

DROPOUT RE-ENTRY INTO THE EDUCATIONAL PIPELINE VIA  
AN URBAN GED PROGRAM

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by  
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## ABSTRACT

Dropout Re-entry into the Educational Pipeline via an Urban GED Program

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In recent years, an increasing amount of attention has been given to the dropout crisis in the United States, particularly in urban areas. What has not been emphasized as often is the substantial percentage of students who drop out of the traditional educational system, but subsequently drop back into alternative educational programs. This dropping back in is particularly evident in the “adolescentization” of the GED, as currently in the United States, one out of every three GED’s is awarded to a person eighteen years old or younger (Murnane, Willett, & Boudett, 1995). However, little research is devoted to describing the life and/or educational experiences of those involved in re-entry (Rumberger, 1987; Metzger, 1997; Altenbaugh, Engel, & Martin, 1995; Chuang, 1997).

In this study, thirty students in an urban GED program (GEL) were interviewed regarding their educational experiences. Several themes were identified and examined across student experience according to three main phases: how and why students dropped out of school, how they came to re-enter education, and what kept them there. The overall story emerging from the data and analyses began with students experiencing a tremendous amount of tumult and lack of support in both their home and school lives, which eventually led to their early departure. After dropping out, they experienced internal change and maturation wherein getting their GED became tremendously important to them. It is during this time that students were able to take advantage of the positive individuals in their lives and/or seek out more positive individuals who

provided them with support and motivation. Once they decided to go back to school they made multiple re-entry attempts but were dissatisfied with the quality of alternative educational programs until they found the GEL program, at which point they experienced an ethos of caring and support from their teachers and fellow students. Theoretical contributions regarding the role of social capital in re-entry and practice and policy implications are also discussed.

## DEDICATION

To the young students who were generous enough to share their time and experiences with me, thank you.

To my Gasiewski, Feghali, Shibley, and Masny grandparents, whose great sacrifices are the foundation of this achievement.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

As the following terms are open to multiple definitions and usage, for the purposes of this study, these specific definitions are utilized:

**Dropout:** “person between the ages of 16-24 who is not attending school and has not earned a high school diploma” (Keene, 2003, p. 6).

**Re-entry:** “return to an educational system, program, or institution following an extended absence” (Houston, 1995, p. 251 in Keene, 2003, p. 6).

#### *Statement of Research Problem*

In recent years, an increasing amount of attention has been given to the dropout crisis in the United States, particularly in urban areas. It is now understood that the decision to dropout has devastating repercussions on every aspect of life, as dropouts face higher unemployment rates, lower lifelong earnings, higher incident of criminal activity, and greater likelihood of health problems (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Rumberger, 1987; Wayman, 2001; Kaufman, Alt, & Chapman, 2001). With these dire consequences in mind, there has been urgency in understanding the risk factors associated with dropping out and ways to engage in dropout prevention. What has not been emphasized as often is the substantial percentage of students who drop out of the traditional educational system, but subsequently drop back into alternative educational programs. This dropping back in is particularly evident in the “adolescentization” of the GED, as currently in the United States one out of every three GED’s is awarded to a person eighteen years old or younger (Murnane, Willett, & Boudett, 1995). Further, between 1996 and

2001, the total number of GED recipients grew from 514,297 to 655,514, a 27% increase. The estimated increase among sixteen year olds was 42% and the estimated increase among seventeen year olds was 32%, within that same time frame. By 2001, eleven states issued over half of their credentials to teenagers and in 2003, 1,070,000 people took the GED, including nearly 353,100 youth (Rachal, 2004).

The GED tests students in five high school subjects: mathematics, social studies, science, language arts-reading and language arts- writing. In order to pass the test, students must score at least a 410 on each of the five tests. If students do not pass the exam, they are allowed to retake each test up to three times a year. To be eligible to take the GED in Pennsylvania, a student must be at least 18 years of age, be a state resident, and not be enrolled in a secondary school.

In Pennsylvania, the following agencies receive funding from the Bureau of Adult Basic and Literacy Education (ABLE) to operate adult education programs: local educational agencies, community-based organizations, volunteer literacy organizations, institutions of higher education, public or private nonprofit agencies, libraries, the public housing authority, nonprofit institutions, and correctional institutions.

Adult education programs funded by ABLE provide multiple instructional services that address the basic educational needs of educationally disadvantaged adults, including: adult basic education (ABE), English as a Second Language (ESL), and Adult Secondary Education (ASE), which prepares students for the GED. Most youth under the age of 25 are enrolled in the ABE and ASE programs.

Clearly dropping out does not signal the end of students' educational journey. In fact, degree attainment among dropouts is a regular occurrence, and several studies suggest that it is more common now than ever (Wayman, 2001; Astone, 2000). Using data from the National

Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, Kolstad & Kaufman (1989) examined the educational attainment of a cohort of 1988 eighth graders and found that 44% of those who had dropped out had received their high school diploma or GED by 1994. Of those who had not completed their high school diploma by 1994, 43% of them were working on their high school credential. NCES extended this analysis and re-examined the 1988 eighth grade cohort in 2000, revealing that of all the students who had dropped out, 63% of them had earned a high school credential by 2000 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2004). Other estimates of the percentage of dropouts who eventually attain their high school diplomas or GEDs have been as high as 44% (Kolstad & Kaufman, 1989; Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2004) and 59.2% (Wayman, 2001). Indeed, dropping out temporarily, or stopping out and returning to school is “not as non-normative a sequence as it may seem” (Entwisle et al., 2004, p. 1198).

However, little research is devoted to describing the life and/or educational experiences of those involved in re-entry (Rumberger, 1987; Metzger, 1997; Altenbaugh, Engel, & Martin, 1995; Chuang, 1997). The few studies on returning dropouts have not fully explored the variables that affect re-entry nor have they painted a clear picture as to *how* dropouts return to education (Wayman, 2001; Keene, 2002; Chuang, 1997; Borus & Carpenter, 1983; Metzger, 1997). Indeed, the few studies that do exist on student motivation for re-entry focus more on the what prompts re-entry, not on the actual process of re-entry or the possible variations in the ways in which youth come to re-enter education through GED programs.

While models of types of dropouts have been developed, there are no models of returnees. There is dropout research citing “significant persons” (Metzger, 1997; Altenbaugh et al., 1995) as an influential factor bringing about re-entry. These models of dropouts make it clear that youths’ relationships with caring adults are critical, leading me to believe that these same concepts might

be important to conceptualizing re-entry. Yet there is a dearth of qualitative, descriptive pieces devoted to exploring and understanding re-entry. Without these descriptive accounts, we are missing the voices of the youth themselves and what this process is like for them, what their experiences are, and how we can best promote their continuing education. Without this deeper understanding, we are unable to conceptualize a model for re-entry. By studying these detailed accounts of re-entry, we will be able to develop a model that will enable us to understand what happens with students and design programs to suit their needs.

This study will also argue that social capital is a useful concept in helping to understand the role of “significant persons” and the relationships underlying the process of both dropout and re-entry. It is well established that students’ relationships have widespread impact on their educational decisions and educational trajectories (Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Portes, 1998). This form of social capital is highly influential in students’ success:

For many urban students, there is a lack of caring adults in their lives. A sense of community and the presence of caring, compassionate adults and mentors can provide students with the motivation to succeed (Hughes, Riley, Brown, Moore, Sarrett, & Washington, 2008, p. 32).

While the influence of social capital on educational achievement has been examined, few prior studies have attempted to examine this concept as it relates to relationships in this educational context. This study will seek to further the small body of literature aimed at understanding re-entry and the transformative power of this concept in relation to educational achievement.

*Purpose*

The intent of this study is to examine the ways in which out-of-school youth describe their re-entry into the educational pipeline via an urban GED program. Exploring and describing this process from the vantage point of students dropping back in will allow critical insight into the ways in which re-entry into the educational pipeline occurs and the role social capital plays in this process. In combination with other scholarly works, this more complete understanding of the process by which these youth come to re-enter structured education will perhaps help to facilitate other similar students' return to education and thereby begin to improve their life outcomes by aiding in and encouraging dropout re-entry.

*Significance*

A study describing urban youths' reentry into the educational pipeline via an urban GED program can begin to shed light on the ways in which youth return to formal education. This can provide information as to how the process and/or mechanism can be promoted, encouraged, or fostered in order to increase youth participation and GED completion. The potential knowledge gained from this study is important for multiple reasons. Firstly, the high concentration of dropouts in many large cities has been described in the literature as the new "social dynamite" of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Comings, 2001). The severe economic and labor market problems of dropouts together with the high incidence of social troubles amongst this population, including high arrest rates, incarcerations, and low rates of marriage and family stability, are a major public policy concern resulting in tremendous economic and societal costs across multiple sectors (Comings, 2001; Keene, 2002). Strictly in terms of economics, the cost of providing food, housing and medical care for dropouts has cost both taxpayers and dropouts billions of dollars in lost tax

revenues (Keene, 2002). Thus, any knowledge gained from re-entry students about how to decrease the number of dropouts and increase GED completion would contribute, on a very small scale, to our understanding of how to reduce the aforementioned economic and societal challenges.

Secondly, for dropouts individually, getting their GED is a critical step in climbing out of poverty and/or improving their life outcomes. Post deindustrialization, there are few labor jobs which can provide living wages. Forty years ago, seventy percent of jobs involved unskilled labor. Today that number is below thirty percent, making a high school credential necessary in order to pass out of poverty (Zhou, 2003). Thus, it is clear that the missing “middle rung” on the ladder of social mobility can have a devastating impact on youth who do not complete school or earn their GED, for in our ever more technologically based world, new workers must have the academic skills to compete and support themselves and their families (Zhou, 2003; Lipman, 2004).

Thirdly, not only do GED programs provide these academic skills, but also obtaining a GED often serves as an entrée to many new opportunities for dropouts (Imel, 2003). It can signal to employers that a dropout possesses positive traits such as ambition, drive or mastery of basic cognitive skills or provide access to training programs that enhance skills. Taking the GED may signal a positive attitude towards the labor market as part of a learner’s decision to search for steady employment with career potential. Dropouts who obtain a GED become eligible for a number of employment and educational opportunities to which they would otherwise not have access. Also, getting a GED can “provide personal and interpersonal encouragement and a sense of pride and accomplishment that can greatly benefit youth” (Murnane et al., 1995, p. 134).

*Research Questions*

1. How do former out-of-school youth describe their journey back to formal education via an urban GED program?
  - What does re-entry look like?
  - What particular processes and/or mechanisms of re-entry do youth describe?
  - Who or what is involved in the re-entry process as supporters and deterrents to youth continuing their education?
2. Can the form and context of drop out inform an understanding of re-entry?

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In this literature review I will explore the most common factors associated with both dropping out of and re-entering formal education in an attempt to argue that understanding the processes and mechanisms by which students drop back in to the educational pipeline is just as critical as understanding the processes and mechanisms by which they drop out. As a substantial portion of students are re-entering education through alternative educational opportunities like the GED, exploring how and why they are doing so will yield critical information that can be used to increase the number of students able to re-enter, earn their GED, and improve their overall life course. I will then examine the ways in which school leaving is understood, as conceptually, I argue that the categorization system describing school dropouts could greatly inform the understanding of re-entry students and their patterns of school return. Finally, I will examine the theoretical underpinnings of dropout and re-entry, arguing that at the heart of this framework is social capital, in the form of relationships, which plays an instrumental role in determining when and how students drop out and eventually drop back in.

Overall, I find the dropout literature to be lacking in several areas. Most studies rely upon demographic data based on surveys and questionnaires, telling us about who the students are and what characteristics they possess. Fewer studies are based upon the perspective of the students themselves, describing their life experiences. In this way, students' perspectives are missing from much of this research. Further, "dropout" is used as a blanket term to describe a wide variety of student experiences, despite the fact there is evidence that dropping out is a

nuanced and complex process. This process is not often explored or described. Finally, re-entry receives very little attention, despite the high number of students returning to education. Thus, we know very little about how and why students re-enter education or what this experience looks like. These flaws in the literature will be explored further in the literature review below.

### *Characteristics of Dropouts*

In his seminal work on dropouts, Rumberger (1987) describes several major categories of risk factors associated with dropping out based on the empirical literature up to that point, including “demographic, family related, peer, school-related, economic and individual” (Rumberger, 1987, p. 109). Although Rumberger’s framework was created twenty years ago, this model is consistent with current thinking on the subject (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Keene, 2002). Thus, this categorization system will be used as a basis for briefly outlining the predominant risk factors associated with dropping out.

Again, it should be noted that most of the studies linking these characteristics with dropout status come with great limitation in that they describe the dropout by naming their specific characteristics, but are unable to truly describe the overall process and experience of each student. In this way the how’s and why’s of the dropout experience are neglected.

#### *Demographic factors.*

The relationship between location of residence, gender and ethnicity and dropping out is firmly established in the literature (Kaufman et al., 2001; Keene, 2002; Chuang, 1997). Youth living in urban areas are more at risk for dropping out than those living in rural or suburban schools, as are those living in the southern and western parts of the United States (Kaufman et al., 2001). In cities with high rates of poverty, dropout rates approach 50% (Alexander, Entwisle

& Kabbani, 2001). Additionally, males are more likely to drop out than females, as are members of racial and ethnic minorities (Rumberger, 1987; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Keene, 2002; Chuang, 1997). Further, the NCES Dropout Report of 2000 reveals that of the 10.9 percent of 16-24 year olds dropouts in 2000, 6.9% were white, 13.1% were Black, 27.8% were Hispanic, and 3.8% were Asian/Pacific Islander. Those findings are reflected in 2002 graduation rates, as well.

This data establishes who is more or less likely to drop out, but what are the similarities and differences in process? What do each of these experiences look like? It is questions like this that quantitative, numbers based research fails to answer. This holds true for the remaining risk factors associated with dropping out described in below.

*Economic factors.*

Dropout rates are higher among students whose families have lower socioeconomic status, lower educational and occupational attainment levels of parents, and lower overall family income (Rumberger, 1987; Croninger & Lee 2001; Keene 2002; Chuang, 1997). In 2000, youth ages 16-24 living in families with incomes in the lowest 20 percent were six times as likely as their peers from families in the top 20 percent of the income distribution to drop out of high school (Kaufman et al., 2001). In another study, students of lower socioeconomic status had a dropout rate four times higher than that of students of a higher socioeconomic status (Alexander et al., 2001).

*Family factors.*

Speaking a language other than English in the home, limited English proficiency in the home, single parent families, having a sibling who has already dropped out, and the absence of learning materials in the home are all associated with increased risk of dropping out (Rumberger, 1987; Keene 2002).

Further, King (2002) conducted a study of 119 participants in GED programs who dropped out of high school from 1996-2001, ranging in age from 16-23 years in nine communities in the southern part of United States. King's results indicated that the primary barrier to participation in school was related to family constraints. The participants indicated that they had a lack of encouragement from family and friends, had difficulty arranging childcare, felt an obligation to help their families, and had other family problems that affected their participation.

King's study is one of only a few that asks students about their dropout experience and expands the category of family factors into a rich examination of familial relationships and the ways in which they affect students' dropout status. More studies like King's need to be undertaken, as this category of risk warrants greater in-depth examination across the literature.

*School related factors.*

Youth identified as at risk for dropping out are often those who do not fit the mainstream educational mold. Their learning styles, learning disabilities, or life experiences may be factors leading to their low achievement or their behavior that is often considered unacceptable by schools. Students who dropout are more likely to experience poor academic achievement, have a weak academic background measured by grades, test scores, and grade retention, and are more likely to be in special education or alternative programs (Entwisle et al., 2004; Chuang, 1997). Being off-time in school, (having been held back) is critical in relation to dropping out as well (Alexander, Entwisle & Horsey, 1997; Entwisle et al., 2004; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). Based on the NELS88, Second Follow-Up survey, one fifth of dropouts had been held back a grade (Schwartz, 1995). They also often experience behavioral or disciplinary problems in school, such as: absenteeism, truancy, and spending little time on homework (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986).

This line of research linking school related factors to dropping out does little to examine or acknowledge the role that the school itself, or its teachers, play in students' dropping out. Thus, this view of dropping out is too student centered and the impact of outside factors are not given enough attention.

*Individual factors.*

Dropouts are often found to have lower levels of self esteem and less sense of control over their lives than non-dropouts (Schwartz, 1995). They often have poor attitudes about school and low educational and occupational aspirations (Rumberger, 1987). Dropouts also often cite a lack of social and academic support (Croninger & Lee, 2001). Additionally, students with adult responsibilities like being employed or having to take care of a child are more likely to drop out than those without these responsibilities.

The Metropolitan Alliance for Adult Learning (2003) expands on these factors, citing several other consistent markers of youth headed for dropping out of school, including a set of experiences, behaviors, and attitudes that impede academic and economic success. Their safety net of social protectors is usually broken and they have access to fewer positive role models. They may have experienced past failures in schools and pursued street life. They are often more vulnerable to crime, substance abuse and violence. These youth often reject traditional social values in favor of street values, are focused on short term street survival, and are pessimistic about their future.

When asked why they dropped out of school, members of the NELS88 Follow-Up cohort of dropouts cited the following reasons most often: got a job, had to support a family, had trouble managing school and work, got married, got pregnant, wanted to have a family, had friends who dropped out, and had a drug or alcohol problem (Schwartz, 1995).

