rate. As the findings of this qualitative study may be transferable, if not generalizable, researchers may extend my findings by conducting similar studies in various areas of the nation and determine if the results are similar and can therefore be spread to a wider audience within and beyond the state of Indiana. Educators might be able to apply these results earlier in students' educational careers which may prevent students from dropping out and ending their education. These results may also be applied with the prospect of reducing the number of students who need additional time to earn their diplomas, culminating in an increase in the cohort graduation rate.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review provides information on the subject of high school dropouts and students (in various grades) that overcame hardships to become persisters and continue their education. The literature review is divided into a substantive review and a theoretical/conceptual review. The substantive review is further divided into two parts. The first part deals with background information of high school dropouts, specifically: (1) statistics on dropping out, (2) costs of dropping out, and (3) federal/state policies to curb dropping out. The second part deals with dropping out versus persisting, specifically: (1) what do studies of dropping out tell us, and (2) what might studies of persistence tell us. The last section, the theoretical/conceptual review, looks exclusively at persistence and is divided into the following sections: (1) developing a lens to examine persistence, (2) caring and persistence, (3) social capital and persistence, (4) resilience and persistence.

#### **Review of the Substantive Literature**

There have been several qualitative and quantitative studies dealing with high school dropouts (Croninger and Lee, 2001; Gotbaum, 2002; Cassidy and Bates, 2005; Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison, 2006; Chapman, Laird, and KewalRamani, 2010; Drewry, Burge, and Driscoll, 2010; Suh and Suh, 2011), some studies that deal with dropouts who return to school (Chuang, 1997; Berliner, Barrat, Fong, and Shirk, 2008), and other studies that attempt to determine ways to overcome some students' lack of achievement (Noddings, 1988; Ream, 2003; Hemmings, 2007; Bass, 2012). I have been unable to find any qualitative study dealing

specifically with five-year high school graduates that did not experience a break in their education and earned a high school diploma.

Before reviewing research on student “persisters,” those that overcame adversity and remained in school, I review research on students that did not persist – those who left school prior to earning a diploma. Initially, statistics and policies to curb dropping out will be reviewed, to be followed by research about the drop out phenomena and finally the persistence of some students.

### **Information of high school drop outs.**

#### ***Statistics on dropping out.***

To announce that the White House had begun working on the blueprint for reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), Secretary of Education Arne Duncan testified before the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee and the House Education and Labor Committee on March 17, 2010. As Secretary Duncan began his testimony, he stated “27% of America’s young people drop out of high school. That means 1.2 million teenagers are leaving our schools for the streets” (para. 4).

There is some confusion when researching graduation and dropout rates for the nation, statistics which are related but distinct. There are also some differences in the calculated rates. For school year 2007-08, Stillwell (2010) reported that the average freshman graduation rate was 74.9% (p. 3) and the overall dropout rate was 4.1% (p. 3). The average freshman graduation rate (public students in the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico) was calculated as the “percentage of an entering freshman class graduating in 4 years” (p. 6). The event dropout rate (public students in the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the Virgin Islands) was defined as

the count of dropouts from a given school year divided by the count of student enrollments within the same grade span at the beginning of the same school year” (p. 12).

However, Chapman et al (2010) reported a national status completion rate for 2008 of 89.9% (p. 10), and a national status dropout rate of 3.5% (p. 5). The national status completion rate “represents the percentage of 18- through 24-year-olds who are not enrolled in high school and who have earned a high school diploma or an alternative credential, including a GED certificate” (p. 10). This percentage includes graduates from outside the United States and is not the inverse of the national status dropout rate. It has shown an upward trend since 1980 (p. 10). The national status dropout rate is the “percentage of individuals who are not enrolled in high school and who do not have a high school credential” (p. 8). It includes those who may never have attended school in the United States with an age range of 16 through 24, and since 1972 continues to decline (p. 8). Secretary Duncan, as stated earlier, reported 27% of high school students drop out (para 4). It was not clarified how the 27% was determined. The differences are a result of, as Heckman and LaFontaine (2010) concluded, the varying methodologies and data utilized by statisticians to calculate the graduation and dropout rates. There is a saying, from an unknown author, that “facts are stubborn things, but statistics are more pliable.” With this I realize that the exact percentage of graduates and dropouts are unimportant. What is important is that as long as there are dropouts there will be substantial costs not only to that individual, but also to the country.

### ***Costs of dropping out.***

A report by Berliner et al (2008) stated that “dropouts are often pushed out of the labor market” (p. 6). Without a diploma dropouts struggle to find a job, and the few jobs that are found

classify them as being underemployed. These students never reach their full potential as contributing members of society, and end up facing costs not just for themselves but also for the nation. Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morrison (2006) reported that “dropouts are much more likely than their peers who graduate to be unemployed, living in poverty, receiving public assistance, in prison, on death row, unhealthy, divorced, and single parents with children who drop out from high school themselves” (p. i). Failure to graduate from high school results in a liability in finding a job, and employment available to non-graduates typically pay less and often do not pay a living wage. There is a small chance that some of these dropouts may become wealthy entrepreneurs, but statistically the odds are against them.

Pinkus (2006) reported that “over his or her lifetime, a high school dropout earns, on average, about \$260,000 less than a high school graduate and about \$1 million less than a college graduate” (p. 2). Had Indiana graduated all of their dropouts from the Class of 2009, the Alliance for Excellent Education (2009) reported that the total lifetime additional income for them would have been \$6,087,640,000 (p. 5). This figure does “not take into account the added economic growth generated from each new dollar put into the economy” (p. 3). Although the estimates may vary, the risks to the student and the nation are widely acknowledged to be substantial.

The report further stated that “if the students who dropped out of the Class of 2009 had graduated, the nation’s economy would have benefited from nearly \$335 billion in additional income over the course of their lifetimes” (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009, p.1). The costs to the nation are substantial in lost income as well as lost tax revenue. Levin, Belfield, Muennig, and Rouse (2006), reported that “if the number of high school dropouts in each age cohort was cut in half, the government would reap \$45 billion via extra tax revenues and reduced costs of public health, of crime and justice, and in welfare payments” (p. 1).

In 2009, the Indianapolis Star reported that the average cost of educating one student in the local school district (Indianapolis Public Schools) was \$11,900 for school year 2005-2006, \$12,800 for 2006-2007, and \$13,200 for 2007-2008, with the state average being \$10,400. These figures are dwarfed by estimated benefits associated with graduation. Levin, et al (2006) reported, “each new high school graduate would yield a public benefit of \$209,000 in higher government revenues and lower government spending for an overall investment of \$82,000, divided between the costs of powerful educational interventions and additional years of school attendance leading to graduation. The net economic benefit to the public purse is therefore \$127,000 per student and the benefits are 2.5 times greater than the costs” (p. 1).

The Schott report (2008) stated that “for each student the U.S. fails to educate, there is a cost to the individual and to taxpayers that runs into the hundreds of thousands of dollars” (p. 10). With Pinkus’ (2006) report having stated that the difference in earnings per year between high school graduates and drop outs was \$10,000, and that the state average to educate a student per year in Indiana is slightly above that amount, it would appear that keeping a student for an extra year to allow that student to earn a high school diploma would be financially beneficial for both the student and the nation.

### ***Federal/state policies to curb dropping out.***

Heckman and LaFontaine (2010) stated that “to increase the skill level of the future workforce, America needs to confront its high school dropout problem” (p. 17). The coordinated national strategy of “reducing school dropout rates and increasing school reentry and secondary school graduation rates” is outlined in public law 107-110, section 1811 (pp. 186-193). Under this law, the Secretary of Education is to gather and disseminate all research that demonstrates a

reduction in annual school dropout rates, an increase in school reentries, and an increase in graduation rates. He/she is to provide grants to state educational agencies, who will then distribute those funds to schools that have a dropout rate higher than the state average. Those funds are to be used by the schools for activities such as increasing professional development, obtaining curricular materials, planning and research, conducting remediation, reducing pupil-to-teacher ratios, counseling and mentoring at-risk students, implementing comprehensive school reform models, and improving school entry activities (pp.189-190).

To meet the national strategy, the states have also implemented ways to prevent students from dropping out of school. Indiana's goal is to have at least 90% of their students graduate from high school in four years or less (IDOE, Graduation Cohort Rate, 2013). The formula to determine the four year graduation rate can be found under Indiana Code (IC) 20-26-13-10. To accomplish this goal, Indiana has created a dropout prevention policy (IC 20-20-37). A dropout prevention fund of \$6,000,000 per year has also been established by the state legislature for the fiscal year 2014-2015 budget (State of Indiana List of Appropriations, 2013, p.6) to be administered by Indiana's Department of Education for the purpose of identifying "students who are at risk of dropping out of school" and developing "strategies and appropriate interventions to prevent identified students from dropping out of school" (IC 20-20-37-4). School corporations submitting grant applications to the Indiana's Department of Education must include a description of the proposed program, the goal for the graduation and dropout rates, and their accountability metrics (IC 20-20-37-5). The state does not recommend any dropout prevention program and leaves school corporations to determine which program might be best suited for their school system.

## **Dropping Out vs. Persisting**

### **What do studies of dropping out tell us.**

#### *Demographic issues.*

To have an effective dropout prevention program, school corporations must first understand the various reasons students drop out of school. A report by Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morrison (2006) stated that students dropped out of high school due to a “lack of connection to the school environment; a perception that school is boring; feeling unmotivated; academic challenges; and the weight of real world events” (p. iii). In a follow-up report, Bridgeland, Balfanz, Moore and Friant (2010), cited similar reasons for dropping out. The reasons included “student apathy, boredom, and perceived lack of relevance; student absences, lack of academic preparedness, and inability to catch up once behind; uninspiring teaching; lack of parental support; and a difficult home environment or other responsibilities and real life events” (p. 10).

A study by Berliner et al (2008) found students dropped out because of academic struggles, and “family crises such as homelessness and alcohol and drug use, fatigue from physically demanding jobs, pregnancy and parenting, gang pressures, and violence in the community” (p. 6). Aviles, Guerrero, Howarth, and Thomas (1999) also mentioned academic struggles and pregnancy as reasons for dropping out, but added that low teacher expectations, treatment by both school administrators and the community, and being “facilitated out” (encouraged by school administrators to leave) were also contributing factors. Reasons for dropping out may vary, but the resulting costs are the same.

Though the costs of dropping out are high, the trends appear to be in a positive direction. Chuang (1997) conducted a qualitative analysis utilizing the 1979-1986 annual surveys of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth looking at the re-enrollment behavior of high school dropouts. Results of his study showed that dropouts from higher socioeconomic families and females returned to school more often than dropouts from lower socioeconomic families and males, although there was no significant difference across the various ethnicities. He also concluded that the longer an individual remained out of school, and the older an individual was when he/she dropped out, the less likely that individual would return to school. Chuang (1997) stated that “these findings suggested that dropouts who expected higher gains from further education were more likely to return to school” (p.177).

Suh and Suh (2011) conducted a quantitative analysis to uncover reasons for a decline in the dropout rate and an increase in the graduation rate over the last 30 years. Data came from “two cohort surveys of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) in the 1980s and 2000s” (p. 3). Looking at the data from NLSY79 and NLSY97, they determined that four factors contributed to lowering the dropout rate, while four factors contributed to raising the dropout rate. Factors that reduced the dropout rate between NLSY79 and NLSY97 were living with both biological parents (12.2%), living in either the south or the west (1.7%), having a permissible mother (.9%) and living in a metropolitan area (defined by the government census bureau as an urban area with a minimum population of 50,000) (.7%). The factors that contributed to raising the dropout rate between NLSY79 and NLSY97 were: being suspended from school at least once (13.9%), larger household sizes (1.9%), being male (1.5%), and being a minority student (.7%). These findings are in line with those detailed in the compendium report by Chapman et al (2010). They reported that factors

that contributed to raising the dropout rate were: being male, being a minority, living in either the south or the west, living in a lower income household, and being an older student (ages 18-24).

*School level variables.*

While acknowledging the social and academic reasons for dropping out as researched by others, Lee and Burkam (2003) focused on school-level variables. Data came from the “High School Effectiveness Study, which is a supplementary data collection to NELS:88” (p. 369). They concluded that schools that offered less challenging courses and more remedial classes contributed to students’ dropping out. They determined that the size of the school was a factor, and that students attending either small or medium-sized schools (less than 1,500 students) are less likely to drop out. Lee and Burkam (2003) stated that “schools can exert important organizational effects on students’ decisions to drop out or stay in school” (p. 384). But they also stated that “many school factors that influence dropout behavior remain unknown” (p. 383). As there are unknown school factors that cause students to drop out, there must also be more than just one school factor that results in students persisting. Their most important finding, in their opinion, was that positive relationships between students and teachers reduce the number of drop outs in schools with an enrollment of less 1,500. Students considered a relationship with a teacher to be positive if that teacher “cared about them, were interested in them, and responded positively to them” (p. 371). Small schools (less than 600 students) had the least number of drop outs with the highest quantity of positive student-teacher relationships.

Suh and Suh (2011) argued that the “actual decrease in the dropout rate is due to a significant influence of omitted or missing variables” (p. 11). They continued that three possible missing variables may be “educational policy change, sources of demographic variables, or school

variables” (p. 11). Although the researchers did not go into any detail about these variables, “school variables” may include “supportive environments and significant others” which were factors that were needed for resiliency as discussed by Gordon and Song (1994).

A phenomenological qualitative study was conducted by Drewry et al (2010) due to the fact that “little is known about the lived experiences of individual students who have dropped out of high school” (p. 502). They concluded that the students in this study did not take advantage of all of the various types of social capital (school, family, community) available. Social capital refers to the benefits derived from associations with either individuals or groups. Drewry et al (2010) stated that “the students often had access to social capital within their reach but did not use it in a manner that would have been an effective means of helping them to complete school” (p. 515). They also stated that their results did not mitigate the results of other researchers as “no data were collected on students who did not drop out of school” (p. 515).

Fine (1991) conducted an ethnographic study of the dropout phenomenon. Reasons provided for dropping out were being bored, frustrated, “not getting it,” being held back a grade, family problems, being “pushed out” or a combination of these reasons. She stated that “being retained in ninth grade almost *doubled* the likelihood of their not reaching tenth grade, and it *tripled* the probability of their dropping out” (p. 81). As for schools pushing students out, Fine (1991) stated that “the nature of overcrowding in city schools, the fiscal and educational disincentives of teaching students who are not attending or are having a tough time, compel schools to move toward this transfusion of bodies, in and out” (p. 68).

Aviles et al (1999) reported that some of the Latino students that had dropped out of school were actually “facilitated out” with school administrators encouraging them to leave.

“The combination of lowered teacher expectations and encouragement on the part of school personnel to opt out of mainstream education facilitated a steady exodus of Chicano/Latino students out of the school system” (p. 469). These individuals stated that principals and counselors specifically told them that they would never graduate, so they left. This was a qualitative study of Chicano/Latino students and the reasons they felt they dropped out of school. Although most of these students felt that they were being “facilitated out” of school, the researchers did not pursue the schools’ reasoning as to why they wanted these students to leave.

With the state threatening to take over public schools if they do not raise graduation rates, raise attendance rates, raise standardized test scores, and so on schools will do what is necessary to ensure their survival – to include cheating. Bohte and Meier (2000) stated that there were four reasons for organizations to cheat: “1) performance gaps; 2) inadequate resources; 3) overwhelming task demands; 4) variations in levels of bureaucratic monitoring” (p. 177). They found that administrators from urban schools “exempt below-average students from taking assessment exams with the hope that having the best and brightest students tested will make their overall districts’ pass rates look competitive with those of wealthier districts” (p. 179).

