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Increasing Our Holding Power: Educators' Perspectives on Increasing Their School's
Graduation Rate

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Increasing Our Holding Power: Educators' Perspectives on Increasing Their School's
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By

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An abstract of
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
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Abstract

Increasing Our Holding Power: Educators' Perspectives on Increasing Their School's
Graduation Rate
By Miyoshi B. Juergensen

Over the course of this yearlong study, I considered the beliefs and practices of educators
who work with students who are at risk of dropping out of high school. Using
ethnographic case study methodology and drawing from Culturally Relevant Pedagogy
and Appreciative Inquiry frameworks, I investigated the social and cultural contexts of
educators' beliefs and practices toward moving students closer to graduation. The study
finds that educators' beliefs and practices hinge on culturally relevant approaches to
dropout prevention through attention to the school's a) culture and climate, b) instruction
and curriculum, and c) personal and academic support structures. In addition to culturally
relevant approaches, the study also finds that educators' beliefs and practices are
consistent with African American educators who worked to increase the graduation rates
of African American students during the postwar era. Understanding the role of schools
in the dropout process in both contemporary and historical contexts has implications for
dropout prevention and teacher education.

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Once we get them into the classroom, our curriculum and/or holding power techniques will determine how long we keep them. If they are right we will keep them, if not, we will continue to lose them. To This We Dedicate Ourselves.
                    -Palmetto State Teachers Association of South Carolina (1953)

CHAPTER I

OVERVIEW OF THE ISSUE

Despite continuous efforts to increase the nation's graduation rate that date to the creation of high school (Reese 1995), still a staggering 750,000 public school students who enter the ninth grade will not graduate on time with a high school diploma (Stetser & Stillwell, 2014). Still approximately 7,000 students drop out of high school a day (Rumberger & Rotermund, 2012). Based on calculations per school day, still one high school student drops out of high school every nine seconds (Shin & Kendall, 2013). If graduation rates are an accurate measure of America's educational fitness, then the percentage of students who disappear from the educational pipeline each year is evidence of its persistent failure.

Perhaps more disturbing are the social and economic consequences of dropping out of school. Economically, dropouts cost the nation billions of dollars in public assistance, unemployment benefits, lost revenue and rehabilitation efforts (Amos, 2008; Balfanz, Bridgeland, Moore, & Fox, 2010; Bridgeland, DiIulio, Morison, 2006). Socially, dropouts are more likely to live in poverty, go to prison, be unhealthy, and have children who also drop out of school (Rumberger, 2011; Orfeild, 2004). In essence, dropouts present specific economic and social challenges that neither they nor their communities– or the country–can afford.

In response to such dismal outcomes associated with dropping out, the current educational landscape is replete with federal reforms and policies that include increased

high school completion as a major indicator of schools' effectiveness especially for

schools that serve traditionally disadvantaged students. In particular, federal legislation

known as *A Blueprint for Reform* (2010) proposes to extend certain existing No Child

Left Behind (NCLB, 2002) policies but also promises to differ from NCLB particularly in

terms of accountability and equity. Regarding high school completion, where NCLB

makes increased graduation rates a part of meeting "adequate yearly progress," Race to

the Top (RT3, 2009)–a federally incentivized funding program for improving school

districts included in *A Blueprint for Reform*–provides government funding to meet this

performance target.

As further evidence of federal interest in graduation rates, the United States

Department of Education is using a recently developed common measure to calculate

dropout rates to hold individual states accountable for student success. Although the

objective was to standardize the method for calculating graduation rates amongst states,

the results brought more attention to the lack of progress in reducing the dropout rate

across the nation. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (Chapman,

Laird, Ifill, & KewalRamani, 2011), twenty-six states reported lower graduation rates

than had previously been calculated using their former methods, with at least seven states

reporting declines in the double digits. Another five states reported no change and only

fifteen states reported slight increases in their graduation rates. The data also expose

persistent and dramatic gaps in achievement and graduation by race and ethnicity,

socioeconomic status, language proficiency, and learning disability. This highlights

public schools' historic and continued struggle with meeting their primary goal of getting

all students to finish high school.

Statement of the Problem

Unfortunately, students of color have historically and contemporarily dropped out of high school in larger percentages than their White counterparts; a statistical fact that is as old as the public high school itself (Dorn, 1996). For African American and Latino students, in particular, graduation rates are more troubling with only 65 percent likely to graduate (Chapman et al., 2011). Regarding African American graduation rates specifically, some research reports that nearly 50 percent of African American students who enter high school will not graduate with a traditional high school diploma (Amos, 2008; Orfield & Lee, 2005; Swanson, 2004).

Given the confluence of race and socioeconomic status, dropouts who live in poverty and/or are members of disadvantaged groups experience more exacerbated outcomes of not holding a diploma (Orfield, 2004). Perhaps most disturbing is that, in general, the stakes are much higher for African American students who do not finish school. African American dropouts are exposed to particular kinds of economic and social tragedy. Indeed, African American non-graduates are even more likely to be unemployed, commit crimes, be unmarried or divorced (Rumberger & Lim, 2008), and earn less income over the course of their lives as compared to their White counterparts (Chapman et al., 2011). Due to the strong relationship between negative life outcomes and dropping out of school especially for students of color, addressing the problem of high dropout rates of African American students presents specific challenges for schools and school districts that are responsible for their education (Swanson, 2004).

Currently, many reform efforts ignore evidence suggesting dropping out is closely related to students' schooling and personal experiences especially for students of color

(Somers, Piliawsky, & Owens, 2008). Instead, the majority of existing literature on

dropouts has focused on risk factors such as students' ability and backgrounds

(Rumberger, 2008), and has only to a limited extent informed strategies that involve

reforming the schools that students of color attend (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015). The

literature fails to explore fully aspects of students' school lives such as instructional

practices, curriculum, and educators' beliefs and practices; each of which matter greatly

as determining factors associated with the withdrawal process from school (Bridgeland,

Balfanz, Moore, & Friant, 2010). This approach then fails to consider the impact schools

have on students' decisions to persist through school and that the graduation gap amongst

racial groups may be more a result of school failure than student failure.

   The existing research on African American students who drop out of high school

also ignores historical data that indicate an increase in graduation rates for African

American students during the decades leading up to widespread desegregation (Rury &

Hill, 2011). The success of African American teachers to retain African American

students during this period is an accomplishment unparalleled in the contemporary

moment. However, the activities of these educators have been ignored in the reform

literature on how to increase the graduation rate for African American students. By

missing this historical moment, the literature on how to intervene in the dropout process

for African American students begins several decades after African American

professional teaching organizations built strategies to increase their schools' holding

power. The failure to incorporate school experiences and cultural and historical contexts

into the literature on dropouts severely limits reform efforts and leaves today's

understandings of how to increase the graduation rate, especially for African American students, incomplete and ahistorical.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this ethnographic case study is to explore one school's efforts to increase its graduation rates and to add to the literature on dropout prevention for African American students in particular. As an ethnography, this project focuses on one school and the educators who work inside it to add to the small but growing literature on dropout prevention that takes into account school-related factors. More specifically, the study uses the educators' personal, professional, and cultural perspectives to elevate for exploration how the school approaches dropout prevention with its majority African American population.