### *Peer related factors.*

Primary peer related factors influencing the risk for dropping out include identifying with friends who dropped out, having friends with low expectations for school, gang involvement, and the effects of peer pressure resulting in poor academic achievement, attendance, and issues with school discipline (Ginsburg et al., 2000; Rumberger, 1987; Keene, 2002). Peers are extremely important during adolescence, as teenagers spend their days in school interacting with their peers. A great deal of research indicates that negative relationships with peers contributes to the dropout problem (Downing & Harrison, 1990; Seidel & Vaughn, 1991). Research also indicates that socializing with peers is one of the five most important factors in motivating youth to stay in school (Kortering, Konold, & Glutting, 1998).

### *Characteristics of Re-Entry Students*

Many studies show that temporary dropouts differ substantially from permanent dropouts before they leave school. It is well established that students who returned to get their GED finished more years of high school than permanent dropouts (Entwisle et al., 2004), were more likely to expect to complete high school (Metzer, 1997; Chuang, 1997; Entwisle et al., 2004; Wayman, 2001), had higher cognitive scores (Murnane et al., 1995) and came from higher SES backgrounds (Wayman, 2001; Cameron & Heckman, 1993; Entwisle et al., 2004).

Entwisle et al. (2004) examined further data on the NELS88 sample students and concluded that years of parental education were higher for temporary dropouts, and that they were less likely to be parents. Temporary dropouts also had less of a likelihood of being retained. Grade level at time of dropout was more than half a year higher for temporary as compared to permanent dropouts. On average, educational expectations at age fourteen were

significantly higher for temporary dropouts; nearly 70% of temporary dropouts expected at least a high school education, compared with 57% of permanent dropouts.

Entwisle et al. also explored differences in motivation characteristics and examined a temperament/disposition measure on the NELS88 survey, noting that temporary dropouts had more positive ratings on this scale than permanent dropouts, and that dropouts who returned seemed to possess a resiliency that enabled them to overcome their earlier academic failures.

Thus far, I hope to have provided ample research regarding the risk factors most often associated with dropping out, as the student characteristics and demographics associated with dropout are well established. Again, what is not provided by existent research is the student's perspective of the dropout and re-entry experience, what these processes look like, and how they happen.

#### *Why return?*

The few existent studies of dropouts' re-entry into educational programs find that re-entry is based upon one of three motivations: a critical incident, such as the birth of a new baby, loss of a job, or graduation of a friend (Metzer, 1997), a significant person's guidance and encouragement (Altenbaugh et al., 1995), or purely economic motivation (Altenbaugh et al., 1995).

Metzer (1997) interviewed ninety-five dropouts regarding their motivation for re-entry and described their responses in depth. Some dropouts stated that their decision to return to education came the moment they realized that without education they could go nowhere. Others stated their decision was influenced by a friend who had successfully returned to school, while some cited a new sense of responsibility associated with becoming a parent. Returnees reported changes in personal views and attitudes occurring between dropping out and returning, including

setting clear goals, feeling more mature, assuming responsibility for themselves or for their child, being motivated to accomplish a goal, feeling independent, valuing money, or becoming decisive. Metzger states that it was the combination of both a critical incident and growth of understanding that the decision to return to school was formulated.

The returnees also identified the following changes in themselves that made them decide to return to education: 31% wanted a better job and a better life, 20% were more motivated to get an education, 16% felt uneducated, 12% had assumed the responsibilities of parenthood, 8% realized the benefits of money or valuing money, 7% wanted to be self supporting, and 5% had been encouraged.

Altenbaugh et al. (1995) also interviewed dropouts and returnees, stating that youth often need advice or guidance to make the decision to return. They stated that many dropouts admitted that no one had contacted them after they left school and that this is indicative of the current social system wherein dropouts are unconnected and un-counseled.

Further Altenbaugh et al. write that dropouts return for largely economic reasons (Altenbaugh et al., 1995, p. 142). Based upon their interviews, they found that dropouts recognized that they were unlikely to find steady employment at anything beyond minimum wage and hoped returning to a reentry program, obtaining a GED, and receiving job training would make them more employable.

I find that most of the studies of re-entry focus almost exclusively on the motivation for re-entry while neglecting the processes and/or mechanisms involved. In this way, what re-entry looks like from a student's perspective is not well established. It is this vantage point that this study seeks to capture and this gap in the literature that this study seeks to fill.

### *Ways of School Leaving*

As the aforementioned section reveals, dropping out is not necessarily related to one key event or decision and does not happen in a uniform manner. The interviews conducted by Altenbaugh et al. with early exit students and their categorization system described below make explicit that most types of early school exit are the culmination of a series of events over time. Rumberger (1987) agrees that dropping out might better be viewed as a process of disengagement from school that culminates in leaving.

Thus Altenbaugh et al. (1995) operationalize the idea of school leaving into four distinctions: dropouts, pushouts, fadeouts, and easeouts, as well as combinations of the four (Altenbaugh et al., 1995, p. 122). Their work builds upon that of Bickel, Bond, and LeMahieu who questioned whether there was one definition of dropout, and coined the phrase “early school exit”. They argued that students who leave before school completion fall into three categories. First, the dropout, “consciously decides to leave early for multiple reasons”, such as pregnancy or disciplinary issues (Altenbaugh et al., 1995, p. 123). Dropouts often feel progressively marginalized in school and a single event can trigger their departure. An example drawn from Altenbaugh et al. involves a young man who was caught smoking a joint in school. This resulted in him getting kicked off the football team and soon after, quitting school. Secondly, pushouts “perceive that the school and its personnel are hostile” and often experience a gradual, but steady, escalation in conflict with authority (Altenbaugh et al., 1995, p. 124). Thirdly, fadeouts’ “decision to leave school does not occur at a particular time and is a less conscious choice” (Altenbaugh et al., 1995, p. 124). These students are often overwhelmed by cumulative effects of negative experiences over time. Additionally, Altenbaugh et al. add the term easeouts, who

experience a process of school leaving and “abandon schooling with either administrative or teacher encouragement” (Altenbaugh et al., 1995, p. 125).

Similarly, Lessard et al. asked dropouts to identify what preceded their leaving school: 48% could recall a pivotal moment, while 52% described a gradual process of fade out (2007, p. 11). “Pivotal moments,” were specific events that were instrumental in changing a participant’s educational journey, while “fading out” described a growing lack of motivation to go to school as students gradually disengaged (Lessard et al., 2007, p. 11).

Any categorization system for differentiating types of dropouts is not widely used in the dropout literature. The majority of research uses the term “dropout” as an overarching term, ignoring individual variation and the process by which the individual comes to dropout. The same can be said of the term “re-entry.” As the literature exists now, there are minimal, if any, studies devoted to examining the intricacies of re-entry, despite the fact that there are clear variations in the ways youth come to re-enter formal education. Perhaps, just as this framework has been used to explain the intricacies of dropouts, it could lend itself to explaining its reverse. Applying a variation of this school leaving framework to school re-entry would yield a categorization system that could capture distinctions in the process of re-entry and the mechanisms through which students return to the educational pipeline. Utilizing a similar categorization system for re-entry could provide the framework through which to capture the main mechanisms of re-entry described in the literature as well as the motivations described in both Altenbaugh et al. and Metzger’s interviews with returnees. Both sets of interviews indicate that dropouts experience a growth of understanding or change in their perception regarding the importance of education. This is what this study seeks to begin to understand.

*GED and Youth: Why?*

It is clear that youth are entering GED programs in large numbers and in a variety of ways (Comings, J., Sum, A., & Reder, S., 2001; Hughes, Riley, Brown, Moore, S., Sarrett, & Washington, 2007; Imel, 2003; Kerka, 2003; King, 2002; Murnane, Willett, & Boudett, 1995; Rachal & Mallard, 2004). In order to understand and describe this phenomenon, it is critical to consider the literature regarding why youth choose GED programs as their path to continued education.

From the inception of the GED around World War II, there was a regulation that test takers had to be at least twenty years old. This was to discourage students from dropping out. In 1981, the minimum age was dropped nationally because of the concern among GED agencies about age discrimination. In 1992, the minimum age was reinstated to sixteen; however, the GED was originally conceived and offered particularly as an opportunity for adults. According to the executive director of the GED Testing Service, the GED is still a program for adults: “After sixty years, there should be no illusion about the purpose of the GED program-it is to provide adults a second opportunity to certify their high school level academic knowledge and skills” (Rachal, 2004, p. 32 ).

The entry of youth into GED programs in large numbers is thought to be based on several factors, including the educational reform movement that is increasing requirements for high school graduation and new enrollment requirements under the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act. This opens the door for programs in some states to be viable alternatives for youth. Imel (2003) describes other factors contributing to increased youth presence in GED programs, including: insufficient alternative programs created by school districts to serve high school dropouts, a lack of knowledge of other alternative programs, and the failure of some alternative

programs to meet the needs of some high school dropouts. Other reasons for youth entry into alternative educational programs include: high school adjustment difficulties, court referral, misperceptions of the GED, preference for an adult environment, and program marketing (Perrin, Flugman & Speigel, 2006).

Despite their increasing enrollment, many students seem to evidence a lack of understanding of the strong literacy and math skills needed to pass the GED, which may create the perception that the GED is an easy out. Indeed, several researchers cite youths' view that the GED is easier and takes less time than traditional high school, as GED programs are often termed "high school lite" by many 16-17 year olds (Bingham, 2002, p. 8-9).

There is further evidence as cited by Rachal that school counselors and school officials recommend GED programs as an alternative for "problem" students. These officials are participating in what amounts to "administrative collusion" in the dropout culture (Rachal & Millard, 2004, p. 39).

Another issue increasing youth presence in GED programs is discharge from school. While discharge or push-out was discussed earlier as one of the four categories of dropout, it must be revisited as a significant cause of youth GED participation. A particularly powerful example of this rising problem is evidenced in New York City public high schools where from 1997-2001 more than 160,000 high schools students were discharged (Gotbaum, 2002). Gotbaum contends that these students were forced push-outs by administrators and many of these discharged students attended GED programs as a result.

It is critical to note that dropouts who obtain a GED become eligible for both employment and educational opportunities to which they would otherwise not have access. That is not to say that the GED should be promoted over completion of standard high school. In fact,

there is a large economic cost to getting a GED over a high school diploma since the GED has less value on the job market and/or as a step to college (Scanlon & Lellard, 2002). In fact, Murnane, Willett, and Tyler (1996) found that males with a high school degree earned 14-23% more than males with a GED certificate. These results hold true for females as well.

### *GED and Youth: What Do Successful Programs Look Like?*

The reasons for youth attending GED programs have just been examined, but what do strong programs serving these students look like? By examining these programs and understanding what works with youth in this educational context, we can begin to model other programs on these examples and promote best practices.

*YouthBuild USA* is one prime example of a successful alternative youth education program that promotes resiliency and success in youth who have exited traditional education. Its underlying philosophy of respect promotes youth as untapped resources. Pines (1999) describes program features which include supportive peer-group communities, community service, culturally appropriate curricula, youth leadership development, participation in program governance, and follow-up through alumni clubs and support services such as information, counseling, and job placement. Pines also describes how in the ten years between 1988-1998, *YouthBuild* programs served more than 20,000 youth ages 16-24. Through *YouthBuild*, students are provided with opportunities to perform meaningful work while learning marketable skills and building warm relationships with caring adults committed to youth. They are also provided with systematic attention to improving basic skills toward achievement of a diploma, GED certificate, or college entrance as well as a safe space in which to achieve their goals.

Another successful program is *Bridge over Troubled Waters* in Boston, where the mission is "doing whatever it takes" for at-risk youth. Kerka (2003) describes the vision, mission, and philosophy as being intended to let young people know that there are adults who care for them, respect them, and want to help to build their sense of accomplishment, purpose, direction, and hope for the future. They offer a wide range of services, including: a pre-employment program, basic skills training, career development, college preparation, health education, peer counseling, parenting support, and inclusion services for youth with developmental disabilities (Bridge over Troubled Waters, 2003). The pre-employment component utilizes an assets approach implemented by caring, well-trained staff and includes a curriculum geared toward assisting youth in developing self-awareness about their assets and limitations. Kerka (2003) writes that this program offers youth "opportunities to feel a sense of support, a sense of belonging, a sense of control over their lives, and hope for the future" (p. 3).

Imel (2003) cites another GED program as highly successful in working with youth called *Future Works*. This GED preparation program for teenagers at risk recruits and enrolls youth who have failed in other alternative education programs or one of four target high schools in Virginia. Students participants identified the following program characteristics as especially beneficial: respect for individual needs (small classes, individualized instruction), supportive climate (informal classroom climate), and alternative opportunities (opportunities to accomplish goals through less traditional routes).

*YouthBuild*, *Bridge Over Troubled Waters*, and *Future Works* are all alternative educational programs that have proven especially successful in working with youth populations. Looking across these programs, several commonalities are evident. Each offers relevant and individualized instruction. Additionally, these programs take a more holistic approach to student

success by providing supportive services such as counseling, job placement, and college preparation. They truly seem to view the student as a complete individual with needs extending beyond academics. Finally, these programs place great emphasis on establishing a supportive climate where youth feel valued and build strong, supportive relationships.

### *Social Capital*

The intent of the prior sections of this literature review was to set the context for this study of dropout re-entry into the educational pipeline and outline a conceptual basis for this investigation. With this in mind, I will now continue the review of the literature and describe the theoretical basis for this study.

Multiple authors recognize the essential role of social capital in promoting academic achievement. (Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995; Portes, 1998; Sandefur, Meier, & Hernandez, 1999; Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Teachman, Paasch, & Carver, 1996). I argue that social capital plays an integral role in *both* dropping out and re-entry. For many urban students, it is the lack of social capital that contributes significantly to their dropping out, while the emergence of social capital plays a considerable role in their re-entry.

Many researchers have written about social capital as it relates to educational outcomes, most prominently Pierre Bourdieu, who extended the idea into multiple categories, including cultural, symbolic, and social capital. Yet the most useful and applicable consideration of social capital in this particular context comes from James Coleman. Coleman defined social capital as **a resource inhering in the relations between and among individuals** and posited that resources that facilitate the wellbeing and development of children are borne of these relationships (Coleman, 1988). In this way, Coleman suggested a broader theoretical perspective

within which to view the effects of family and other relationships on child wellbeing, growth, and achievement. He suggested that a connectedness between a child, her family, friends, community, and school could translate into higher academic achievement (Meier, 1999).

Much of the criticism of Coleman's initial conception relates to the broad definition and a lack of distinctions amongst different aspects of social capital (Astone et al., 1999; Portes, 1998; Sandefur and Laumann, 1998; Teachman et al., 1996). However, researchers using Coleman's approach to social capital have proposed a variety of ways to achieve greater conceptual clarity by discriminating amongst several different dimensions of social capital (Meier, 1999). Portes (1998) suggests three specific categories of social capital: possessors of social capital, sources of social capital and resources available through social capital. Sandefur and Laumann (1998) recognize two distinct categories of social capital: forms and benefits. Astone et al. (1999) break social capital into three distinct elements: forms of social capital (e.g., family structure), quality of social capital (e.g., degree of social involvement in relationships) and the resources available via a form of social capital (e.g. advice and information from parents or others).

For the purposes of this study, I will utilize Coleman's original definition of social capital as inhering in the relations between and among individuals. Thus the actual form of social capital then, in this context, is relationships themselves. For example, relationships with parents are one form of social capital. Other relationships, such as those with teachers and students at school or in the neighborhood, represent other forms of social capital. I do not deny that other aspects of social capital, such as the quality of connections and resultant resources are equally as important, but they are simply beyond the scope of this small study.

The two main relationships that will be focused on in later sections are the child-parent relationship and the child-teacher relationship. Many researchers have examined measures of

parent-child interaction and found a positive correlation to child wellbeing (Thomson, Hanson, and McLanahan, 1994; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994; Marmer and Harris, 1998; Furstenberg and Hughes, 1995). Teachman et al. (1996) find that parents who interact with their children have children who are more likely to avoid dropping out of school than children who have little or no meaningful interaction with their parents (Meier, 1999). In terms of the child-teacher relationship, teachers can provide tremendous amounts of academic guidance and assistance since this is their primary relationship with students. Good relationships between teachers and students work to promote academic achievement, school involvement, and other positive educational outcomes.

There is a vast amount of literature citing the tremendous effects of social capital, in the form of positive relationships, on high school completion and dropping out (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995; Portes, 1998, Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Teachman, Paasch, & Carver, 1996; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). Indeed, Croninger & Lee (2001) posit that it is the nature of the existent social relationships that matters most. From this perspective differences in the “probability of dropping out can be explained by differences in the quality of the social networks that comprise a student’s interactions with adults” (Croninger & Lee, 2001, p. 554). Thus, because of its predictive role in educational outcomes, particularly in dropout, social capital will surely play a significant role in the re-entry process.

### *Individual Relationships: The Building Blocks of Social Capital*

The importance of students’ individual positive relationships with adults and the resultant resources stemming from these relationships is echoed throughout the literature. Lee calls these positive relationships “safety valves” which provide students with “emotional support,

encouragement, and actual assistance when personal or academic problems threaten to overwhelm them” (Croninger & Lee, 2001, p. 551). Without these positive relationships, the aforementioned risk factors associated with dropping out are clearly quite powerful and challenging to overcome.

Kerka cites researchers at the Search Institute who identified adult role models, supportive relationship with three or more other adults, adults in the community valuing youth, and ongoing relationships with caring adults, as essential to youth’s health and well-being and success. (Kerka, 2003). Likewise, Matsen & Coatsworth (1998), among others, cite the critical protective influence of supportive relationships with adults. Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, Ouston, & Smith, (1979) echo the aforementioned, citing the importance of “one good relationship,” stressing the importance of adults in the lives of youth at risk for dropping out of school.