The rationale for excluding some students from accountability statistics can appear compelling. A report prepared for the New York City Board of Education (2002), the class of 2001 four year longitudinal and 2000-2001 event dropout rates, stated “students who are discharged from the school system no longer attend the New York City public schools. As such, it is inappropriate to hold schools accountable for these students, and they are not included in the final statistics for the study group” (p. 3). Gotbaum (2002) stated that her findings were in line with the findings of a 2001 study conducted for the New York State Education Finance Resource Consortium. “The Study found that in order to keep performance levels up, principals across the

state employed a variety of strategies to “push” at-risk or low performing students out of school” (p. 6). Again, the state and the nation have put pressure on schools to demonstrate successful progress in various areas. And schools have made a conscious decision to “push out” certain students to meet those requirements. Thus, accountability pressures in the present period may intensify those practices and conditions pushing students out that Fine described in 1991. Given these findings, the tendency for some students to persist despite pressure to leave is intriguing.

### **What might studies of persistence tell us.**

Much research has been done into why students drop out of high school, but very little as to why they remain in high school for a fifth year. Chuang (1997) made two recommendations in his study; first that the phenomenon of dropouts returning to school needed to be studied in depth. Secondly, that additional research into “finding the empirical factors that may influence dropouts’ decisions to reenter school” (p. 171) needed to be conducted. Berliner et al (2008) concluded a “more complete and accurate description of reenrollees is needed to shape policies and practices that enable students to reenroll and improve their graduation outcomes” (p.2). Pinkus (2006) stated “accountability systems and graduation rates must simultaneously provide policymakers and the public with useful data and must support educators and schools in doing what is educationally sound for individual students” (p. 16). Despite calls of this sort and the potential insights to be gained from the study of the persistence of five-year high school graduates, specifically those who did not drop out and reenroll during their high school careers, I have been unable to find studies of this sort in my review of the literature. Study results could contribute to shaping policies and practices that might enable schools to reduce the dropout rate and increase the cohort graduation rate.

Gordon and Song (1994) stated, “age and situation-specific supports for learning and development (generated by oneself or others) are essential to the development of negative prediction defiers” (p. 35). Rajendran and Videka (2006) concluded that “social competence as well as a quality relationship to the caregiver contributed strongly to the construct of resilience” (p. 348). Gordon and Song (1994) concluded that “persons who achieve success against the odds appear to do so through deliberate and fortuitous orchestrations of many personal, environmental, and situational factors” (p. 41). These statements along with Gordon and Song’s (1994) earlier statements discussing “supportive environments and significant others” and its importance for success, and Masten’s (1994) statement discussing the importance of “relationships with competent adults” may be an explanation as to why these five-year graduates became persisters.

Kahne and Bailey (1999) conducted a qualitative study of two “I Have a Dream” (IHAD) programs over a 2 ½ year period. Each program was located at a different school, each was considered a case study, and was analyzed for different forms of social capital. The researchers discussed “other supports and opportunities” in their study results, as the individuals that supported the IHAD program provided more than just social capital. Also provided to these students were “cultural, human and financial capital (tutoring, trips, help with personal problems, knowledge of and funds for private high schools and college)” (p. 329). The students involved in the IHAD program, with the additional capital provided, became persisters. This resulted in the graduation rate for the two classes involved with the program being almost double when compared to the two classes that graduated the previous year and were not involved. Kahne and Bailey (1999) stated that “the value of varied forms of social capital as well as other supports and opportunities are interdependent – particularly with respect to social trust. For youth in low-

income urban environments, social trust appears to significantly expand the value of these resources” (p. 340). They concluded that the addition of social capital was important in increasing the graduation rate.

Obradovic, Burt, and Masten (2006) conducted a quantitative study of competence and resilience with data drawn from a 20-year longitudinal study. Data was collected during childhood (8-12 years old), adolescence (14-19 years old), emerging adulthood (17-23 years old), and young adulthood (28-36 year old). They found interesting that “the most dramatic changes in pathways of adaptation occurred during emerging adulthood” (p. 341). Obradovic et al (2006) stated that “dramatic “turning points” occur often during transitions or life altering experiences” (p. 340). They concluded that their study “underscores the importance of the developmental period between emerging and young adulthood, which appears to be a window of both opportunity and vulnerability” (p. 343). The five year high school graduates in my study, in their emerging adulthood stage, were vulnerable to dropping out of high school yet remained in school. These individuals became resilient and persisted in school an extra year to earn their high school diplomas.

### **Theoretical/Conceptual Review**

In the theoretical/conceptual review of persistence the focus will be on access to, or utilization of, two social attributes, the ethic of care and social capital. It will also focus on an individual attribute, that being resilience.

#### **Developing a lens to examine persistence.**

To persist, as defined in Webster’s dictionary (2001), is “to refuse to give up, esp. when faced with opposition or difficulty; continue firmly or steadily” and “to continue to exist or

prevail; endure; remain” (p. 1074). To put it in other words, persistence is the ability of an individual to continue working toward an end no matter the opposition that individual may encounter.

A report for Achieve, Inc. and Jobs for the Future (2006) titled *Moving Indiana Forward: High Standards and High Graduation Rates*, stated that a small number of students who do not graduate in four years will graduate in five or six. It continues that about 60% of dropouts will earn their GEDs and continue their education. While this report specifically mentions the persistence of dropouts who earn their high school GEDs it avoids the discussion of this same type of persistence in those who take that extra year or two to earn their high school diplomas.

This study deals with high school persisters and the individuals and/or reasons that contributed to their refusal to give up on their education. Theoretical literature on the ethic of care, social capital, and resilience as contributing factors to the emergence of persistency in these five year high school graduates will now be reviewed. However, the research studies that will be discussed have looked at the ethic of care, social capital, and resilience as separate entities. For my study, those three concepts will be interwoven to form my research lens. The ethic of care that these graduates may have received would go hand in hand with social capital. A teacher/administrator must care about his/her students to have the type of relationship that will provide social capital as an asset. Once that student has seen that someone does care about his/her future and has received additional social capital, resilience may ensue resulting in persisting in school and finally graduating with a high school diploma.

### **Care and persistence.**

Noddings (1988) stated that “an ethic of caring prefers acts done out of love and natural inclination” (p. 219). Cassidy and Bates (2005) stated that “for the caring relationship to be complete, care must be received; that is, the recipient of care must recognize, and in some way respond to, the care provided” (p. 68).

In a case study that dealt with caring, Valenzuela (1999) found that teachers that demonstrated that they care obtained more from a student than teachers that did not. Students would care more about school, if teachers would care more about them and their culture. As part of her study, Valenzuela (1999) interviewed a counselor that had just helped a student get accepted into a special school program. She concluded that this incident “demonstrates the power of a caring counselor who is willing to intervene on a student’s behalf, even when that means breaking school rules” (p. 81). With this intervention the counselor demonstrated the importance of the ethic of care and the student reciprocated by not dropping out of school. However, Valenzuela (1999) also stated that “when no explicit culture of caring is in place, teachers lose the capacity to respond to their students as whole human beings and schools become uncaring places” (p. 74).

Cassidy and Bates (2005) conducted a “qualitative case study approach that is situated in the ethnographic tradition of educational inquiry and individual interview methodology” (p. 73). The school selected was designed for at-risk students. These students had been suspended several times, had dropped out and returned to school, or were involved with the justice system. The researchers concluded that the administrators, teachers, and students perceived care as “the importance of building respectful, responsive, and supportive relationships and, through these

relationships, meeting the needs of children in flexible and insightful ways” (p. 95).

Administrators wanted the school to have the right atmosphere and incorporated care in their policies and procedures. Teachers built friendships with their students and incorporated care in their curriculum allowing flexibility to meet the needs of each of their students. Students just wanted someone that truly cared about them. They wanted to be “accepted, understood, respected, and helped” (p. 95). These teachers not only became “friends” with their students but also provided these students and their families social networks to include contacts with social workers, and other members of the community. As Cassidy and Bates (2005) stated “the caring culture of the school was extended through the partnerships created among the students, staff, parents and community” (p. 97). This ethic of care allowed these students to grow emotionally, socially, and academically.

Berliner et al (2008) conducted a mixed methods study for the Institute of Education Sciences researching the “personal and academic reasons why students dropped out and reenrolled in high school” in a large, urban school district (p. iii). Of the 35% that dropped out, 31% reenrolled, and 5.7% earned a diploma within five years. Most drop outs reenrolled because they could not find a job, but all reenrollees agreed that “caring and persistent school staff” providing academic counseling and assistance resulted in their returning to school (p. 6). One reenrollee, after trying a charter school and day adult school, returned to the high school because that individual wanted a high school diploma rather than an equivalency diploma. The study was conducted due to the lack of knowledge of the “number and characteristics of students who drop out and then reenroll” (p. iii).

More recently Bass (2012) conducted an exploratory, multicase qualitative study. She studied “black feminist caring” in the leadership styles of five African-American female

educators and administrators from a large urban school district. There were two findings. The first finding dealt with “mothering and other mothering” (p. 79). While the actions of these women were of a mothering kind, some of them refused to acknowledge it possibly because of their positions or their levels of education. One example of the “other mother” was ensuring a student ate breakfast even though the student arrived late for school. The second finding was “care trumps justice” (p. 79). If these women administrators could assist a student, whether their actions were legal or not, and whether or not there would be consequences, they would do it.

Bass (2012) stated that

African-American women leaders respond to the oppression of disadvantaged students by acting out of an ethic of care. Their personal struggles with oppression based upon race, gender, and social class fuel their relentless pursuit to show the necessary mercy for the students they care so deeply for (p. 83).

These women did what they did because of what happened to them when they were younger. Each woman suffered discrimination of one or more types as they grew up and resolved that their students would be cared for and would not have to suffer the way they did. As Bass (2012) did not delve into the background of these women, it would be difficult to surmise if these women would be considered persistent.

Shapiro and Stefkovich (2005) discussed utilizing four paradigms when making decisions in a school. One of the four is the ethic of care. They stated, “Viewing ethical dilemmas through this paradigm may prompt questions related to how educators may assist young people in meeting their needs and desires and will reflect solutions that show a concern for others as part of decision making” (p. 18). When making decisions, the decision maker should think not only about what the results of the decision will be but how it will affect others.

In Noddings' (1988) essay about an ethic of caring, she stated "If we cared deeply about fostering growth and shaping both acceptable and caring people, we could surely find ways to extend contact between teachers and students" (pp. 224-5). Masten, Best, and Garnezy (1990) stated that "the most important and consistent protective factor is that of adults caring for children during or after major stressors" (p. 431). Waxman, Gray, and Padron (2002) stated that "schools build resiliency in students through caring and personal relationships" (p. 39). The common element in these studies is that teachers, as well as other school personnel, are available to provide the caring relationships that so many students need to build persistency.

### **Social capital and persistence.**

The ethic of care goes hand in hand with social capital. The ethic of care relates to the concept of social capital. Bourdieu (1986) specifically mentions care, while Coleman (1990) alludes to it, as being a component needed to build social capital. Initially an individual must care about another individual thereby demonstrating the ethic of care. That other individual must recognize and reciprocate the care provided by the first individual. Social capital incorporates the ethic of care. For social capital to exist, individuals must care for and about each other. Social capital deals with the social relationships that provide the behavioral norms expected of individuals within our society. Social capital also builds trust amongst individuals thereby allowing for informational exchange. Social capital begins with family and extends outward to peer and professional relationships. The greater the number of family, friends, and associates the more social capital an individual has. These are the individuals that you can trust for advice and assistance. This ethic of care, along with additional social capital, may be the reason these five-year high school graduates remained the extra year to earn their diplomas.

Ream (2003) defined social capital as “the convertibility of resources embedded within social networks, *via* social exchange, into other kinds of capital ... in which our lives are made more (or less) productive by social ties” (p. 239). While Farmer-Hinton and Adams (2006) added that “social capital is an asset, embedded in social relations, which can be used to improve one’s life outcomes” (p. 101). Hemmings (2007) looked at social capital as an educational asset and stated that it “is constituted as the social resources and networks that enable people to promote their own or others’ educational achievement and attainment” (p. 10).

This was demonstrated by the reenrollees in Berliner et al’s (2008) study when they discussed how the principals, teachers, and counselors were important factors in their decision to return to school. School personnel also provided a supportive environment by not just welcoming these students back, but by providing counseling and academic assistance to ensure their success.

A qualitative study dealing with social capital was conducted by Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau (2003). They interviewed and observed third and fourth grade students and their families allowing them to utilize “ethnographic data to examine social-class differences in the relations between families and schools” (p. 319). They concluded “that for middle-class families, webs of social ties tend to be woven through children’s lives and especially through the organized activities they participate in, as well as through informal contacts with educators and other professionals. By contrast, the social networks of working-class and poor families tend to be rooted in and around kinship groups; ties to other parents and to professionals are considerably less common” (p. 327). Middle class parents were able to access various contacts that had the knowledge and the power to assist them in intervening on their child’s behalf; while the working class and poor relied on mainly on relatives to assist them. Race was not an issue as both Black and White parents in the various socioeconomic classes behaved similarly.

Perna and Titus (2005) conducted a qualitative study utilizing data from the second (1992) and third (1994) follow-ups to the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) of 1988 researching the relationship between parental involvement as social capital and college enrollment. Only students from one of four race/ethnic groups (African-Americans, Asian, Hispanic, or White) that graduated on time were included in this study. Perna and Titus (2005) concluded that

on average, African Americans and Hispanics are disadvantaged in the college enrollment process not only because of their own low levels of the types of economic, human, and cultural capital that are valued in the college enrollment process but also because of the low levels of resources that are available to promote college enrollment through the social networks at the schools they attend. This research demonstrates that parental involvement as a form of social capital is positively related to college enrollment regardless of the level of individual and school resources (p. 511).

For this study, I intend to use as a definition of social capital the type of relationship these at-risk students had with their families, teachers, school administrators, or anyone else that may have influenced them to persist in school and earn their high school diplomas. I will also look at what was provided, and how it was provided, by these individuals that influenced these at-risk students to persist in school.

Bourdieu (1986) stated,

Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a “credential” which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word (pp. 248-9).

He continued,

It has been seen, for example, that the transformation of economic capital into social capital presupposes a specific labor, i.e., an apparently gratuitous expenditure of time, attention, care, concern, which, as is seen in the endeavor to personalize a gift, has the effect of transfiguring the purely monetary import of the exchange and, by the same token, the very meaning of the exchange. From a narrowly economic standpoint, the effort is bound to be seen as pure wastage, but in the terms of the logic of social exchanges, it is a solid investment, the profits of which will appear, in the long run, in monetary form (p. 253).

I would surmise that Bourdieu meant that as a member of a group you earn social capital that may be synergistic.

The greater the number of family, friends, and associates, the more social capital an individual has. If this is applied to education, teachers and parents have the contacts to assist students to become successful. Parents from a higher socioeconomic background have more social capital and can assist their children in ways that parents from a lower socioeconomic background cannot. Parents from a lower socioeconomic background usually do not have the knowledge or contacts to assist their children in getting assistance of any kind. Should lower socioeconomic parents, and their children, take advantage of the contacts that are available at school some social capital would be gained. The additional social capital would assist these parents' desires to achieve their initial goal of having their children graduate from high school and possibly attend college. It becomes a social stratifier, those that have large social networks and various other types of capital, versus those that do not.

Social relations include relationships between parents and children, between student and teacher, between parents and other parents, and between parents and school. When students trust

their teachers/counselors, and teachers reciprocate by showing that they care for their students, a relationship is formed that produces increased social capital for those students. The increased social capital may result in an increase in “the achievement of certain ends” such as an increase in scores on standardized tests, more on time high school graduates, and more students pursuing higher education following high school graduation (Croninger and Lee (2001), Clark, Shreve, and Stone (2004), Cassidy and Bates (2005), Hemmings (2007)). According to Coleman (1990) and Kahne and Bailey (1999), trustworthiness is a critical element in forming social capital. Another factor that creates social capital is ideology. Coleman (1990) stated that “an ideology can create social capital by imposing on an individual who holds it the demand that he act in the interests of something or someone other than himself” (p. 320).

