ALLOWING DROP-OUTS TO DROP-IN: A CASE STUDY OF WEST BLADEN HIGH SCHOOL

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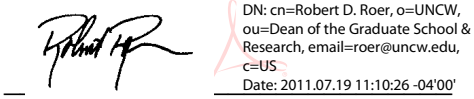
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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study sought to understand one principal's ideology of turning high school dropouts to drop-ins. The study was conducted at a high school, which has experienced a high rate of drop outs in Southeastern, North Carolina. A purposeful sampling was used to select six participants who were either interviewed individually or in a focus group. Data showed that lack of caring relationships, unsafe school environments, and lack of support contributed to student dropout.

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I would like to thank the principal and faculty of West Bladen High School. They were so gracious to allow me to conduct my research at their school.

Finally, I would like to thank all my family, friends, colleagues and students who have supported me throughout this process. Their words of encouragement, motivational pep talks, and vested interest in my work has meant more to me than they will ever realize. They have inspired me each day to be a better person and teacher, and to them I am forever grateful.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate my thesis to my family. To my son, Sullivan, you have been my driving force from the day you were born. May you look back on this time in our lives and think; you will always have time for your education and you can always follow your dreams. To my husband and parents, thank you for believing in me, supporting me, and encouraging me in all aspects of my life. To my sister, you are my inspiration for this thesis. Thank you for being you and reminding me to do everything in my power to keep my students from falling through the cracks. I love you.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Student graduation rates are at the forefront of national education concerns. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) mandates schools systems to report graduation rates, a required demand that has magnified dropout rates. The goal of NCLB is to ensure that all children will graduate from high school. However, by putting increased importance on graduation rates, NCLB has perversely led to increase in dropout rates in some areas (McNeil, Coppola, Radigan, & Heilig, 2008). Due to NCLB, dropout rates have received renewed attention from educators, policymakers, and researchers (Daniel, Hampden-Thompson & Warkentien, 2010).

Statement of the Problem

Every year, nearly one-third of all public high school students—and almost one-half of minorities—fail to graduate with their class (Bridgeland, DiIulio & Morison, 2006). These high dropout rates have negative consequences for the students, the economy, and the civic fabric of communities (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Moore & Fox, 2010). In order to succeed in present day society, research suggests that students need at least a high school diploma or an equivalency degree (Daniel et al., 2010). Research has proven that there is a student disconnect in the importance of the high school diploma (Balfanz et al., 2010). Students are dropping out, even when it is not in their best interest to do so. There needs to be some way to help students remain in school and successfully complete all requirements to obtain a diploma.

To motivate students and keep them involved in the education process, National Dropout Prevention Center[1] identifies effective strategies for dropout prevention. They include, mentoring programs, service learning opportunities, alternate school programs, and after-school programs. The federal government is spending a total of $3.5 billion in School Improvement Grant funds earmarked for dropout prevention (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009).

[1] http://www.dropoutprevention.org/effective-strategies

Nationwide, school systems are implementing different programs, such as extracurricular programs, Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), the use of graduation coaches, and community resources to retain students in school (Balfanz et al., 2010; Swanson, 2010). AVID, for instance, has been implemented in middle and high schools across the United States. AVID was originally developed to help close the achievement gap between underserved students who might not otherwise have the necessary academic skills to attend a post-secondary school after high school graduation and students who are historically successful in school.

During the 2009-2010 school year, the dropout rate in North Carolina was 3.75%, which translates to 16,804 students (NCDPI, 2010). North Carolina is also using the Early College High Schools model to stem the tide of dropout rates. Early College High Schools blend high school and college in a rigorous program, to help combat the drop out epidemic (Nodine, 2008). Dropout rates in early college schools are 4% lower than statewide rates for traditional schools (Vargas & Quiara, 2010). Another strategy that some states have implemented to help increase student graduation rates is breaking the schools into smaller learning communities, such as freshman academies (Connell, Eccles, Kemple & Legters, 2006). Breaking the schools into smaller communities allows for student/teacher relationships to build, teacher collaboration, and support to prevent students from falling through the cracks (Oxley, 2007). However, once students drop out of school, what, if anything are schools doing?

Purpose of the Study

This study sought to understand one principal's ideology of turning high school dropouts to drop-ins. The principal, in one public high school in Southeast North Carolina, put a document on the schools webpage, which was also carried in the local newspaper and covered on the local

news, asking students who had dropped out of his school to come back and finish their high school course work needed to graduate. Part of his appeal stated:

> Moms, Grandmas, Dads and Grand-dads...Uncles, Aunts, Cousins and Neighbors: spread the word. I want your kids back. I don't care where they are from, and I don't care about the past. It isn't our past. Our past hasn't even happened yet. If they want to be here, and they want another chance at that diploma, I will not turn them away. Let's turn Drop Outs into Drop Ins.[2]

According to North Carolina Department of Instruction (NCDPI, 2010), the 2010 graduating class of West Bladen lost 29% of its original members. One of two traditional high schools in Bladen County, West Bladen high school has a student population of eight hundred students, with a 93% attendance rate. In 2009, NCDPI designated West Bladen high school a "School of Progress", which means "High Growth" (NCDPI, Report Card, 2009). This means that 60% of students grew academically from the previous school year. NCDPI (2010) defines student growth as the change in academic achievement for students in the current year.