The presence of caring, knowledgeable adults provides support for out-of-school youth in many ways. Indeed, outside of the immediate family, the most frequently encountered positive role models in the lives of youth in alternative educational programs are teachers, who are not viewed only as instructors, but also as confidants and positive role models (Werner, 1990). Noddings (1988) writes that a caring relationship with a teacher gives youth the motivation for wanting to succeed:

At a time when the traditional structures of caring have deteriorated, schools must become places where teachers and students live together, talk with each other, take delight in each other's company....It is obvious that children will work harder and do things...for people they love and trust (Noddings, 1988, p. 8).

Indeed, the presence of caring, knowledgeable adults, who may be teachers, counselors, mentors, case workers, or community members, who understand and deeply care about youth

and provide them with significant time and attention is cited as a critical element of successful youth alternative education programs (Jekielek, Moore & Hair, 2002). Youth at risk for dropping out of school often feel that teachers, administrators, and others are not interested in their well-being and success. Students need caring adults to help establish a climate of trust and support that lets them know someone is paying attention to them and that someone is there for them.

Through this literature review, I hope to have established a conceptual and theoretical basis for this study. Despite the overwhelming body of literature devoted to the study of “dropout”, the term still lacks the nuanced usage, which the variety of student experiences necessitates. Furthermore, the predominance of quantitative studies devoted to the collection of demographic data overwhelms the number of in-depth, rich examinations of the dropout experience while completely neglecting the re-entry experience all together. These studies are necessary as an increasing number of young students are attempting to complete their high school credential through alternative educational programs. Those programs that are especially effective in helping young students achieve this goal are characterized by a strong sense of community, comprehensive support services, and most importantly, strong, supportive relationships between students and teachers. These relationships greatly influence educational success and represent one especially potent form of social capital.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS

#### *Scope/Bounds of the Study*

The main purpose of this study is to examine and describe the ways in which out-of-school youth navigate their re-entry into the educational pipeline via an urban GED program. The aims of this study are exploratory, descriptive, and analytic, as little is known about what the re-entry process looks like for this population (Penna & Tallerico, 2005). As research on dropouts often takes a quantitative approach or specifically aims to link risk factors with dropout status, the aim of this research is to understand one aspect of dropouts' educational journey from their perspective. Thus, this study employs qualitative methods, in an attempt to reconstruct re-entry through student perceptions and experience, thus gaining some insight into the re-entry process (Altenbaugh et al., 1995, p. 3). Although this approach is seldom taken in the limited literature on re-entry, Altenbaugh et al. cite its particular strengths: "There is a richness and depth of feeling expressed by school leavers themselves that cannot be approximated by the collection of large volumes of statistical data" (Altenbaugh et al., 1995, p. 146). Guiding this qualitative approach, the following research questions were posed:

1. How do former out-of-school youth describe their journey back to formal education via an urban GED program?
  - What does re-entry look like?
  - What particular processes and/or mechanisms of re-entry do youth describe?
  - Who or what is involved in the re-entry process as supporters and deterrents to youth continuing their education?
2. Can the form and context of drop out inform the understanding of re-entry?

### *Sample*

The selection of the setting and participants for this study is based upon purposive sampling. The data collection has taken place at a GED program, here called GEL. The site was selected because it is emblematic of a GED program in an urban setting with a high number of youth participants. It is operated by a university, which is one of the state designated institutions available to run GED programs, and serves a variety of students in terms of age, race, gender, and location of residence.

The age group 18-24 was chosen since it is the age range most commonly utilized in research on youth, with 16-17 year olds excluded, so that minors were not involved and parental consent was not needed (Metzer, 1997; Keene, 2003). It is necessary that students themselves act as participants, because it is their multiple and complex experiences this research seeks to understand (Hughes et al., 2008).

### *Sample: What does an average youth participant look like?*

Thirty individual interviews were conducted with participants, in keeping with other qualitative studies of youth participation in alternative education programs (Perin, Flugman & Spiegel, 2006). This number of participants is necessary in order to capture the range of participant experience and to generate common themes.

The average participant in this study was a twenty year old, African American female, as 80% of participants were female and 86% were African American. In terms of time of dropout, 10% dropped out after the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, 43% dropped out after the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, 30% dropped out after the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, and 16% dropped out after the 11<sup>th</sup> grade. Approximately 56% (17) had parents who graduated from high school, 50% (15) had siblings who graduated from high school, and

63% (19) were unemployed. None were designated special education students. All but three of the students attended a comprehensive high school and public grade school. The chart below depicts this demographic data.

ID #	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Last Grade Completed	Employed	Comprehensive H.S.	Parents Grad. H.S.	Siblings Grad. H.S.
1	18	F	AA	10th	No	No	yes	Yes
2	19	F	AA	9th	No	No	no	Yes
3	23	F	AA	10th	Yes	No	no	No
4	18	M	AA	9th	Yes	Yes	yes	No
5	22	F	AA	10th	No	Yes	no	No
6	21	F	AA	10th	No	Yes	yes	Yes
7	24	M	AA	11th	No	Yes	no	Yes
8	18	F	AA	11th	Yes	Yes	yes	No
9	24	F	AA	10th	No	No	yes	Yes
10	18	M	AA	8th	No	Yes	yes	No
11	18	F	AA	10th	No	Yes	yes	Yes
12	24	F	AA	9th	No	Yes	yes	Yes
13	20	F	AA	10th	No	Yes	yes	No
14	22	F	AA	11th	No	Yes	no	No
15	18	M	AA	11th	No	Yes	no	No
16	21	F	AA	10th	No	Yes	no	No
17	24	F	AA	11th	Yes	Yes	no	Yes
18	18	F	AA	9th	Yes	Yes	no	No
19	18	F	AA	8th	Yes	Yes	yes	Yes
20	20	F	Cuban	9th	No	Yes	no	No
21	22	F	AA	9th	No	Yes	no	No
22	22	F	AA/PR	10th	Yes	Yes	yes	No
23	19	F	AA	9th	No	Yes	yes	Yes
24	25	F	Other	8th	No	Yes	yes	Yes
25	18	F	AA/Caucasian	9th	No	Yes	yes	Yes
26	24	F	AA	9th	No	Yes	yes	Yes
27	19	M	Latino	9th	No	Yes	yes	Yes
28	23	M	Other	9th	No	Yes	yes	Yes
29	19	F	AA	9th	No	Yes	no	No
30	21	F	AA	9th	No	Yes	no	No

### *Procedure*

I conducted interviews during two GEL cycles: June and October of 2008. Early in each cycle, I went into the classrooms and was introduced by the instructor. I then explained the purpose of my research, described the criteria for participation, and asked for volunteers.

Through this process, I was able to interview every individual in the GEL program during this time period between the ages of 18-24.

Once students agreed to participate, we went one at a time, into a private office off of the main classroom in order to conduct the interview. I once again explained the purpose of my research, but in greater detail, to make sure they would be comfortable answering my questions. I asked each student to fill out the informed consent, audiotape permission forms, as well as the questionnaire. I answered general questions, and helped with any reading/writing problems that arose, although they were minimal. Once the paperwork was complete, the interview began. Interviews ranged in length from 4 minutes to 45 minutes, and were digitally recorded and transcribed by an outside transcription company. The transcription company signed a confidentiality agreement and the researcher maintained a signed/dated copy. Interviews were then coded for themes and analyzed.

Upon completion of each interview, I assigned each participant an identification number and put the questionnaires in a sealed envelope until arrival at my home office. The participants' identities were kept confidential. The log relating identification numbers to identities was kept in a locked file cabinet to which only I had access.

In conjunction with questionnaire administration, I conducted participant observation during two Learning to Learn week sessions, wherein I observed the entire GEL student body for a total of six days. Observation consisted of disclosing my identity on the first day of each session, and sitting amongst the participants observing interactions.

#### *Forms of Data Collection/Instruments/Process*

The data sources in this study include (a) pre-interview questionnaire (b) face-to-face, one-on-one semi-structured, in-depth interviews (c) participant observation.

The questionnaire allowed me to gather a host of demographic data. As described in previous sections, youth who drop out of school often face a host of challenges, among them low self esteem and poor attitudes about school (Schwartz, 1995; Rumberger, 1987). With these challenges in mind, individual one-on-one interviews provided an atmosphere that has been known to work effectively with drop-out youth (Lessard et al., 2007; Hughes et al., 2007; Metzger, 1997). In group interview settings, participants are not only responding to the questions, but to each other and the group dynamic (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, p. 199). Also, some participants may be more verbally dominant than others, stifling some students' responses. The few existent qualitative studies on re-entry students have utilized interviews as their main investigatory method. This study follows suit, utilizing an in-depth, semi-structured interview protocol (Metzger, 1997; Altenbaugh et al., 1995). Research on dropout youth indicates that when seeking information about at-risk youth, interviews are the best way to obtain this information (Graham 1993, in Keene 2002).

Semi-structured, in depth interviews in particular, allow participants to guide the conversation more readily toward the topic that is most relevant to them within the framework of the interview. This type of interview relies on a prepared set of questions and attempts to guide the conversation around those questions, while allowing participants some freedom to talk about what is of interest or importance to them (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, p. 127). Furthermore, the notes taken during the interviews allow the researcher to note nuances of facial expressions, fidgeting, and other body language that can provide further insight into the students' accounts of their re-entry experiences. Often, researchers who choose to conduct in-depth interviews are looking for patterns that emerge from the "thick descriptions" of social life or experiences

recounted by participants (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, p. 119-120). This is exactly what this research aimed to gather.

Additionally, observations of participants during Learning to Learn Week allowed critical insight into the ways in which youth navigate their initial transition back into the educational pipeline in terms of how they interact with one another and with their teachers, how they introduce themselves, and what educational and personal histories they choose to share.

### *Types of Data*

Thus, the data from this research is in the form of questionnaires, digital recordings, transcriptions of digital recordings, and observational notes over the course of two GEL Learning to Learn sessions.

### *Analysis*

The data analysis procedure began by repeatedly reviewing the interview notes and digital recordings of each interview in order to become immersed in and familiar with the data, then having each interview transcribed the week it was conducted. Gradually codes were developed from the various themes that emerged. These codes were then collapsed into a number of larger, simpler codes or expanded into more detailed, specific codes, depending on the thematic outcomes. These codes were identified and tagged across interviews and the specific number of instances of each theme were recorded. This involved highlighting the actual words used by participants that encapsulate the overall meaning of each sentence, statement, or interview chunk (Hodgeson, 2007, p. 5). These chunks were then copied from the transcripts and pasted together so that all related excerpts representing each theme were grouped together.

Specific examples of each theme were utilized to represent each code in the narrative explanation of the results. Although the themes that emerge from this study surely differed from the few other studies of re-entry students, those themes served as a starting point for the thematic coding that emerged. Keene (2002) suggests several categories of students' responses to questions regarding the motivation for re-entry, including: career/job, self improvement, financial/life style, as well as family related themes, centering around not only the various educational, social, economic, and psychological manifestations of re-entry, but also the problems, difficulties, concerns and expectations during the returning process (Keene 2002, p. 70). Other themes considered related to who these students are, when and why they return, which could lead to the discovery that certain subsets of individuals share a common set of experiences or that there are certain turning points or life events that are critical to consider.

### *Limitations*

There are two main limitations to this study. First, the small sample size limits generalizability, as does the fact that the sample consisted of predominately African American females enrolled in one particular GED program. Additionally, the qualitative data obtained in interviews reveals students' perceptions, which are not absolute or verifiable conditions (Ginsburg, 2000).

### *Reliability*

The issue of reliability has been addressed by having only one researcher in order to attempt to provide as much consistency as possible in the interview process. Additionally, follow up de-briefing sessions were conducted with participants to ensure the opportunity for

feedback. During this process, students were given the opportunity to read over the transcripts of their interviews and confirm that the transcripts accurately represented their conversations with me.

Responses have been categorized and the category codes reviewed repeatedly during analysis to ensure reliability. The category codes were developed continuously after the first interview and reviewed several times to ensure fidelity.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONTEXT

#### *Pilot Studies*

I began working with the GEL Program four years ago as part of a service learning project. Most of my time spent there involved observational sessions and several formal and informal interviews with students and staff. My initial intent was to understand the inter-workings of the program, form relationships with learners, gather qualitative information regarding if and why the program worked, and observe process related aspects of the programs. After spending one semester at the GEL program and reflecting on my interactions with students, I described the seeds of my current research in a memo:

I should have probed the students further and asked them how they found out about the GED classes, how they knew about the importance of this test, where their children were while they attend classes, what types of support they have in their lives, and about their general feelings about the teaching strategies and morale in their classes.

Once my service learning project was complete, I stayed on at the GEL Program as a participant-observer and tutor. Over the course of the following three years, I attempted to define what success meant to the GEL Program, because their version of success did not match my own academically centered understanding. I interviewed more students and teachers and spent time observing and analyzing various interactional patterns between students and teachers and amongst students themselves. Analysis of this data revealed that the GEL teachers and students consistently exhibited a tremendous amount of care towards one another. It was then that I began to see that this ethos of caring was at the heart of the program's true success. This early work provided evidence that there was something critically rich happening, something that bore further investigation. In a memo to myself two years ago, I wrote:

I am astounded by how much the students love the GEL Program. Their immense affection for it was revealed in every set of field notes, through their interactions with one another and their teachers, and through their responses during the group sessions. The students rarely, if ever mentioned anything academic. Their main focus was on the way in which they felt cared for by their peers and their teachers, and how the GEL Program was like: “a family away from family.”

As my own reflections reveal, when I asked students directly about their feelings for the GEL Program, they never failed to tell me how much they truly loved it. However, as an outside observer, I saw several programmatic and operational flaws and found the students’ enthusiasm difficult to understand. In this way, my previous studies of the GEL Program represented entrée into a complex topic. This program seemed to be fulfilling a need, a need to belong, to feel cared for, and to feel valued. I was left with many questions: what was driving this need for belonging?, what else was going on in these students’ lives?, what shaped their educational expectations?, how were these expectations shaped and/or shattered? Thus, my previous work laid the groundwork for this study and drove me to seek a more complete understanding of the educational journeys these students take and the experiences that shape their lives.

In describing my previous work at the GEL Program, I hope to have provided the reader with a sufficient amount of background knowledge in order to understand the genesis of my current study. In the remaining parts of this chapter, I describe the GEL Program in depth, to give the reader some context regarding where this research took place, how this program operates, and what daily life is like there.

### *Role as Researcher*

My role in this research context has been that of a participant-observer wherein “the researcher participates fully in the ongoing activities of the research setting, and the identity of the researcher is known to the members of the setting” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, p. 272).

Working in partnership with the GEL Program, I became a familiar face to many of the staff and students. I observed meetings, various classes, and developed many relationships with staff and students. In particular, I formed a close bond with the lead teacher, Ms. Virginia, who served as my primary contact.

Yet, despite my ongoing presence as part of the GEL community, it is nonetheless clear to me that my status is still that of an outsider. Being both a Caucasian female amongst a predominately African American student body and staff, as well as a doctoral student sets me apart. I would be foolish not to acknowledge these obvious racial and educational differences, as well as the underlying history of marginalization these students have faced. My positionality as a female Caucasian doctoral student clearly makes my view point distinct and comes with a set of inherent biases. Through continued reflexivity, I hope to be able to continue to acknowledge these biases and share the voices and stories of these youths’ educational journeys as authentically as possible.

### *Site Description*

The GEL program is a continuing education program in a major Northeastern city with a population of approximately 1.5 million people. This program was established in 1981 and provides GED programs and workforce education programs to approximately five hundred participants each year. It is funded by a large urban university and the state’s Department of

Labor and Workforce Development. Of the 500 students, 91% are African American, 67% are female, 65% are unemployed, 31% are on Public Assistance, 57% are identified as low income, and 36% are single parents. Approximately 51% of the total student population is between the ages of 16- 24.

### *Physical Location*

The GEL Program is located in Heisman Hall, which is devoid of the active hustle of the rest of the university campus. On many occasions, the front doors are locked and one has to go around the building to the basement in order to enter. The lower floor is a large empty space with one or two students casually sitting around or walking through. This downstairs area is ornate and features chandeliers, carved woodwork, and intricate wrought iron. Going up the narrow stairway at the back of the building, you reach the GEL offices, which hold none of the grandeur of the lower floor. There is one large beige room, separated by a set of rickety French doors with several smaller offices adjoining the main room. Most of the time the French doors stay shut and students enter and exit the divided classroom through separate doors. The walls of the main room feature posters detailing grammatical skills and photos of the most recent graduating classes. In one corner of the right-hand side of the divided room sits a table with a computer. In the middle of the room are three rectangular tables with an array of black upholstered seats scattered around them. Tattered cranberry curtains are halfway hung over some of the windows, and appear ready to fall down. The left hand side of the divided main room contains several tables and a teacher's large wooden desk. The back half of the room houses a large chalkboard and round table. The main staff office, which houses the copier, sits off the main classroom as well. This small room is also home to four huge file cabinets full of

supplies. Connected to this room is another small office which houses a smaller, lower level adult education class. Off to the right of this room is the main reception area, which contains a large wooden desk, computer, and several more file cabinets. The program coordinator's office is in back of the main reception area, connected through a frosted glass door.