This case, a non-traditional high school with an above average graduation rate of 68 percent since opening in 2008, is designed to address the specific needs of students who are at risk of dropping out of high school. This particular school's graduation rate represents the possibilities for diploma acquisition when students are part of a school setting designed to facilitate completion. Each research question is designed to explore the strategies and approaches of a group of educators at this particular school as they work toward intervening in the dropout process of their students. The following research questions guide this study:

1. What are the beliefs and practices of educators working in an urban high school designed for students at risk for dropping out?

2. To what extent, if any, do educators use culturally relevant practices to move high school students toward graduation?

3. To what extent, if any, do educators' beliefs and practices reflect African

    American educators' historical ideas about moving students toward graduation?

Research question one (RQ1) seeks to first identify participants' perspectives, characteristics, decisions, and beliefs as they work toward moving more students through school successfully. Considering that over 50 percent of those students not graduating are either African American or Hispanic and/or attend school in urban school districts (Swanson, 2004), research question two (RQ2) explores whether participants employ culturally relevant approaches in their work with students placed at risk for not graduating and to what extent, if any, culturally relevant approaches are utilized.

Research question three (RQ3) is designed to examine participants' beliefs and practices in comparison to the historical efforts of African American educators in segregated schooling communities. Findings from a previous study indicate that African American educators possessed ideas about specific, unique, and effective strategies for increasing the high school completion of African American students during the Jim Crow Era (Juergensen, 2015). More contemporary studies on positively impacting students' academic achievement have offered similar findings by arguing educators' dispositions and characteristics matter greatly for most students (Hill-Jackson & Lewis, 2010) and African American students in particular (Gay & Howard, 2000; Irvine, 2002; Milner, 2006). Using these findings as a framework, RQ3 seeks to determine if participants are employing innovative ideas and techniques about how to increase the school's graduation rate or building on an existing model.

Theoretical Frameworks

The study is framed by two theoretical approaches: Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Appreciative Inquiry. The first, Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP), is included as a framework to guide specific inquiries about how educators' and students' cultures and identities impact the dropout prevention strategies used in the school. The second, Appreciative Inquiry (AI), is used to frame the entire project because AI attempts to search for the best in people, their organization, and the world around them. Both are essential to understanding the perceived success of the school in increasing graduation rates.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. Following Gloria Ladson-Billings's (1994) popular framework, this project understands that educators often possess personal and professional objectives regarding educational issues and practice that are associated with their students' cultural identities (Irvine, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Love & Kruger, 2005) as well as their own (Howard, 2003; Ware, 2002). Essentially, Culturally Relevant Pedagogy is a construct that identifies values, respects, and uses the knowledge and culture of marginalized students. Ladson-Billings (1995a, 1995b) suggests that successful teaching occurs not when students are required to abandon their cultural identities in order to learn, but when educators view student culture as an asset rather than as an impediment. In so doing, the teacher sees culture as a valuable tool in impacting student success.

This study invokes "culturally relevant" in an attempt to more precisely describe educators' beliefs and practices regarding increasing the graduation rate of a student population that is largely Black and Brown. According to Irvine (1990, 2002), educators

who are able to culturally sync with students are in a better position to teach and support them. Most important to this study, however, is that a significant characteristic associated with cultural relevance and effective teaching for Black and Brown children is high expectations for student achievement. By filtering through a culturally relevant framework, this study examines educators' particular cultural understandings of themselves and their students to ascertain a relationship between those understandings and their impact not only on instructional practices, but also larger student outcomes such as achievement and high school graduation.

Appreciative Inquiry. Based on the premise that organizations change in the direction of their inquiries (Bushe & Kassam, 2005), Appreciative Inquiry is an asset-based model defined by its ability to interrupt existing realities and generate fresh ideas, dialogues, and models (Bushe, 2007). Although emerged from organizational theory, AI has been applied to educational contexts to positively shift school culture (Ludema, Whitney, Mohr, & Griffen, 2003) and assist schools and teachers in identifying and building on their strengths through focusing on positive aspects of their school community (Calabrese, Goodvin, & Niles, 2005).

For the specific purposes of this study, AI is employed for its explorative, interventional, and generative capabilities. The beliefs and practices of educators who help students to graduate (RQ1) is a broad and complex landscape of existing and imagined experiences, beliefs, ideas, and attitudes; AI charts a path for exploring educators' beliefs and practices by providing clear steps via its 4D Model: discover,

dream, design, and deliver. As a researcher, the primary focus rested on the first step[1],

which required identification and reflection on the positive and generative aspects of

participants' beliefs and practices.

Several AI methodologists recommend accomplishing successful discovery by

seeking the "best of" experiences of the participants (Bushe, 2011; Cooperrider &

Whitney, 2001; Ludema et al, 2003). Some examples include inquiring about specific

beliefs and practices of participants that give life to the organization, or in this case, the

school (Bushe, 1995); cataloging participants' signature beliefs and practices; and,

focusing on a specific capacity (Bushe, 2011) such as moving students toward graduation.

The latter allows participants to reflect on their best experiences helping students

graduate from their perspective as educators, from the perspective of students, and/or

from the perspective of best practices external to their school. Such guidelines and

examples directly contributed to my decisions in the field as an observer, participant

observer, and interviewer, which I discuss in more detail in the methodology section.

Appreciative Inquiry was also chosen specifically in response to the case being

studied. Initial conversations with the school's principal ahead of the start of the project

revealed the principal and director of student support services believed the school was

experiencing a shift in culture. The school's original approach – "Every child, every day,

any way"–seemed to no longer resonate with the faculty and staff. Given AI's

interventional and generative possibilities, a theoretical road map was provided for how

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[1] The three steps following discovery (dream, design, and delivery) are particular to the interventional and generative capabilities of AI. After the discovery step, participants ideally become active members of the inquiry process in an effort to create and implement their own interventions.

[2] The rationale for the time period is due to the educational climates at the time. After A Nation at Risk (1984), states began reporting the first large increase in the dropout rate since the 1960s. Following this period, both Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton responded with legislation that listed a 90 percent graduation rate as one of the six goals of official educational policy (Dorn, 1996). The current

to inquire about and engage with participants about possible institutional and interpersonal improvements to help the school's educators reimagine their role and more effectively move students toward graduation.