Given that federal and state accountability measures require that students be proficient on End of Course (EOCs) and End of Grade (EOGs) tests, it is plausible to argue that it is rare for a principal to publically plea for drop outs to come back to school to complete graduation requirements. There is a possibility that such students may decrease the chances of a school being recognized by the state as a "School of Distinction." This study was designed to understand one principal's ideology of turning high school dropouts to drop-ins and its implications. The following questions guided this study.

1. What factors contribute to students dropping out at West Bladen High School?

[2] http://www.nodropouts.org/blog/door-was-closed-take-lookit-now-open

2. What makes the principal concerned about turning dropouts into drop-ins?
3. How does this school support drop-ins?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because as the dropout epidemic continues to plague our schools, new strategies must be implemented to reduce the numbers of student dropouts. Every year one in five students will drop out of school (Hurst, Kelly, & Princiotta, 2004). Individuals who drop out of school will earn less money than graduates, and are more likely to be unemployed, incarcerated and dependent on the government (Belfield & Levin, 2007). A high school in North Carolina is implementing a new strategy, allowing dropouts to return, to decrease the number of dropouts.

Definition of Terms

Throughout this study, the following definition of terms are applied.

Drop In: A student who has returned to a traditional high school after dropping out, with the goal of earning a high school diploma by the age of 21.

School of Distinction: Schools that made at least expected growth and had at least 80% of their students' scores at or above Achievement Level III (NCDPI, 2010).

School of Progress: Schools that made at least expected growth and had at least 60% of their students' scores at or above Achievement Level III (NCDPI, 2010).

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review is divided into a number of different sections in a parallel organization. The first section defines a dropout in current educational terminology. The second section dissects the literature that directly assesses the impact of the school as an organization on dropouts. The third section describes the literature that investigates the family structure and influence on dropouts. The fourth section dissects the literature that discusses lack of motivation and what has been done to increase motivation. The final section will discuss conclusions and will address areas where more research is needed.

National high school graduation rates hover between 68% and 71%, indicating that about one-third of all high school students drop out (Finnan & Chasin, 2007). Preventing students from dropping out and increasing rates of successful completion of high school is a national goal.

Defining a Dropout

In order to understand dropouts we must first understand who is classified as a dropout. Bridgeland, DiIulio, Jr. and Balfanz (2010) suggest that the term dropout is used differently by different groups' limited understanding of its scope and confusion over actual graduation rates. Efforts must be undertaken to ensure principals and teachers have an accurate understanding of the extent and dimensions of the dropout problem in their schools. According to the US Department of Education (2001), a dropout is any student who entered the ninth grade but does not graduate within four years. This includes students who leave traditional high school to pursue a GED or to earn a diploma from a non-tradition high school. Many of these students are considered at risk.

School as an Organization

Lee and Burkam (2003) investigated how high schools, through their structure and organization, may influence students' decisions to stay in school or drop out. They found that

there is a clear difference of the day a student decides to drop out of school and the day the student starts to feel disengaged from school. Students begin to feel disengaged and over a period of time decided to drop out. As a school, it is necessary for someone to catch the student as they start to disengage before they decide to drop out. Literature regarding national drop outs (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Fashola, 2003; Finnan & Chasin, 2007; Kolstead & Owing, 1986; Lee & Burke, 2002; Mahoney & Cairus, 1997; McNeal, 1995; Melnick, Sabo & Vanfossen, 1992; Rumberger, 1997; Rumberger & Thomas, 2000; Peck, Roesser, Zarrett & Eccles, 2008) has a reoccurring theme, the continual decrease in graduation rates are a problem. The reasons why students are dropping out of school are well documented; factors related to school as an organization, family structure, and student lack of motivation (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Finnan & Chasin, 2007; Lee & Burke, 2002; Kolstad & Owings, 1986; Rumberger, 187). The effects of schools as an organization on dropouts indicate that many factors can contribute to the decision to drop out. These include: size of school and student body (Rumberger & Thomas, 2000), curriculum standards (Lee & Burke, 2002), and lack of relationships built with teachers and students (Croninger & Lee, 2001). Numerous studies have found that dropout rates for lower socioeconomic students are higher (Kolstad & Owings, 1986; Rumberger, 1987). Studies (Fashola, 2003; Mahoney & Cairus, 1997; McNeal, 1995; Melnick, Sabo & Vanfossen, 1992; Peck, Roesser, Zarrett & Eccles, 2008) have found that there is a positive relationship between the implementation of extracurricular activities as a way to motivate students to stay in school. If students do not have access in extracurricular activities they have a greater chance of dropping out of school.