### **Resilience and persistence.**

Webster’s dictionary (2001), defines resilience as the “the ability to bounce or spring back into shape, position, etc.” and “the ability to recover strength, spirits, good humor, etc. quickly” (p. 1220). Naglieri and LeBuffe (2006) stated “that resilience refers to positive outcomes, adaptation, or the attainment of development milestones or competencies in the face of significant risk, adversity, or stress” (p. 108). Masten, Best, and Garmezy (1990) defined resilience as “the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances” (p. 425). They stated that resilience is “coping...by means of human activities, including thought and action” (p. 430).

Gordon and Song (1994), Masten (1994), and Rajendran and Videka (2006) discussed the importance of supportive environments and significant others as contributing factors to

becoming resilient and ensuring success. Rajendran and Videka (2006) concluded that “social skills and relationship with caregiver are the most important components of resilience” (p. 348).

Gordon and Song (1994) along with Masten (1994) also discussed increasing resources to at risk children. Gordon and Song (1994) stated that a supportive environment has the “resources and the supports for learning and development” (p. 35). These resources included meals, tutoring, caring teachers, and health clinics at schools. Masten (1994) mentioned resources for parents that would also indirectly benefit these students. These resources would “provide income, food, education, job training, or child management skills to parents” (p. 17). As Masten (1994) stated,

When adversity is relieved and basic human needs are restored, then resilience has a chance to emerge. Rekindling hope may be an important spark for resilience processes to begin their restorative work (p. 21).

Resilience should be studied, as Masten (1994) stated, because “examining resilience phenomena rests on the fundamental assumption that understanding how individuals overcome challenges ...will reveal processes of adaptation that can guide intervention efforts with others at risk” (p. 3). She continued that the “study of resilience begins with a diagnosis of good adaptation despite risk or adversity” (p. 5). This study should be able to address this concern that despite the risk of dropping out, these students underwent some kind of “adaptation” and displayed resilience by earning a high school diploma in five years.

Two major kinds of judgments are required by Masten (2001) for an individual to be considered resilient. First is that the individual be exposed to risk. She says “individuals are not considered resilient if there has never been a significant threat to their development; there must

be current or past hazards judged to have the potential to derail normative development” (p. 228). The second judgment is that the individual must actually have had a normative outcome. This, she stated, deals with “the criteria by which the quality of adaptation or developmental outcome is assessed or evaluated as “good” or “OK”” (p. 228). Similarly, Naglieri and LeBuffe (2006) stated “if the individual has attained typical or superior outcomes in the presence of risk or adversity, then resilience is inferred” (p. 108).

Literature on resilience was reviewed in an article by Masten, Best, and Garmezy (1990). They concluded that “children who experience chronic adversity fare better or recover more successfully when they receive good and stable care from someone or, in the case of older children, when they have a positive relationship with a competent adult” (p. 438). They also concluded that “for older children, social connections independent of caregiving, such as those found in schools and communities, may compensate for family inadequacies” (p. 438). Although there was no new research discussed, areas for future research were. One area dealt with asking research questions that begin with “how” instead of “what” to understand the “underlying processes that influence adaptation” (p. 439).

Joseph (1994) stated that there were three characteristics that composed a resilient individual. The first characteristic is a sense of control which “refers to the basic belief that I as an individual can influence what happens to me. It means that I can control myself and accept responsibility for my own decisions and their consequences” (pp. 30-31). The second characteristic is the sense of challenge, “the ability to see the positive aspects of change and to minimize or get beyond the negative aspects of a situation” (P. 31). The last characteristic is a “sense of commitment, the ability to find meaning and value in what one is doing. Commitments are the goals we set and the effort we put forth to reach them” (p. 32).

For the purposes of this study, resilience refers to the ability of an individual to recover from adversity to complete what the individual wanted/needed to accomplish despite setbacks and obstacles. Said differently, resilience is the ability of an individual to have a positive outcome following a serious setback. For my research, a student was considered resilient if he continued in school (persisted) and earned a high school diploma in five years. That individual “bounced back” from adversity (being an at-risk student in an inner city school) to become a graduate – a normative outcome.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

A qualitative study was conducted to interpret the persistence of five year high school graduates. These students who refused to quit and remained in school for a fifth year, determined to graduate with a high school diploma, have the right to be heard. I listened to their stories and interpreted (with their assistance) these experiences. A safe and respectful outlet was provided which allowed these graduates to tell their stories, in their words, and provided me the opportunity to understand the phenomenon which led these students to the decision to persevere and remain in high school after their peers had graduated. The influence(s) on the graduate to persist in high school a fifth year and earn a high school diploma guided the research of this qualitative study.

#### **Design**

##### **Approaches to studying persistence.**

Several quantitative and qualitative studies dealing with students that graduated high school, with and without their cohort, can be found for review (see chapter 2), although none dealing specifically with the area I wanted to research – those that graduated in five years without ever dropping out of school. The following is a brief overview of a sampling of some studies that helped me in my research.

A qualitative study conducted by Gordon and Song (1994), utilized a “correlation and life history analyses to identify candidate hypotheses by which the phenomena of success and failure can be explained” (p. 31). They interviewed 26 successful African-Americans who had

succeeded in their careers but were classified as high risk when they were younger. Males and females were included, however it is unclear how many of each, or their ages, were utilized for this study. Variables included various personal characteristics, various environmental characteristics, and various situational constraints (p. 33). One methodological problem, identified by the researchers, was that “retrospective data collection has its weaknesses (inaccuracy, reliance on memory, and omission of significant events), it also has certain strengths (vivid portrayals and historical reports of important events)” (pp. 38-9), although not a single story or quote was in this write-up. However, their conclusions were useful in my research. In their study, 10 factors were looked at that may have contributed to the success of these individuals. Gordon and Song (1994) stated that “these factors and others interact dialectically and reciprocally to accommodate and influence each other” (p. 32). They concluded that “persons who achieve success against the odds appear to do so through deliberate and fortuitous orchestrations of many personal, environmental, and situational factors” (p. 41). This demonstrated the importance of relationships with various individuals and the need for social competence.

Obradovic, Burt, and Masten (2006) conducted a quantitative study of competence and resilience with data drawn from a 20-year longitudinal study. They utilized a “recently developed person-centered methodology and indices of positive development to differentiate adaptive patterns from adolescence to adulthood” (p. 340). Data from 202 school children were studied during their childhood, adolescence, emerging adulthood and young adulthood. As an example of how some of the data was gathered, the report stated that in the “three follow-up waves, two clinicians independently rated participants’ global adaptation on a 7-point scale” (p. 341); in “emerging adulthood, two interviewers rated participants on the reality of their goals and on their

persistence and commitment to those goals on a 5-point scale” (p. 341); and “indices of family and community adversity exposure were created by averaging two independent 7-point ratings” (p. 341). This information was gathered from questionnaires, surveys, multiple informants, and so on. The questionnaires and surveys and information derived from informants are opinions by those individuals being interviewed or filling out forms, although not necessarily completing the documentation. An example of one difficulty in utilizing opinion based scoring deals with an individual rating a stressful incident. One individual may rate the incident as being ‘catastrophic’ while another individual may rate the very same incident as being only ‘moderate’. However, I did find the conclusions useful. One conclusion was that “dramatic “turning points” occur, often during transitions or life altering experiences” (p. 340). The other was that “the most dramatic changes in pathways of adaptation occurred during emerging adulthood” (p. 341), emerging adulthood being defined as individuals between the ages of 17 and 23. The question became, since these 5-year graduates were within this age group, exactly what “life altering experiences” caused them to remain in school? Could it have been, as they were transitioning to young adulthood, they realized that they could not achieve their goals without high school diplomas?

Another quantitative study by Rajendran and Videka (2006) looked at social competence, academic achievement, and sense of relatedness to caregiver as components of resilience. Data came from the “National Survey of Child and Adolescent Wellbeing, (NSCAW), the first national probability survey of children who were investigated by Child Protective Services (CPS) between October 1999 and December 2000” (p. 345). They studied resilience in 816 adolescents, aged 11-15 years old, who had been referred to CPS. They concluded that all coefficients were statistically significant (p. 347). For my research, their statement that “social competence as well as a quality relationship to the caregiver contributed strongly to the construct of resilience” (p.

348) while academic skill did not (although they did state that additional research was needed in this area) was useful. The findings on caregiver relationships and social competence were intriguing.

Although the above sample of quantitative and qualitative studies gave us generic conclusions such as needing support from ‘others,’ it does not define exactly who the ‘others’ are or what type(s) of support is required to ensure success. Were the ‘others’ the same for all the graduates? Was the type of relationship between the ‘others’ and the graduates the same? These questions, and others, could only be answered utilizing a qualitative study of five year high school graduates which I conducted.

#### **Rationale for qualitative design.**

Despite the fact that there have been many studies of high school graduates and non-graduates, there is very little research specifically associated with the persistence of five year high school graduates (see chapter 2). I was unable to find a qualitative study dealing specifically with five-year high school graduates. As such, this topic needed additional exploration to better understand the phenomena and to add to the limited amount of research that is currently available on the topic. Creswell (1998) stated that a researcher should “choose a qualitative study because the topic needs to be *explored*” (p. 17). He reasoned that “variables cannot be easily identified, theories are not available to explain behavior of participants or their population of study, and theories need to be developed” (p. 17). There is a need for additional research, specifically qualitative, on those students who persisted in high school for five years to accomplish one of the initial coming of age rituals, earning their high school diplomas.

Qualitative research, as stated by Schostak (2002), allows for “the meanings, the feelings, the sense of the lived that cannot be measured” (p. 80). Allowing these particular graduates to tell their stories, in their own words, allowed for better and deeper understanding of the phenomena without the constraints associated with quantitative research (Patton, 2002; Schostak, 2002). Qualitative research allows the researcher to give voice to those who usually are not heard (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Lodico, Spaulding, and Voegtle, 2006). It also allows the researcher to “use their participants” own words to more accurately represent their views and experiences (Lodico et al, 2006, p. 309). I conducted a qualitative study which gave voice to a sampling of five year high school graduates. This study was completed by providing these persistent students with an outlet to describe their experiences in their own words, which provided fresh data on the fifth year senior phenomenon; thereby having created a means for further investigation and analysis.

Various reasons that a researcher should consider utilizing qualitative research were discussed by Creswell (1998). Two of those reasons Creswell (1998) covered were “because of the need to present a *detailed view* of the topic” and “because the topic needs to be *explored*” (p. 17). Qualitative researchers are known for completing in-depth studies. As Bogdan and Biklen (1992) stated, “the qualitative research approach demands that the world be approached with the assumption that nothing is trivial, that everything has the potential of being a clue that might unlock a more comprehensive understanding of what is being studied” (pp. 30-31). Qualitative researchers ask why or how or where or under what circumstances. No detail is overlooked not just from what is said or how it is said, but also the hand gestures used while answering the questions. The initial responses to the research questions lead to follow-up questions that then

provide additional in-depth details to the qualitative researchers. Creswell (2008) calls this an emerging design. He stated that it is a

process in which the researcher collects data, analyzes it immediately rather than waiting until all data are collected, and then bases the decision about what data to collect next on this analyses (p. 442).

Qualitative researchers “do not search out data or evidence to prove or disprove hypotheses they hold before entering the study” (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992, p. 31), quantitative researchers do.

Quantitative researchers utilize questions specifically designed to address the specific topic that they are investigating. Although much information is derived from statistical analysis such as, which risk factors affects individuals more than others and which factors affect achievement more than others; there is still a limit to the information and insight it provides. Quantitative researchers concern themselves with the credibility and validity of the responses provided in questionnaires and/or standardized tests. Mertens (2010), in contrast, stated that “researchers who focus on the reduction of a complex social phenomenon to one or more numbers that can be statistically analyzed run the risk of overlooking important variations” (p. 144). As life experiences do not necessarily fit neatly into categories or mathematical models, and to study the phenomenon in detail, a qualitative study of five-year high school graduates was conducted.

### **Paradigmatic Assumptions**

Guba and Lincoln (1994) stated that a researcher should answer three questions when deciding on a type of inquiry. The first was “the ontological question; what is the form and nature of reality and, therefore, what is there that can be known about it?” (p. 108). For this study

the ontology, or the nature of reality, was critical realism. Scott (2010) stated that “critical realism is critical then, because any attempts at describing and explaining the world are bound to be fallible, and also because those ways of ordering the world, its categorisations (sp) and the relationships between them, cannot be justified in any absolute sense, and are always open to critique and their replacement by a different set of categories and relationships” (p. 12). Guba & Lincoln (1994) stated “reality is assumed to exist but to be only imperfectly apprehendable because of basically flawed human intellectual mechanisms and the fundamentally intractable nature of phenomena” (p. 110). Reality was as the participants remembered it. These individuals were capable of consciously reflecting upon, and changing, the actions that produced their reality. I acknowledged that the data provided by the participants was imperfect, as was my interpretation. Imperfections were derived not only from the difficulties of eliciting the stories from the participants, but also from choices made in how their stories were pieced together in an attempt to understand the phenomenon under study.

Guba and Lincoln’s (1994) second question was “the epistemological question. What is the nature of the relationship between the knower or would be knower and what can be known?” (p.108). For this study the epistemology, or how we know what we know (the nature of knowledge), was objectivist. Guba & Lincoln (1994) stated that “objectivity remains a “regulatory ideal”; special emphasis is placed on external “guardians” of objectivity such as critical traditions (do the findings “fit” with pre-existing knowledge?) and the critical community (such as editors, referees, and professional peers)” (p. 110). We can approximate reality, but never actually know it. Scott (2010) discussed six types of objectivity: ontological, alethic, positional, extrinsic, method, and warranted (pp. 68-69). I applied extrinsic objectivity to this study. Scott (2010) stated, when referring to extrinsic objectivity, that “something can be said to

be objective if it refers to and provides a description of the world which does not encompass subjective states of mind” (p. 69). What can be known is reality as the participant understood it to be without the intention of making false statements.

Axiology, another vital part of the research process although not discussed by Guba and Lincoln, concerns the role of values (New World Encyclopedia, 2012). Creswell (1998) stated that “the investigator admits the value-laden nature of the study and actively reports his or her values and biases as well as the value-laden nature of information gathered from the field” (p. 76). This includes the value people attributed to the phenomena, the value of the phenomenon itself, and the processes by which the phenomena obtained its meaning.

The last question, per Guba and Lincoln (1994), was “the methodological question. How can the inquirer (would be knower) go about finding out whatever he or she believes can be known?” (p. 108). I used an interpretive case study that drew on phenomenological approaches (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2002; Lodico et al, 2006).

### **Overview of selected design.**

As stated above, I used an interpretive case study that borrowed from the phenomenological approach and described the lived experiences of the five-year high school graduates involved in this study (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2002; Lodico et al, 2006).

This qualitative study allowed for the study of a complex situation while searching for the commonality that resulted in these individuals being able to graduate after five years. Not only did we need to understand what unified these graduates, we also needed to understand the context in which this situation transpired.

### **Overview of unit(s) of analysis.**

Context sensitivity deals with ensuring that we understand where and when the situation took place. Patton (2002) quotes Lightfoot as stating that “Context becomes the framework, the reference point, the map, the ecological sphere; it is used to place people and action in time and space and as a resource for understanding what they say and do” (p. 63). To ensure for as complete as possible information gathering and understanding, a case study approach was utilized.

Stake (2000) stated, “Case studies have become one of the most common ways to do qualitative inquiry” and continued that a “case study is defined by interest in individual cases” (p. 435). Patton (2002) added that “well-constructed case studies are *holistic* and *context sensitive*” (p. 447). He also stated that

this holistic approach assumes that the whole is understood as a complex system that is greater than the sum of its parts. The analyst searches for the totality or unifying nature of particular settings (p. 59).