Definitions

Several terms specific to the research questions are operationalized in ways that require explanation. They are as follows:

African American/Black. Terms used to self-describe and describe African Americans have undergone several evolutions (Derrickson, Speight, & Vera, 1996). In both general and scholarly discourse, the terms are used interchangeably along with "Black American" and those persons who are of African Caribbean, African Canadian, or African-American heritage. For the purposes of this study, I will not delineate between terms; and, instead, use them interchangeably as well.

Dropouts. Nationally, dropouts are defined as students who do not graduate within the traditional four-year window allotted for high school (Snyder & Dillow, 2012). Because this work will examine educators in an accredited traditional high school, students who receive high school equivalents or complete adult education programs are omitted from this label.

Graduation rates. The common method for calculating graduation rates is called the Four-year Adjusted Cohort High School Graduation Rate (ACGR), which is the number of students who graduate in four years with a regular high school diploma divided by the number of students who form the adjusted cohort graduating class. Of note: the state in which this study takes place complies with the national definition and uses the ACGR to calculate its graduation rates.

Educators' practices and beliefs. The terms "practices" and "beliefs" are operationalized based on research about teacher belief systems due to the correlation between teachers' beliefs and perspectives and students' academic success. As explained by Frank Pajares (1992), all teachers hold beliefs relative to and beyond the teaching profession that include–but are not limited to–attitudes, values, and ideas about their roles, students, subject areas they teach, and the schools where they teach. And these beliefs, be they personal and/or professional, significantly influence teachers' perceptions about themselves and their students, which, in turn, influence teachers' practices (Kagan, 1992). For the purposes of the study, educators' beliefs and practices for moving students toward graduation are considered as part of a larger belief system informed by experiences, orientations, and other predispositions that are often cultural and social.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review is divided into two major sections. The first section discusses the extant literature on dropouts, school completion, and intervention approaches. Essentially, the section spotlights the strands of literature that explore and evaluate strategies for increasing graduation rates and the impact educators have on students' decision to persist through school. The second section of the review is an examination of the literature that discusses historical and contemporary trends in addressing African American graduation rates. I include this literature to illustrate the approaches utilized by African American educators to respond to high school completion concerns as compared to national efforts.

I used a multiphase process to locate articles, books, and reports for this review. The process included a systematic search of electronic databases; screening of article abstracts, full articles, books, and book chapters to determine if they met inclusion criteria; and, footnote chasing of all included reference lists. For the electronic searches, I used common educational databases such as ERIC, Google Scholar, and JSTOR. I used a number of search terms that included various combinations of the words "high school," "high school graduation," "graduation rates," "dropout," "dropping out," "graduation," and "completion." The preliminary search yielded an initial sample of over 1000 studies, which included theoretical literature on the predictors for high school graduation and dropping out, empirical studies that focused on the causes and contributing factors to dropping out, and empirical studies that focused on interventions. I narrowed the literature down to what is included in this review by first only discussing studies that fit

the time frame. The scope of the review is limited to studies published from 1985 to the

present[2], which captures the latest wave of research on the topic since increasing high

school graduation rates officially became a national objective. I then narrowed the

literature down further by only using studies published in peer-reviewed publications.

Overview of General Factors Influencing Discourse on School Dropouts

This section of the review deconstructs the dropout phenomenon by parsing out

the key strands of the literature to address (1) stereotypes of students who drop out of

school, (2) risk factors associated with dropping out, and (3) intervention approaches to

the dropout phenomenon. Undertaking the literature in this way serves to provide an

overview on the literature about dropouts and graduation rates.

Stereotypes of students who drop out of school. Much like other educational

terms, "dropout" is a social construction that "educators and social critics have created,

rather than discovered" (Dorn, 1996, p. 3). It was not until the 1960s that the

phenomenon of dropping out entered the forefront of America's psyche (Dorn, 1996;

Roderick, 1993). Specifically, in the 1960–a time in America's educational history that is

marked by slow and then wide-spread desegregation, the War on Poverty, and the

Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965)–researchers began to consider more

pointedly students' individual characteristics as factors in dropping out of school. The

work of 1960s scholars strongly correlated ethnic background, family history of

[2] The rationale for the time period is due to the educational climates at the time. After A Nation at Risk (1984), states began reporting the first large increase in the dropout rate since the 1960s. Following this period, both Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton responded with legislation that listed a 90 percent graduation rate as one of the six goals of official educational policy (Dorn, 1996). The current educational landscape is a continuation of the national importance attached to graduation rates as it is replete with federal reforms and policies that include increased high school completion as a major indicator of schools' effectiveness.

educational attainment, and socio-economic status to the event of dropping out of school (Cervantes, 1965; Coleman, 1966; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Savitzky, 1963). As a result, children who exhibited these indicators were exclusively placed at the center of the dropout conversation, and the "Social Dynamite[3]" stereotype was created. Once the dropout stereotype arrived, it became the academic and social platform for how to approach the issue of school incompletion. Scholarly treatment of the dropout from the 1960s to present discusses concern for the dropout as poor, culturally and/or academically deficient, and delinquent. In the decades that followed the 1960s, educational research and policy addressed the dropout phenomenon using the limited conclusions about the drop out from the 1960s as a frame.

Present stereotypes of students who drop out have not strayed far from their 1960s antecedents. Profiles of the typical student who drops out of school are well documented in recent research (De Witte et al, 2013; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Prevatt & Kelly, 2003; Rumberger, 2004, 2008, 2011) and generally focus on the same fixed demographics such as race, gender, and class (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004).

Research that targets such unalterable variables contributes to the dropout discourse by elevating the demographic commonalities associated with dropping out of school. For example, males drop out more than females (Crowder & South, 2003); African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans drop out more than Asians and Whites (Chapman, Laird, Ifill, & KewalRamani, 2011); students in urban schools and districts drop out more than students in suburban schools and districts (Orfield & Lee, 2005); and, students in southern states drop out more than students located in the

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[3] "Social dynamite" is a phrase made popular by James Conant's seminal 1961 book, titled *Slums and Suburbs: A Commentary on Schools in Metropolitan Areas*. It was used to emphasize the perceived outcomes of the growing number of students not completing school, particularly in urban areas.

Midwest, West, and Northeast (NCES, 2012). As such, background and individual

characteristics such as gender, race, and residence are widely considered as factors in the

dropout process in both the present and historical moment.[4] However, scholars have

argued that the sizeable amount of research on demographic variables has provided the

message that students drop out due to fixed factors "unavailable to intervention or

remediation" (Doll & Hess, 2001, p. 353).