Lee and Burkam (2003) further found out that larger schools (enrolling between 1,500 and 2,500 students) had a higher proportion of students dropping out, roughly 12%, compared to

6% drop out rate of smaller schools. These numbers can be attributed to students "falling through the cracks" in a large high school. Likewise, smaller schools are typically private or charter schools (Lee & Burkam, 2003) were student's parents have a monetary investment in a student's achievement, therefore students are typically more successful. On the other hand, larger schools typically have a larger population of low socioeconomic students (SES), majority who must gain employment to help their families financially (Rumberger, 1987; Astone & Upchurch, 1994).

Curricula can also influence students to stay or drop out of schools. "In our highest-poverty public schools, a whopping 68% of fourth-graders fail to reach the basic level of achievement. Only 10% of fourth-graders at these schools can read at the proficient level, the ideal goal for all students" (U.S. Department of Education, 1999, p. 7).

High-quality early childhood education has the greatest positive effects not only on children with disabilities, but also for students from lower SES students who are at-risk due to outside circumstances (Stegelin, 2004). Stegelin's scholarly work documents over 20 years of research on high-quality early childhood education and its importance in helping predict or prevent students from dropping out in later grades. Such education is:

- Holistic
- Nurturing
- Consistent
- Hands-On;
- Stimulating;
- Exploratory, and
- Integrates interactive learning across the curriculum (Stegelin, 2004).

Interviews with dropouts as they left school revealed that one half of students said they were dropping out due to social reasons: because they didn't get along with teachers or other students (Caterall, 1998). In their study, Lee and Burkam (2004) found that the most influential factor in a student's achievement is the relationships students have with teachers, administrators and peers.

Griffin (2002) conducted a study in Florida where he collected data from 132, 903 high school students to gain a better understanding of why some students can easily create relationships within the school setting some others cannot. In his study he discovered two possible explanations: cultural inversion and stereotype threat. He found that it is difficult for many minorities to join school organizations because they do not have an emotional connection to the programs offered. For example, what is popular in the USA may not be popular or of interest to students who have moved here from Mexico. In addition, Griffin discovered that some students are not engaged in school activities because they do not want to go against a stereotype. For example, minority students might not want to join academic organizations because they do not want to be viewed by their peers as too smart.

Family Structure

Researchers have concluded that parent involvement has a lasting impact on students achievement in school (Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems, & Holbein; 2005). These authors reviewed numerous studies to better understand the impact parent involvement has on the success of student achievement and willingness to stay in school. Parental involvement was measured as participating in parent-teacher conferences, participating in school activities, engaging in activities at home including, but not limited to homework, assisting in choosing students courses, knowledge and reaction to students academic success, and imparting parental values (attitudes

about the importance of effort and academic success) (Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems, & Holbein; 2005).

Researchers (Henderson and Mapp, 2002; Mapp, 2004; Rumberger, 1987) underscore the relationship between socioeconomic status and student dropouts and suggest the following steps to establish effective family engagement programs:

1. Recognize that all parents, regardless of income, education level, or cultural background are involved in their children's education and want their children to do well in school;
2. Link family and community engagement efforts to student learning;
3. Create initiatives that will support families to guide their children's learning, from preschool to high school,
4. Develop the capacity of school staff to work with families;
5. Focus efforts to engage families on developing trusting and respectful relationships;
6. Embrace a philosophy of partnership and be willing to share power with families. Make educational development a collaborative enterprise.

Motivation

Students of color account for the highest percentage of student drop outs across the nation. Fashola (2003) describes four effective models to improve academic achievement of all students, especially African American males. The author focused on after school programs as a method of motivating students to stay in school. The author studied two academic programs, Exemplary Center for Reading Instruction (ECRI) and the Howard Street Tutoring Program (HSTP), which were specifically designed to target African American students. The author, also

examined outside school programs such as: the Boys and Girls Club, Brothers and Sisters Program and Help One Student to Succeed (HOSTS). He concluded that students who are involved in these programs have a sense of community and are less likely to drop out of school and more likely to do well academically. Within this safe community, the students can discuss problems they are facing in school.

The more students are engaged in school, the more academically resilient they become and the more likely they will be to remain in school through to graduation. Finn and Rock (2002) studied 1,800 minority students to gain a better understanding of why students decide to stay in school when all the odds are stacked against them. Among the most important variable that they identified for a child and adolescent was self-esteem. The authors suggested involvement in extracurricular activities will allow students to see themselves succeeding personally and academically.

Four of the studies included in this literature review (Cairus & Mahnoey, 1997; Eccles, Peck, Roeser, & Zarrett, 2008; Fashola, 2003; Melnick, Sabo & Vanfossen, 1992; McNeal, 1995) directly address the relationship between secondary public school graduation rates and extracurricular activity participation. These studies found that there was a positive relationship between extracurricular participation and student graduation rates. Peck et al. (2008) found that college enrollment, directly related to high school graduation, increased for students who participated actively in clubs and sports and McNeal's (1995) discovered that students who participated in extracurricular activities were less likely to dropout. Finally, while Melnick et al.'s (1992) found a strong correlation between participation and lower dropout rates, especially in athletic participation, which had an impact on school attendance for rural black males, suburban Hispanic males and rural Hispanic males.