### *Daily Life in the Program*

Two classes are held within the GEL Suite between 9am and 1pm, and another from 5pm to 9pm. This means that from 8:45am to 1:15pm and from 4:45pm to 9:15pm, the suite is abuzz with activity. Students come rolling into classes until around 9:30am, or 5:30pm respectively, and have a snack break after 1.5 hours of instruction. Everyone is dressed casually, the ladies usually in tight jeans and t-shirts and the men in baggy jeans and t-shirts. There is almost always a constant hum of conversation within the classrooms.

### *Structure of the GEL Program*

The GEL Program runs in ten week cycles. This means that theoretically every ten weeks a new group of students should enter the program. This is, however, rarely the case as few, if any, students are able to finish all of their GED preparation in this limited amount of time. The GEL schedule looks something like this.

*Orientation: 4 Days: Monday-Thursday.* On Monday, students are given the student handbook and it is reviewed in detail. They are told program expectations. Then on Tuesday, they are given the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) in order to gauge their abilities. This is an introductory activity. Once the TABE's are scored, Individualized Education Plans are

completed on Wednesday and Thursday in twenty minute long, one-on-one meetings between each student and a GEL staff member.

*Learning to Learn Week: 4 Days: Monday-Thursday.* During this week the lead instructor, Ms. Virginia, and the assistant program director, Ms. Clarence, run activities where students get to know one another and the GEL staff members. The students also participate in group readings of stories, writing exercises, and various presentations wherein they learn about building strong study skills, multiple intelligences, and learning styles.

Following Learning to Learn Week, students are separated into classes based on their TABE scores and their time slot selection. Two classes are held during the day from 9am to 1pm and one class is held in the evening from 5pm to 9pm. During these time slots one teacher conducts class with anywhere from ten to twenty students. These classes involve a range of activities including, but not limited to, individual work, guest speakers, group instruction, and student-led debates. Students are given the TABE again after four weeks of instruction and again after the tenth and final week of the program. At this point students either move on to take the GED, return for the next cycle, or drop out of the program. If they return, students again take part in the introductory activities and Learning to Learn Week. They also take the TABE again to provide updated scores and have an IEP update meeting.

There is a lapse of two weeks in between the end of one cycle and the beginning of the next. The program calls it “administrative time”. Yet neither the teachers nor the students seem pleased with this break and both believe it causes the students to forget what they have learned and lapse back into bad habits.

*Observations of Learning to Learn Week*

I was able to observe two Learning to Learn Week sessions. Based on those students I met personally and those whose interactions I overheard or observed indirectly, it seemed the students were all very receptive to the staff and activities. They seemed eager to learn and to participate in this program. On the first day of the first session I observed, we were all asked to fill out a “What’s in a name?” activity sheet and asked to share with people at our tables. The sheets asked what our full name was, where it came from, what it meant, what our nicknames were, and what we would like to be called while in the GEL program. Some students volunteered to share the stories of their names out loud with the class. Their words recounted below, reveal the difficulties they encountered in their home lives and the support they received from their teachers and fellow students.

Ms. Virginia began the exercise by sharing the story of her name first. She said: “My full name is Virginia Terrell Loretta Ernestine Coleman...it took me 15 years to get my GED.” She told a short story about each of her names and why they are special to her. She then led the group in going around the room and sharing the history of our names. We went from student to student and almost all of them seemed very receptive to sharing. About halfway through the right side of the room we got to Antonia, a light skinned African American young lady with a braided Mohawk. Antonia said: “My mother was killed when I was three years old, so I kept my mother’s name.” She began to cry and people said “take your time girl”. She continued: “My mom tried to keep everyone happy, she was a very compromising person...you might not know me in class, but say ‘hi girl’ and I’ll smile and say hi.” Everyone clapped for her. Actually, everyone clapped for everyone else throughout the exercise as each person shared their personal story. This was just one way they showed support for one another.

Then Brandi, a returning student, raised her hand and offered advice to her fellow students. She said: "I'm a returning student. Having personal problems at home, don't bring them to school. If I woulda' kept comin' I woulda got my GED already and been in college already." Then another returning student named Amira said: "I had some problems at home too, but the teachers are here for you, they will help you all. Build relationships with each other and every one of them (the teachers). Don't be discouraged."

After Amira finished speaking, Mike, one of the male instructors stood up and said: "You can go above and beyond what you think you can do. Look past the limits you feel. When you hit a wall, climb up it and go beyond it. Do not give up because we won't give up on you. Come ready to learn cause we come ready to teach." He continued: "One teacher said to me, 'you'll never do nothing.' But then I saw one of my old teachers and she asked me what I was doin'. When I told her I was a teacher, she said 'a teacher of what, of who?' I told her that I teach ya'll and she was real impressed." He told the class that it may have taken him 20 years, but he had a dream when he was 18, and just 2 years ago he made his dream come true.

By teachers and students sharing their life experiences so openly, an atmosphere of common experiences, acceptance, and support is established. Some of these teachers have struggled to get their GED's too and by sharing their experiences, they let the students know that they can relate and are willing to help. In this way, during the very first days of the program it is made clear to the students that these teachers will be there for them, as will their fellow students. Further observations of Learning to Learn Week will be integrated into later chapters in support of relevant thematic categorizations.

*Descriptive Reviews of Key Players*

Ms. Clarence: Ms. Clarence is the program coordinator. She is the direct supervisor of all the classroom teachers. She has been with the GEL Program for five years. She has an enormous presence, not only because of her stature, but because of her voice and her eyes. She speaks in a soft baritone voice and her eyes are a mix of fire and water, fierce and comforting at the same time. Her skin is a light caramel color and complimented daily by an infusion of color from her bright shirts. She is about 5 foot 6 inches tall and full bodied. She wears her salt and pepper hair in soft dread-like twists, usually pulled away from her face by a cloth band. She moves slowly, but with purpose and strength in her stride. She often walks around the office without her shoes. She talks with her hands constantly, hands which are strong and tender at the same time. Ms. Clarence is not often seen in the classrooms, since she is usually either off-site at a training session or sitting in front of her computer.

Ms. Virginia: Ms. Virginia is the lead instructor and teaches one of the two daytime classes. She has been with the GEL Program for six years. She might appear to many to be another version of Ms. Clarence, with a similar stature and presence, about five foot six, and full bodied. She too wears her graying hair in soft dreadlocks, but her skin is a bit less caramel and slightly darker. She favors dangly earrings and soft flowing hippy-ish clothes, more subdued in color than Ms. Smith. She always wears her sandals with socks. As compared to Ms. Clarence, Ms. Virginia's demeanor is overall much more gentle, but her gaze can be a bit more intimidating. She looks tougher than Ms. Clarence, as she lacks the soft lines around her eyes, but she speaks softly and has a mellow air about her.

The relationship between these two women is difficult to discern. Ms. Virginia has often expressed frustration and anger towards Ms. Clarence. Yet they seem to have established a working partnership over the last four years that enables them to co-exist and to complete their tasks.

Mike: The third staff member I have come to know is Mike. He has been working at the GEL program for almost four years and recently completed his masters at Temple. He is one of the few Caucasian individuals working for the program. Mike has very tightly curled brown hair, wears rimless glasses, and sports a soul patch beneath his lip. He of medium build and dresses in business casual attire daily. He has a very gentle demeanor and laughs often. Mike spends a great deal of time with Ms. Virginia and they often team teach or teach one another's classes if the other is absent.

## CHAPTER 5

### UNDERSTANDING DROPPING OUT AND RE-ENTRY

The overall purpose of this study is to examine the ways in which out-of-school youth describe their re-entry into the educational pipeline via the GEL program. Exploring and describing this process from the vantage point of students dropping back in will allow critical insight into how students navigate their transition back into education. In undertaking this purpose, I present detailed data in three areas: how and why students came to drop out of traditional high schools, how and why they returned to the GEL program, and why they decided to stay there.

In lieu of describing each of the thirty students' experiences in detail, I have chosen five typical students whose stories I relate here in-depth. Although these five cases obviously differ in the exact life circumstances and type of person involved, they have many commonalities that shape the re-entry experience. I describe the background on these students, then provide a thematic analysis of their stories accompanied by supporting data from other study participants. These student accounts are also supplemented here with observations from Learning to Learn Week. Through the examination of themes and commonalities it is my hope to begin to answer the research questions driving this study, which I reiterate below.

1. How do former out-of-school youth describe their journey back to formal education via an urban GED program?
  - What does re-entry look like?
  - What particular processes and/or mechanisms of re-entry do youth describe?
  - Who or what is involved in the re-entry process as supporters and deterrents to youth continuing their education?

2. Can the form and context of drop out inform an understanding of re-entry?

These five students' experiences are being utilized as the foundation for this examination of re-entry for various reasons. Each of their stories is not only representative of multiple commonalities across re-entry experience, but is particularly illustrative of relevant themes. These students were also able to articulate their navigation of re-entry in tremendous detail and express themselves with great candor and eloquence.

Lily

Lily is a twenty-three year old African American female who dropped out after the tenth grade. She is quite slender and has light skin. Her strong, gravelly voice does not match her petite frame. She has an extremely strong and mature air about her. She is known as the second teacher in Ms. Virginia's classroom and other students often come to her for help. She left home at the age of sixteen because she was "coming home to drama" and couldn't focus on school. As a result she began working to pay her bills and soon dropped out. She states repeatedly how she never intended to drop out of school, but that her livelihood came first, then her education. This current attempt is her third in pursuit of her GED. She also came back to school when she was nineteen and twenty-one, but she "couldn't juggle education and handle finances." Currently, she "got rid of all distractions, all negativity" and started to believe in herself again. She is very focused on not only getting an education but also certification in a career. She aims to be a federal probation officer and wants to give back to the GEL Program by tutoring in her spare time.

DeDe

DeDe is a twenty-two year old African American female who dropped out after the tenth grade. She attributes her departure from school to her grandmother passing away unexpectedly

and “mainly just people leaving me.” Having never known her parents, after her grandmother’s death, she was bounced from house to house and has been on her own since the age of fifteen. She felt a complete lack of support and felt that despite their promises, “no one ever tried to stop me leaving school”, and “no one even helped with anything.” She is adamant in defending herself for dropping out, stating “I don’t blame myself for it, because it really wasn’t my fault.” She has come back to school twice, when she was eighteen and nineteen, but then had two difficult pregnancies over the past few years which limited her mobility and ability to attend classes. She initially heard about the GEL Program from her children’s father. He has encouraged her to return to school and attends a GED program himself. As her children have grown she has learned the importance of providing a stable life for them. As she tells me that “learning is everything to me now”, she begins to cry. She plans on opening her own business with her children’s father and strives to be her own boss.

#### Jameer

Jameer is a twenty four year old African American male. He has bright green eyes, light skin, light brown hair, and a slim build. He dropped out after the eleventh grade because of family problems and getting caught up in the wrong crowd. Over the past four years he attempted to complete his GED several times through various programs while working full time and being “out on the streets alot” but states that until now he wasn’t motivated. He found out about the GEL Program from a GED program at a community college. Once he became dissatisfied with his string of dead end jobs, and “got tired of sitting around watching TV in the daytime” Jameer decided to treat the GED program like a second job. He has one hour from when he gets home from his night shift to get ready to come into class, and although he is often tired he states “I gotta do it.” He has a daughter who he says is his biggest motivation because

“she’s a little person and she needs things”. He is determined to get a better job in order to do better for her and give her a better life than he had.

### Shawna

Shawna is an eighteen year old African American female with big bright eyes, a deep caramel complexion and, a slender build. She is a true story teller and has a warmth and passion about her, as so many great story tellers often do. Shawna lost her father at an early age, and does not get along with her mother. She currently lives with her grandmother, sister, and nephew. She reports that she had good grades, played basketball, and was a cheerleader while in school. However, her family problems, in combination with hanging out with a bad crowd, caused her to leave after the eleventh grade. While she was out of school she longed to go back and would watch the other girls going to school, wishing it was her. Shawna was only out of school for three months before she decided to enter an alternative education program. She stayed at that program for a month and a half before enrolling in the GEL program. She found the GEL program through her sister who enrolled in the program for six cycles before finally getting her GED. She repeatedly talks about her former friends and family members resenting her for going back to school and how she’s outgrown them and needs to distance herself in order to succeed. She strives to pave her own way and “not let history repeat itself by becoming a failure like my sister and my mom.” Her eyes repeatedly fill up with tears as she explains the role her grandmother plays in her life and re-entry into education. She wants nothing more than to get her education and take care of her grandmother, whose voice she constantly hears in her head, telling her to go to school. She aims to go to a community college, transfer to college, and study writing. She is fiery in her intent to succeed, as she states “I’m not gonna stop going to school. I think I got a serious addiction.”

## Niema

Niema is a twenty three year old African American and Puerto Rican female. She wears her hair in tight cornrows and has a design shaved through her left eyebrow. She has a very masculine air about her and tells me early in our conversation that she is gay. She initially left school because she “just had a lack of care in my household, just like lack of help.” She also strongly decries the poor quality teachers she encountered and cites their lack of care as another chief factor in her departure from school. She has been out of school for seven years, during which time she enrolled in different programs, but again felt the instruction was lacking. She currently feels more focused on her education, due in large part to her fiancée, who has been her chief motivator in returning to education. Niema sees her as an inspiration since she has a graduate degree in business. Apart from working on her GED, Niema is a skilled basketball player and has won multiple trophies and MVP awards throughout the city playing for the Dawn Staley Foundation. She plans to attend college to play basketball and study business.

Again, Lily, Shawna, Jameer, DeDe, and Niema’s experiences, in particular, will be examined throughout this chapter in order to provide some context for data analysis and to illustrate each conceptual point as a part of an individual’s process rather than in isolation. Having interviewed thirty students with thirty distinct re-entry experiences, I obtained a tremendous amount of rich, descriptive data. In this chapter I identify, describe, and analyze the themes across these data in order to understand what this experience looks like. In order to capture the nuances of this process, I have found that re-entry is best understood by examining three distinct elements:

1. How and why students came to drop out of traditional high schools
2. How and why they returned to the GEL program
3. Why they decided to stay there

It is critical to understand that for these students, dropping out of traditional high schools is actually the first step in their new educational journey towards the GEL Program. The who, what, when, where and why behind leaving school serves as the initial context for re-entry, as the circumstances under which students leave school influence their later educational experience and expectations. Also, it has been widely established that students are leaving traditional high schools and entering GED programs in tremendous numbers. By examining why they are dropping out, based on direct student accounts, we are more readily prepared to combat the issues that cause their early departure and to tailor alternative educational programs to students' specific educational needs. Additionally, obtaining a richer understanding of the ways in which students successfully re-enter education and why they persist in a certain program reveals what is working for and against these students, and what they have in common. Once more is known about what is going on during the re-entry process, attempts can be made to facilitate this process and thereby enable more students to successfully navigate the journey back into education and obtain their GED.

#### *How and Why They Dropped Out*

Understanding what underlies students' departure from education is a necessary element in examining their eventual re-entry. When asked why they initially left school, student responses fell into three main thematic categories: family problems, teachers' lack of care, and a chaotic school environment. These categories of response are examined below.

*Family problems.*

*“I just didn’t have the home life that I needed.”*

Based upon the established categorization of risk factors most often associated with dropping out and my experience with the GEL program and this population, I knew that GEL students faced multiple risk factors for dropping out of school, including at a minimum: being members of minority groups, living in an urban area, and being of low socioeconomic status (Rumberger, 1987; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Keene 2002). Being young, urban, poor, and members of minority groups, students face a multitude of other risk factors for dropping out of school.

Contrary to what the literature would predict, most students including Lily, DeDe, Shawna, Jameer, and Niema had not been retained, were not special education students, and were not failing in school. This stands in direct contrast to the established view that a lack of academic skill/success is primarily responsible for students dropping out (Entwisle et al., 2004; Chuang, 1997). Additionally, they did not convey that peer pressure, issues with school discipline, having to get a job, becoming pregnant, doing drugs, drinking, truancy, or any other negative individual behaviors were primarily responsible for their dropping out.

The main factor that students cited as consistently derailing their educational journey was “family problems”. Based upon the questionnaire and interviews, more than half of the students cited family problems as their primary reason for dropping out of school. When I refer to family problems, I am referring to a host of negative conditions described by students as influencing their dropout. Based upon the interviews and observations, these conditions include: a tumultuous home environment, bouncing from house to house, and lack of support from parents.

As shown earlier in this chapter Lily, DeDe, Jameer, Shawna, and Niema all identified their family situations as primarily influencing their dropping out. Shawna in particular did not get along with her mother and described a chaotic home environment similar to that of many other students:

I had my own personal problems, my situation at home with me and my mother. There was times when I was in elementary school I remember I never want to go home, when I go home it's yelling here and yelling there. I lived in a bad house. Now we got a baby cryin' in the house that's not mine, or my grandmom's.

The idea of living in a bad house is echoed by Lily who stated that she was "coming home to drama". She also felt a total lack of support and encouragement. However, unlike Shawna who continued to live at home, Lily left home and began working in order to cope and to survive, as she describes below:

I initially left school because of some at-home issues with me and my mother. We really didn't get along that well. I wanted to have my own place because sometimes, if you're coming home to drama, you can't focus on school. So my main goal was to get myself situated so that I could focus.