Commonly, students who drop out are characterized in general terms that are

loaded with the same kinds of negative connotations seen in the 1960s. Most prevalent

are terms that associate dropouts with delinquent and criminal behaviors (Dorn, 1996; De

Witte et al, 2013), unemployment (Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr, & Hurley, 2004;

Rumberger & Lim, 2008), and generally bleak life outcomes (Orfield, 2004). In addition

to broader negative terms, dropouts are also linked to specific personal and social

characteristics that serve to identify them as the opposite of students who graduate

(Vizcain, 2005). As a result, focusing on typologies of dropouts instead of both graduates

and dropouts creates a gap in the literature on the characteristics that contribute to

academic success.

Risk factors associated with dropping out of school. Studies on high school

dropouts have highlighted the myriad factors involved in students' school and daily lives

that can be used as predictors for dropping out of school. Of these predictors, student-

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[4] The work of 1960s scholars strongly correlated ethnic background, gender (male), family history of educational attainment, and socio-economic status to the event of dropping out of school (Cervantes, 1966; Coleman, 1966; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Savitzky, 1963). As a result, children who exhibited these indicators are exclusively placed at the center of the dropout conversation, and the "Social Dynamite" stereotype was created. Once the dropout stereotype arrived, it became the academic and social platform for how to approach the issue. Any scholarly treatment of the dropout in the 1960s discussed concern for the dropout as poor, culturally and/or academically deficient, and delinquent. In the decades that follow, especially the 1970s, educational research and policy address the dropout phenomenon using the limited conclusions about the dropout from the 1960s as a frame.

related factors emerge as the most commonly researched. Student-related risk factors can

be described in two groups: immutable factors (i.e. family educational attainment, gender,

race, age, SES) as mentioned in the above section on demographic commonalities of

dropouts; and, mutable factors (i.e. academic failure, attendance, retention, behavior) as

mentioned in the paragraphs that follow.

Researchers argue that the strongest mutable factors are academic performance

(Alexander, Entwistle, & Steffel-Olson, 2005; Rumberger, 2004; Shin & Kendall, 2013)

and low levels of school engagement (Rumberger, 2004). Poor grades, especially over an

extended period of time, have been found to significantly impact whether a student drops

out of school. For example, Alexander and colleagues (2005) conclude that low academic

performance or failing grades start to impact the likelihood of dropping out as early as

first grade; and, the impact continues through middle and high school.

Likewise, low student engagement has been identified as a key predictor for

dropping out. Several theoretical studies argue that students drop out of school due to

disengagement (Newmann, 1992; Rumberger, 1987; Wehlage, 1989) and withdrawal

from school (Finn, 1989; Lee & Burkham, 1992; Rumberger, 2003). Both models have

been applied to students' disengagement or withdrawal from a particular school or from

school altogether. According to Wehlage (1989), students disengage from school when

they do not feel socially tied or committed to the school. Examples of social bonds to the

school are often considered in terms of extracurricular involvement with schools'

personnel and activities (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Without these authentic bonds, the

likelihood of dropping out of school increases.

Consistent with Wehlage (1989), Finn's (1989) work on the dropout process contends that students withdraw from school through a progression of failure-induced frustration that leads to low self-esteem and problem behaviors. Otherwise stated, students drop out of school because they grow frustrated with their academic failure—a process that culminates in high school when there are less opportunities for intervention (Orfield, 2004). While these models identify disengagement and withdrawal as important factors that influence dropping out, they do not take into account underlying issues that may factor into the process. Even more, they do not specifically address the institutional roles of schools and school districts in the process either.

Further, identifying the critical moment in students' educational careers when the dropout process begins is key. Also in Finn's (1989) study, he concludes that dropping out of school involves a long-term process that usually gains detrimental momentum in middle school. Subsequently, numerous longitudinal studies have been conducted and have determined the same importance to school years prior to high school (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001). In each, the pivotal finding is that predictors for dropping out of high school can be located as early as the first and fourth grades. This, however, is not new information for the developers of programs in the 1960s such as Head Start who sought to intervene in students' lives significantly early (Currie & Thomas, 1998; Arroyo & Zigler, 1995).

Once students enter high school, however, literature on dropouts indicates that the ninth grade is the most critical year due to the personal, social, and curricular factors associated with the transition from middle to high school (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). High school presents an increased set of demands that often result in freshmen

students having the lowest grade point averages, highest number of office referrals, and the highest amount of absences (Fritzer & Herbst, 1996). As a result, the transition from middle to high school poses a particular set of obstacles that potentially place students at risk for dropping out of school before they can fully begin their high school careers.

Unlike studies that focus on elementary (Barnett & Belfield, 2006; Barnard, 2004; Finn et al., 2005) or middle school predictors (Bedard & Do, 2005; Reschly & Christenson, 2006), research on the ninth grade is significant because it provides high school educators with a way to think about those students who are typified as lost causes by the time they get to high school (Lee & Orfield, 2006).

In addition to poor academic performance and low student engagement, grade retention is another significant mutable factor in the dropout process (Alexander et al, 2001; Rumberger, 2004). Scholars assert that retention at any level increases the probability of students not graduating from high school (Shin & Kendall, 2013), which is partly due to the cumulative academic and social effects of being held back in school (Hammond, Linton, Smink, & Drew, 2007). According to Jimerson (2001) and Plank et al. (2005), repeating a grade places students on the margins of age norms as well as academic success. The result of which is being at higher risk for academic failure in the long term despite the moderate short-term gains of retention (Shepard and Smith, 1990).

Research from the perspectives of students both confirms and challenges the aforementioned theoretical model. Confirming models of disengagement and withdrawal, the study, *The Silent Epidemic*, reports the number one reason students say they leave school without a diploma is they feel bored and disengaged from high school (Bridgeland, et al., 2006). In the reasons that follow, students report that if more was expected of them

or if they took more academically rigorous coursework, they could have finished high school. Somewhat contrary to Finn's (1989) models of failure-induced frustration, students who dropped out indicate that while failing in school was a major factor, it mattered considerably less in comparison to their relationships to the curriculum and the school community.

Importantly, however, research indicates that no single risk factor predicts whether a student will decide to persist or withdraw from school (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015). Instead, prediction is most accurate when multiple risk factors are examined. For example, a student's racial category does not alone indicate a significant relationship between race and high school completion (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Researchers contend that the intersections of a student's identities and experiences are more predictive. For example, a student's race and his/her grades across time (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015) or his/her behavior (Rumberger & Rotermund, 2012) provides a more accurate probability of completing school (Lan & Lanthier, 2003; Lee & Burkam, 2003; Suh & Suh, 2007). It is perhaps this research that has encouraged a shift in the dropout discourse from a focus on mutable factors to more critical analyses of the complex interplay of the in and out of school factors in students' lives.