Lodico et al (2006) stated, that “case studies typically focus on small groups or individuals within a group and document that group’s or individual’s experience in a specific setting” (p. 15). Yin (2009) stated that ““how” and “why” questions are more *explanatory* and likely to lead to the use of case studies” (p. 9). The leading questions for this study were why these students decided to remain in high school another year after their peers’ graduation in order to earn their diploma and furthermore who and/or what influenced their motivations and decisions.

## **Interpretive Approach Borrowing from Phenomenological Tradition**

Stake (2000) stated that the “ethos of *interpretive* study, seeking out emic meanings held by the people within the case, is strong” (p. 441). Schwandt (2000) stated that “to understand a particular social action (e.g., friendship, voting, marrying, teaching), the inquirer must grasp the meanings that constitute that action” and continued that it is how we “come to understand how social reality, everyday life, is constituted in conversation and interaction” (p. 191). Reality is culturally derived and historically situated. Although reality is constructed from an interplay between subject and object, the knower is actively making meaning from culturally and historically derived interpretations. It is truth as the participants interpret it to be. The focus is more on authenticity than validity, more on trustworthiness than reliability, and more ideographic than nomothetic.

Lodico et al (2006) stated “phenomenologists attempt to understand the meaning of an experience from the perspective of the participant” (p. 270). They continued, “wanting to understand the human experience and how experiences are interpreted differently by different people would certainly be an appropriate reason to conduct a phenomenological study” (p. 271). I wanted to understand the stimulus which caused these students to remain in high school an extra year and I acknowledged the fact that each graduate may have interpreted their experience differently while I searched for what their lived experiences had in common. For this qualitative study, I utilized the theoretical tradition of phenomenology. Phenomenological researchers, according to Bogdan and Bilken (1992), “attempt to understand the meaning of events and interactions to ordinary people in particular situations” (p. 34).

Phenomenology focuses on understanding how individuals create and understand their own life experiences (Patton, 2002; Creswell, 1998; Mertens, 2010). Patton (2002) stated that phenomenology explores

how human beings make sense of experience and transform experience into consciousness, both individually and as shared meaning. This requires methodologically, carefully, and thoroughly capturing and describing how people experience some phenomenon – how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others” (p. 104).

## **Methods and Procedures**

This was an interpretive case study that drew from three cases of persistence.

### **Overview of unit of analysis.**

An initial sampling size of three graduates was decided upon by me for this study. When determining a sampling size references were made to writings of Creswell, 1998; Stake, 2000; and Patton, 2002. Creswell (1998) stated that the “important point is to describe the meaning of a small number of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon” (p. 122). Stake (2000) added that the “opportunity to learn is of primary importance” (p. 447) when deciding on the size of the sample. Patton (2002) stated that common to all sampling strategies is the selection of “information-rich cases – from which one can learn a great deal about matters of importance and therefore worthy of in-depth study” (p. 242). Creswell stated that “the study of more than one case dilutes the overall analysis; the more cases an individual studies, the greater the lack of depth in any single case” (p. 63).

Saturation, as defined by Creswell (2008), is “the point where you have identified the major themes and no new information can add to your list of themes or to the detail for existing themes” (p. 257). These three cases were studied in depth, with their interviews being read and reread. Saturation was achieved at the point where no new themes were discovered.

I utilized intensity sampling consisting of “information-rich cases that manifest the phenomenon of interest intensely” (Patton, 2002, p. 234). “Purposeful sampling” was also used for this qualitative study. Patton (2002) stated that “qualitative inquiry typically focuses in depth on relatively small samples, even single cases (N=1), selected *purposefully*” (p. 230). I utilized three information cases selected purposefully and studied in depth.

The graduates came from an inner city public school system, located in a Midwestern city. There are seven high/community high schools within the system, three of which are magnet schools. Three five-year high school graduates were selected from a list provided by, and recommendations from, the senior counselor at one of these non-magnet high/community high schools. The individuals selected for this study had to meet certain criteria. They had to have graduated high school and have earned their high school diploma in five years. They had to be 18 years of age or older. They had to be classified as a general education student. These graduates could not have had any type of interruption to their education (i.e. home school, medical leave, incarcerations, expulsions or period of non-attendance) during their first four years of high school.

### **Data collection.**

Creswell (1998) stated, when discussing the problem statement, that “for a phenomenological study, I should hear from the author that we need to know more about the

“experiences” of individuals about a phenomenon and the meaning they ascribe to these experiences” (p. 95). Data was gathered utilizing “in-depth interviews with people who have directly experienced the phenomenon” (Patton, 2002, p. 104). Interviews allowed these individuals to tell us about their lived experience, and as Patton (2002) put it, “how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others” (p. 104).

### **Interviews.**

Patton (2002) stated that “we interview to find out what is in and on someone else’s mind, to gather their stories” (p. 341). These subjects were interviewed in-depth (Creswell, 1998). Patton (2002) stated that “contrasting interview strategies are by no means mutually exclusive” (p. 347). Because this is understood, the decision was made to use a combined approach for the interviews. The standardized open-ended interview was utilized initially and was followed by the informal conversational interview. This allowed for the initial interview to be conducted utilizing exactly the same questions for consistency. Later, the interviewer pursued additional information with follow-up questions, or as Lodico et al (2006) stated “only after the researcher gains some insight that in-depth data collection can begin” (p. 271). Patton (2002) stated “this combined strategy offers the interviewer flexibility in probing and in determining when it is appropriate to explore certain subjects in greater depth, or even to pose questions about new areas of inquiry that were not originally anticipated in the interview instrument’s development” (p. 347). This allowed for feedback during the interview which made the connection between the interviewer and interviewee, promoted an environment and relationship for comfort and safety, and thereby encouraged honesty and fresh understanding of their viewpoints.

Research questions chosen were open ended which allowed for, and promoted, the individuals' perspective of the event that was discussed. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) stated "research questions are not framed by operationalizing variables; rather, they are formulated to investigate topics in all their complexity. They are also concerned with understanding behavior from the subject's own frame of reference" (p. 2). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) stated that qualitative researchers "emphasize the value-laden nature of inquiry. They seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning" (p. 8). Data collected in qualitative research has been termed soft (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Bogdan and Biklen, 1992) "that is, rich in description of people, places, and conversations, and not easily handled by statistical procedures" (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992, p. 2). Despite disparities, it allowed for the possibility that the data may provide variations that were never thought of when the qualitative study was conceptualized. It allowed the reader to better understand what the individuals thought, felt and went through while the participants experienced the phenomenon.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed. I also took notes during the interview and formulated the follow-up questions that were utilized during the informal conversational interview.

### **Data analysis.**

Creswell (2008) stated that "there is no single, accepted approach to analyzing qualitative data" (p. 245). However, both Creswell (1998) and Patton (2002) discussed specifically how to conduct phenomenological analysis. Both authors put forth various approaches by Moustakas. Both methods were extremely similar, although the steps were in different orders.

I used the transcendental phenomenological analysis (Patton, 2002, p. 483) with references to both Patton (2002) and Creswell (1998). I made that decision based on the fact that although several obstacles were put before me while I was in high school, I was still able to graduate in four years. However, my experiences were not exactly the same as the experiences of these five year high school graduates.

In the first step *epoche*, I had to set aside any preconceptions or prejudices that I held. As Patton (2002) stated “the researcher looks inside to become aware of personal bias, to eliminate personal involvement with the subject material, that is, eliminate, or at least gain clarity about, preconceptions” (p. 485). In this case the subject material was the verbatim transcription of all of the interviews. I was cognizant of my personal biases and set them aside prior to reading the transcriptions in their entirety. Also in order to begin the analysis responsibly, and to ensure understanding of the data thoroughly, I read the transcripts more than once.

Phenomenological reduction was the second step. Creswell (1998) stated that the “researcher then finds statements (in the interviews) about how individuals are experiencing the topic, lists out these significant statements (horizontalization of the data) and treats each statement as having equal worth, and works to develop a list of nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping statements” (p. 147). Creswell (1998) continued that “these statements are then grouped into “meaning units,” the researcher lists these units, and he or she writes a description of the “textures” (textural description) of the experience – what happened – including verbatim examples” (p. 150).

Patton (2002) stated that “the researcher “brackets out” the world and presuppositions to identify the data in pure form, uncontaminated by extraneous intrusions” (p. 485). Denzin (1989) stated that bracketing has five steps. These steps were:

- (1) Locate within the personal experience, or self story, key phrases and statements that speak directly to the phenomenon in question.
- (2) Interpret the meanings of these phrases, as an informed reader.
- (3) Obtain the subject’s interpretations of these phrases, if possible.
- (4) Inspect these meanings for what they reveal about the essential, recurring features of the phenomenon being studied.
- (5) Offer a tentative statement, or definition, of the phenomenon in terms of the essential recurring features identified in step 4 (pp. 55-56).

Phrases were scrutinized to identify those that should be considered significant. Initially I interpreted the meaning of these phrases and then had the graduates interpret the same phrases. I then reviewed all of the meanings to locate any repeating themes. A statement that describes the findings was then prepared.

Following bracketing, and part of the second step, the data was then “horizontalized.” All the phrases and meanings had equal value, were reviewed, and were placed in groups by theme. Then, as Patton (2002) stated, I proceeded through a “delimitation process whereby irrelevant, repetitive, or overlapping data are eliminated” (p. 486).

Step three was the imaginative variation. Patton (2002) stated that “through imaginative variation, the researcher develops enhanced or expanded versions of the invariant themes” (p. 486). Creswell (1998) stated that the “researcher next reflects on his or her own description and

uses imaginative variation or structural description, seeking all possible meanings and divergent perspectives, varying the frames of reference about the phenomenon, and constructing a description of how the phenomenon was experienced” (p. 150). Each theme was looked at to see if the graduates had differing points of view of what transpired as they experienced each part (theme) of the phenomenon.

The final step was the synthesis of texture and structure. Patton (2002) quotes Moustakas and stated that the “final step requires “an integration of the composite textual and composite structural descriptions, providing a synthesis of the meanings and essences of the experience” (Moustakas 1994: 144)” (p. 486). Creswell (1998) stated that the “researcher then constructs an overall description of the meaning and the essence of the experience” (p. 150). This is the time that I had to write a description of my findings, which ensured a greater understanding of the phenomenon.

### **Methods to ensure rigor/trustworthiness.**

Research results should be credible and legitimate. Patton (2002) stated “that trustworthiness of the inquirer is one dimension of rigor. The issue, then, is not really about objectivity in the abstract, but about researcher credibility and trustworthiness” (p. 576). Cousin (2010) stated that “many researchers, particularly qualitative, adhere to a notion of ‘trustworthiness’ to replace that of validity and reliability” (p. 9). Bogdan and Biklen (1992) stated that “in qualitative studies, researchers are concerned with the accuracy and comprehensiveness of their data” (p. 48). In the following paragraphs the three techniques I used to ensure trustworthiness will be discussed. These techniques were triangulation, member

checks, and an expert audit review which agreed with what Creswell (2008) stated is typical of qualitative researchers needing to validate their findings.

### ***Method 1.***

One technique utilized to ensure the trustworthiness of this study was triangulation.

Patton (2002) stated that a researcher should “include triangulation of data sources and analytical perspectives to increase the accuracy and credibility of findings” (p. 93). Schostak (2002) added that

triangulation is not a magic solution to the problems of assuring validity, truth, generalization and objectivity. However, it does provide a means of exploring what is at stake for individuals when they try to coordinate actions in relation to a material and symbolic world of others (p. 79).

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) stated that triangulation is utilized as an “attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question” (p. 2). Stake (1994) stated that triangulation is

a process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation. But, acknowledging that no observations or interpretations are perfectly repeatable (p. 241).

The type of triangulation used was the triangulation of data sources. Patton (2002) defined it as a “means of comparing and cross-checking the consistency of information derived at different times and by different means within qualitative methods” (p. 559). I utilized analyst triangulation and applied the following three strategies.

The first was “checking for the consistency of what people say about the same thing over time” (Patton, 2002, p. 559). I started with the standardized open-ended interview and followed with the informal conversational interview. Although the informal conversational interview was utilized to elaborate on some of the responses from the open-ended interview, it allowed me to check on the consistency of some of the responses put forth by these graduates.

“Checking interviews against program documents and other written evidence that can corroborate what interview respondents report” (Patton, 2002, p. 559) is the second strategy I used for this triangulation. As stated earlier some documents utilized included transcripts, and standardized test results.

The third strategy used was “comparing observations with interviews” (Patton, 2002, p. 559). I was able to review the information provided by these graduates in their interviews and compared some of what was said to what I have observed over my years of teaching.

### ***Method 2.***

Member checks, a second technique to ensure trustworthiness, were also utilized. Creswell (2008) stated that “member checking is a process in which the researcher asks one or more participants in the study to check the accuracy of the account” (p. 267). Allowing the interviewees to review the findings and conclusions of the study provided them the opportunity to offer any suggestions and recommendations to me. I provided the interviewee’s transcript to that individual with the analysis and conclusions of the study. Each interviewee had access only to their transcript. Comments were requested and received in writing.

### ***Method 3.***

The third technique, an expert audit review was also conducted. Auditing of a study is conducted by an “external examiner.” Huberman & Miles (1994) stated that this allows the “possibility for qualitative researchers to have a list of analytical bases to touch, so that interested and rigorous peers can determine whether the sampling, measurement, and analyses leading to the main conclusions and explanations stand up to the most common sources of bias and error” (pp. 438-439). Creswell (2008) stated that “researchers may also ask a person *outside* the project to conduct a thorough review of the study and report back, in writing, the strengths and weaknesses of the project” (p. 267). Patton (2002) stated “expert reviews can increase credibility for those who are unsure how to distinguish high-quality work. That, of course, is the role of the doctoral committee” (p. 562). Therefore, I utilized my doctoral committee as the auditors of this study. It was their responsibility to ensure that this was a viable study and that it would withstand the scrutiny of peers and other experts in the field.

### **Limitations**

As with any research, there were limitations. Creswell (2008) defined limitations as “potential weaknesses or problems with the study identified by the researcher. These are enumerated one by one, and they often relate to inadequate measures of variables, loss or lack of participants, small sample sizes, errors in measurement, and other factors typically related to data collection and analysis” (p. 207).

One limitation of this research dealt with credibility. The assumption was made that the participants remembered everything accurately, and that they provided truthful information. They reported on personal experiences and a number of issues may have limited the quality of

these reports. Some of these issues included the ability to recall past events, and the challenge in conveying the full account of the phenomenon. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated,

the source respondents must attest to the credibility of the reconstructions, but our interest, in this chapter, is mainly that those attestations be useful to the consumer in assessing credibility from his or her perspective. Credibility is a trustworthiness criterion that is satisfied when source respondents agree to honor the reconstructions; that fact should also satisfy the consumer (pp. 328-9).

Other issues included, but were not limited to, the participants' willingness to divulge the information to a stranger, and a temptation to color the account in particular ways. Patton (2002) stated that,

Interview data limitations include possibly distorted responses due to personal bias, anger, anxiety, politics, and simple lack of awareness since interviews can be greatly affected by the emotional state of the interviewee at the time of the interview. Interview data are also subject to recall error, reactivity of the interviewee to the interviewer, and self-serving responses (p. 306).

One way to mitigate this situation was to ensure that rapport was established with these graduates. Bogdan and Bilken (1992) stated that the "researcher's goal is to increase the subjects' level of comfort, encouraging them to talk about what they normally talk about and to eventually confide in the researcher" (p. 79). Age was also taken into consideration when rapport was developed (Bogdan and Bilken, 1992, p. 89).