While Lily and several other students left home of their own volition, other students, like DeDe, were bounced from house to house. They stayed with relatives or family friends and never really found a place where they felt supported enough to continue their education. DeDe describes the departure from the last house she lived in as follows:

And this lady I was stayin' with she...I'm not exactly sure what happened...but I just know that I came down here with my brother one day and when it was time to go back to get ready for school, she didn't want me to come back. I was basically on my own from there. This was when I was 15. She like didn't let me take any of my clothes or anything like that. I basically was on my own from there. No guardian or anything like that to help me make it back to school. And so I was with my brother and he just left and so I was basically by myself.

Once DeDe's brother left her alone, she stayed in shelters and with friends for the following three years until she met her boyfriend and moved in with him. As difficult as DeDe's

experience was, it is not completely unique. Antonia too was bounced from house to house and never found the support she needed in order to keep going to school, as revealed in her words below:

See at the time I wasn't livin with my mom. So I was going from house to house. I didn't really have nobody telling me to go. So I just went when I wanted to go.

DeDe and Antonia were being bounced from house to house at a young age and never lived with their parents. However, even when students were able to live at home, they did not necessarily receive the support they felt they needed to stay in school. Nila, Camika, and Eboni did live with their mothers, but felt that their mothers never cared enough about them to encourage them to go to school. They describe the lack of care and encouragement in their homes below:

But like one of the reasons why I left school was because I just had lack of like care in my household, just like lack of help. Nila

If my mom would have encouraged me, like I said, at a young age, none of that would have never happened. I just needed a mom and she wasn't there for me. Camika

I left school well it was like because I didn't have the home life that I needed. And I just didn't feel like I needed to do it anymore. It was just the lack of support from home. It's hard to go to school. Because I was an honor roll student and I didn't have the support and I was like what's the point of doing it? Like the support I'm saying is like your mom or whoever you're living with says 'Oh, good good job. Keep it up.' Stuff like that. And if you don't get that then it's like what's the point of coming. Eboni

Eboni's words in particular poignantly illustrate the way in which the lack of parental support and encouragement she experienced affected her educational status. Feeling like she was working hard and doing her best in school without any acknowledgement from her mother affected her so deeply that she came to see education as pointless.

Furthermore, these students' words indicate clearly that they had very limited relationships with their parents and/or adult guardians. Students described these relationships as

characterized by neglect and a lack of care on the part of their parents. In this way, social capital in the form of parent-child relationships was quite minimal for these students and thus they were unable to benefit from its resultant resources.

These students' words describing the tumultuous nature of their home lives, being bounced from house to house, and the lack of care in their households speak to the constellation of family problems that affect students in very real and detrimental ways. These themes were bolstered by observations from Learning to Learn Week wherein students' revealed further the complexity of their lives and devastating circumstances under which they live. While introducing themselves to one another, during an ice-breaker activity, one African American male named Jay went to the front of the classroom to tell his story. He said: "The feds took my dad when I was 3. I was left in a car and had heat stroke when I was 8. I was shot in the face at 15. My only child that woulda' been here, but my ex-girlfriend got rid him." Another student, Mike, who's only 18, states: "I am on my own. I need to be independent to take care of myself." Several other students went on to explain how and why they enrolled in the GEL Program, making statements like: "I'm a returning student who had problems at home" and "I had some problems at home too."

While it is true that researchers have determined that many family factors are significant risk factors for dropping out, the factors most often examined are family structural characteristics such as levels of parental educational, household composition, and family socioeconomic status (Lessard, 2006; Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; Rumberger, Ghatak, Poulos, Ritter, & Dornbusch, 1990). Additionally, recent large scale quantitative studies taking into account the category of "personal/family problems" fail to note the significant influence of familial troubles on dropout or what family troubles truly involve. This category of risk is rarely expanded or

utilized differently to allow for rich, in-depth exploration of exactly what role it plays in the dropout process. Thus there is little research establishing this pervasiveness of family problems or what Lessard terms “family turmoil” in the lives of many of the dropouts and the role that family turmoil plays in setting the stage for school dropout (Lessard, 2006). Of all the research I have reviewed, only a few studies examined family factors in this descriptive, in-depth way.

One such study is King’s 2002 work wherein he examined family factors in depth, expanding “family constraints”, to include a “lack of encouragement from family and friends, inability to attend regularly, reduction in family time, arranging child care” (King, 2002). King approached dropout reentry from a slightly different angle than this study, as he attempted to determine what barriers recent high school dropouts encountered in pursuing available GED programs. King also documented that the primary barrier to participation in GED programs amongst high school dropouts was related to family constraints.

Hearing the stories of dropouts who lived in chaotic home environments allowed me to document the pervasiveness of family problems throughout the lives of these students (Lessard, 2006). Students expressed that their experiences of a tumultuous home environment, bouncing from house to house, and lack of support from parents greatly contributed to their dropping out. This sets the stage for further research in this area and lends further credence to the claims of those few researchers who have thus far documented the impact and importance of this seemingly widespread issue.

*Teachers' lack of care.*

*"Ain't no point of going to school if I'm not gonna learn nothing."*

Like the aforementioned factor of family problems, the dropout literature gives minimal in-depth consideration to describing influence of the quality of schools, instruction, and environment on students' early exit from school and the way in which these factors influence re-entry. Of the thirty students interviewed, nearly half described poor quality, uncaring teachers and a chaotic school atmosphere. For these reasons, students felt that school was a waste of time. These descriptions of school related issues echo the Hughes' findings wherein dropouts cited "poor or uninteresting classes or instruction; the teachers' communication styles; and negative interactions with peers, teachers, and principals" as influencing their decision to drop out (Hughes, 2007, p. 25).

The results from both this study and Hughes' work differ from the main stream explanations for dropout, wherein the category of "school related factors" most often centers on the issues of the student and not on the school itself. Thus previous studies (Gleason & Dynarksi, 2002) have tended to focus on student characteristics or performance as causal factors related to dropping out. Although these factors are important, overemphasizing them without considering school and/or teacher quality can easily result in "blaming the victim" and viewing students as the only cause of the dropout crisis (Hughes, 2007).

Students described two main issues with their traditional high schools as especially problematic for them: teachers' lack of care and a chaotic educational environment.

In terms of teachers in particular, students described in their interviews individuals who "put a sheet of paper in front of you and tell you to do it." Many students also felt that their teachers "really didn't care if you was there or not", "wasn't really teachin' nothin", "got

people's names mixed up", and "did not pay attention to their students". Further, during Learning to Learn Week, even before really knowing one another, their teachers, or the GEL Program, students were very open about their previous negative experiences with teachers. They described their individuals who "just hand you the papers and tell you to do it yourself", "aren't really teachers," and "don't care about you". One student went as far as to say: "some teachers make a person not come back."

A keen example of this lack of care comes from Shawna. She began falling asleep in class and having behavioral problems, but decided to make an effort to pass geometry. She felt however, that her teacher wrote her off as a "problem" student and became unwilling to help her. She describes how this teacher showed her a lack of concern and care:

Cause my geometry teacher would not look at me twice. Like even when I made efforts to pass the geometry class she wouldn't stay after class because she felt as though 'Oh well, this girl fight a lot. She don't really want this.' Stuff like that. Like but that's how she felt and that's how most of the teachers started to feel.

Likewise Jameer, Niema, and Lily's words illustrate this lack of care clearly and reveal the deep impact it had on their attitude towards school and eventual departure:

At school, you had, you know, teachers that really didn't care if you was there or not. There's times that I'd come to class and just, 'I'm leaving' and I just leave and they wouldn't really care." Jameer

I've been in schools where the instructors they don't want to hear anything from you. They don't want to do anything besides their hours that they're getting paid for it. You know. They don't want to do anything. Lily

The teachers didn't really care about the students. So it was like I felt like they didn't care about my education, so why should I? Being a young student and I'm thinking like 'Okay, teachers are supposed to care.' I feel like if you're gonna be teaching, you got to have a passion to be a teacher. You're supposed to want your kids to learn, supposed to want them to grow and know things, not like make them feel like they don't want to come here. So I was like 'You know what? I had it. Niema

Niema's words truly get at the heart of this matter and bear repeating: "I felt like they didn't care about my education, so why should I?" A few minutes later in our conversation she tells me: "So my teachers didn't care, my mom didn't care, so I didn't care."

Clearly, care is a critical element to students and greatly affects their educational success for as Noddings writes: "Caring is the very bedrock of all successful education." (1992, pp. 27) The relationship between teacher and student is based upon the fundamental human need of knowing that another person genuinely cares. With this focus on caring, teachers actively engage students in the learning process. This engagement is necessary for learning to be meaningful and long lasting (Noddings, 2002). By providing students with significant time and attention, teachers can establish a climate of trust and support that lets youth know someone deeply cares about them (James & Jurich, 1999). It is well established that students who drop out often feel that teachers, administrators, and others are not interested in and do not care about them (Grobe, Niles, & Weisstein, 2001).

Interpersonal relationships with teachers are especially important for students struggling with personal and social issues as student perceptions of teacher care are positively correlated with positive social and academic outcomes at school (Wentzel, 1997). Lessard et al. (2004) found the negative perception of student-teacher relationship was the second most important factor contributing to increasing the risk of dropping out in a sample of 3,359 students. In considering the form of social capital to be these interpersonal student-teacher relationships, it is clear that these negative relationships or lack of relationships altogether, negatively affect students' positive academic and personal outcomes. Indeed, many studies show that students with caring and supportive interpersonal relationships with teachers report more positive

academic attitudes and values, and more satisfaction with school (Battistich, Solomon & Kim 1995; Shouse, 1996; Solomon, Battistich, Watson, Schaps, & Lewis 2000).

*Chaos in the classroom.*

*“All we’d do is fight and play around.”*

Besides teacher’s lack of care, students also described a chaotic educational environment where they spent the majority of their time playing around or fighting and little time learning.

Below Jameer and Niema express their frustration with the lack of learning and the constant playing and fighting. They recognized that they were not getting anything out of school, which led to their early departure.

It wasn’t a nice school. I wasn’t learning nothing in there. All we’d do is fight and play around and that’s how it is. I mean I knew I wasn’t gonna get nothing out of it because I like, it was like just being outside with my friends all day. Jameer

You have kids over here laughing. You got kids over here fighting. You got kids over here playin. There’s no real education in there. I felt like what would be the point of coming to school if every time I come to school it’s a fashion show or it’s like I’m not really learning nothing. So I just left. Niema

As Jameer and Niema’s words show, the time wasted in the classroom playing and/or fighting made them feel like school was a waste of time. Other students also expressed their frustrations with the classroom environment and the way in which it affected their learning by providing unwanted distractions. Ellis said: “It’s just hard trying to work with other people talking and laughing and throwing stuff around.” Antonia and Anita also found the learning environment to be a challenge, stating:

Because it’s hard, especially when you go to a school like I do it’s hard to learn. Like, people in class don’t be sittin’ in class trying to learn. Like, I think if everybody would sit in class and try to learn, stuff would be better. But nobody tryin to do that. Antonia

So I didn’t learn anything. You know you can’t learn anything in there. And the environment around you, all it is is a bunch of kids you know, want to fight you and

everything. A lot of delinquents you know. And I couldn't do anything. I couldn't concentrate, so I stopped going. Anita

Beyond these behavioral issues, other students described overcrowded classrooms, saying “you have a lot of children in the classroom” and “too much people was in a class and it was so uncomfortable”, which only added to the chaotic state.

In describing their schools, other words like “pretty rough,” “bad”, and “not nice” continually came up. Add these words to the aforementioned image of overcrowded, disruptive, distracting, uncaring, and nonproductive classrooms and there will be a perfect picture of the ways in which these students view their school experience.

The data and analysis above indicates that students are collectively identifying a lack of care from their teachers, along with a chaotic environment, as problems in the schools they attended. Many of these students also described both of these factors as influencing their departure from school. Indeed, this supports the idea that dropping out is often the result of multiple situations compounding each other (Hupfeld, p.1).

Based upon these thirty interviews, there are clearly other factors at play in these students' lives beyond what most of the literature would predict. Even when these factors have been considered in the literature, most studies of dropouts are lacking in their examination of the tremendous influence and pervasiveness of family problems and school dysfunction. Many of these studies have also not examined the dropout and re-entry experience in an in-depth manner or from the perspective of the student themselves. This perspective captures one view of this educational journey in a way that statistics cannot, by seeking the perspective of those living it. It is through these accounts that we can begin to understand the intricacies of the dropout and re-entry experience. Listening to these youth and understanding what is standing in the way of their

high school completion is the first step in remedying the family problems and school environments that contribute so enormously to their dropout.

As the students' words illustrate, their lives were marked by dysfunctional and unstable home environments, a lack of support from parents, a lack of care from teachers, and chaotic school environment. These factors were critical in the students' decisions to leave school. And indeed, as Lessard et al. write: "for many of these students, family turmoil and problems in school set the stage for a difficult educational journey" (p. 12).

#### *How and Why Students Returned to Education*

Having analyzed students' departure from school, I now turn to an examination of the ways in which they come to re-enter alternative education. This section begins with the concept of internal change, and is broken into several manifestations of such change: maturation, realizing the importance of GED certificate, wanting to better oneself, and removal from negativity. I next examine several other elements of re-entry, including: the role of a "significant person", multiple re-entry attempts, and how students found out about the GEL program.

##### *Internal change.*

*"I guess it's just your inner self, why you get tired after a while."*

Prior to interviewing these students, the literature led me to believe that the data would reveal the crux of reentry to be the infusion of some new form of positive social capital into students' lives in the form of a person or incident that would drastically change each student's educational course. I viewed the catalyst for change as completely external to the students. However, my findings indicate quite the opposite. The change seems to have come from within the students themselves, as most of them underwent a tremendous amount of internal change.

Once they experienced this internal change, not only were students able to put themselves in the position to meet more positive individuals, they were often able to recognize and utilize sources of positivity and strength that were already present in their lives. Thus it was not a someone or something that happens, but something that happens *to* these students that brings about their reentry.

This idea of internal change is similar to Metzger's findings wherein he concluded that it was the combination of both a significant person/critical incident and growth of understanding that the decision to return to school was formulated. However he put more of an emphasis on the outside person or event incident as the catalyst for change, rather than viewing the internal change as the mechanism through which the critical incident or significant person becomes critical or significant.

#### *What Forms Does This Internal Change Take?*

When students were asked during their interviews what, if anything, had changed for them between the time they dropped out and when they entered the GED Program, half stated directly that they had matured. Students also revealed internal change in other ways. Many stated they knew that they needed a GED certificate to move on in life, while others discussed wanting to better themselves. Several students also described the importance of removing themselves from negativity. When Ms. Virginia asked them during Learning to Learn Week to describe their personal dreams and what was driving them to come back to school, students stood up and described needing to lead by example, going college, getting a degree, needing to have a vision, feeling unsatisfied, and seeking their own personal satisfaction.

Again, each of these expressions of internal change represents what Metzger terms a “growth of understanding”. These changes and resultant importance students place on education are echoed in the work of Bridgeland et al. (2006), wherein students indicated that they highly valued getting an education and believed it was critical to achieving their future goals. Below I present further data on the ways in which students talked about their internal changes which prompted them to enter the GEL program, including: maturing, realizing the importance of a GED certificate, bettering of self, and removal of negativity.

*Maturing.*

*“I’m much more mature right now.”*

More than half of the students interviewed stated that an increase in their maturity level influenced their return to education. When expressing how they had matured, students conveyed recognition of their own maturation in multiple ways. Many students stated that they felt as though they didn’t know things that they should and were unable to help younger family members and friends or to answer elementary level questions. Other students saw family members suffering and realized that they were the only ones who could help them. Many of these students were very direct in their identification of their own maturation as leading to re-entry.

When Jameer first dropped out of school, he was attracted to street life. However, after spending time “runnin the streets”, his views changed. He stated: “I seen everybody else doing things on the street...I was just seein something totally different from what I’m seein now. I grew up and got mature. I just learned a lot bein’ out of school.”

DeDe and Niema also developed a more mature outlook and experienced a change in attitude. They began to care about themselves and became dedicated to their own education.

A whole lot had changed, and my attitude. Like when I was younger it was, you know, ‘I don’t care’. That kind of attitude. But as I grew I realized that some things you have to care about. Not caring, you know, when I had that attitude, I don’t care, I don’t care, I don’t care, I didn’t have anything. And then I started to care about things. DeDe

Like today, it was raining, I did not want to get up and come to school. But I look at it like, all right, the days that I really can go to school, on days like this when it’s raining and snowing, then I know I’ll come in on a day that it’s sunny and stuff like that. I think you just got to push and you got to want it. It’s like no stopping you. You just for yourself. You ain’t worried about what nobody got to say. It’s all about me right now. My time-I wasted enough time. Niema

Through both word and deed these students directly reveal elements of maturation that assisted in their re-entry. Many students revealed their internal change in other ways as well.

*Importance of GED certificate.*

*“I need that piece of paper.”*

Just under half of the students interviewed came to realize the value of the GED certificate itself. Students expressed this knowledge in multiple ways: “you just need to have an education because everybody is asking for it now”; “I see that you really can’t get a job without it”; “they don’t accept you without a piece of paper, GED or high school diploma”; “I can’t get a job and really do nothing without a diploma or GED”; “I know that you cannot do anything without a high school diploma or GED”; “I need that piece of paper just so I can get to the next step”; “you even need a high school diploma or GED to flip hamburgers”; and “If you cannot present them with just this one piece of paper, they turn you away”.

The above excerpts show the scope of students’ responses regarding the importance of a GED certificate. Clearly, students felt that without a GED certificate they couldn’t get a job at all, get a better job, or advance in life. Students also expressed the desire to have something under their belt and to always have something to fall back on. Nalia’s and Malika’s words show the depth of these responses.