Dropout intervention approaches. Previous research on dropout interventions are woefully small given the enthusiasm and national attention to the dropout problem. Most surprisingly, there is even less information about effective dropout prevention practices or policies (Freeman and Simonsen, 2015). Of the available literature on prevention, studies can be categorized by policy or practice interventions.

Policy interventions. Research shows that the most effective policy decisions intended to intervene in the dropout process generally consider both individual and institutional factors in systemic ways (De Witte, 2013; Rumberger, 2004). Prime examples of such policies include developing programs that mediate students' personal and academic risk factors. As such, studies that examine policy recommendations tend to focus on measures aimed at students, their families, and the schools they attend.

Much like the compulsory schooling legislation of the early 20th century, current policy interventions have also zoomed in on compulsory attendance and enrollment as a way to impact the national graduation rate. Studies such as the one conducted by Bishop, Mane, Bishop, and Moriary (2001), find that school attendance laws have a small but significant impact on enrollment. Importantly, however, studies that examine attendance policies do not show evidence that compulsory attendance laws have the same significant impact on graduation.

Other policy interventions aimed at students include those that consider academic performance. Since research indicates that grade retention is a highly significant factor in dropping out, recent policy seeks to restrict its use (Entwistle et al, 2005; Vizcain, 2005) and instead recommends not delaying student's entry to subsequent grades. As noted by Orthner and Cook (2002), the more effective intervention strategy is to identify students at risk of grade retention and provide personal and academic supports that prepare them with the necessary skills to succeed in later grades.

In the same vein, policy interventions have also been aimed at students' parents and/or guardians. As discussed by several researchers, parental involvement is a well-documented variable in the dropout process (Blondal & Adalbjarnardottir, 2014; Booth &

Dunn, 2013; Bridgeland et al, 2010; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Schargel and Smink, 2013).

Specifically, research suggests that policies that encourage parents to be active in their

children's educational experiences promote a certain degree of self-reliance and provide a

wide-range of positive implications (Bridgeland et al, 2006).

Finally, the research on dropout prevention largely agrees that policies targeting

schools and school districts are equally important in addressing the dropout problem. In

this small but expanding strand of dropout literature, researchers are increasingly

recognizing the importance of developing strategies and practices for improving schools

(Dorn, 1996), their culture and climate (Blue & Cook, 2004), and teacher quality

(Balfanz & Letgers, 2005; Bridgeland et al, 2006; Cooper et al, 2006) to intervene in the

dropout process. In a departure from approaches used in the 1960s and 1970s, where the

individual and his/her background were located as both the cause and cure for dropout

prevention (Dorn, 1996), such a perspective on the school has caused a paradigm shift in

the educational discourse on students at risk of not graduating from high school. With

more focused attention on school and institutional level factors that both predict and

prevent students from leaving school before completion, research on dropouts has started

studying school-based preventions that include addressing individual characteristics as

key to their approach.

Practice interventions. Practice interventions generally attempt to target students'

mutable factors (i.e. behavior, academics, and attendance) through academic and

emotional support programs. In general, studies that examine the impact of such

programs on dropout rates find a significant decrease for students who participate. For

example, Furstenberg & Neumark (2007) found that participation in a program that

provided academic support, counseling, role models, and career guidance increased the

high school's graduation rate by 14 percent. In a similar study, Lever and colleagues

(2004) found that students who participated in a five-year comprehensive program that

provided basic skills enhancement, work experience, student support, and transition

services were less likely to drop out of school than their counterparts who were not

enrolled in the program.

Importantly, the impact of the above interventions underscores the significance of

personal and academic support that is both ongoing and targets multiple components.

Research shows that students who participate in dropout prevention programs and efforts

early in high school and continue through until senior year are more likely to graduate

(Mac Iver, 2011; Porowski & Passa, 2011). Even more telling, students who receive

academic and personal support as early as elementary school are more likely to graduate

than students who do not receive support (Meyer, 1984; Ramirez, Perez, Valdez, & Hall,

2009).

Unfortunately, the majority of studies that examine academic and personal

support look at supplemental programs that provide resources and personnel by

organizations outside of school personnel. This is problematic for two reasons. First, as

discussed by McPartland and Jordan (2004), the primary limitation of supplemental

dropout prevention programs is that they require persistent attention to funding, resources,

and district support; the lack of which often results in programs being discontinued after

three to five years. Thus, despite strong evidence that prevention efforts need to be multi-

pronged and ongoing, many students do not receive the benefit of such programs due to

financial and organizational restraints.

The second reason supplemental programs are problematic is that more is known about the programs than how schools themselves implement prevention. However, research is emerging about schools attended by students at risk of not graduating. Given that schools are complicated spaces that are consistently influential and influenced, studies have further disaggregated schools by examining student composition (Heck & Mahoe, 2006; Hill & Jepsen, 2007), characteristics and resources (Christle et al, 2007; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Rumberger & Thomas, 2000), and schools' processes and practices (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Clements et al, 2004; Lee & Burkam, 2003).

Despite evidence of a significant relationship between schools and high school completion, still only a few studies explicitly include teachers' practices as factors in students deciding to drop out or persist through school. The literature identifying teachers as key elements in student success usually do so from the discourse on teacher quality (Alexander et al., 2001; Bedard & Do, 2005, Stearns et al., 2007). While researchers argue that teachers are examined in terms of their quality, "quality" is often operationalized by certification status, preparation, teaching experience, and content knowledge (Darling-Hammond, 2010) with little consideration for how teacher quality relates to educational outcomes such as graduation.

Overall, studies that examine practice preventions report a significant impact on high school dropout rates as compared to studies on policy interventions. Importantly, little is known about how to implement policies and/or practices in ways that address contextual and cultural realities of students. As a result, there is a gap in the literature on how to specifically address the dropout process as it relates to African American students. In response, the educational community has started to more thoroughly explore the

impact of policies and practices aimed at students, families, and schools especially as

they relate to underlying factors such as poverty and social injustice that contribute so

significantly to a student's ability to succeed. More research is needed, however, that

considers partnerships between schools and communities to develop the types of policies

and practices that effectively support students through school (Bryan, 2005).

An Overview of Dropout Prevention Efforts for African American Students

This portion of the review examines the literature that discusses historical and

contemporary trends in addressing African American graduation rates. I include this

literature to illustrate the approaches utilized by African American educators to respond

to high school completion concerns as compared to national efforts.

Historical efforts. Historical research on graduation rates in the United States

points to a significant increase for African American students in the postwar era

continuing through until the Civil Rights movement. According to the National Center

for Education Statistics (1991, 2014) and notable educational historians (Dorn, 1996;

Rury & Hill, 2011), the African American graduation rate begins increasing at an

accelerated rate in the 1940s. Although largely ignored in the mainstream rhetoric of the

day, Myrdal's (1944) study of race relations in America finds that African American

students who were able to make it to high school were slightly more likely than their

white counterparts to graduate from high school and attend college. However, the

contexts and processes by which African American graduation rates improved and

outpaced the white graduation rate leading up to widespread desegregation has been left

up for debate.