Some students, especially at-risk students, need to know that there is someone at school that cares about them. This could be a teacher, a coach, administrator, or mentor. Christenson and Thurlow (1994) emphasized creating an environment that is caring and offered community service opportunities. They found that if student felt they were needed or that an adult expected them to be in school their attendance would drastically increase.

To prevent students who lack support from dropping out of school as well as ensuring that they attend college, effective programs such as Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) can be implemented in middle and high school. AVID students become active learners by participating in Socratic Seminars, weekly tutorials, service learning projects and extracurricular activities. These different activities boost the confidence level of AVID students. Once students build up their confidence, they are able to speak up and seek out opportunities to benefit themselves. Further, students create bonds with community leaders, teachers and classmates.

Watt, Johnston, Huerta, Mendiola, and Alkan (2008) conducted a study of the retention behaviors of high school seniors in the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) class. The design involved a multiple case study of eight high schools in California and Texas. They discovered that personal bonds formed among administrators, teachers, tutors, community leaders and students. The bonds were critical to student achievement.

Conclusion and More Research

As the dropout rate continues to rise in the nation, the concern for understanding and preventing further drop outs has also increased. There have been many studies conducted by researchers to gain a better understanding of potential drop outs, reasons for dropping out of school, and problems that are implemented to reduce dropping out. However, there are few schools that are asking dropouts to return. Because this is a new strategy being implement, not

much research regarding allowing drop outs to come back to school exist. In this study, I used West Bladen High School in Bladenboro North Carolina to investigate the reasons and effect of the principal of WBHS when he asked all dropouts to come back to school.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Rationale and Assumptions of Research Design

This study was designed to shed light on a strategy of increasing student graduation that is being implemented in one high school in southeastern North Carolina. The strategy allows dropouts to return to school to complete their coursework and graduate. The following questions guided the study.

1. What factors contribute to students dropping out at West Bladen High School?
2. What makes the principal concerned about turning dropouts into drop-ins?
3. How does this school support drop-ins?

I used a qualitative design with a case study approach. Qualitative research allows the researcher to seek answers to the "how" and "why" of a topic, and allows for a natural approach in a real world environment (Cresswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Merriam, 1998; Miles & Hubberman, 1994; Patton, 2002; Yin, 2003). According to Merriam (1998), "qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (p. 6). Maxwell (1997) enumerates five research purposes for which qualitative studies are particularly useful: (1) understanding the meaning, for participants in the study, of the events, situations, and actions they are involved with , and of the accounts they give of their lives and experiences, (2) understanding the particular context within which the participants act, and the influence this context has on their actions, (3) identifying unanticipated phenomena and influences, and generating new, grounded theories about them, (4) understanding the processes by which events and actions take place, and (5) developing causal explanations.

I used a case study approach, which according to Merriam (2002,) is "an intensive description and analysis of a phenomenon or social unit such as an individual, group, institution,

or community" (p. 8). Yin (1989) describes case study research as a flexible form of inquiry best suited for studying a particular phenomenon within its natural context. Merriam (1998) contends, "By concentrating on a single phenomenon or entity, the researcher aims to uncover the interaction of significant factors of characteristics of the phenomenon" (p. 29). For this study, West Bladen High School was the setting for my case study investigating drop out cases and strategies available to support those that are readmitted to complete and graduate from high school.

Setting

West Bladen High School is located in Bladenboro, North Carolina. According to North Carolina Department of Instruction (NCDPI, 2010), the 2010 graduating class of West Bladen lost 29% of its original members. In 2010, NCDPI designated West Bladen high school a "School of Progress" that met "High Growth" (NCDPI, Report Card, 2010). This means that 60% of students grew academically from the previous school year. NCDPI (2010) defines student growth as the change in academic achievement for students in the current year.

Department of Public Instruction (2010) reported the following data for the Annual Report Card on West Bladen High School. The high school has a traditional schedule and diverse school population with students enrolled in grades 9 through 12. West Bladen High School has a student-teacher ratio of 14.7.

Table 1

Population Breakdown of WBHS for the 2010-2011 School Year.

Ethnic Group	White	Black	Hispanic	Am. Indian
Percentage of population	59.7%	37%	3%	1%
Number of students	474	294	24	8

Table 2

Breakdown of the Numbers of Dropouts in the Past Three Years at WBHS.

Year	2007-2008	2008-2009	2009-2010
Total	48	35	38
Female	18	19	15
Male	30	16	23
African American	17	14	9
White	28	16	28
American Indian	0	<5	<5
Hispanic	3	<5	<5
Asian	0	0	<5
Other	0	<5	<5

Sampling

Purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) was used in selecting participants. The sample included the principal, the assistant principal, a guidance counselor, a teacher, and two students. I included the principal in the study as a participant because as the leader of the school it is his vision to allow drop outs to return to school. I sought the assistance of the principal to identify teachers who fit my criteria and who he thought were playing a significant role in helping eliminate drop outs and retain drop-ins. I targeted teachers based on their gender and because they have direct relation with students who are returning. The purpose was to gain their perceptions on the ideology of asking dropouts to come back to school.