I think definitely a decision – it's a long decision-making process, but school is so, so, so, so, so important 'cause you're really not gonna go anywhere and do too much of anything. You're not gonna make that much money. You're not gonna be able to support yourself and your family like you need to without this piece of paper. It is so, so, so important to have, so very important. You can go anywhere once you get this piece of paper because whatever you want, the sky's the limit. It depends on what you do with that piece of paper once you have received it. So like it whatever you do, find time to go to school 'cause it's important. Make time. Nalia

I learned that you can't get nowhere out here without it. So you just need to have an education because everybody is asking for it now. It's not just I come in and interview and I don't need to have no schooling. I need something to say I'm qualified for this or I can do this because – you know. I need it. I know you need it. I knew for a long time. That's why I'm back, and I'm young. And because you cannot present them with just this one piece of paper and it turns you away from it, that hurts. And that had me thinking that I really gotta go back and get this piece of paper because this type of money they're offering me is not gonna support me and my family. And the type of money that I want and need, I can't get it because I don't have a piece of paper. So that hurts. That hurts. It's kind of embarrassing too to a point. Malika

Nalia and Malika's words come from experience. Nalia and her boyfriend are supporting two children while working minimum wage jobs. Neither of them have yet completed their GED. She described making do with what she had and not being too proud to do without. She wants a better life for her children and to give them everything she never had. She clearly sees the GED as a path to a better life for herself and her family. Nalia, on the other hand, had interviewed for several jobs and been offered the positions only to be turned away because she did not have her GED. She wanted a better job to provide for her daughter. She described the shame and disappointment she felt each time and how those experiences drove her to succeed. For both Nalia and Malika and all the students who spoke about the importance of a GED certificate, it represents the opportunity for better employment and to earn more money to support themselves and their families.

*Bettering of self.**“I don’t want to be a bum.”*

Beyond maturing and realizing the value of the GED, more than one third of the students described wanting to better themselves. This desire for self improvement was driven by several factors including: seeing others succeed, realizing that they were wasting time, and other internal motivations.

Several students saw friends and family members succeeding and realized that they could never really succeed themselves without their GED. By contrast, they felt that their current educational status was lacking and decided to act, as illustrated by David’s words:

And I see my friend out there he’s going on to college and my cousins are getting Clark Atlanta University for their diploma so I said yeah, I’m need to get something, I’m gotta do something, so I can have more options. It mean a lot to me now. I realize that school mean a lot so I need to be here somewhere.

Josh went as far as listing his relatives who he felt had succeeded and describing how he didn’t want to be one of the “outsiders’ who never did anything, like other people he knew, his own mother included.

Like my cousin, he – I don’t know. He just – I think he is a counselor or something. My other cousin is a electrician. My other cousin, she just don’t do nothing, but the other one a nurse. And I just want to be something. I’m just not gonna be one of the outsiders that ain’t doing nothing like my mom and them.

Jay also saw family members graduating, younger cousins who should have graduated long after him. With this realization came his desire to go back to school and to stop wasting time. He said:

Like, what am I doing? I could be in school. My younger cousins were graduating before me and all that, and I’m wasting my life, and I could do it while I’m young. Basically I was wasting my life, just sitting in the house doing nothing. I think it’s better to stay in school, to be in school.

Other students were also motivated by a strong desire to stop wasting their time. Jameer is a perfect example of such a student. He was working the night shift then coming home, watching TV, and going to sleep, but he grew tired of wasting his time and decided to put it to good use, as illustrated below:

I got tired of sitting around watching TV in the daytime. What I was doing in the daytime was wasting time. Just sitting home. Watching TV as soon as I come home from work waiting to fall asleep. So I thought that well if I find something to do in that little time frame that I be up I'll be all right. So I decided to go back to school.

Erika too felt that sitting home all day was a waste of her time and decided to come back to school. She said:

I felt like I wasn't doing anything with my life. At first it was cool. Yeah. I don't have to go to school and everybody else does. But then after a while it was just like I'm here by myself. Everybody else is, you know, doing something.

Other students described a personal motivation that differed from those listed above, but still involved wanting to better themselves. They articulated a need and deep desire to go back to school based upon something inside them, something from within. Niema and Yvette said:

Within myself, if you're serious about your life and what you doing, you got to be serious about your education. And if you're not, then you're not – you don't care. You don't care. You don't care. You don't know what's going on. Your mind frame is very off.

Because I feel it's something that I need to do, 'cause I feel like that's a part of my life that's just missing that I need. I think it's just something that I need to do personally besides work and besides my son. It's just something that I feel that I need to do.

These students felt that in order to lead a richer, fuller life they needed to complete their education. It was a fundamental need for them. Similarly, in further describing this desire to better themselves, other students were able to express their disappointment, sadness, and annoyance with themselves over their past actions while looking forward to the future.

Shawna spent a lot of time while out of school sitting on the porch with her friends smoking weed, talking trash, and fighting. During that time, she didn't feel good about herself and knew it was not where she wanted to be. She made a conscious decision to change her circumstances and "get up" as she says:

You're trying to act childish and I'm trying to grow up. If ya'll want to sit up here and you all want to do this I realize I can be so much more. I don't have time for that. Out of school I learned that sitting there will not get you anywhere. Just sittin' there in one spot will not get you anywhere. You're gonna be sitting there in that spot until you get up. So I had to get up and I'm starting here.

Niema too didn't want to stay where she was. She wanted to break out of the circle she was in and do better for herself as her words illustrate:

I am just trying to better myself as a person, get myself together. So if I can do that, I can progress within myself to show that you could do better for yourself, instead of being the one who, being at square one, just keeping going in circles, dropping out, doing the same thing.

Whether their spark came from seeing others succeed, growing tired of wasting time, or other internal motivations, all of these students were driven to re-enter education by the desire to better themselves. Beyond this, the roles of maturation and realizing the importance of a GED certificate have also been examined.

*Removal of negativity.*

*"If they're not on a positive note, then I don't want to be bothered."*

The final element of internal change explored here is students removing themselves from negativity. Students described having to remove themselves from people in their lives who were sources of negativity in order to progress towards getting their GED. Both family members and friends were sources of distraction from school. Time spent with them involved drug use,

skipping school, getting into trouble, and generally taking up time that should have been spent on school.

Lily found herself in a relationship with a man who consistently told her that education meant nothing. While she was with him, she felt he hampered her re-entry by trying to squelch her desire to get an education and putting her down. After she left him, she decided to only surround herself with positive people, as she explains here:

I got rid of all distractions, all negativity. I'm at the point now where I kind of isolate myself now to this school. That's no different when I go home, it's me. And whoever's around me in my home with me if they're not on the positive note like I am then I don't want to be bothered. So that is the main difference. I got rid of all distractions and I got on a more positive note and I started believing in myself more.

Again, Shawna spent a lot of time with her girlfriends on the porch smoking weed and starting fights. When she talked about coming back to school they dismissed her and chastised her, telling her she thought she was too good for them and that school was a waste of time. She says that when she finally came back to school she had to separate herself from them and their activities:

Like I started hanging with certain people and they wasn't doing too much that I was doing and started falling with them. But we not even friends no more. And then my girlfriend they be like why don't you want to hang with us no more? Because 'You're trying to act childish and I'm trying to grow up'. But I will not sit here and chill with you all so you all can be telling me what I'm doing wrong when I know I'm right. But that's one of the reasons why I can't hang around people like that. Because I know they could put stuff in my head because it's just that easy for me to be so drawn into it. Like that's just like when I dropped out of school. And they got tired of me not being there with them to do all this stupid stuff and be wanting to fight and all this stuff. I don't have time for that. I have a life. I feel so much better now. Those people is not who I want to hang with. Like my mind right. So I had to leave them alone. And that's why we had to stop being friends.

As Lily and Shawna's experiences and words reveal, they had to make some very difficult decisions in their personal lives in order to re-enter education. They, and many other

students had to put aside relationships with family members, significant others, and friends in order to pursue their education since these relationships were toxic to their educational success.

Shirley also described having to remove herself from her friends because she felt that her friends would not allow her to succeed and provided constant distraction away from education, as revealed below:

Probably because I cut off a lot of people. I was around a lot of people that frowned upon it like, ‘Oh, you say you wanna do something good with yourself?’ They ain’t tryin’ to hear that. ‘You can’t be there. You gotta be over here.’ It’s like, no. ‘I’m not gonna be over there. I’m gonna be over here. I’m gonna get mine. Running around with you is messing up my life.’ I separated myself from the crowd.

Shirley also stated that when she decided to go back to school her friends called her a nerd and when they saw her with her book bag they made fun of her repeatedly. Amira recounted a similar experience during Learning to Learn Week. While introducing herself, and relating her journey back to education, she described “messing up” in school because of bad influences and peer pressure. She stated that she didn’t want to do the right thing because people would talk about her and “say bad stuff” about her, but that she had to leave all that behind in order to succeed. Still other students gave different descriptions of the oppressiveness of this negativity, how it could so easily stop a person from succeeding and keep them in place, and how important it is to escape, as Antonia’s, Amira’s, and Josh’s words illustrate:

Because if you around a whole bunch of negative, you’re not gonna achieve. You’re not gonna go anywhere. You’re just gonna be stuck right there in that same place with the rest of them people doing the same thing for the rest of your life. I don’t want to be like that.

Being around negative things is always gonna touch you. So if you don’t get out of that, you’re gonna be scarred.

There’s always gonna be people that’s gonna – be negative people. The more you stay with negative people, you just gonna be a negative person who will feel negative.

Clearly many students were able to identify and articulate the sources of negativity in their lives and the ways in which the negativity was hindering their re-entry into education. They were also able to remove themselves from the people that brought this negativity into their lives. These findings are consistent with the work of Altenbaugh et al. (1995) and Battin-Pearson et al. (2000) wherein the negative influence of deviant peers in the lives of students was a potent force in their delinquency and subsequent drop out.

*Significant person/critical incident.*

Students did not only have negative people in their lives, but also many positive, helpful individuals that aided in their re-entry process. In fact, when asked if there was anyone or anything that motivated them to reenter education, more than two thirds of the students cited a significant person as particularly motivational. This person was either an active supporter such as a significant other, sibling, friend, or family member or was the son/daughter of the student. The positive relationships between students and these individuals represent yet another form of social capital that positively affects students' academic and personal outcomes.

Thirteen students stated that they had a family member, friend, or significant other urging them on and supporting their educational goals. In many cases these individuals had been in the student's life for many years, but the student was unable or unwilling to hear or see their support.

Shawna is a perfect example of this situation. She lived with her grandmother all her life, and all her life her grandmother had been touting the importance of education and trying to keep Shawna on the right path. Shawna never listened to her grandmother but did what she wanted to do. Finally in the past couple of years she finally began seeing her grandmother as a positive force in her life and source of strength, as her words reveal below:

I been in the foster system and all that and it's not what it's cracked up to be. I need to get myself together so that I can put my grandma in her seat and she can stay there. Or I can be a failure like my sister and my mom. I can't do that. I really can't. That's what's pushing me. My grandma. She always said, 'I want you to do this, and I want you to do that.' And I never did it. But now I still have a chance to do it. I still have a chance and that's my motivation. My grandma. And I'm trying to make my grandmom real proud of me to be the only one in my family ever to go to college. Ever to do anything. Cause like I said, in my family, it's like history repeats itself. I'm tryin. It is all because of my grandma. She don't even know that. She'd just a loud mouth in the back of my neck. 'Go to school. Do something with your life.' And now I'm here and I'm so happy. She about to make me cry. Like before, when I was in high school it was like she was getting on my nerves. Like I felt she was just the worst person in the world. But now I realize what she was talking about.

Like Shawna, other students, including Claire, Nick, and Jamilla also found inspiration and support in people that they had known all their lives, their siblings. They attributed their re-entry into education to either the active support or the example being shown by these individuals as their words reveal below:

Well now I have that support that I need. Like my older sister's pushing me through; 'You need to go ahead and get your education'. So I have the support that I need. My sister basically like I look at her and I see how she went back to school. And she did what she had to do to further herself. And I look at her and it inspired me to do better for myself.

My brother kept trying to get me to go back 'cause he had dropped out too but he had dropped out a lot later and he started getting his GED too so he kind of got me to come back.

Yeah, my sister – like, she's not the type to always push me, whatever. But it's just what I've seen her do. She went to Arcadia and she graduated Arcadia. So she just graduated. So you gotta think four years ago is when she first started. And that's during that semester when I was confused in high school, and I didn't know where I was going, and it was like – I was just like wow. I got over that laziness, that state of mind that I couldn't do it. And then I just realized that my sister took the bus all the time, in the cold, from Northeast Philadelphia, all the way to Glenside, PA, and Arcadia. And she struggled. And we come from the same kind of environment. There is no way for me to actually try to take my life any differently. And she has been a very, very big impact, going to school, and it's just awesome.

For several other students a significant person came in the form of their own child. They felt that they had to get an education in order to support and teach their child and make their lives better. Here Jameer describes how much his daughter motivates him:

I have a child now so that's my motivation right there. I have to do better for her. So that's my biggest thing. That's why I keep going. Well, I feel as though the reason why she motivates me is because she's a little person. She needs things. I don't want her to look at me when she get my age and be like well, you dropped out. You never went back.

Beyond wanting to take care of his daughter and provide for her, it was also important to Jameer that he be a strong example for her in terms of his educational attainment. He didn't want his daughter to one day understand that he dropped out and feel that since he did it, she could too. This sentiment is echoed by Brandi:

My son, he's getting older. When he starts school, I can say, 'Oh, you have to go to school 'cause I did.' You has to have some kind of influence on them. You can't just sit there and keep lecturing them to go to school when you're not doing it yourself. So I mainly did this for my son.

Other students, like Niema, were able to put themselves in the position to meet new, positive people who encouraged their education instead of hindering it. Here, Niema describes her new partner:

My partner, she's real dedicated to me. She's really my inspiration. When she found out that I didn't have my GED, she didn't down me. She told me I could do it, made sure I did it, made sure I went. She pushed me every day. All my other partners, they would just want some stuff, like their main party was surviving.

Like Niema, Bianca's new partner is extremely dedicated to her educational success and acts as her chief motivator. Bianca says that he doesn't put her down, but encourages her to keep going to school:

My fiancé-that's a big thing to him. And he motivates me a lot, a whole lot. He doesn't even work in Philly anymore. He works in Virginia. He's gone five days a week and he will call me every night and help me with my homework, or whatever it is, over the

phone, as much as he can do, whatever he can do. With him being with me all the way. He makes sure I get it done. So he's pushing me, So that's my motivation right there.

Regardless of the form a significant person takes or when they entered a student's life, they would have no impact without the aforementioned internal change. Like Shawna, students described family members and friends they had known for their whole lives who suddenly made sense to them, whose words suddenly motivated them to change. Like Jameer, students wanted to better the lives of their children, and this desire did not necessarily coincide with their birth, but with their own realization of the role they wanted to play in their child's life. Like Niema, students were able to put themselves in the position to seek and find significant others who would support them and believe in them and leave negative individuals behind. Thus it is the growth of personal understanding and internal change that allows significant others into the lives of these students to support them in their re-entry process.

*Multiple re-entry attempts.*

Before students get to the GEL Program, more than two thirds enter other alternative education programs but are unsuccessful in obtaining their GED. In describing their experiences at these programs, students had multiple reasons for leaving before completion, both personal and programmatic.

In terms of personal barriers to completion, several students gave birth to children during their enrollment while others had problems with child care. DeDe is one such individual whose pregnancies interrupted her re-entry, as she describes below:

And I just went and got all my information and I have been trying since then but then I had two sons in that time and I had to stop coming and then come back and then stop coming again and then come back. I came – I left when I was 18. I came back when I was 19, and then that's when I found out I was pregnant so then I couldn't really walk or nothing like that.

For DeDe her situation was compounded by other personal factors, including the fact that her boyfriend became unable to pick her up at home and drop her off at the GED Program because of his work schedule. Because she could not walk, she had no way to get there.

Other students simply were not ready to go back to school when they made their first few re-entry attempts. Jameer is a prime example of such a student, as he states: “I tried a few times through different programs. It just wasn’t working at the time. I wasn’t really motivated.”

Stephanie also did not feel that she was ready to focus on her education, saying: “I didn’t even attend the program as long as I’ve been here because it just didn’t have my attention. It was always something else going on in my life to where I wasn’t putting my priorities first.”

Beyond these personal issues, students also described the programmatic issue of teachers who did not actively engage them in learning. Students talked about being handed work sheets and left alone to do them. Sabrina and Mark’s words below speak to this issue:

And being in that program, it’s not – they don’t teach you anything. They just give you papers and you read and write. I’m not learning anything, so my mind is wandering other places. So I’m like, ‘I can’t be here.’

The other GED instructors were – looking at it, they weren’t very professional. And they had me kind of doing independent work when I needed help. So that’s how they did it.

Students also repeatedly described classrooms with a non-productive atmosphere wherein they felt they were not learning anything and just wasting their time. Niema and Anita’s words speak directly to this issue:

Well, I went to this other program, and I went there and I wasn’t really learning anything. So I dropped out. I’m not gonna stay in school when I’m not learning anything. They don’t help you. So there was – that program wasn’t for me. It was just a waste of time.