Patton (2002) stated that

rapport means that I respect the people being interviewed, so what they say is important because of who is saying it. I want to convey to them that their knowledge, experiences, attitudes, and feelings are important. Yet, I will not judge them for the content of what they say to me. Rapport is built on the ability to convey

empathy and understanding without judgment (pp. 365-366).

Body language was observed as another technique employed to mitigate this situation. Patton (2002) suggested utilizing observations which would provide “a check on what is reported in interviews” (p. 306). Being able to “see the informal communication” (Creswell, 1998, p. 124) is important when an interview is conducted. But even this mitigation had its limitations as the graduates may not have acted normally as they knew they were being observed, and I, the observer, may have misinterpreted what I observed (Patton, 2002, p. 306).

Individuals from different backgrounds also interpret data differently. The majority of resilience studies have been done by psychologists; this study was done by a high school teacher. I, a high school teacher, have spent my entire teaching career in two inner city high schools. As such, I am very familiar with the many students that overcome adversity to graduate high school, those that graduate in four years and those that take five. I work with these students on a daily basis and am closer to them than any of the other researchers that walk in, get the required data and depart the research site.

According to Patton (2002) “the researcher is the instrument” in qualitative research (p. 14). He continued that the “credibility of qualitative methods, therefore, hinges to a great extent on the skill, competence, and rigor of the person doing fieldwork” (p. 14). I dealt with “the suspicion that the analyst has shaped findings according to predispositions and biases” (Patton, 2002, p. 553). To avoid this limitation, I incorporated reflexivity, meaning per Creswell (2008) that “researchers reflect on their own biases, values, and assumptions and actively write them into their research” (p. 58). Patton (2002) stated that “the principle is to report any personal and professional information that may have affected data collection, analysis, and interpretation –

either negatively or positively – in the minds of users of the findings” (p. 566). I not only discussed the research participants’ interpretations of the events but also my interpretation of the same events. It is how they knew what they knew, and how I knew what I knew.

A different limitation is the ability of future researchers to either replicate or conduct studies similar to this one (Patton, 2002, p. 584; Creswell, 2008, p. 207). Patton (2002) discussed extrapolating the results and stated,

extrapolations are modest speculations on the likely applicability of findings to other situations under similar, but not identical, conditions. Extrapolations are logical, thoughtful, case derived, and problem oriented rather than statistical and probabilistic. Extrapolations can be particularly useful when based on information-rich samples and designs, that is, studies that produce relevant information carefully targeted to specific concerns about both the present and the future (p. 584).

Although this study had information-rich cases, it also had a limited number of participants, from a single state in the Midwest, from one school system as well as from only one school. How other researchers intend to apply the results to graduates from other states (transferability) is unclear, except to say that they may be able to use this as a building block for further research.

## **Timeline**

IRB approval was received in April 2014. I then requested approval to conduct research within the mid-western inner-city school that I taught in, which was received in August 2014. Subsequently I contacted the senior counselor at the school and requested the names of eligible candidates, those that were in their fifth year of high school and met the remainder of the criteria. Once the participants were selected, I met and interviewed them at school. Interviews were then transcribed. Phrases were selected from the transcription and grouped into ‘meaning units’. I

reviewed this data and determined what questions would be asked in the follow up interviews. The participants' interviews along with chapters four and five were provided to them and comments requested. All of the data analysis was completed in the fall of 2016, with completion of this qualitative study in the spring of 2017.

### **Researcher Positionality**

Making my biases explicit went along with my ability to feel empathy for these students. And I could empathize with these students. I attended six different schools for junior and senior high school (grades 7-12), three of those schools were considered inner city and one of them was within the school system I studied. Our house was repossessed, and our possessions were never recovered. After my parents divorced, my father was given custody of my sister and me. After a year we went to live with my mother, and lived with her for two years. Utilizing my savings, I took my younger sister and ran away from our mother in California to our father in Indiana, never seeing our mother again. More transpired during those years but the little information that I have provided demonstrates that I too was at risk of dropping out. However, I persisted and earned my high school diploma in four years.

When I retired from the Army and returned to Indiana my daughter was in the fifth grade. Students started bullying her and the teachers never made her feel welcomed. When she was in the seventh grade she became ill and missed almost two months of school. The school wanted my 100% disabled husband to visit her teachers and get her homework daily; this he could not do and I was teaching in another district. My daughter's district called and said she was authorized at home schooling and that they would send someone to the house. I told them I did not need anyone, all I needed was the school work. I never heard from them again nor did I ever receive

any school work. She broke her arm at school in the eighth grade. Her band teacher flunked her because she did not turn in her practice card. At a meeting with that teacher and the principal, I asked how she was supposed to turn in a practice card if she could not practice. The teacher stated that she should have turned a blank card in. The principal agreed with the teacher, and the grade remained. She developed irritable bowel syndrome. In high school she was tested for special education. My daughter was told that she was emotionally handicapped because her mother had been in the military, and had attention deficit disorder. She flunked English although she had tested at the college level in that subject. When I talked to her English teacher I asked why she had not called me. She replied that she did not have the time. I told her that I had taught math and I had to contact all the parents. She stated that teaching English and teaching math were two different things. There was more, but when I discovered at my daughter's annual case conference that the school had violated her individual education plan (IEP), I had had enough.

Nobody cared about my daughter, although I was caring for my students. Over time I had gained social capital and was able to go to those resources for advice as to what I should do. I withdrew her from that school and enrolled her in the district and school that I taught at. At my school she flourished because of the caring teachers and fellow students. I hated myself for not transferring her sooner. I hated myself for not understanding everything about how schools operated. To this day, I feel guilty that I did not believe everything she told me about her experiences in school, or that I could not make my daughter's educational experience better than it was. I had learned how the business of education at a school operated, information not covered in any of the education classes that I had taken after I retired. But my daughter persisted and graduated in four years. I promised myself that I would not allow my students to become victims as my daughter had.

I teach Army Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) in high school because, just as in the military you take care of your soldiers, I can now demonstrate care for my students. I taught math for two years on a limited license, and although I tutored my students after school, there was no time to assist them with any issues they were experiencing. When the JROTC position became available I took it as a way to support students. I continued taking education classes and earned my teaching and administrators licenses. In the military, the more rank you earn, the less time you spend with your troops. As such, I remain in the classroom so I can continue working with the cadets and not spend the day burdened by administrative functions required for the operation of a school.

As I stated earlier, I did not want my students to become victims like my daughter had. Although I had a masters degree and was a military retiree, I did not know how to maneuver the labyrinth of secondary education to help my own child. Having now had ‘on the job training’ I am able to advocate for my students. I have advocated for them with other teachers, counselors, and when needed the administrators of the building. As there are two JROTC instructors, I have the time to listen and provide advice on personal matters. And just like the women in Bass’ (2012) study, I also have a refrigerator which is always stocked with the necessities to make sandwiches. Apparently, the administrators in the building also know what I do because they have also brought non-cadets for a sandwich when these students have missed a meal.

Cassidy and Bates (2005) stated that care must be recognized and reciprocated. As an example, after returning to school following a medical appointment, various students wanted to know where I was. I was talking with another teacher about this and kidding that it was alright for students to miss several hours for their medical appointments but I could not be gone for a couple of hours. The other teacher stated that I should feel special as students do not ask that of

all the teachers in the building. I realized that although the students and I may not agree on everything, I feel they do understand that I do what I do because I actually care about them and about their futures.

As for my own persistence, it goes back to all the years I spent in the Army. We are trained to accomplish the mission at all costs. It has taken me 10 years to complete my EdD. At times I wanted to quit. After several attempts at the first three chapters of the dissertation, my committee chair told me that I would never be able to write the dissertation and that as an alternative I could complete a project designated by and for my school district. I did not appreciate what he had to tell me. Again, with the additional social capital I had gained in the various education classes I had taken, I met with the head of the university's education department and was given a new committee chair. This new individual provided me with encouragement and advice which motivated me to persist and complete the dissertation thereby completing the requirements for an EdD.

The limited information provided above reveals the connection I had with the participants. This empathy combined with the environment of respect and safety aided in lessening the limitations.

### **Summary/Recap**

The phenomenological approach was utilized in an attempt to understand what led these students to persist in high school for a fifth year and earn their high school diplomas. It is these students' stories, the why and how of their lived experiences that was studied, documented, and interpreted (Patton, 2002; Creswell, 1998; Mertens, 1998).

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

Mr. Lionel Logue: “So why should I waste my time listening to you?”

King George VI: “Because I have a right to be heard!”

From *The King’s Speech* (2010)

#### **Introduction to the Findings**

The purpose of this study was to examine persistence in five-year high school graduates who never dropped out of high school. Five individuals, all males, initially qualified to participate in this study. Three were African-Americans, one was Hispanic and one was Caucasian. Three qualifiers (two African-Americans, and the Caucasian) completed the study, one (African-American) dropped out to work additional hours allowing his girlfriend to graduate on time, and one (Hispanic) stopped attending school resulting in the school declaring him a dropout.

Three one-on-one interviews were conducted with each of the three participants that completed the study. All participants were extremely polite yet seemed nervous during the interviews. It appeared to me that they wanted some acknowledgement that they were providing the correct answers. It was if they were trying to assist me in earning my doctorate. I was also given access to each of the participants’ pupil cumulative and attendance records.

The findings are presented in relation to the guiding research question: why did these individuals persist in remaining in school a fifth year to earn their high school diploma?

The three participants responded to the interview questions with short replies requiring prompting to expand on their answers to this phenomenon. In general, there was not a great deal of variation to their responses, which seems to suggest a high degree of commonality among them. It may also suggest that the participants are representative of five-year high school graduates.

### **Individual Profiles**

It is necessary to become familiar with the individual backgrounds of the participants to understand the findings and significance of this study. All participants have different personal histories but were to graduate with the 2014 cohort from the same urban high school. The following information is provided to better understand the backgrounds of the participants in this study (pseudonyms are utilized).

**Arthur.** The first participant, Arthur Davidson, is Caucasian and turned 20 years old two weeks before he earned his high school diploma. Arthur was raised by a single mother. Although his father is alive, the father has no relationship with his son. His mother remarried when he was in the tenth grade, with Arthur referring to his step-father as his “mom’s husband.” He has two biological sisters but is unsure where they live and can only approximate their ages. Two nieces and a nephew, were removed by CPS, and have moved in with the family. His mother is in the process of adopting all three. Neither his mother nor his sisters earned a high school diploma. Arthur attended a suburban high school for one year before transferring to the urban school from which he graduated. He participated in an alternative program his second semester of his junior year for fighting in school.

**David.** The second participant, David Stevenson, is African American and was also 20 years old when he earned his high school diploma. He is the second youngest of eight with both parents being involved in his upbringing until he turned 13. Since then he has been raised by a single mother with no contact from his father. His mother remarried when David was in the eighth grade. David also refers to his stepfather as his “mom’s husband.” His eldest brother is the only individual in the family to have earned a high school diploma.

David moved from Illinois to Indiana prior to his sophomore year of high school. He technically attended the same inner city high school for four years. When he was 18, and a junior in high school, he moved out and rented a house on his own. His stepfather paid his bills for the first two months he was on his own; after which he became financially independent. David participated in an alternative program his second semester of his first senior year for an incident at school. The second semester of his second senior year he participated in the Pioneer Educational Enhancement Program (PEEP), a different alternative program, due to his poor attendance. This program allowed him to work during the day and late at night while he took on-line classes at school, from three in the afternoon to seven in the evening.

**George.** The third participant, George Washington, is African American and was 19 years old when he earned his high school diploma. He was also raised by a single mother. His father was in and out of jail, with little contact when he was not incarcerated. George is the third of four children of his mother, and the youngest of five of his father. With the exception of George’s eldest half-brother, no other immediate family member earned a high school diploma. Although George’s transcript reflects that he went to the same urban high school for his entire high school career, the code by his junior classes revealed that he participated in an alternative

program that entire year. He remained in high school a fifth year because he could not pass the state's required graduation exam in math.

### **Overview of the Findings**

In the military there is a saying, “take care of the troops and the troops will take care of you.” As long as a soldier is taken care of by the chain of command, that soldier will reciprocate and complete the mission. Although students are not soldiers, the military expression can be applied to the phenomenon of five-year high school graduates. The responsibility of taking care of these students fell on a number of individuals to include family members, school personnel, and friends. These individuals demonstrated that they cared about these students and provided encouragement, advice, and confidence; all necessary to motivate these students to persist. These individuals all contributed in their own way to taking care of the troops/students. The second half of the military axiom “and the troops will take care of you” can also be applied. These troops/students took care of these individuals that cared and supported them. These students persisted in school and earned their high school diplomas. Although caring was the most important reason that these students persisted, it was not the only reason.

The following sections describe the participants' interview responses regarding the reasons they persisted in high school a fifth year and earned a high school diploma. Some of the participants' responses were short, curt, and straight forward. At times the participants went into lengthy answers, but that was a rarity. When reviewing the responses, do not think that these individuals were cared for any more or any less than the others; just understand that some participants were more talkative than others. The responses were grouped into three general areas: (1) care and support of the students provided by relatives, school personnel, and friends,

(2) reciprocity provided by the students to these various individuals, and (3) resiliency. As such, I will now review their responses.

The first area that is discussed aligns itself with the first half of the military axiom of “take care of the troops and the troops will take care of you.” The students are representative of the troops, and the responsibility of taking care of these students fell on a number of individuals to include family members, school personnel, and friends. The discussion begins with the care provided by relatives.

### **Care and support of the participants provided by relatives.**

Traditionally, the nuclear family consisted of a mother, a father and children. In current society, the family unit may consist of heterosexual couples, same-sex couples, adopting individuals, single-parent households, or extended family members living together with a child or children. For most of their lives the participants were raised by a single mother. Two of the three mothers remarried after their sons were older. The participants had immediate family that consisted of mothers, fathers, stepfathers, brothers, sisters, half-brothers, and half-sisters; with the extended family that consisted of grandmothers, aunts and uncles.

#### ***The mothers’ relationships with their sons.***

The participants’ mothers cared enough about their sons that they said and did what they had to, to ensure that their sons became high school graduates. These mothers wanted their sons to earn their high school diplomas, something they had not done. All three participants expressed a strong parental bond with their mothers. Arthur said the most influential relationship he had was with his mother. When asked how she influenced him, Arthur stated that “she just kept telling me how proud she would be if I graduated high school, things like that.” Similarly, David

stated that the most important relationship “was the relationship between me and my mom.” He said that “she would give me helpful advice or something to motivate me to keep going.” George also stated that “what really inspired me was my mother.” He added that she was “a really big inspiration to me finishing school.” According to the participants, these mothers provided encouragement, advice, and confidence which motivated them to persist.

All three participants stated that their mothers motivated them to remain in school. However, it is more likely that the mothers provided the necessary encouragement which led to their motivation, as motivation is internal. Arthur’s mother encouraged him by saying “stuff all the time.” She always told him that he needed his high school diploma, that he had to graduate to become a mechanic and “how proud she would be if I graduated high school, things like that.” David’s mother “was always there, pushing me to complete what she know I can always get done, which is graduate.” He also said that she “pushed me a whole lot more because she knew what I can do. She knew what I was capable of.” George’s mother also provided encouragement to graduate. He stated that “my mom just encouraged me to continue, continue to try to get my high school diploma.” Besides encouragement, advice was provided by the mothers to their sons.

Moreover, these mothers provided advice to their sons. For the five years Arthur was in high school his mother kept telling him he needed to get his diploma. Arthur had talked about becoming a mechanic and going in the Army. His mother (along with his aunt and grandmother) told him that “to become a mechanic you have to have your high school diploma and you got to go to a trade school.” David said his mother provided “helpful advice or something to motivate me to keep going.” She told him that he would “be a fool if I drop out of school when I came this far,” that “she didn’t approve of it at all,” and that he “needed to continue, need to finish.” David added that she said “I think you should finish school because you’ll always have the opportunity

after school to do the same thing that you're doing now." George's mother's advice was simple, "she said just stay out of trouble and it'll just be the smart thing to do." In addition to encouragement, and advice these mothers also instilled confidence in their sons.