As discussed by several historians of African American education, African American educators in southern segregated schools had clear ideas about developing caring relationships, holding high expectations of students, and involving themselves in the community as well as professional organizations (Baker, 2006; Foster, 1997; Kelly, 2010; Siddle Walker, 1996, 2001, 2009, 2013). Indeed, much of the scholarship on African American educators in the segregated South describes them as caring and having high character and academic expectations of their students that required them to perform better than their white counterparts (Foster, 1997; Morris & Morris, 2002; Jones, 1982; Siddle Walker, 1996, 2001, 2009, 2013).

There are only a few examples of focused attention to dropouts in the literature on African American segregated schools. In some cases, the link is subtle but just as clear. For example, in Rury and Hill's (2011) text on the shrinking of the graduation gap between White and Black students in the postwar era, the authors highlight how the support African American students received from their communities and teachers led to academic achievement. The text is mostly concerned with how increased school availability and broader acts of political activism contributed to increased graduation rates. However, the authors introduce a student who believes his teachers from his segregated school encouraged him to graduate and pursue post-secondary education. Similarly, David Cecelski (1994) discusses in his work how the teachers at Hyde County Training School in North Carolina "encouraged the children to finish twelfth grade and to continue their educations" (p. 64).

As suggested in the literature, African American schooling communities are characterized as being spaces driven by philosophies of care, parental involvement,

institutional support, and high character and academic expectations of students (Anderson, 1988; Cicelski, 1994; Foster, 1991, 1997; Siddle Walker, 1996, 2000, 2001). Much of this research, though providing unquestionable evidence of these characteristics, does not specifically name the types or degrees of student outcomes that resulted from the care, involvement, support, and high expectations espoused by African American educators during this era.

In a more specific example, Vanessa Siddle Walker (2009) discusses a dropout prevention program used in a segregated African American school designed and implemented by the principal. According to the author, the program provided parental support to its seventh and eighth grade students. Specifically, the program's goal was to prevent school dropouts by addressing damaging school habits before the students entered high school. It required teachers to volunteer their time before and after school, required students to participate in military drills, and provided opportunities to exhibit pride by performing for the entire school community. Professor Byas's attention to the students at his school who were on the margins of success provides a tangible example of the kind of programmatic efforts African American educators utilized to address dropouts directly.

Dropout programs, such as the one Professor Byas implemented, resembled white schools' response to low-achieving students who were at risk of not completing school during the later years of Jim Crow. First, white teachers and administrators utilized experience and ingenuity to devise a variety of strategies that addressed students who struggled to be successful in school (Franklin, 2000). In the case of Professor Byas, his experience as a potential school dropout who later became a proponent of research and

data collection, led him to develop an institutional response to dropouts by creating a school-based program. Second, popular programs at the time called for separate educational settings outside traditional classrooms and adjusted curriculum (Cuban, 1989). This was the structure of Professor Byas's program as well.

Unlike Professor Byas's program, however, historical scholarship on low-achieving students indicates that white schools varied from African American ones in terms of implementation and sustainability. For example, few teachers in white schools desired to volunteer their time to difficult-to-teach children (Franklin, 2000); thus, several programs that required additional teaching time failed. Walker (2009) does not inform how long Professor Byas's program was implemented, to what degree it was successful, or to what extent it was shared with and implemented by fellow African American principals. As a result, these variations in implementation trouble the historical scholarship on the success of school completion programs, especially with regard to African American schools.

In addition to school-level attention to dropouts, African American educators also demonstrated a uniformed and unique approach to high school completion through the ideas presented in their professional organization publications (Juergensen, 2015). First, African American educators' ideas about increasing graduation existed on a complicated continuum of organized advocacy and implementation. Similar to the literature that examines African American educators' roles as agitators for equality (Loder-Jackson, 2011; Siddle Walker, 2001, 2005), research on African American educators' efforts to increase graduation rates considered high school completion to be a major objective of their political activities. As a result, they discussed advocacy in terms of how it would

lead to markers of equality. They wanted to draw more qualified teachers and motivate students to attend and graduate from high school (Juergensen, 2015).

Juergensen's (2015) study also finds that African American educators utilized the whole-child approach through a variety of student, parent, school, educator, and community relationships. This encouraged African American students to attend and complete high school. Consistent with literature on the importance of the community to African American schooling (Kelly, 2010; Morris & Morris, 2002; Siddle Walker, 1996, 2000, 2001), African American educators were encouraged to develop and nurture community-school partnerships in an effort to retain students until graduation. For example, teachers were expected to both connect with the community and also to encourage their students to cooperate in school, community, home, and church activities in order to stave off feelings of alienation that could lead to withdrawal.

Teachers were also expected to develop relationships with students' parents. While significant research exists that shows African American parents' efforts to increase enrollment and attendance by providing funds for school buses and other modes of transportation (Baker, 2006; Cicelski, 1994; Siddle Walker, 1996), few studies take up the more pragmatic ways in which teachers and parents worked together to keep their children in school (Kelly, 2010; Siddle Walker, 2001). African American educators' ideas about students' ability to graduate included a clear commitment to cooperation between parents and the school through formal interactions such as regular bulletins and informal interactions such as church attendance. Through this web of student, teacher, and parent relationship building and maintenance, African American educators' stake in community involvement worked to increase graduation.

It is unknown whether or not specific ideas and practices for increasing the graduation rate of students were common in African American schools pre-*Brown*. However, specific strategies are evident. As noted by Sherman Dorn (1996), efforts to keep students in school until graduation were primarily approached through dropout prevention programs beginning in the 1960s. As evidenced by the literature on segregated schools, African American educators implemented such programs at state-wide and perhaps regional levels prior to the 1960s.

Current efforts. In light of the negative impact of dropping out on students of color in particular, serious attention has been given to African American student success (Lewis, James, Hancock, Hill-Jackson, 2008; Landsman & Lewis, 2004; Moore, 2003; Obiakor & Beachum, 2006; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2004) but not dropout prevention. As noted by Freeman and Simonsen (2015), "the current body of empirical research in the area of high school dropout interventions does little to inform adaptation of interventions in order to ensure contextual fit and effectiveness" (p. 241). This section of the review looks specifically at literature examining the interventions targeted at African American students at risk of not graduating from high school.