I tried this one, there’s this one program and I went there for a little while. And it wasn’t – you just sat there, and you didn’t do nothing. It was boring. All they did was – all you did was sit around. So I was like, I can’t do all day, three days a week and not do nothing. You’re not learning. So I just left that one.

Students also described technicalities in program rules preventing them from graduating with no effort being made to understand or accommodate their life circumstances. One particularly keen example is Desiree, who had to leave class an hour early every other day to pick her daughter up from daycare, which closed at five pm. She was getting paid to go to the program and agreed to let them keep the \$150 per week so that she could finish, but she was kicked out for leaving that hour early. She describes her situation below:

Yeah, I tried, but the other program kicked me out because my daughter's daycare –the school – I got out of school at 5:00 and her daycare closed at 5:00. So I was leaving an extra hour early and they paid you 150 every week if you stay there whole – so I was letting them keep the 150 and I was just going to pick up my daughter. But they kicked me out for leaving that hour early.

Lily encountered both the personal issue of her work schedule conflicting with class time and a program related issue with one of the GED classes she enrolled in. Here she describes how she attempted to come back to school three times after her initial departure at the age of sixteen:

The reason why it took me so long at this point to come back I took two other opportunities. This is my second time at this program. And I also went to a charter school, which I completed but they didn't give me my diploma because I was three days short of an absence. So I never gave up on it. I always kept trying. That's why I'm here now. I left school at 16. I'm just coming back at 23 permanently. But as I said I've had two different times in between so I left at 16; went back at 19; left again. Went back at 21; left again. I'm here again at 23."

Shawna also describes a similar situation where she encountered programmatic issues. She felt that the GED program was hindering her progress by losing track of her credits. She describes taking several classes which never showed up on her transcript, despite her repeated appeals and conversations with program staff:

I was out of school for three months. I was out of school for three months there and I went to another program but that didn't work out because of my credits. I kept taking classes and they kept not counting them. So I left there and that's when I came here. But I was only in there for like a month and a half. I'm happy that at least I got the second

and third chance because most people don't get third chances. Or second ones. But I got it so I gotta take advantage of it this time.

Clearly, despite the personal and programmatic issues they encounter, and multiple unsatisfactory and incomplete re-entry attempts, many students persevere in the re-entry process.

It seems prudent at this juncture to reiterate the major findings thus far. In terms of their initial departure from traditional high schools, students seem to be leaving because of issues with their families, quality of instruction, and school environment. When the re-entry process begins, students undergo immense internal change and personal growth wherein education becomes paramount to them. During this time they also open themselves up to positive individuals around them or are able to seek new positive individuals. Most students make multiple re-entry attempts, which result in dissatisfaction and incomplete GED courses.

#### *How Did Students Find Out about the GEL Program?*

Having undergone tremendous internal change and attempting to return to education several times only to be dissatisfied, the next step for these students is finding a program that fits their needs and expectations. Documenting and understanding the ways in which students found the GEL Program is critical, as it offers insight into what avenues of communication are most successful in conveying programmatic information to students and thereby bringing them back into education. Of the thirty students interviewed, eighteen had heard about the GEL program from either a friend or relative, nine had heard about it from a staff member at another program they had attended, and two had found it on their own.

Shawna was one of the students who found out about the GEL program from a family member. Her sister attended the program for five cycles before completing her GED. When

Shawna began looking for programs to attend, her sister suggested GEL. DeDe found out about the GEL program from her sister as well. When her sister told her she was coming back to school, DeDe asked if she could come too. DeDe said in this regard:

My sister, she made me really come here but other than that, no. She's here. She just came. She called me and told me she was going to a school opening and I said, "Can I go?" and she said, "Okay", and I came here.

Other students, like Lena and Cara described being told about the GEL program by friends:

Well, I used to live around here a couple years ago. And my girlfriend had lived in the same apartment building with me, she had told me about the program. I just called and they told me when the classes started, and then I just started coming here.

My friend told me, and she gave me the number. And then I called and they told me I had an interview to come in. And I did the interview and that's when I started coming to Temple.

The significant number of students obtaining information regarding the GEL program from family or friends is consistent with Hughes' study wherein dropouts consistently reported that some member of their family or close friend acted as a "resource leading to a job, a GED, a training program, or another avenue to adult roles" (Hughes, 2007, pp. 28).

Jameer, April, and Antonia were three of the nine students who went to another GED program where a staff member recommended the GEL program to them. When Jameer decided to come back to school the second time, he called the first GED program he attended and they gave him the phone number for the GEL Program. April was told about the GEL program by a counselor at another alternative education program, who went so far as to enroll her. April said: "Oh, through the leader at my last program, she was a counselor in my program, and she was familiar with this program. And she got me in this program." Antonia too was directed to the

GEL program by another program. She described her experience as follows: “I went to this other program that down Broad and Master. I went there and they said to come here. And they gave – and I came here. They just gave me a date and I just came.”

Two students were not told about the GEL program by anyone, but instead found it on their own. Once Celia decided to come back to school she Googled “high school diploma classes” and “GED classes in Philadelphia” and the GEL program popped up. She describes her internet endeavor as follows:

I looked at – oh. It was a website. I Googled high school diploma classes or GED classes in Philadelphia. And I found it on a website. So I thought it was actually, it was very easy. It was more open than a lot of the other classes I called. They told me that there was an opening coming up.

When Antonia decided to come back to school, she was anxious to get started, so she searched the internet and began calling around searching for the program with the earliest start date. She describes this process here:

I did it by myself. I was calling all around to see which ones started more sooner. ‘Cause a lot of them told me, “Wait ‘til next year,” and all that. This one, I guess, was the best. I called them and I was supposed to come in July. It started the day before my birthday. I wasn’t in town that day. And I came in on my birthday and they told me it was too late to come in ‘cause you had to be there for the first day. So I came right back this time I guess.

Again, only two students found the GEL program on their own, the rest were told about it by friends/family members or staff members at other alternative education programs. Why is it that people are referring others to the GEL program? I suspect that it is the same reason why so many students decide to stay enrolled in the program and not continue their multiple re-entry attempts elsewhere. An examination of these positive features of the GEL program follows.

*What they found that kept them there.*

The previous section detailed the multiple attempts students made in an effort to complete their GED. Although the students interviewed for this study have persisted thus far, many students do not succeed in completing a GED program or earning their GED. In fact, Perin, Flugman, & Spiegel (2006) conducted a case study of four urban adult basic education programs in a northeastern state, and while they documented large increases in youth enrollment they also found that an average of 45% dropped out prior to completing their GED. The GEL program contrastingly retains approximately 70% of their youth from cycle to cycle and although the exact figures are not available, a substantial percentage of these youth eventually obtain their GED.

Because of the relative success of the GEL program in retaining young students, it makes sense to examine what keeps them in the program. Below I present data that illustrates the two main program features that had the most meaning for students: caring and dedicated teachers, and supportive classmates with common goals. Both of these sets of relationships between the students and their teachers and amongst the students themselves represent forms of social capital that are highly valued by the students and contribute positively to their academic and personal success.

*Caring and dedicated teachers.*

*“They show that they want to help me.”*

During the observations of Learning to Learn Week, the caring and dedication of the GEL teachers was evident in the words of both the teachers and students. Ms. Virginia and Mike, in introducing themselves to the students stated:

I don't wanna be a cop or a disciplinarian; I know you go home and deal with alot, but respect your classmates, me and yourself. Students who get through this quick are those who go home and pick up the book; you need to go home and work. It's not like it was when you were a child, life happens. Things will get resurrected that will stop you and place this program on the backburner. Let me know if you have to be out. We understand extenuating circumstances. This is your learning community, you're allies, exchange numbers, do your own thing to keep you going. I wanna help people get somewhere, someone helped me. I dropped outta schools at 15, and was pregnant and married at 22. It took me 15 years to go back to school, my husband was threatened by my education. Ms. Virginia

I expect you to always challenge yourself, to step outside the limitations placed on you; reject labels placed on you; see all possibilities; try to break it down, get you over your humps. I learn from you guys. I hope to help you develop. You're my inspiration. Mike

These teachers' words openly and candidly lay out their expectations for their students while letting them know that they will be there with them each step of the way. They let them know that they believe in them, that they understand their struggles, and that they care.

Students were also quite open and candid regarding their feelings for the teachers in the GEL Program. While many of the comments came from returning students, several new students voiced their initial impressions as well. When telling the new students about the program, one returning student, Margo, said:

Those other programs just buy the books, that's it. They don't care about you. A lot more comes with it here, it seems like one of the best programs and I've been to other GED programs. You don't just sit here and do it on your own and that's it."

Then a new student Max, said: "Here it seems to be so much more, it's about the whole person." Students also commented: "the teachers are open and honest, they care"; "they take the time and explain it to us, they give a lot of love"; "they sit with us and work with us if we don't understand"; "they cares about us".

Furthermore, when asked in their interviews what, if anything, differed between the GEL Program and their previous educational experiences, students' sentiments mirrored those

expressed during Learning to Learn Week. Almost half of the students described the caring nature of the GEL teachers as opposed to the teachers at the other alternative educational programs they had participated in. They felt that the teachers were very supportive of them both academically and personally and were genuinely interested in their well being and success.

Their words below speak to this point:

I know a lot of places will just give you a piece of paper and expect for you to learn, but here they actually teach you step-by-step about each subject. That's what I like about the program. DeDe

These teachers care more. They'll help you one-on-one and tell you to stay after class or come on Fridays when we don't have school and they'll get you a tutor. Mike

The teachers at the other program, they would just pass out books. They weren't like teachers teaching. So I really like this program because they're really teaching. And if I have – if I don't know it, I just go to the teacher and ask them and they would help me. And this is just different because they show that they want to help me. Antonia

This program is very different from others because it actually has one-on-one meetings. They talk to you. They want to know what's going on. When you go to other programs, it's just straight GED classes. They come in. They do some work with you, whatever, and that's it. They're not really in your ear or by your side trying to tell you, 'Look, you need this.' Kara

This is the best GED class I've ever been in. The teachers in here are wonderful. They motivate you all the time. I love them. Camika

Clearly, these students have found something unique at the GEL program that they did not find elsewhere, caring teachers who want to teach them. The engagement level of the teachers and the one-on-one attention is especially important to these students.

Other students echoed these feelings that the GEL teachers showed a tremendous amount of dedication and care and were willing to sit with them and actually work with them. The idea of a teacher sitting with them, talking with them, and sticking with them until they understood was especially impressive to Shawna and Jameer as evidenced by their own words.

I got teachers here who actually want to teach me something. I have somebody who want to teach me and will sit there with me until I learn it. Shawna

Here, you know, you got people that talk to you. Sit there and explain what's going on. If you don't understand they'll work with you to help you understand. Jameer

Two final students described their experiences with the GEL teachers in a particularly poignant way that speaks to the way in which these teachers affected these students' lives.

Lily was adamant in her feelings towards the GEL instructors and praised them throughout her interview. She spoke passionately about their dedication and willingness to support her no matter what, and to be there for her. Her words show her feelings best:

So it was a matter of just me believing in myself and being inspired by the instructors. Because the instructors play a whole lot. When you get that inspiration from somebody that's telling you, 'I'm here around the clock. I'm here when you graduate. I'm here after you graduate. You can do this and I wanna help.' And that makes you feel so much better. It makes you feel like okay, I'm not in this by myself. We're in this together. So really the support is what helps 'cause I was totally like can I do it. That was the main thing. The instructors. Nothing else. It could be another GEL program that's probably offering the same things but if you put negative teachers in there or teachers that just want to be there on the clock and in them nobody will succeed. The instructors totally, the instructors.

Likewise, DeDe's words about the instructors are particularly touching and telling:

My champions in there, in the classroom, they helped me in – kind of at first it was kind of like I didn't know anything. It was like I was just blank. Like a blank sheet of paper, then like some things I started knowing. They've been pushing me to do better. The support comes mainly from my teachers. Camika

Clearly the care the GEL teachers show toward their students is tremendously meaningful for students and highly influences their success. As we have seen, youth at risk for dropping out of school often feel that parents, family members, teachers, administrators, and other adults in their lives are not interested in their well-being and success. The presence of caring, knowledgeable teachers provides support for out-of-school youth in many ways. Indeed, outside

of immediate family, the most frequently encountered positive role models in the lives of youth in alternative educational programs are teachers who are not viewed only as instructors but also as confidants and positive role models (Werner, 1990). A caring relationship with a teacher gives youth the motivation for wanting to succeed (Noddings, 2002). The presence of caring, knowledgeable adults is cited as a critical element of successful youth alternative education programs (James & Jurich 1999). Additionally, it has been established that close relationships between teacher and student can lessen stress, provide support, cultivate attitudes leading to academic perseverance, promote willingness to take risks and learn new things, and build a belief in one's own efficacy and sense of personal responsibility (Wang et al., 1997).

*Caring classmates with common goals.*

Additionally, based upon the interview data, more than one third of the students felt that their fellow classmates cared about them and that their more mature attitude made for a positive learning environment where everyone helps everyone else. They felt that their classmates understood them and were working towards the same goals as they were.

Several students described the motivation that comes from being around others with similar goals who care about others and all help one another along:

And not just the teachers, but it's also the people in class. Everybody's there to help each other. This program is motivating, you get motivated. You have people in here with the same kind of problems you went through and everybody's in here trying. They're there to help each other. So that's a good thing. Jameer

So yeah, it's very different. It's motivating and it's actually other people in the class 'cause you might get to know them more. You could have a team, a buddy, or a team up or a study partner and be able to move along. You can't find that in a lot of other programs. Niema

Being here makes me feel comfortable. It's like I'm in an environment where people feel the exact same way I do. There's really people in here who care about other people instead of just their self. Shawna

These findings were echoed in the observational data gathered during both Learning to Learn Week sessions. Through both word and deed, students evidenced a tremendous amount of support and caring towards one another. When talking amongst one another during ice-breaker activities, students made statements like: “we’re like a big family.”; “it’s very seldom you find people like this, all willing to help one another like we do here”; “I wish the world was like this classroom, where we all help each other and learn from each other”; “alot of stuff someone else might know that you don’t and they help you”.

Additionally, in their interviews students described how being around more mature individuals made them feel comfortable and was more conducive to their learning. Many students contrasted the GEL experience with that of their previous educational experiences and found that they greatly appreciated the mature environment, as revealed here:

I’m around a lot more of older people so I learn more and they talk different, act different. And it’s not that many people, so like I do not have like a whole bunch of like my peers around me, talking about this, talking about that, lockers, breaks, this class, that class. April

Well it’s much more mature. In the school you come across a lot of different things, like there will be all types of different things going on with high school kids. It’s different there. It’s totally different. Lena

It’s just like the people around me, and stuff, they’re like not a bunch of little rambunctious kids running around me and stuff. They’re more serious, and they’re all focused on doing their own things, rather than being forced to come here, they’re coming here on their own choice. So they’re all taking it much more seriously. Well, I’m here mainly with a bunch of adults. So we’re all just focused on doing our thing, and just like – you know, we have a little laugh here and there. Everybody’s pretty much focused on getting their GEDs with me. So we just like – we’re all taking this very seriously, so it’s just like – well, it’s just much different in many ways from like, high school. Mike

But it seems like now, I’m in a different environment with older people, mature people, and I just feel comfortable. Everybody, or most, have the same problems as you do, or understand how you feel. You know, we could connect like that. And older people my age, or a couple of years older than me, in their 20s or in their 30s, you know I can

connect with them. 'Cause it seemed like when I was in high school and stuff, we never was on the same page. It was all about just like stupid, stupid things. I wanted something more. So I guess now, I can connect that way. So I like school. DeDe

Together, the data from the interviews and observations represent findings which are consistent with the work of Perin et al. described earlier. When interviewing students in four adult basic education classes in a large northeastern city, they found that the students described their experiences in alternative educational programs in much the same way as the GEL students. Students praised the personal attention, supportive environment, and one-on-one interactions with their teachers, whom they felt were very caring and interested in their success. They also described the chaotic, distracting, and even violent nature of their high school experiences contrasting it against the goal oriented, focused, mature setting in the alternative educational programs (Perin et al., 2006).

I have presented data suggesting what distinguishes the GEL program in the eyes of these students from other alternative educational programs. Beyond the teachers and fellow students, GEL students also described an overall positive atmosphere that makes them feel hopeful about their futures and enables them to believe in themselves. Below are a few excerpts that I feel best capture these feelings:

And then it was like okay, I exceeded more than I ever thought I would. It was just like. Before it was just like get in and get out. And then it was like I'm gonna take my time. I don't want to just pass it any more, I just wanted to pass it the first time I take it. I don't want to just pass the test, I want to pass the test with high scores. So that's different from when I came in here. Shawna

I'm just gonna pass with flying colors and I can be happy and then I'm going straight to Community with that. Like before I wanted to be a writer. I should have stayed in school but I didn't. But now I'm back and I can have a second shot at being a writer. And I'm just not gonna sleep on it this time because now I know what it feels like to sleep on the opportunity that some people just can't get back. Antonia

And for myself, I just – I have high expectations for myself ‘cause I know where I want to be at in life. I just come in here every day and do my work and make sure it gets done. And don’t let nothing else sidetrack me like before. I see myself, not as a different person, but just a stronger person. I believe in myself more. Niema

As the quotes from Shawna, Antonia, and Niema illustrate, they, along with many of their fellow students, began to believe in themselves and set higher expectations for their own achievement. They began to realize their own potential and work towards it.