Data Collection Strategies

In order to gain an understanding of allowing drop outs to return to school, I conducted face-to-face interviews as well as focus group interviews. The interviews provided data that is "potentially richer and more complete than that which can be obtained from a questionnaire" (Slavin, 2007, p. 111). Qualitative data collection focused on verbal information rather than numerical information (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003).

I conducted a non-structured face-to-face interview with the principal (See Appendix A). The focus of the interview was used to gain an understanding of the dropout problem, why he asked the dropouts to return, and the strategies the school uses to keep the drop-ins on task and on track to graduate. The interview lasted for approximately forty-five minutes. With the principal's consent, the interview was tape recorded and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Besides the one-on-one interview with the principal, I used a focus group (See Appendix B) to interview the assistant principal, lead guidance counselor, and a science teacher. According to Iwasaki (2005), "focus groups are an effective method for obtaining in-depth information

about a concept or issue and learning about people's experiences" (p. 45). The focus group meeting lasted for forty-five minutes. My goal in conducting the focus group interview was to gain an understanding of why students were dropping out, the implementation process of allowing them to return, and the success of the returning students.

Lastly, I interviewed two student drop-ins. One interview was one-on-one and the other was done via email. My goal was to gain an understanding of their experiences as drop-outs and drop-ins.

I also analyzed West Bladen High School report card for the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 school years, published by the NCDPI. I analyzed the change in dropout rate and overall changes in the school before and after the current principal's arrival in the school. The goal of this analysis was to gain insight and valuable data that served as a reference during the interviews. In other words, the documents became a secondary tool, a checks and balances, to the information provided by the participants.

Data Analysis

The following steps are used in analyzing qualitative data: (a) organizing the data, (b) developing themes and patterns in the data, (c) and analyzing the data along the research question (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). For this study, I organized the data and transcribed all interviews and focus group discussions verbatim. Once the data was collected through focus groups and interviews and the transcription of said methods, I analyzed for reoccurring themes. Once completed, I documented reoccurring themes between the data by color coding themes within the transcription. Three reoccurring themes emerged. I created three headings to represent the themes and I copied and pasted each direct quote that correlated. Seidel (1998) states, that

"analyzing qualitative data is essentially a simple process. It consists of three parts: Noticing, Collecting, and Thinking about interesting things" (p. 1).

Methods of Verification

The primary criterion for evaluating qualitative studies is the creditability of the study. McMillan (2008) defines credibility as the extent to which the data, data analysis, and conclusions are believable and trustworthy" (p. 296). McMillan further observes that while the primary purpose of a case study is to obtain as many details as possible to gain an understanding of a particular situation, it can lead to concerns with generalizations. With that in mind, I tried to avoid generalizing this study's findings. By conducting one-on-one interviews with the principal, lead guidance counselor, two students and a focus group interview with faculty members, I increased the trustworthiness of the findings.

To ensure the data collected is reliable I conducted a "member check" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) a process where participants verify data and interpretations. All participants were notified when the transcription of the data was complete and were given the opportunity to check the accuracy of the transcription.

Ethical Consideration

In order to ensure confidentially and the safety of participants many ethical considerations were implemented. I submitted the research proposal to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington for approval. I contacted the principal to gain consent to conduct the study in his school, as well as, recruited him to be a participant. I personally asked staff members to volunteer in the focus groups. I explained the purpose of the study to the members and then received their formal written consent to participate

in the study. Participation in the study was voluntary and participants were free to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty.

I asked participants for permission to tape-record the interviews, which I later transcribed for data analysis. All data was stored in a locked filing cabinet and a password protected computer. Any reports emerging from the data does not have any identifiers that are associated with the actual participants. Instead, I used pseudonyms. All data will be destroyed after two years as required by the law and the university policy.

Role as a Researcher

Glesne and Peshkin (1992) point out that, "a reflective section on who you are as a researcher and the lenses through which you view your work is now an expected part of qualitative research studies" (p. 109). As the researcher, I was the interviewer and the facilitator for the focus group. I do not have an affiliation with West Bladen High School. However, I am the Coordinator of the AVID program and a history teacher at a neighboring county. My passion to understand why students drop out of high school derives from having a sibling, my sister who became a drop out at the age of sixteen.

While I shared my sister's story with the participants, I did not voice my opinions or beliefs about dropouts to the principal and faculty. Instead, my goal was to allow the participants to speak honestly and freely as I documented their experiences.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

In this chapter, I present the findings from the study. My analysis was done using the guiding questions; I discovered three themes, including:

1. Lack of relationship
2. Lack of student support
3. Lack of a safe learning environment within the school

Upon starting his role as principal at West Bladen High School, it was apparent that there was a dropout epidemic that was plaguing his school. He explained:

> We are not going to have the attrition numbers of kids who are dropping out that traditionally dropout. You are talking 20% of students drop out between their 9th grade and 10th grade year. Go to that cafeteria and split it and then take one-quarter away and that's how many usually drop out (A. Adams, personal communication, April 8, 2011).