In Finn and Rock's (1997) exhaustive study on minority students in low-income homes (read: African American students), the authors explore academic success among students at risk for school failure. Using a sample of 1800 minority students, Finn and Rock attempt to understand factors that distinguish successful students from unsuccessful students. Ultimately, the researchers determine that school engagement is linked to resilience for students of color in particular and recommend creating schooling spaces that encourage students to have high self-regard and sense of control over their learning.

As for African American students specifically, Finn and Rock suggest using students' families to develop personal and academic supports that increase engagement. Indeed, students exhibit educational disengagement when their beliefs and values are extrinsically and intrinsically out of sync with schoolwork and the curriculum (Wehlage et. al, 1989).

Somers and Piliawskwy (2004) analyzed dropout prevention among urban African American students. The researchers primarily concluded that students who participated in a dropout prevention program benefited from close relationships with adult allies and tutors. As a result of the program, the authors argue that the dropout rate for participants was considerably less as compared to students who did not participate. Although the researchers evaluated the dropout prevention program's effectiveness for African American students specifically, the only explicit reference to dropout prevention strategies that benefit African American students was "reciprocal peer tutoring" (p. 18). The rest of the study, however, echoed the established discourse on dropout prevention by focusing on correlates, predictors, and consequences without interrogating how race and/or culture confirms or challenges the relationship between these variables and high school graduation.

Studies have also examined dropout prevention from the perspective of African American students. In Davis & Ajzen (2002), the researchers explored the decision of African American students to complete high school. The study found that early interventions and behavioral control (how to manage academic failure, distracting life situations, and conflicts with others) greatly increase African American students' desire to complete school. Likewise, Somers, Owens, and Piliawsky (2008) found that supportive structures that utilize students' families, teachers, and peers are strongly

related to African American student achievement. Missing from these studies, however, was the perceived role race plays in the students' lives or the dropout intervention supports. As a result, the researchers were unable to establish a clear relationship between the recommended dropout prevention supports and African American students' graduation.

In conclusion, dropout intervention strategies for African American students in both historical and contemporary contexts generally included authentic collaborations between families and schools and provide opportunities for academic and personal support. In both past and present research, little is known about dropout prevention strategies or their impact for African American students in particular.

Summary of Literature Review

In the last 50 years, educational research on increasing graduation rates has been largely concerned with individual characteristics of dropouts as opposed to the schools they attend (Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr, & Godber, 2001). While many exogenous and endogenous factors contribute to a student's decision to drop out of school, divergent research suggests that persistent student failure is more plausibly an indication of school failure (DeWitte et. al., 2013). By focusing on individuals instead of other contextual factors, the majority of research on dropouts has created a typology of students most at risk (Vizcain, 2005). Arguably, such an approach reifies and reproduces stereotypes about dropouts instead of intervening in the dropout process.

Also dropout prevention strategies, particularly those effective for African American students, are underexplored. The research on African American students at risk of dropping out is limited and primarily framed by deficit models. It rarely focuses on

African American students as a unique group, and rarely considers school-related factors

and experiences. Such a gap in the research on African American students on the margins

of success is particularly ironic given the documented success of African American

educators who worked with African American students and communities when the

dropout phenomenon became a national crisis in the 1960s. The failure to incorporate

school experiences, teacher interactions, cultural history and differences into the literature

on dropouts limits current dropout reform efforts. More research is needed that fully

considers the important relationship between students and their schools, culture, and high

school completion.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

The purpose of this ethnographic case study was to explore one school's efforts to increase its graduation rates. The following research questions guided the project:

1. What are the beliefs and practices of educators working in an urban high school designed for students at risk for dropping out?

2. To what extent, if any, do educators use culturally relevant practices to move high school students toward graduation?

3. To what extent, if any, do educators' beliefs and practices reflect African American educators' historical ideas about moving students toward graduation?

Utilizing Yin's (2009) case study design, I used an appreciative inquiry model to identify the beliefs and practices of educators in an urban, nontraditional school for students at risk of not graduating from high school. More broadly, case study methodology was chosen because it allows the researcher to study the participants' beliefs and practices in their real-life contexts (Yin, 2009); has a historical bend similar to other case study projects that presume "history repeats itself; that what can be learned from past events can generalize to future events–in the same setting and in different settings" (Erickson, 2011, p. 129); and, seeks to uncover what happens, why, and what it means more broadly in conjunction with the data collection methods. Although literature on educators' beliefs and practices for increasing graduation rates is primarily quantitative, qualitative methods better served this project due to the exploratory nature of the research questions. In addition, this study addresses the paucity of qualitative research on educators who primarily work with students placed at risk of not graduating from high school.

Setting

Over the course of a full academic year, I collected data from a southeastern urban, nontraditional school that is designed to serve students who have or are at high risk of not graduating from high school with a diploma. The school employs 28[5] faculty and staff; 27 participated in the study. The study was bound to this case because educators in the school are expected to possess ideas and skills about how to help struggling students achieve academically and personally. At the time of the research study, the school had successfully graduated 148 out of 218 students with majority of those graduates being African American. While this number may seem low, the faculty and staff estimate that 100 percent of those 148 students would likely not have graduated from a traditional high school.

The school will be referred to as Middle State High School, heretofore MSHS, and is the only nontraditional[6] high school in Middle State Public Schools (MSPS) district. Opened in the 2007-2008 school year, MSHS is the result of a community partnership between MSHS and Communities in Schools (CIS), an organization offering community support to assist with helping students stay in and graduate from high school. MSHS is located in Holtsboro[7], an urban city in a southeastern state. Holtsboro is a diverse metropolis whose diversity is due in part to the educational, health, and research institutions that exist in the area. Specifically, Holtsboro is home to a top-tier university, one historically Black university, one community college, and a world-recognized hospital. In addition, Holtsboro is located less than 20 miles from two other cities

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[5] The one educator who did not participate in the study resigned during the first semester of the school year and asked to have all data related to her removed from the study.
[6] Nontraditional as opposed to alternative (Explain here or definitions section?)
[7] Pseudonym

comprised of equally competitive institutions. Such figures contextualize data that reveal

44 percent of Holtsboro's population hold bachelor degrees as compared to the rest of the

state's 26 percent. Despite the high percentage of Holtsboro residents holding college

degrees, still 18 percent live below the poverty level (U.S. Census Report, 2013).

Specifically, MSHS is located in a community on the east side of Holtsboro that is

approximately 80 percent African American even though African Americans only

account for 38 percent of Holtsboro's population. In addition, and most pertinent to the

study, approximately 45 percent of the surrounding community do not hold high school

diplomas and, in general, have less educational attainment on other measures such as

high school equivalents, some college, and graduate degrees (city data website, 2014).

While MSHS's students come from all schooling zones in Holtsboro, the majority of

MSHS's students live and work in this community.