The mothers also contributed to instilling confidence in their sons which may have provided them the courage to believe in themselves and persist. Arthurs' mother repeatedly stated "you're going to graduate! You're going to make it in life! You're going to go to the military!" David's mother also instilled confidence by saying "You can do it! Don't give up success is key!" Although George did not specifically state that his mother said anything to instill confidence, he did say that his mother was a "big inspiration to me finishing school," and that he learned to face his fears and accomplish what he set out to do.

The three participants had a special bond with their mothers. These mothers contributed to their sons' persistence by providing encouragement, advice and confidence. The participants also had a special bond with their other female relatives.

#### ***Adult female family members' relationships with the participants.***

One participant was supported by a grandmother and an aunt, while another was supported by a grandmother. Arthur's grandmother and aunt encouraged him by continuously telling him he needed to graduate and earn his diploma. His grandmother encouraged him by saying "about the same things my mom said," and added that she had confidence in him. His aunt advised him that if he wanted to be a mechanic he needed a diploma, and then he could "get the job that I want to get." Both his grandmother and his aunt also provided additional support by tutoring him. George's grandmother also provided encouragement. He said "my grandmother and my momma always talkin' about how they want to see me graduate."

The care and additional support provided by these female relatives contributed to the persistence of the participants. Although the three participants had a bond with their mothers and their other female relatives, they did not have that same bond with their male relatives.

***Adult male family members' relationships with the participants.***

The three participants had no male role model to speak of. They had been raised by a single mother for either most or all of their lives. Arthur knows his father's "name and what he looks like and stuff, but I don't know anything about him." He and his father have no relationship and the father was not involved in his upbringing. Arthur's mother remarried when he was in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade (MFR). Arthur refers to his stepfather as his mother's husband. Although the relationship with his stepfather has improved, "we still don't really talk." Even after Arthur turned 18 years old, the stepfather allowed him to continue living in the house. The stepfather also cared enough about the family to assist in the adoption of Arthur's nieces and nephew. Arthur mentioned that he had had a different job this past school year, "just a little less hours but now it's with my uncle so he cooperates better because he's family."

Since the age of 13, David had been raised by a single mother. When the family moved to Indiana his father "was left in Chicago." David said "it was my suggestion that I didn't want to talk to him. So he didn't have anything to do with me growing up." To this day his father is not involved at all in his life and they have no relationship. David's mother remarried when he was in the eighth grade and also refers to his stepfather as his mom's husband. Although David had never been asked to leave, when he turned 18 years old he made the decision to live on his own and rented a house. His stepfather took "care of the bills for me for about a month, two months" when he first rented the house, after that he was on his own. This allowed David to "come in and

finish things that I had to do here at school.” He said “I knew if I didn’t pay these bills then I’d lost my house and I could always go back to my mom’s house.”

George did not meet his father until he was ten years old because his father was incarcerated (I1#191, 105-109). As of this writing, his father was “back locked up.” There is no relationship with his father, as George stated “for some reason, he do not communicate with his sons, he do not like his sons.” George’s mother never remarried.

Although there may not have been a relationship with the biological fathers, one might infer that two of the three participants had some type of relationship with their stepfathers and one had some type of a relationship with his uncle. Other family members also contributed to the persistence of the participants. Care and support were also provided by siblings, with some siblings having been more involved in their brothers’ lives than others.

### ***The siblings’ relationships with their brothers.***

The relationship between the participants and their siblings was a little more complicated. All three participants had siblings. Arthur and David did not recognize their siblings’ overt support, although it was obvious to George. However, Arthur’s and David’s responses suggest that their perspectives were informed indirectly by the relationship. For instance, there is the everyday care as they grew up with their siblings.

Arthur has two older sisters. According to Arthur, he received no support from his sisters nor does he know where they are located. His mother currently is in the process of adopting Arthur’s two nieces and nephew at which time they would become his siblings. At the time of these interviews, Arthur’s nieces were seven and four, and his nephew was two.

David is one of eight children, and is the second youngest. He has a younger sister that goes to the same high school that he graduated from. Only his brother, the second oldest child, earned a high school diploma. David stated that he never received any type of support from his brother or from any of his sisters.

George is one of eight children, the third of four of his mother, and the youngest of five of his father. He received encouragement from all but one of his siblings, the exception being his baby brother. Only his eldest half-brother earned a high school diploma through an alternative program, all the others quit. When George's half-brother visited he "encouraged me a lot." His two older brothers also provided advice and encouragement. They told George that his "education is important, to go and continue your education after high school." George's older sister provided additional support by tutoring him. He said she "really showed me she was trying to help me, she really encouraged me, when I woke up late she took me to school. She used to try to help me with my homework when I did have homework."

Relatives were important in the persistence of the participants, though other personnel also contributed to their persistence. The discussion now shifts from relatives to other personnel that displayed care for the participants. School personnel care and are concerned about these students and their futures.

### **Care and support of the participants provided by school personnel.**

The participants received care from several individuals involved with their high school education. These individuals included teachers, counselors, vice-principals and, in one case, a principal. When some of the school staff identified that the participants were having difficulties,

they interceded and provided needed care and support to ensure that the participants persisted and were successful.

***The teachers' relationships with their students.***

Arthur had several teachers that encouraged and advised him to finish high school. His Spanish teacher “told me not to give up, she gave me motivation.” That teacher also provided advice, “she explained things, why it was important to graduate. Told me I can get a better job if I got a high school diploma and stuff like that,” that “I could have a better life if I graduate high school.” Arthur continued that “I was talking about being a mechanic and she had said I can’t do that without a diploma.” She provided him with additional support by tutoring him in various subjects not just Spanish. When she found out that he would not graduate on time, she specifically asked him if he was going to drop out. Arthur told her “I’m not” and that she continued to encourage him, “she said that’s good, that I should come back next year and graduate.” Arthur also spoke about his two Army Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) teachers. One was a retired Command Sergeant Major that encouraged him. Arthur said that he “talked to me, made sure that I did the work.” His other JROTC teacher was a retired Major. Arthur said that she “came to my classes and if I didn’t get the work she got it for me.”

David had several teachers, although not singling one out specifically, that encouraged and advised him to remain in school. He said that the teachers “would just be uplifting, small things, words, conversations, help with work, small things like that.” David also received additional support from some of his teachers. He received “a lot of tutoring and after school studies with a couple of the teachers.” David said one teacher told him “even if I feel I didn’t need help, still come to him for help.” He continued that “on days that he didn’t stay after school

or he had something else to do after school, he would stay even if he didn't have to, to help me get done to pass that test (the math graduation exam), get me the information I needed." That teacher encouraged David to graduate by telling him "I want your butt out of here."

Perhaps some teachers utilized reverse psychology to get David to stay in school and graduate. David said that he had received negative comments from some teachers. He said one teacher told him "to just go home and don't come back. Just quit, give up, cause you never gonna be done. His exact words were you're an old man." Perhaps this teacher did care about David. Perhaps this teacher did encourage David by daring David to prove him wrong.

George also had several teachers that provided him encouragement and advice. A social studies teacher provided him encouragement and advice. According to George he "just give me advice, man to man, just like when he was my age." Each time he appeared frustrated, that teacher would encourage him and "ask what was going on, trying to see if there was anything he could do." George said "he really showed that he really cared and tried to help." A science teacher also took the time to give him advice and talk to him, "not like a student, like a grown man to grown man. So like you were grown now, what are you going to do with your life, you can't keep following people. You can't keep messing up, you want to be able to live good and have the nice things that you want." George also credited his remedial math teacher for her encouragement. He said she encouraged him by saying "just don't give up, you done already failed so you just keep going till you win, till you get it successful. All you got is the time." George continued that "even when I didn't get something, she took her time and went over it with me again, and she just really helped me," she would not let him quit. When pressed for exactly what words of encouragement she provided, George said "just the way she treated me, tough love. But you could tell she cared about me, she said it with love."

These teachers provided these students with encouragement, advice, confidence, and additional support to ensure that these students persisted and earned their high school diplomas. However, teachers are not the only school personnel that cared about, and provided support to, these students. There are other school personnel that cared about these students.

*The counselors' relationships with their students.*

All three participants also credited their counselors for contributing to their persistence. Arthur credited his counselor for providing encouragement and confidence. He stated that “she, well made me feel bad when I didn’t graduate last year.” He continued that she “was disappointed” that he had not graduated on time, but was confident that he would graduate this year.

David also credited his counselor for the encouragement she provided. His counselor “called me and gave me a small speech.” David continued that “she was just saying like almost the same thing my mom said. You’re too far, you’re too far in to be trying to quit and give up now. So whatever I had going on at home, I had to suck it up and keep pushing.”

George’s counselor also encouraged him. He said “she just talked to me throughout the years. Me and my friends, telling us she really wanted to see us graduate on time. You know do better for our life.” But even when he didn’t graduate on time his counselor continued to encourage him. She also provided George with confidence and said “she was disappointed but she was happy to see me continue trying because she knew I could do it.”

Besides teachers and counselors, vice-principals and a principal were also involved in these students care. Principals get involved when everything else has failed.

*A principal's relationship with her student.*

David was the only participant that credited his principal for his decision to remain in school. When David contemplated dropping out, the principal became involved and provided both encouragement and advice. She “actually showed up to my house and gave me about an hour speech about why I shouldn’t stop coming to school, and I took that and used it.” She was ultimately responsible for putting him in the “3 to 7 program” which allowed him to work most of the day, and earn the required credits to graduate from 3 PM until 7 PM, and then work again in the evening.

All school personnel contributed to the persistence of these students. The teachers, counselors, vice-principals, and principal all provided the encouragement, advice, confidence, and additional support to ensure that these students succeeded. There is one more group at school that was involved in the persistence of these participants, and that group is their friends.

**Care and support of the participants provided by peers.**

Peer pressure is an important aspect in most students’ lives. Friends are influential; hopefully their influence is for the better. The participants’ friends also provided encouragement, advice, and confidence in a different manner as compared to relatives and school personnel, which also contributed to the participants’ persistence.

Arthur had a close friend that provided him encouragement. His friend, that graduated with their cohort, told Arthur that he “should have graduated last year but he told me that it’s good that I went back and stuff like that. And good that I’m trying to get my diploma.” Arthur did make some new friends his last year of high school, three of whom knew that it was his fifth year. These new friends offered simple encouraging words, “it’s better than dropping out.”

David had several friends, some that had graduated the previous year, some that had dropped out, and some that were still in school. All of his friends provided him encouragement and confidence needed to remain in school and graduate. David said that “the ones that dropped out was the ones that really motivate me the most,” and continued that “they knew what I can do so they didn’t want me to give up on myself and they didn’t give up on me either. So that was a big help as well.” David’s friends also said “don’t quit, you got it, just stay determined and god going to look out for you, it was just a lot of those type things.” David had also stated that some of his friends, that were now seniors, were also in the JROTC program with him. These students/cadets helped him by keeping him out of trouble, thereby providing him with additional support. When these students saw that David was “getting into trouble or doing something I know I had no business doing they would stop me, pull me to the side, tell me I gotta focus on this, that way I can get done what I have to get done.” David admitted that his friends encouraged him to continue and stated that “I needed that push from y’all, that helped me a whole lot. I gotta stay surrounded by positive people.”

George also made friends with his new peers, those that were true seniors. Some of his friends had joked about his situation, however “after cracking jokes they’d say as long as you keep trying to get your high school diploma,” and this encouraged him. He also made friends with some underclassmen that not only encouraged him, but also provided additional support by tutoring him in math. Most of George’s friends that graduated on time (his cohort) also encouraged him. They wanted him to continue. These friends encouraged him when they were in school together, and continued “sharing really encouraging words” even after their graduation.

All of these friends cared enough about the participants to provide encouragement, advice, confidence, and additional support that contributed to these participants persistence. They all wanted their friend (the participant) to graduate.

To summarize, the first half of the military axiom of “take care of the troops and the troops will take care of you” has been covered. The students are the “troops,” and the responsibility of taking care of these troops fell on a number of individuals to include family members, school personnel, and friends. By providing these students the encouragement, advice, and confidence to persist, these individuals demonstrated to the participants that they cared about them. All of these individuals provided care, and contributed in their own way, to ensure these students persisted. The second half of the military saying “and the troops will take care of you” can also be applied to these five-year high school graduates. The participants reciprocated the care provided them and persisted in school.

### **Reciprocity Provided by the Participants to Relatives, School Personnel, and Peers**

In the previous section the care and support provided by various individuals to the participants was discussed. In this section, the second half of the military axiom, “take care of the troops and the troops will take care of you” will be discussed, or putting it another way, the reciprocity by the participants to their relatives, school personnel and peers. These various individuals were shown reciprocity by the participants as they became five-year high school graduates.

#### **The sons’ relationships with their mothers.**

Just as the mothers cared about their sons’ futures, the sons also cared about their mothers. Arthur reciprocated the care provided him by his mother and persisted because “I

would have felt like I disappointed them (his mother and grandmother). When asked what his mother said now that he had graduated, Arthur said “she’s proud of me.”

David also reciprocated the care provided him by his mother and persisted. He stated “I’m doing this for my mama! I want to earn my high school diploma for her! I gotta get it done if I wanna make my mama happy, I gotta get it done.” David took his mother’s advice to persist because she “said I think you should finish school because you’ll always have opportunity after school to do the same thing that you’re doing now, but so I took that, I took that as a lesson and I continued coming to school.”

George reciprocated his mothers’ care and persisted because “my grandmother and my momma always talkin’ about how they want to see me graduate.” He almost repeats himself word for word later when he said “I want to do it for myself and my momma and my grandma cause I know they really want to see me graduate.” When George’s mother found out that he would not be graduating on time, he said that “she was disappointed in me but I told her I was going to keep trying because I knew how much it meant to her.” When George graduated his mother said “I love you George and I’m very proud of you.”

As the mothers cared about their sons, these sons reciprocated that care by persisting and earning their high school diplomas. With the encouragement, advice, and confidence that was provided by the mothers to their sons, the sons became motivated and persisted in school to make their mothers proud. The graduates also wanted to reciprocate the care provided them by other adult female relatives.

### **The participants' relationships with adult female family members.**

Just as the mothers wanted their sons to graduate from high school, so did the other adult female relations. The participants cared about their grandmothers and aunt and reciprocated this care by persisting and earning their diplomas.

Arthur did not want to disappoint his mother, his aunt, or his grandmother. He decided not to quit because "I would have felt like I disappointed them and disappointed myself." George persisted for "my momma and my grandma cause I know they really want to see me graduate and just being the first person in my immediate family to graduate."

These grandmothers and aunt provided care to the participants, and the participants reciprocated by persisting and graduating from high school. Although not recognizing the support provided by some of the adult male family members, the participants may also have reciprocated the support unconsciously.

### **The participants' relationships with adult male family members.**

All the participants stated that they had no relationship with their fathers or their stepfathers but, again, perhaps they did not recognize the support provided. Arthur lived in a house with his family and his stepfather. His stepfather contributed financially to the household. Although Arthur may not have recognized the relationship, the stepfathers' contributions allowed Arthur to persist in school. Arthur also had an uncle that he was working for. He stated that he had been able to work less hours because his uncle "cooperates better because he's family." Arthur reciprocated the stepfathers' and uncle's contributions, perhaps not consciously, by persisting and earning his diploma.

David's stepfather also contributed financially to the household. When David decided at the age of 18 to move out, his stepfather paid all of the bills for the first couple of months. Perhaps David's stepfather made his contributions because he wanted his stepson to be successful. And although David may not have recognized the relationship he had with his stepfather, David did reciprocate by persisting in school and earning his high school diploma.