However, he also has a personal tie to the issues of dropping out as he noted in an article he authored and published by nodropouts.org.

> As the new, first-year principal, I took this challenge personally. The reason for this is simple: before I became an adult and an eventual high school principal, I stood on the verge of being one of those kids we know simply as "dropouts". Each time I see a withdrawal form handed to me by a student, who wants to leave high school, I think of freezing rain, a jungle, a desert, canned peas, newspapers, and basketball. Then I hand the paperback, unsigned. I had no real home and I began to feel like a bit of an outcast. One of my journalism teachers knew my situation, and she gave me a box of pots and pans and a few other things she thought I might need. She did not want to see me drop out so close to graduation. Between the cheap hotel and the eventual floors of a few friends, I

made it to that special day. Despite the fact that nobody was there to see it from my family, I walked across that stage on Saturday, and was walking to the recruiting station on Monday morning.[3]

To ensure that students are successful at West Bladen High School, the principal made it his goal to solve three issues: lack of relationship, lack of support, and school safety.

Lack of Relationships

Data revealed that there is lack of caring and trusting relationships between the community and school, administration and teachers, and teachers and students, all which contributed to high student dropout rate.

Community and school.

The principal revealed that West Bladen High School had previously been looked at as the laughing stock of the community. He shared that "facebook pages, tshirts, and jokes have been made to belittle students at West Bladen." I learned that part of the culture in the small community was whoever had the better football team, had the better school. The principal analogously stated that "the other high school is the hammer and we are the nail." In order to change this tide, the principal implemented a community clean up day and invited community members to the high school. He asked for the community members and students to interact with each other while cleaning up the school. The principal went to all the churches in the community to talk about the changes that were taking place at the high school and invited all community members to have a vested interest in the school. He published in the newspapers the changes that were being made at the high school and invited all students who had previously dropped out of school to return.

[3] http://www.nodropouts.org/blog/not-without-fight-one-mans-journey-homeless-teen-high-school-principal

Administration and teachers.

To ensure the success of all students, the principal wanted to build a bridge between the administration team and the faculty. He asked that all teachers publically be supporters of the school but could criticize school policy privately to him and the administration staff. He created an open-door policy in which teachers freely discussed their differences. The principal said that "in order to have a healthy school, the teachers must trust that they have a voice, and buy-in to the changes being made."

Using the coaching model, the principal wanted the teachers to be a part of the West Bladen team so he implemented "Jean Friday" to allow teachers dress down and wear their West Bladen High School t-shirts. He expected teachers to engage the students everyday so he had allowed them to wear sneakers too. He believed that if the teachers are engaging, the relationships between teachers and students will emerge.

Teachers and students.

Lack of caring and trusting relationships between teachers and students contributed significantly to a high number of students dropping out. According to the guidance counselor, previously, West Bladen was not a positive place for students because it was adult centered. "Everyone lived their lives, did their workdays, with the premise of what was best for adults. How can teachers do their job the easiest?" To build relationships between teachers and students, the principal set an expectation for all teachers to know the students at the high school. He asked the faculty to go through the yearbook to learn all the names of the students who attended the school. He also changed the language at the school. The word "duty" changed to "engagement". He argued "your duty means you are obligated to stand there with your arms folded, we don't want that, we want engagement, say good morning to everyone." Teachers are expected to be in

the hallways greeting students by their first names. Likewise, when students are sent to the principal's office or in a conference, the student is asked to tell the faculty two good things about themselves. The principal justifies this practice by stating:

> They want to feel like we care, so even if they are in trouble, tell me one good thing about you. If say, well I like basketball. Okay, now I know [Adam] likes basketball. Little things like that, that we can build on (Adams, personal communication, April 8, 2011).

Remaking on the change of relationships between students and teachers, the guidance counselor said, "we are seeing kids taking classes that they might not have taken before because of a teacher's reputation who is a proponent for kids." These statements point to the level where students are meaningfully cared for and connected with their teachers and where teachers not only demand accountability of them, but also support them to achieve at high levels.

Lack of Student Support

Data revealed that students were not supported or motivated to learn. One student interviewee stated that one reason he dropped out was because he was constantly got into trouble in and outside of school. He said "school didn't matter because the streets took over, and the school didn't care what I was dealing with on the streets." I asked him why he didn't talk to a teacher about the situations he was dealing with and he answered "No one would have understood and if they did, how could they help?" Had this students trusted a teacher or administrator enough to talk to them about what he was dealing with outside of school, that person could have supported the student by offering strategies and resources to help deal with the outside forces.

In order to get students to come to back to school, they must trust the faculty at the school has their best interest in mind. The principal said "I believe we will have more dropouts return in the next year. We started this 8 months ago and some people just have to see what happens to the students that have come back. We have to earn their trust." The administration team wanted to create a supportive environment with academic and parental support, in order to prove to the students, that there was a vested interest in their success.

Supportive environment.