In this chapter, the commonalities across these dropouts’ experiences have been examined and the main empirical findings have been explored. In school they experienced a tremendous amount of tumult and lack of support in both their home and school lives which eventually led to their early departure. After they dropped out they experienced internal change and maturation wherein getting their GED became tremendously important to them. It was during this time that students were able to take advantage of the positive individuals in their lives and/or seek out more positive individuals who could provide them with support and motivation. Once they decided to go back to school they made multiple re-entry attempts but were dissatisfied with the quality of other alternative educational programs. When they heard about the GEL program it was most often through staff members at these other programs or family members or friends. Students found that the GEL teachers really cared about them, as did their fellow students. They were happy with the overall environment and experienced a new found belief in themselves and their own potential.

## CHAPTER 6

### DISCUSSION

#### *Social Capital and Dropping Out*

In the Literature Review section of this study, I posited that social capital would play a vital role in both dropout and re-entry. Now that the data has been examined and themes developed, I turn to an examination of what can be learned about social capital in this research context as it pertains to dropout, re-entry, and persistence in the GEL program. Again, I utilize a working definition wherein social capital is a resource inhering in the relations between and among individuals, with the form of social capital being the relationships themselves.

#### *Dropout*

What has the data revealed regarding these students' relationships with others? Students described their relationships with key adults in their lives, namely their parents and their teachers, as particularly tumultuous and lacking in care. They also described the chaos, instability, and neglect that characterized these relationships. Yet home and school are the two main institutions that most often provide students with positive relationships, positive support, and guidance. In this way, from the theoretical vantage point of social capital, the absence of these positive social relationships denies students access to resources that could most positively affect positive educational outcomes.

Students' families are highly influential on their life outcomes. However, there are many approaches to conceptualizing how this occurs. The conceptualization utilized in this research context was put forth by Coleman wherein he proposed that the impact of families and home

environments can be separated into three different components: financial capital, human capital, and social capital (1988, p. 109). Coleman argues that financial and human capital represent the basic constraints and opportunities associated with a family's resource base, while social capital measures the density of interaction among parents, children, and school (Teachman, 1996). Within the parent-child relationship, social capital is represented by the amount of positive parent-child interaction. Using this conceptualization, it is clear that these students were able to accumulate minimal social capital or the resultant benefits.

Youth facing social hardships at home are especially dependent on schools for support and guidance if they cannot find these forms of social capital elsewhere in their lives. (Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Unfortunately, the students in this study echoed the words of the students in other similar qualitative studies that found that students who dropped out felt disconnected from their teachers, felt that their teachers did not care about them, and were unwilling to help them (Croninger & Lee, 2001). In sum, most of these students had either a negative relationship with their teachers or no relationship at all and thus were unable to benefit from social capital in this context. Many authors have found that positive social relationships with teachers can create powerful incentives to attend school, and that these relationships can provide students with emotional support, encouragement, and help when academic or personal problems arise. In this way, teachers are an especially important source of social capital for students at risk of educational failure. Indeed, the quality of students' relationships with teachers, another crucial form of social capital, is an important predictor of educational success (Raywid, 1995; Furstenberg & Hughes 1995). These students lacked this fundamental relationship and form of social capital. Its absence negatively affected their educational outcomes.

Many of these students described how their negative relationships with their teachers and parents influenced their decision to leave school. They were unable to establish the relationships that are most instrumental in helping students stay in school. In this way, the lack of social capital represented by these relationships is critically linked to their departure from school.

It is not the intention of this paper to paint both parents and teachers with the broad brush of “not caring”, but instead to best represent students’ perceptions. It is critical to couch these perceptions within a societal context, and to remember that students, parents, and teachers do not operate in isolation. Further, what students perceive as “not caring” may in fact be something else entirely, namely a lack of training and/or support on the part of their teachers or a feeling of being overwhelmed and/or frustration on the part of their parents.

### *Re-Entry*

Initially I posited that when dropouts decide to return to education, it would be through the acquisition of some sort of positive social capital, be it in the form of some “critical incident” or “significant person”. I argued that re-entry students would make a social connection that encourages, motivates, enables, or supports them enough to make the leap back into formal education, whether through the infusion of a something or someone new into their lives, or from some change in circumstance.

Yet data analysis revealed that when dropouts return to education, it is not through the acquisition of some sort of positive social capital, in the form of some “critical incident” or “significant person”. Instead, what seems to enable students to make the leap back into formal education is their own internal change and maturation. Social capital does play a pivotal role in re-entry, as once this internal change has occurred students are able to both recognize and seek

out more positive relationships. As the students' words regarding the role of significant others in their lives reveal, some of them were able to access people who had been in their lives all along, while others were able to seek out new, more positive people. In most cases it is through these relationships that students initially hear about the GEL program and are supported while they attend. However, it seems that social capital is playing more of a supporting role here in the re-entry process and that the actual mechanism for re-entry is internal, not external.

### *Persistence*

I see social capital to be most powerful in this research context at the GEL program itself. As revealed in *Understanding Dropout and Re-entry* earlier in this study, students clearly recognize the positive relationships they have with their teachers and fellow students. In this way, positive social capital abounds at the GEL program and these students are relishing it. It is this positive social capital that keep students coming to the GEL program.

### *Can the Form and Context of Dropout Inform the Understanding of Re-Entry?*

When I wrote the proposal for this study, I was determined to develop a categorization system for re-entry similar to that existing for dropouts, mirroring *dropout*, *pushout*, *fadeout*, and *easeout*. I do not feel that this small data set necessarily lends itself to defining a "type" of re-entry student. However, it does begin to lay a foundation for a typology based upon motivation for re-entry, wherein I can say that students' tendencies to return are based upon: past personal and educational experiences, instrumentality of the degree, their need for a job, or various forms of internal motivation, etc..

Certainly the circumstances under which students drop out heavily affect multiple aspects of their re-entry into education. Students seem to be seeking elements in alternative education programs that they were lacking in their home and school experiences. They are seeking an ethos of caring and a place to feel supported, which so many of them lacked in their home and school lives. They are seeking teachers who care about them and a classroom environment where they feel their classmates care too and share similar life goals. They are also seeking more positive relationships with their parents and teachers, which in this context, are viewed as forms of social capital.

Additionally, while only nine students indicated on the questionnaire that they had “decided” to dropout, every single student marked that they had “decided” to re-enter education. Thus, while most students felt that dropping out “just happened”, all students felt that they had made a conscious choice to re-turn. In this way re-entry does not seem to involve a gradual process of re-engagement, unlike the disengagement of dropping out, but rather a process of personal growth culminating in re-entry. Based upon this information, clear differences in the dropout and re-entry experiences become evident. Thus re-entry should be viewed as a unique process that while informed by dropout research, involves its own set of nuanced, rich experiences that warrant a great deal of further investigation.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION & IMPLICATIONS

#### *Conclusions*

Innumerable studies have documented the complexity associated with dropping out of school as well as the personal and societal implications. However, these studies have most often focused on linking various risk factors to dropout status and have neglected to explore the lived experiences of the dropouts themselves. Further, these studies have ignored the increasing number of students who re-enter education through alternative educational programs and the ways in which they navigate their journeys back into education. This study's contribution revolves around the idea that students seem to be seeking in alternative education programs those elements they found lacking in their home and school experiences, namely an ethos of care and caring, supportive relationships. We need to find a way to introduce, promote, and sustain this ethos of care in the lives of these, and all other students.

Furthermore, this study extends the research on high school dropouts. It targeted a voice rarely found in the dropout literature: that of low-income youth, primarily African American females attending a GED program, who previously attended high-poverty, low-performing schools. These students' experiences capture the complexity of re-entry in a way that statistics cannot, by allowing participants' own voices to explain how they navigated their journey back to education. In this way, this study revealed the nuances of re-entry in a way that could only come from those who have lived it. The data obtained by interviewing the thirty participants allowed me to break my conceptualization of re-entry into three main phases: how and why students left traditional education, how and why they came back, and what made them stay.

In regard to dropping out, students expressed that problems at home and at school were primarily responsible for their early departure. The influence of these two factors has been established in the dropout literature. However, listening to students describe the abandonment, harsh treatment, neglect, turmoil, and lack of care they suffered in their home lives enabled me to document the pervasiveness of family issues in this population. Likewise, the indifference, impatience, and lack of care exhibited by their teachers along with the chaos in their schools enabled me to document the pervasiveness of this other critical issue. Again, most previous studies have neglected to examine this issue from the students' perspective, despite the fact that "Overlooking students' perspectives can also diminish the importance of schooling itself as a cause of leaving" (Altenbaugh, 1995, p. 21).

The ways in which students described their home and school lives prior to dropping out powerfully conveyed the tremendous effect their family and school problems had on their educational experiences. At the heart of their words was a deep desire for care in their lives.

Despite these powerful findings, it is critical to emphasize that these are students' retrospective perceptions. Students, parents, and teachers operate and interact within a complex society. Surely the issue is more intricate than "not caring". What students are reading as uncaring may be more about teachers no being properly trained and/or supported and thus unable to readily express care. Further studies are needed to tease apart this complicated issue.

Once students began the process of finding an alternative educational program to attend, they sought those qualities they found lacking in their homes and schools; most notably an ethos of care and social capital in the form of positive relationships. Further, when describing the ways in which they came to re-enter alternative educational programs, students described various manifestations of internal change and maturation wherein they came to value education and

themselves. Entwisle (2004) posits that dropouts who returned to education seemed to possess a resiliency that enabled them to overcome their earlier academic failures. I would extend this explanation to resiliency enabling them to overcome not just academic failures, but tumultuous home lives and dysfunctional school environments. As resiliency is the likelihood of succeeding despite “personal vulnerabilities and adversities brought about by environmental conditions and experiences,” (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994), it is clearly a critically important contributing factor in students’ journeys back to education. Without resiliency, students would be unable to overcome their negative family and school experiences, or the host of other challenges facing them and might never return to school. As they utilized this resiliency and made their way back, students either sought out new, supportive and positive individuals or were able to recognize those positive, helpful individuals who were already in their lives. Many students made multiple re-entry attempts before they found the GEL program, which they most often heard about from family members, friends, or program staff at other alternative educational programs. These findings begin to build upon the very limited knowledge base regarding what re-entry looks like for these urban youth.

Extending this knowledge base, I was able to document the ways in which students expressed their deep appreciation of the caring and supportive nature of the teachers, as well as their caring, more mature classmates. They also cited the overall positive environment at the GEL program as especially helpful to them both academically and emotionally. Documenting the attributes students are seeking in an alternative education program is the first step in opening a dialogue between students, researchers, and program staff regarding what works best for them.

### *Implications*

In what ways are this study's findings useful? How can they inform educational policy and practice? To begin with, more studies investigating dropouts' educational journeys must employ methods utilizing students' perspectives as the core of their inquiry, because without these perspectives, teachers, school administrators, politicians, and the general public does not have a clear picture of students' experiences or what works in bringing them back to education. Also, this line of inquiry should be extended by increasing the number of participants across various programs throughout the city, state, and nation in order to gain a more comprehensive idea of what re-entry looks like in a larger context. These findings should also be corroborated by seeking input from teachers, parents, and other key players in students' lives in order to obtain a more complete and multi-faceted understanding of the re-entry experience.

Additionally, we need to examine ways in which to apply this understanding of re-entry to the high school context, as many students drop out and then choose to re-enroll in high school rather than alternative education programs. Based upon input from these students re-enrolling in high school, alternate models for high schools can be developed, and/or at the very least policy and practice regarding existent models can be amended.

Further exploration is also needed in terms of how to help families and schools build an ethos of care in their respective environments. Noddings writes that we learn to care about others through our experience of being cared for by others and in this way we can build this ethos of caring: "learning first what it means to be cared for, then to care for intimate others, and finally to care about those we cannot care for directly" (Noddings 2002, p. 31). In this way an ethos of caring might become more prevalent in students' lives.

In terms of increasing this ethos of care at home, we must begin when students are young. Parents need more support and guidance regarding the importance of their role in their children's life outcomes. The networking of social support structures would be particularly useful in this regard. The venues that may lend themselves best to these types of interventions are churches and community based organizations where parenting workshops, support groups, counseling, and child care services could be provided. Another viable option is to increase the availability and use of mentors and mentorship programs like Big Brother/Big Sisters, as the efficacy of mentors in promoting educational resilience is well established (Zimmerman, 2002).

If the development of a caring approach to teaching is not included in teacher preparation programs, administrative certification programs, or in-service experiences, it needs to be. Caring should be a topic of serious consideration for all training programs, but especially for perspective urban educators. These teachers need to be better prepared to teach urban youth. They must know enough about the psychology of the students they are teaching in order to recognize social and emotional problems and at the very least, be able to seek the appropriate assistance. This preparation will create a more stable, motivational, and supportive learning environment. Additionally, the creation of small learning communities is finding increasing success at promoting care coupled with educational success and is should be utilized whenever possible. A final suggestion to increase care in schools is emphasizing the role and efficacy of psychologists and counselors in schools.

Further, we cannot ignore the fact that these students undergo significant developmental and cognitive changes throughout the dropout and re-entry process. Like Shawna's relationship with her grandmother, students grow and change, as her grandmother transformed from her biggest nagging nuisance to her biggest source of strength and motivation. While the nuances of

this development are beyond the scope of this study, future studies might take a developmental approach to this same issue.

Apart from the aforementioned suggested actions, the state of more alternative educational programs needs to be researched and documented. These programs need more attention across the board, both locally and nationally. Researchers, politicians, education officials, educators, media sources, families, and community leaders need to be made aware of the tremendous number of students these programs are educating as well as the challenges they face. By beginning to identify the various factors that acted as supporters and deterrents to program participation, alternative education providers may be able to take appropriate action that will encourage high school dropouts to participate in available GED programs. There need to be more effective networks for reaching out to dropouts, and greater efforts at keeping in contact with them and encouraging them to return to education. Every educational false start dropouts experience is quite costly not only to the individual, but to society as a whole and to workforce development in particular.

Further, finding ways to form collaborations between these programs, school systems, and various social service agencies is critical in order to build webs of support for these youth. We need to learn from those programs that are successfully integrating services as well as those providing individual services.

Finally, we need to understand more about the internal change and resiliency that exists in the re-entry process as resiliency is a critical element of student success in re-entering education. Further studies need to explore the inner changes students undergo during this process and the origins of their resiliency. Families and educators must find ways to build young people's potential to be resilient and strengthen protective processes in the face of various risk

factors. It is critical to identify and promote educational resilience on both an individual and programmatic level prior to and after dropout takes place. Understanding and being able to promote resilience can provide information that can help administrators, teachers, and policymakers design more effective school environments and intervention models.

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## APPENDIX A

**DROPOUT RE-ENTRY INTO THE EDUCATIONAL PIPELINE:****PARTICIPANT QUESTIONNAIRE**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Home Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_

Today's Date: \_\_\_\_\_

***Please check one:***Gender:             M             FRace:             African American  
 Caucasian  
 Hispanic/Latino  
 Asian  
 American Indian  
 Other**1. What is the highest grade that you have *completed*?** 8th 9<sup>th</sup> 10<sup>th</sup> 11<sup>th</sup>

**2. Please rank the *TOP 3* reasons why you withdrew from school.**

- Employment       Expulsion       Marriage  
 Family Problems       Poor Grades       Pregnancy  
 Boredom       Illness       Arrest  
 Held back in school       Lack of support       Peer Pressure  
 Encouraged to drop out  
 Other

(If Other, please explain) \_\_\_\_\_

**3. Please rank the *TOP 3* reasons why you came back to school.**

- Birth of a Child       To make more money       To better myself  
 Loss of Job       Friend came back       Feeling encouraged  
 Forced to       Feel more mature  
 Other

(If Other, please explain) \_\_\_\_\_

**4. Please mark a spot on the line that you feel best shows the way in which you left school.**

All of a sudden

Gradually

**5. Do you feel that you “decided” to leave school or did it just happen?**

- Decided       Just happened

**6. What is the primary way in which you felt you reentered school?**

All of a sudden

Gradually

**7. Do you feel you “decided” to re-enter school or did it just happen?**

Decided

Just happened

## APPENDIX B

### **DROPOUT RE-ENTRY INTO THE EDUCATIONAL PIPELINE: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

#### DROPPING OUT

1. Can you tell me more about why you left school?
2. How did it happen? (gradually, or abruptly)
3. What was school like for you? How did you see school?
4. Did anyone try to stop you from dropping out?
5. Can you imagine anything or anyone that could have prevented you from dropping out?

#### IN BETWEEN TIME

1. How long were you out of school?
2. How did you feel about being out of school?
3. What did you do most of that time?
4. Did anyone try to get you to go back to school?
5. What did you learn while you were out of school?

#### RETURNING

1. Can you tell me about enrolling in this program?
2. Was a particular person involved in your enrolling in this program?  
Who?  
How?  
When?

3. Why do you think some people don't return?
4. Can you discuss anything you see as a major change in your life that influenced your decision to return?  
What?  
How?  
When?
5. Can you discuss any event(s) that influenced your decision to return?
6. Can you discuss any person(s) that influenced your decision to return?
7. How do you see school now?  
Work?  
Friends?  
Money?
8. When was the first time you thought about getting into this program?
9. How did you find out about this program?
10. What or who made you think about it?
11. Why did you choose this program?
12. What do you expect from this program?
13. What do you expect programs to do to help you? (teachers, class friends?)
14. What supportive services (counseling, tutoring) are essential in helping you?  
When do you need these most?
15. How is this program different from school?

#### FUTURE

1. What are your plans for the future?