The participants also wanted to reciprocate the care provided them by their siblings. They also wanted to set the example for their younger siblings, and desired to accomplish what for most of their older siblings was an impossible task, and that was to earn a high school diploma.

### **The brothers' relationships with their siblings.**

All three participants had siblings. However, the care and the relationships varied among them. Arthur and David had said that they received no support from their siblings, although perhaps they just did not recognize it. Arthur did not know where his sisters were but did have a relationship with his nieces and nephew, his soon to be siblings. Arthur said, "I wanted them (his nieces and nephew) to be able to look up to someone who's graduated from high school, cause their mom didn't graduate and my sister, their aunt, didn't graduate either." He continued "I want my high school diploma to go to the military and have my nieces, or give my nieces someone to look up to." Arthur added that his seven-year-old niece said that "she can't wait to get to high school and graduate." Arthur may not have recognized the influence his siblings provided in his desire to graduate, however he did recognize the care he received from his nieces and nephew. As such he persisted to set the example for his nieces and nephew, his soon to be siblings.

David's eldest brother and the only male, earned a high school diploma, while his sisters "chose a different lifestyle." He never mentioned any overt support from his brother or older

sisters. Although he may not have recognized their relationship, it may have influenced his desire to graduate. He persisted and accomplished what his older sisters did not, and that was to earn a high school diploma.

Except for George's eldest half-brother who earned a high school diploma through an alternative program, all of his other siblings quit school. However, all of his siblings stressed the importance of getting an education and wanted him to earn his high school diploma. He reciprocated their encouragement by persisting and graduating. After graduating George's siblings said "they was really proud of me. Like my sister, she said she even want to go back now after me graduating."

The participants had various relationships with various family members. These family members cared about the participants and the participants reciprocated by persisting and earning their high school diplomas. These participants not only reciprocated the care provided by relatives, but also the care provided them by various school personnel.

### **The students' relationships with school personnel.**

Teachers, counselors and school administrators do expect something in return from their students. These three individuals reciprocated the care provided by various school personnel by persisting and earning their high school diplomas.

Arthur, David and George reciprocated the care provided to them by their teachers, counselors and principal. Arthur stated that "my teachers, they just know me since the beginning of high school so I feel like they should be able to see me graduate instead of give up." He persisted because of his counselor and the fact that she was "confident that he would graduate this year." David said "I gotta prove myself, I gotta prove a point now, I got something to

prove.” George mentioned many teachers that cared and assisted him. The participants reciprocated the care provided them, persisted, and graduated from high school.

All three participants credited their teachers, counselors, and one credited his principal for caring. In return the participants reciprocated the care shown them, by caring enough about the various school personnel to persist and earn their high school diplomas; which is exactly what the various school personnel desired. However, teachers, counselors and the principal were not the only individuals in the school that cared about the participants, their friends also cared about them.

#### **The participants’ relationships with their peers.**

All three participants credited their peers for caring about them. In return the participants reciprocated that care by persisting and graduating. The encouraging words provided by Arthur’s friends let him know that he had made the right decision to remain in high school and earn his diploma. Even David admitted that his friends were pushing him to graduate. One of his friends said “I’m proud of you, that’s what I’ve been telling you to do.” David told a friend that had dropped out, that he graduated, and now his friend has decided to return to school. George’s friends continued to encourage him to persist even after they graduated. When he told some of his friends that he was graduating, they sent text messages with “a lot of encouraging words, saying congratulations. I’m so proud of you.” These graduates reciprocated their friends’ care, by caring enough about them to persist and earn their high school diplomas.

The first two sections dealt with caring of the participants by various individuals and the care and reciprocation put forth by the participants to these various individuals. Besides the care shown to the participants and reciprocated by the participants, other factors may also have

influenced their desire to persist in high school to earn their high school diplomas. These individuals were demonstrating resilience.

### **The Participants' Resiliency**

Although these five-year high school graduates had relationships that were influential resulting in their ability to persist and earn their high school diplomas, it also led to the development of resilience. These participants, by “means of human activities, including thought and action” utilized other contributing factors that added to their ability to persist. Joseph (1994) stated that there were three characteristics that composed a resilient individual. The first characteristic is a sense of control which “refers to the basic belief that I as an individual can influence what happens to me. It means that I can control myself and accept responsibility for my own decisions and their consequences.”

#### **The participants' sense of control.**

All the participants agreed that they had matured, and had taken school more seriously, during their fifth year of high school. Arthur stated that his fifth year “was an extra year I didn't have to do if I would've took it serious the first four years.” When Arthur didn't graduate on time, he was “mad at myself, cause I could have done it but I didn't apply myself to do it.” He had matured “because I stopped acting like a little kid.” Arthur could have “quit if I wanted to” but “I'm not a quitter.” Arthur wanted his diploma because “I'd be the only one in my family to graduate.”

David matured and said that he “started thinking about my future.” He said “I started thinking about what can happen after school. When I get out of school and I ain't wanna be sitting around.” He continued that “I started progressing and the years went by and I get into a

different grade level I wanted to go to class more because I see myself falling behind. So over the years I just progressed to becoming more of a student.” David said “I take my work serious and I try to get everything done so I can get finished, I’m determined to finish. I got something to prove not only to myself but to everybody around me, my friends, my mom, and other teachers and things like that.”

George also matured and said “I really started taking school more serious, I developed more and just started trying.” He said that you need to get your diploma “to show that you at least accomplished something within you, feel me, your kid years, your teen years.” He continued that “I learned it’s something in myself you know, facing your fears and accomplishing them.” George “realized that I just gotta want better for yourself and the only way to want better and to get better right now is for me having a high school diploma, I want it for myself, I can’t let myself give up.” He continued and said that earning your high school diploma “shows that you really want to do something with your life, that’s what it shows people. That you really want to do something and go somewhere and be something.”

Joseph (1994) stated that the second characteristic of resiliency is the sense of challenge, “the ability to see the positive aspects of change and to minimize or get beyond the negative aspects of a situation” (p. 31). As these students took responsibility for their actions, they also realized that they wanted a better life for themselves than their mothers had.

### **The sense of challenge for the participants.**

All three participants watched their mothers live paycheck to paycheck. The participants had all worked part-time jobs to help their mothers financially. These five-year high school graduates wanted better lives for themselves and their future families.

Arthur had a job that interfered with school and getting homework done. But this year he had a different job, “just a little less hours but now it’s with my uncle so he cooperates better because he’s family.” When Arthur was asked why he persisted in school when his sisters did not, financial issues came to the forefront. He said “I seen how their lives was and the jobs that they got, and I didn’t want to live like that.” Arthur was asked what advice he would give students in a similar situation to his. He said he would tell them “it’s their choice but they should stay in school because if they stay in school they can earn more money and have a better life after high school. Stay because in the end it’s worth it.”

David “wanted to stay at home and work, so I can pay bills and everything.” At the age of 18 he rented a house and worked approximately 15 hours a day at two jobs. He said “I was kind of making the wrong decision by not coming to school and going to work.” The principal put David into an after school program (the 3 to 7 program) so that he could complete high school while still working two jobs.

As a senior George got a job and stated that he would “rather work sometimes than come to school.” He continued, “I wish I would have just waited to finish high school and then got a job, you know. Like stay focused on school.” Because of his mother’s financial situation, George wanted better for himself. He said “just seeing my mother live paycheck to paycheck each day. I just realized I do not want to be there in my life when I reach that age. I want to have no stress about financial problems and everything and just me growing up and seeing my mother struggle. Live paycheck to paycheck.” He continued “it’s just as I’m getting older I just realize it’s not what I want. I want a career some good something better.” George said that even his brothers told him “to go and continue your education after high school, just to try to get a good job and make some money! You don’t want to live a life where you’re living paycheck to paycheck. You

wanna be living comfortable!” As for the future he said, “Hopefully I got a good job and to be able to support my family.”

Joseph (1994) third characteristic is a “sense of commitment, the ability to find meaning and value in what one is doing. Commitments are the goals we set and the effort we put forth to reach them” (p. 32).

### **Commitments by the participants.**

The goals of the participants all dealt with getting additional training and having careers. This training (higher education) would provide them the career they wanted while earning more than minimum wage.

Arthur had always spoken about “wanting to be a mechanic since I was a little kid.” In return his mother, aunt and grandmother told him “if you don’t graduate you’re not going to be able to become a mechanic because now you have to have your high school diploma and you got to go to I think it’s called a trade school,” and that he had to graduate to be a mechanic. His aunt told him that if he “would graduate high school I can get the job that I want to get.” Arthur also said that he needed “to have a diploma to go to the Army.” He said “I want to graduate, I want to get out of school and I want to go into the military.”

David said “I like money so obviously you gotta graduate school if you wanna have a career. I ain’t just want no job, I wanted to have a career that way I stand for something.” David is now “thinking about joining the military” because “it got a lot of benefits to it and I feel it’ll push me towards the right things.”

George stated that he just wanted “to really get my high school diploma right now, that’s my goal and just to stay working too.” George said “I want a career some good something better. That’s motivation.” He continued, “I’d really like to go to trade school and do a trade like culinary arts. Yeah, and do a trade in barbering too, just a lot of stuff, and probably business.” George said “as the world get tougher, it’s harder to find a job and you just if anything you need a high school diploma.”

The three characteristics that composed a resilient individual, as stated by Joseph (1994), were fulfilled by the participants. Resiliency was another contributing factor is the participants’ ability to persist and earn their high school diplomas.

## **Summary**

The participants persisted for several reasons. Each and every factor contributed to the participants’ persistence resulting in their earning their high school diplomas. They were provided with the ethic of care by many individuals including relatives, school personnel, and friends. The participants also reciprocated that care. They were provided with additional social capital and became resilient individuals. These graduates never said that there was only one reason for their persistence, but discussed several individuals and factors that influenced their decision to persist and become a five-year high school graduate.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to examine persistence in five-year high school graduates who never dropped out of high school. Five individuals, all males, initially qualified to participate in this study. Three were African-Americans, one was Hispanic and one was Caucasian. Three students (two African-Americans, and the Caucasian) completed the study, one, African-American student, dropped out of school to work additional hours allowing his girlfriend to graduate on time, and one, Hispanic student, stopped attending school resulting in the school declaring him a dropout. Three one-on-one interviews were conducted with each of the three participants that completed the study. I was also given access to each of the participant's cumulative record and attendance record.

The prior chapter offered findings addressing the guiding research question: why did these individuals persist in remaining in school a fifth year to earn their high school diploma? There was a high degree of commonality in the participants' responses. I explored a number of themes in the data including, the ethic of care, social capital, and resilience. By examining the experiences described by the participants in chapter 4, I hope to contribute to the understanding of persistence. In this chapter, I consider the findings as they relate to the literature on persistence. I begin with the ethic of care, then social capital and conclude with resilience.

#### **Discussion of the Ethic of Care**

Caring according to Noddings (1988) “prefers acts done out of love and natural inclination” (p. 219). Masten, Best, and Garmezy (1990) stated that “the most important and

consistent protective factor is that of adults caring for children during or after major stressors” (p. 431). My findings agree with those of Noddings (1988), and Masten, Best, and Garmezy (1990).

### **The social unit of family.**

The first group, or social unit, that provided these participants with care “out of love and natural inclination” was their family. All the participants had a special bond with their mothers. The mothers provided encouragement, advice, and confidence to their sons. Arthur’s mother kept telling him “You’re going to graduate! You’re going to make it in life!” Arthur’s mother also would tell him “how proud she would be if I graduated high school.” David said his mother would provide “helpful advice or something to motivate me to keep going.” David’s mother also said “You can do it! Don’t give up success is key!” George said his mother was a “big inspiration to me finishing school” and that she “encouraged me to continue to get my high school diploma.” These participants had mothers that loved and cared for and about them. The mothers were the adults caring for their children in an urban environment. These mothers struggled on a daily basis and desired for their sons lives to be better than theirs. These mothers never earned their high school diplomas and understood the importance of having their sons earn theirs. Although these mothers encouraged their sons to graduate, they were limited in what they could do to ensure their sons persisted. As such they turned to other family members for additional support and assistance.

Even though the mothers may have been the most influential relative the participants had, other relatives also demonstrated the ethic of care. Arthur had a grandmother and an aunt that provided encouragement, advice, and additional support. Arthur also had a stepfather that contributed to the household and never requested Arthur to leave, even after he turned 18.

George had a grandmother and siblings that provided encouragement, advice, and additional support. David did not specifically state that any relative provided any type of support, but it may be that he did not recognize what was provided. David's stepfather did contribute to the household and did pay David's bills for a limited amount of time when David decided to live on his own. David also admitted that he could return home should he have needed to.

With the exception of two siblings, none of the participants other relatives had earned their high school diplomas. These relatives explained to the participants the importance of getting their diplomas and how it would improve their lives. They loved and cared for the participants and did not want them to struggle the way they were. These relatives were also adults caring for children, and provided what they could to help the participants persist and earn their diplomas. The help they provided also was limited as they had little access to individuals outside of immediate family members. Perhaps family members discussed the issue amongst themselves, as there were no responses indicating that anyone had requested any type of assistance from outside sources. The family looked to each other as they tried to determine the necessary actions that would ensure that the participants persisted. Whatever the family did, they did because they cared for and about the participants.

Again, caring according to Noddings (1988) "prefers acts done out of love and natural inclination" (p. 219). However, Cassidy and Bates (2005) stated that "for the caring relationship to be complete, care must be received; that is, the recipient of care must recognize, and in some way respond to, the care provided" (p. 68). My findings agree with those of Noddings (1988) and Cassidy and Bates (2005) as the participants loved and cared for their relatives but they also recognized and reciprocated the care provided to them. Arthur persisted because "I would have felt like I disappointed them (his mother and grandmother)." He also wanted to "give my nieces

someone to look up to someone who's graduated from high school." David stated "I gotta get it done if I wanna make my mama happy." George persisted "because I knew how much it meant to her (his mother)."

The participants listened to what their relatives were telling them while observing their daily struggles. The participants realized that there were several relatives that cared about them, although at times they may not have recognized the care some provided. Masten, Best, and Garmezy (1990) stated that "the most important and consistent protective factor is that of adults caring for children during or after major stressors" (p. 431). Having the participants earn their diplomas would relieve some of the stress that everyone lived with daily. Relatives were stressing that the participants may not persist and the participants were stressing because they wanted to make their relatives happy and proud. The participants understood what these relatives desired from them and that was for them to accomplish what most of the relatives had not, and that was to earn their high school diplomas. The participants had to reciprocate the care provided them and also care enough about their futures to persist and earn their diplomas.

### **The social unit of professionals.**

Family members were not the only social group that cared about the participants. There was another social group that demonstrated the ethic of care, and that group consisted of various school personnel. In addition to what Noddings (1988), and Cassidy and Bates (2005) previously stated in reference to care, Waxman, Gray, and Padron (2002) offered that "schools build resiliency in students through caring and personal relationships" (p. 39). My findings agree with those of Noddings (1988), Cassidy and Bates (2005), and Waxman, Gray, and Padron (2002).

The participants credited their teachers for having taken the time to encourage, advise, and provide additional support to them. Arthur credited several teachers for encouraging him to remain in school and graduate. His Spanish teacher “explained things, why it was important to graduate. She told me I can get a better job if I got a high school diploma, that I could have a better life if I graduate high school.” David said that his teachers “would just be uplifting, small things, words, conversations, help with work, small things like that.” David stated that one teacher told him “even if I feel I didn’t need help still come to him for help.” George also credited several teachers with providing him encouragement and advice. David had one teacher that would give him “advice, man to man; he really showed that he really cared and tried to help.” Another one of David’s teachers spoke to him “not like a student, like a grown man to grown man. So like you were grown now, what are you going to do with your life, you want to be able to live good and have the nice things that you want.”