In order to ensure success for drop-ins, the administration team wanted to create a supportive school environment where students wanted to come to everyday. To achieve this, the principal reflected on what he thought was missing to make his school a place where all students would be proud of and could give them identity. He said, "It's bad because they [seniors] had three years of mediocrity. They never had a pep rally, a bond fire, a Miss West Bladen pageant. We have started all that this year." Observation of the hallways of West Bladen High School are filled with student artwork, school banners, and memorabilia. End of grade test scores are displayed with the percentage of students being proficient. There was a countdown displayed with how many days left until graduation. Students who earned A/B honor roll receive free VIP tickets to that season's games. The Science teacher argued, "Most schools would worry about the loss money associated with free tickets, but you have to look at it as the kids doing better, or five dollars. I will take the five dollars." It was interesting to learn that the school allowed playing of music in the cafeteria. The principal said that, "Sometimes we play their music and sometimes we play our music, but they [students] feel like they can relax a little bit."

Administration.

The summer before the principal and assistant principal started at WBHS, they met to go through transcripts to ensure students were scheduled correctly. They discovered that some students dropped out or failed to graduate on time because of a system failure. The assistant principal shared that "we realized some kids dropped out last year or didn't graduate last year because they were lacking a credit or two." The guidance counselor added, "the schedule was not done accurately, they were allowed to register for whatever, and there was nobody there sitting with the students getting some good one on one conversation going." To correct this, the principal had asked the guidance counselors to meet with each student individually to schedule them. This allowed for students to ask questions or voice any concerns. Once the students were scheduled correctly, the administration focused on academic support to ensure success.

The support drop-in students received started with signing a contract binding them to be in school every day, not to get into any trouble, and take at least one honors class. I learned that while the contract is standard for all returning students, the approach for academic support varied depending on the students and their learning needs. For example, the assistant principal shared that one student came back to school and needed 12 credits to graduate. "Since he is older, he only had this school year to complete the coursework. Never quite been done before. For him to come back in, we came up with a prescription for him that was possible but not plausible." The prescription for academic support for this student was to take a full course load and teachers were willing to work with him to graduate as envisioned. This kind of educational support demonstrates dimension of care, intellect, ethics, action, and accountability on all stakeholders.

Expectations.

Teachers can raise (or lower) students' performance by expecting more (or less) of them. Nothing influences behavior so strongly as the clear expectations of a significant other. Teachers, like parents are automatically significant others to students, if for no other reason than that they have power over them. When the principal and his assistant started at WBHS, they discovered that there was a lack of engagement which led to minimal expectations. The assistant principal stated, "I want to say the engagement wasn't there. I mean we have good teachers, a great faculty and most of them were here last year. I think it was more the comfort level and the expectations weren't there." The science teacher shed light on her expectations of her class, "in my Biology class, the kids know that anything less than 90 is not passing, it's what I expect, and I will do anything to get them there." It is an expectation that teachers support students by engaging them, setting high standards, and collaborating with colleagues. The science teacher further stated, "I have never seen students run up the stairs to class before, but they now know that's what we expect of them." The principal disclosed that for the first time 70% of the teachers in his school indicated, on the North Carolina Teachers Working Conditions survey that they felt they had an opportunity to collaborate with colleagues within the school day to raise their students' academic expectations.

To further raise teacher's expectations of their students, the principal had made changes on the teaching schedule. Prior to the change, veteran teachers chose the classes and students they wanted to teach. The veteran teachers would typically teach the Advanced Placement (AP) and Honors students whereby notice teachers taught at-risk students. The assistant principal explained, "we are now student centered. Some teachers that had seniority wanted to teach certain classes and students and have their classrooms in certain locations. If this arrangement

did not support all students, we changed it." He also implemented a "school without walls." Teachers are expected to teach with the same pacing guide, and if a student does not master a learning objective, he or she may be sent to another teacher, who teaches the same subject, to relearn the material. With the "school without walls" mentality, students understood that there was more than just one teacher that has an invested interest in them. Students want to know that they have the support of their teachers, one student interviewed dropped out because "I didn't have a connection with my teachers, and I failed." Students want to know that they have the support of their teachers, and just like teachers they want their parents support as well.

Lack of parental support.

Students shared their perceptions of their parents' involvement in their education. One student said, "my parents were not involved in my education, I guess they thought the school knew what was best for me." While this statement can be interpreted to show lack of involvement on the parents, it can also be interpreted to show the trust the parents have on the school to help the student learn. To involve parents more in their children's education, the administration team encouraged teachers to have direct communication with parents by inviting them to conferences, games, and school events. The school also implemented open house nights where parents come into the school to meet teachers, kept their website updated for parental information, and continued to publically invited parents to events via newspapers, bulletins, and phone calls. According to the principal, these strategies were creating a different and positive tone that set high standards and expectation for students with support from the significant others.

Lack of safe learning environment within the school.

It emerged from the data that the school experienced high incidents of safety including a shooting, which was reported in 2009-2010 school year (See Table 3). An analysis of the school drop-out records during this period showed that WBHS had a drop-out rate of 29%.

Table 3

Reported Incidents at West Bladen.