Not only did the teachers care about their students but so did the counselors. As seniors, the participants had the same counselor that provided them with encouragement and advice. She told the participants that she was disappointed that they did not graduate on time but had confidence that they would graduate this year (their fifth year). Arthur said his counselor “she knew that I was going to do it, she motivated me to graduate.” David said that the counselor told him that “you’re too far, to be trying to quit and give up now.” George stated that the counselor told him that “she was happy to see me continue trying because she knew I could do it.”

David was so close to dropping out that the school’s principal paid him a visit at his house. He said that the principal “gave me about an hour speech about why I shouldn’t stop coming to school and I took that and used that.” David made the decision to persist.

The majority of school personnel have the “natural inclination” to care for and assist students; that is why they became educators. This was evident as the teachers tutored and advised the students, but they did not have to. A teacher’s job is to teach, it does not require that they tutor or provide any type of assistance outside of the classroom. But these teachers and counselors and even the principal invested the extra time with the participants because they cared about them now and about their futures. School personnel became a consistent protective factor for the participants. They were aware of the stress these students were under as a result of living in an urban environment, their family life, and what was waiting for them if they failed to graduate. School personnel care and assist their students because they want them to be successful. The teachers that were involved with the participants could see the potential their students had and understood that education is a key to a better future. So the teachers took the time to work with the participants, not because they had to but because they wanted to. Teachers had access to other school personnel outside of their classroom which they utilized in support of the participants. When the teachers needed additional assistance with the participants, they were able to leave their classroom and discuss the situation with other teachers, or counselors, or the deans, or the vice principal or the principal and vice versa.

The participants also reciprocated the care provided by school personnel. Arthur stated that his teachers “should be able to see me graduate instead of give up.” David also stated, when discussing his teachers, that “I gotta prove myself; I gotta prove a point now.” George stated that his counselor “was happy to see me continue trying.” He also took the advice of the principal when she said that he “shouldn’t stop coming to school.” The participants reciprocated the care provided them by school personnel by understanding the importance of education for their futures; they persisted and earned their diplomas.

### **The social unit of peers.**

Not only did various adult social groups demonstrate the ethic of care, but so did the participants' peers, a different social group. The participants' peers also provided them with encouragement and additional support. One of Arthur's friends told him that it was "good that I'm trying to get my diploma." Other friends just told him "it's better than dropping out." David's friends said "don't quit, you got it, just stay determined." David's other friends told him that he needed to "focus on this, that way I can get done what I have to get done." David mentioned that some of his friends made sure that he avoided any trouble at school, therefore providing some additional support. George also had friends that told him to "keep trying to get your high school diploma." George also mentioned that some of his friends provided additional support by tutoring him.

The participants' peers also desired for them to graduate. Some of the participants' friends had dropped out and were now suffering the consequences of a minimum wage job and living pay check to pay check. These drop outs explained the need to persist and some were even contemplating returning to school. In the military soldiers are taught to never leave your battle buddy behind, and this was true amongst the peers. The participants did not want to leave their friends behind, they wanted to graduate together. These friends did various things, from tutoring the participants to just keeping them out of trouble, anything that was needed at the time to ensure that the participants (their friends) would persist and graduate. This is true friendship which begins with the demonstration of the ethic of care.

The participants reciprocated the care that their peers provided. The encouraging words provided by their friends reinforced the participants' decision to remain in school and graduate.

Friends take care of friends, and in this case the participants took care of their friends by persisting and allowing for their graduation together.

### **Discussion of Social Capital**

The care provided by various social groups also contributed to the participants' gain of social capital. My findings agree with those of Gordon and Song (1994), Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau (2003), Ream (2003), Farmer, Hinton and Adams (2006), and Hemmings (2007). Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau (2003) concluded that "the social networks of working-class and poor families tend to be rooted in and around kinship groups; ties to other parents and to professionals are considerably less common" (p. 327). While Farmer, Hinton and Adams (2006) added that "social capital is an asset, embedded in social relations, which can be used to improve one's life outcomes" (p.101). As discussed previously, the ethic of care was demonstrated by three social groups: the family, school personnel, and peers. The social capital that was had by the family was limited to their kinship group; it did not appear that they had ties to other parents or professionals. The social capital provided by their peers was even more limited. The peers had no social network to speak of, but they may have taken the opportunity to discuss their friend's situation and difficulties with one of the professionals within the school. However, as the participants had a social relationship with various school personnel, or education professionals, they gained additional social capital.

Hemmings (2007) looked at social capital as an educational asset and stated that it "is constituted as the social resources and networks that enable people to promote their own or others' educational achievement and attainment" (p.10). The participants, with the additional social capital gained from their relationship with professionals within the school, allowed for

their “educational achievement and attainment.” The participants passed their classes and earned their high school diplomas. The participants were also able to apply this additional social capital and diplomas to improve their “life outcomes” by providing themselves with more opportunities for their futures. This social capital included but was not limited to advising the participants on what was necessary to achieve their goals, how to apply to college, how to apply for financial aid, getting letters of recommendation, and so forth. For the participant(s) that wanted to join the military, it meant contacting the recruiter from the military branch they wanted to join. The social capital, the networking, which was provided by school personnel, was vast and far superior to what was available to the participants from their families and peers.

### **Discussion of the Ethic of Care and Social Capital**

In my opinion the ethic of care cannot be separated from social capital, which does agree with what various researchers have concluded. Again, caring according to Noddings (1988) “prefers acts done out of love and natural inclination” (p. 219). Masten, Best, and Garmezy (1990) stated that “the most important and consistent protective factor is that of adults caring for children during or after major stressors” (p. 431). Farmer, Hinton and Adams (2006) stated that “social capital is an asset, embedded in social relations, which can be used to improve one’s life outcomes” (p.101). While Hemmings (2007) stated that social capital is an educational asset and that it “is constituted as the social resources and networks that enable people to promote their own or others’ educational achievement and attainment” (p.10). To have a relationship requires the application of the ethic of care by a minimum of two individuals. There were various relationships; between the participants and their relatives, between the participants and school personnel, and between the participants and their peers. Once these relationships were formed, and after care was provided and reciprocated, the participants gained social capital. The amount

of social capital gained varied with which group they had a relationship with. The social capital gained with their relatives was not equivalent to the social capital gained from school personnel. This gained social capital was then utilized “to improve one’s life outcomes” and “promote others’ educational achievement and attainment.” Relatives, school personnel, and peers cared about the participants and wanted them to persist in school and graduate. This demonstrated care was reciprocated by the participants as they did persist in school and graduate. The additional social capital that was gained allowed the participants to improve their “life outcomes” and earn their diplomas. It also allowed the relatives, school personnel, and peers to promote the participants “educational achievement and attainment” as the participants became high school graduates. As “social capital is an asset, embedded in social relations,” you must have some type of relationship with someone else. A relationship which is done “out of love and natural inclination” begins with the ethic of care. Once someone is shown care that individual gains some type of social capital, which will vary with the individual that provides it. Therefore, the ethic of care and social capital cannot stand alone; they are an asset that remains interwoven.

### **Discussion of Resilience**

It appears that it was not just one factor but possibly the intermingling of several factors that resulted in the participants becoming resilient. My findings agree with Masten, Best, and Garmezy (1990), Gordon and Song (1994), Joseph (1994), and Naglieri and LeBuffe (2006). Masten, Best, and Garmezy (1990) stated that resilience is “coping...by means of human activities, including thought and action” (p. 430). Gordon and Song (1994) stated, “age and situation-specific supports for learning and development (generated by oneself or others) are essential to the development of negative prediction defiers” (p. 35). Naglieri and LeBuffe (2006) stated “resilience refers to positive outcomes, adaptation, or the attainment of development

milestones or competencies in the face of significant risk, adversity, or stress” (p. 108). The participants did have a positive outcome and attained a developmental milestone; they graduated from high school and earned their high school diplomas.

Nevertheless, Joseph (1994) was more specific as she stated that there were three characteristics that composed a resilient individual. The first characteristic is a sense of control which “refers to the basic belief that I as an individual can influence what happens to me. It means that I can control myself and accept responsibility for my own decisions and their consequences” (pp. 30-31). The second characteristic is the sense of challenge, “the ability to see the positive aspects of change and to minimize or get beyond the negative aspects of a situation” (p. 31). The last characteristic is a “sense of commitment, the ability to find meaning and value in what one is doing. Commitments are the goals we set and the effort we put forth to reach them” (p. 32).

### **The participants’ sense of control.**

My findings agree with the conclusions of both Joseph (1994) and Obradovic, Burt and Masten (2006). Joseph’s (1994) first characteristic for resiliency dealt with a sense of control, that these participants could “control myself and accept responsibility for my own decisions and their consequences” (pp. 30-31). Obradovic, Burt and Masten (2006), concluded that “the most dramatic changes in pathways of adaptation occurred during emerging adulthood” (p. 341) which was between 17 and 23 years of age; the age of the participants. Arthur stated that his fifth year “was an extra year I didn’t have to do if I would’ve took it serious the first four years” and that “he stopped acting like a kid.” David “started thinking about my future, thinking about can happen after school” and that “I just progressed to becoming more of a student.” While George

stated “I developed more and just started trying” and that earning your high school diploma shows “that you really want to do something and go somewhere and be something.” The participants realized that they had wasted precious time and started taking school more seriously. They had also accepted responsibility for their actions, both in the past and for their future. They had matured, understood the task before them, and made the decision to persist.

### **The sense of challenge for the participants.**

My findings agree with Joseph’s (1994) second characteristic of resilience, the sense of challenge which is “the ability to see the positive aspects of change and to minimize or get beyond the negative aspects of a situation” (p. 31). Arthur said “I seen how their lives was and the jobs that they got, and I didn’t want to live like that.” He stated “stay in school you can earn more money and have a better life after high school.” David wanted to join the military because it has “a lot of benefits.” George stated “I just realized I do not want to be there in my life when I reach that age. I want to have no stress about financial problems and everything and just me growing up and seeing my mother struggle.” Perhaps the participants did see the “positive aspects of change” and got “beyond the negative aspects of a situation”. The participants had watched their mothers and other relatives live pay check to pay check, and did not want to live like that themselves (“get beyond the negative aspects of a situation”). The participants realized that instead of taking the easy way out and dropping out of school, they needed to persist and earn a high school diploma so that they could have a career and become financially secure (“positive aspects of change”).

### **Commitments by the participants.**

My findings also agree with Joseph's (1994) third characteristic of resiliency that being a "sense of commitment, the ability to find meaning and value in what one is doing. Commitments are the goals we set and the effort we put forth to reach them" (p. 32). The participants wanted to make their lives more productive with a better outcome which would require additional education. Arthur had spoken of "wanting to be a mechanic" and needing "a diploma to go to the military." David had also spoken of entering the military. He said "I ain't just want no job, I want to have a career." George wanted to attend a trade school because he wanted "a career, some good something better." He added that "as the world gets tougher, it's harder to find a job; if anything you need a high school diploma". The participants had taken the first step towards attaining their goals; they became committed to earning their high school diplomas.

### **Discussion of Social Capital and Resiliency**

Gordon and Song (1994) and Masten (1994) discussed the importance of supportive environments and significant others as contributing factors to becoming resilient and ensuring success. Rajendran and Videka's (2006) concluded, "social competence as well as a quality relationship to the caregiver contributed strongly to the construct of resilience" (p. 348). The participants had supportive environments at home and at school. They gained social capital from the relationships they had with significant others, their relatives, school personnel, and peers. And they became resilient as a result of these supportive environments and significant others. As additional social capital is needed to become resilient, it appears that that these two factors are also interwoven. Therefore, I must conclude that additional social capital is needed to become resilient.

## **Discussion of the Ethic of Care and Social Capital as well as Social Capital and Resiliency**

In geometry there are several laws of logic, one of which is called the Law of Syllogism. This law states that if P then Q and if Q then R; therefore if P then R. This law can be applied to this study. If the ethic of care is present, then we gain social capital and if we have social capital then we become resilient; therefore if the ethic of care is present we become resilient. This agrees with conclusions from Gordon and Song (1994), Masten (1994), Waxman, Gray, and Padron (2002), and Rajendran and Videka's (2006).

Gordon and Song (1994) and Masten (1994) discussed the importance of supportive environments and significant others as contributing factors to becoming resilient and ensuring success. Rajendran and Videka's (2006) concluded that "social competence as well as a quality relationship to the caregiver contributed strongly to the construct of resilience" (p. 348). Garnezy (1990) stated that "the most important and consistent protective factor is that of adults caring for children during or after major stressors" (p. 431). I would interpret their conclusions to mean that with the addition of social capital as well as with the demonstration of the ethic of care is needed by an individual for the construct of resiliency. Waxman, Gray, and Padron (2002) stated that "schools build resiliency in students through caring and personal relationships" (p. 39). From their conclusion, I would imply that students can become resilient if they are provided with the ethic of care and additional social capital.

For a person to become persistent requires someone demonstrate the ethic of care, that is that someone cares for and about them. Once they receive and reciprocate the ethic of care they gain social capital and become resilient. Based on the conclusions of various researchers discussed above, and this study, the ethic of care cannot be separated from social capital or from

resiliency. The ethic of care goes hand in hand with social capital and with resiliency. The participants persisted because of the ethic of care. With the ethic of care the participants gained social capital. And because of the care and social capital they also became resilient. The participants persisted not because of one factor, but because of the intermingling of various factors which all began when various social groups demonstrated the ethic of care for the participants.

## **Conclusion**

Past qualitative studies have looked at a specific reason for persisting. These studies have looked at the ethic of care or social capital or whatever singular reason the investigator was researching. Although my qualitative study also looked at the various factors that led the participants to persist, it also questioned whether these reasons stood alone or overlapped. In my opinion these reasons overlapped.

You cannot have the ethic of care without social capital or social capital without the ethic of care. You also need the ethic of care and social capital to become resilient. Therefore, I must conclude that the ethic of care, social capital, and resilience overlapped and was needed by the participants to persist and become high school graduates.

Initially, these five-year high school graduates had various social groups that cared for and about them. This ethic of care provided the participants the social relations they needed that would ultimately improve their life outcomes. The participants gained the social resources and networks that enabled parents, school personnel, counselors and peers to promote their educational achievement and attainment. The ethic of care exhibited by various individuals provided the social relations, the social resources, and the social networks needed by the

participants to gain social capital, become resilient, and persist. And the participants reciprocated the care and graduated from high school. It may have taken the participants a fifth year, but they did earn their high school diplomas, the first step to becoming successful adults. The ethic of care and social capital were significant factors and contributed to the construct of resiliency which factored into the participants' persistence.

## **Recommendations**

I have been told research is done to study a problem not to solve it. However, I would like to offer the following two recommendations:

- 1) Advisory periods should be added to students' daily schedule, and should be an informal period. This would allow teachers to have a relationship with their students which would allow a bond to form. The possibility exists that more students would persist, possibly graduating with their cohort, if more students realized that at least one teacher had the inclination and the time to demonstrate the ethic of care for and about them. From this would form a social relationship with added social capital from professional educators.
- 2) This study was conducted at a school where each year the student gets a new counselor. Let that counselor keep that group of students for their entire high school career. Students would know their counselor and their counselor would know them. The ethic of care demonstrated by the counselor would also develop into a social relationship with added social capital that would lend to the construct of resiliency by the students.

## **Future Research**

Additional qualitative research needs be done to test if all the factors in this study can be applied to other students on the verge of dropping out of high school. This study utilized three males from the same school, from the same school system, from the same city, and from the same state. A similar study should be done with a larger quantity of participants from various school systems in various states. But most importantly, females must be included in any future research as there were no females in this study. The factors outlined in this study may or may not affect male and female students similarly.

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