School Year	2008-2009	2009-2010
Number of Students	801	758
Incidents Reported	11	13

For the 2009-2010 school year, WBHS saw a 140% increase in reportable offenses on campus. . He explained that last year, that the SRO had to use many cans of pepper spray to break up frequent fights. There has been a complete turnaround in the 2010-2011 school year. The assistant principal stated, this year, there might be a 300% decrease. "These are the same kids that were whaling on each other last year. The SRO has not cracked one [pepper spray] can yet, and it's going to be May." The principal added, "the bottom line is this; we have created a safe environment." They have done this by moving "Principals Academy", an In-School Suspension program, beside the main office instead of the middle of the school building. Teachers are in the hallways, cafeteria, and parking lots monitoring during the school hours. The principal added "Sometimes, that [safe school environment] gets challenged and that's okay we have keep in mind that it has not been a year yet, since the school has been at its rock bottom." There are still incidents that happen at the high school that the administration team has to

address. One faculty members attributes the decrease in violence to the trusting relationship that the students have with the faculty. “Kids are comfortable telling us….you know my friend is going to get in a fight today. They know we want to make things better and so do they (B. Brown, personal communication, April 8, 2011).

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Discussion

Data from this study provides insight on allowing dropouts to drop-in at West Bladen High School. The principal asked all students with the potential to graduate before the age of 21 to come back to school. The administrative team at WBHS made it their goal to make the high school a safe and enjoyable place for all students to attend and graduate. "The collective self esteem has really gone up, they feel good about themselves, they feel safe, and they feel cared for but they also feel respected, there is a mutual respect there" (A. Adams, personal communication, April 8, 2011).

The administratave team at the high school is stressing the relationship component of the 3 R's: Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships. In a study, Irvine (2003) and Collins (1991) discuss the importance of teachers establishing relationships with students. They argue that teachers often are disconnected from their students because they come from different backgrounds. They suggest that teachers should take a vested interest in what their students are doing in and outside of school, to promote a caring environment. This study underscores the importance of relationships, parental involvement, safe schools environment, and setting high standards and expectations for students, while helping them to excel academically.

The climate at WBHS has changed with the emphasis on relationships, support, and school safety. Which begs the question, if the high school could change so quickly, what was the issue before? The principal believed it was a mindset: "equity over excellence" (A. Adams, personal communication, April 8, 2011).

Limitations

There were a few limitations to the study. First, allowing drop-outs to come back to school has only been implemented for 8 months, a period that might not long enough to understand the implications. The first cohort, of two students, who came back to WBHS will not graduate until June 2011, so the full success cannot be measured. Second, my initial plan to interview teachers to understand their experience with the drop-in policy did not take off due to low response rate. Only one teacher accepted to be interviewed while other did not return my requests even after sending them multiple requests. The teacher who consented to be interviewed was relatively new in the school and did not have much historical information on high student drop out at WBHS.

Implications of the Findings

From the time the principal publically asked for students who had previously dropped out to return, students have taken him up on his offer. The school has laid a foundation to retain and prevent students from dropping out. This study has proven that was the principal about WBHS is implementing is working at the school and that all students deserve a second chance at an education. The local School Board, teachers, and students can use the data that emerged from the study to gain an understanding on why students were dropping out and the effects of allowing them to return to WBHS.

The local School Board and policy makers should allocate funds to reaching students who have dropped out. Further, funds should be used to implement staff developments on the effects of allowing dropouts to drop-in, so teachers could gain an understanding of the reasons for the increased dropout rate and strategies to assimilate drop-ins.

Nationally, the dropout rate continues to rise and all school systems can learn from the strategies being implemented at this high school. Schools that have an increased dropout rate, should be encouraged to use this high school as an example and implement the strategies that are being put in place at West Bladen.

Future Research

In examining the data, it was evident that allowing dropouts to return to school proved positive. However, students have been in the school system for more than 10 years once they reach high school. This begs the question: Who is responsible for dropout prevention once students reach high school? Should dropout prevention be implemented in earlier grades? What is the long term success rate of allowing dropouts to return?

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol-Principal

1. Tell me about your professional and leadership experience.
2. Describe the problem of drop outs at your current high school and explain what makes it unique.
3. What factors led you to ask dropouts to return to WBHS? Describe the current drop-ins.
4. How was your idea of turning drop-outs into drop-ins impacting the teachers and school community?
5. What support system do you have in place to implement this policy?
6. What challenges are you experiencing the implementing this policy and how have you tried to overcome them?

Appendix B

Interview Protocol-Faculty

1. Tell me about your professional and leadership experience.
2. Describe the problem of drop outs at your current high school and explain what makes it unique.
3. What has changed with your principal asking dropouts to return? Describe the current drop-ins.
4. How has the idea of turning drop-outs into drop-ins impacted you and your colleagues and school community?
5. Describe the support system that is in place for returning dropouts.
6. What challenges do you see in allowing dropouts to return?

Appendix C

Interview Protocol-Students

1. Why did you drop out of high school?
2. What factors contributed to this decision?
3. What factors contributed to you returning to high school?
4. What was your goal once you returned?
5. Describe your parental involvement in your education.
6. What factors contributed to your success the once you returned to high school?