MSHS is located in Holtsboro City Schools district, a relatively young school

district in that it is the result of a merger between the county and city school systems in

the early 1990s. Among the many issues that have faced the school district since the

merger, dropout and high school completion rates have continued to garner the attention

and effort of district policymakers (Todd, 2013). In response, district officials have

dedicated policy objectives to address school dropouts through the district's High School

Completion Plan and later the Strategic Dropout Prevention Plan. According to the most

recent data on district's graduation rates, one in five students does not complete high

school on time, which places the school district below the state's completion average–

where it has been since 2008[8]. Presently, the school district addresses attendance and

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[8] Newly released data reveals an increase in the school district's graduation rate from 75 percent to 79.6
percent.

graduation concerns through its "strategic plan of action… designed with and for [their] community" (2013). Specifically, the action plan is a four-point model that seeks to strengthen community partnerships, provide formal and informal student support services, and obtain financial support for existing programs such as Middle State High School.

As a nontraditional school specifically created and ran to increase graduation rates in its district, MSHS varies distinctly from a traditional school in a number of ways. First, MSHS is a choice-school, which means all students in the district are eligible to enroll regardless of districting zones. Second, students who attend MSHS have to undergo an entry process that consists of an application, family interview, and diagnostic test. Third, students take and complete courses at their own pace; courses are either entirely online, entirely offline, or blended. Under this self-paced model, students are able to obtain credits from failed courses while simultaneously taking classes that move them toward graduation. As a result, teachers are not teachers in the traditional sense; they are "learning facilitators" who work with students individually as they progress through the course on their own. Learning facilitators are usually trained during the summer months when they are encouraged to reimagine traditional notions of teaching. Teachers are expected to act as facilitators of students' independent learning. The application process is thus designed to determine if students meet the academic criteria to enroll (application), have support outside of school (family interview), and can read and do math at or above an eighth grade level (diagnostic test).

Middle State High School Students. At the write-up of this study, MSHS serves approximately 147 students from the ages of sixteen to twenty. All students undergo an application process, which includes a referral from their home school, an application,

entrance tests to assess reading and math proficiency, and an interview with their parent/guardian/adult ally. While the application process looks like a gatekeeping mechanism, the process is designed to provide students the opportunity to demonstrate 1) agency by seeking a referral from their home school, 2) their ability to process and produce schoolwork on their own as well as with the assistance of the teacher, and 3) they have a system of support outside of school that is willing to hold them accountable.

Since enrollment at MSHS is district-wide, the student body is made up of students who come from all high schools in the district and at various points in their high school careers. In the majority of cases, students have failed one or more courses while attending a traditional high school, have a persistent record of truancy, and, in general, struggle to achieve academic success.

MSHS is structured to serve approximately 200 students. Due to the transient nature of the student population, the number of students enrolled at MSHS changed constantly. At the start of data collection, 165 students were enrolled; only 119 remained by the culmination of data collection. The majority of the students are African American or Latino. The percentage of African American students remained between 60 and 62 percent; the percentage of Latino students remained between 38 and 40 percent. At no point did the percentage of any other ethnic group exceed that of African American students. Throughout the course of data collection, the percentage of White students remained between six and eight percent.

Middle State High School Building. MSHS is located in a tri-level school building that is home to several educational programs such as cosmetology, barbering, early childhood development, and a second-chance program for school dropouts needing more flexibility

than traditional high schools offer (referred to as Bridges Academy[9]). In addition, the

facility supports community initiatives organized by Holtsboro City Parks and Recreation

department. See Figure 1 for a visual layout of the school building.

Third
Floor
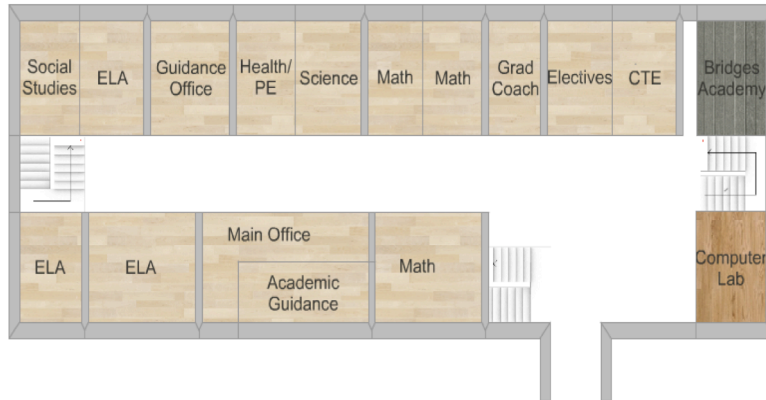
Second
Floor
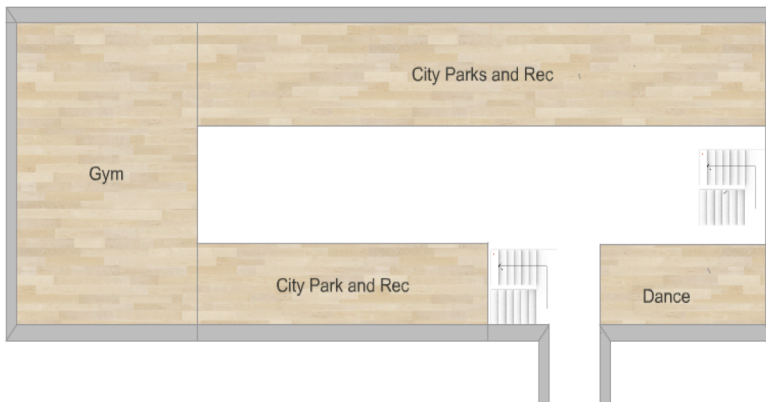
First
Floor
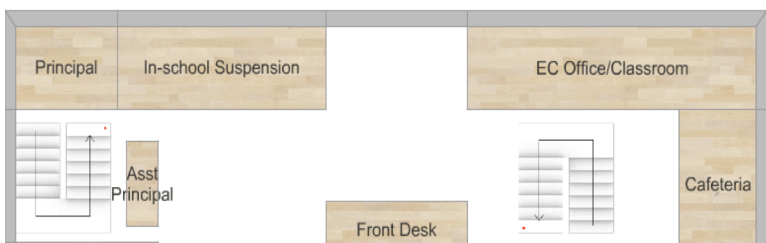
Figure 1. Layout of Middle State High School. This figure shows the physical layout of
MSHS and the other entities with which they share the building.

[9] Even though these programs are strikingly similar, the scope of this project is limited to MSHS. Bridges
Academy will only be discussed in terms of interactions with MSHS participants.

Data Sources and Collection

Data were collected in four phases: 1) observation, 2) participant observation and artifact collection, 3) focused observations, and 4) interviews. The selected methods were used to collect data, inform subsequent methods, and address issues of validity and reliability. During phase one of data collection, I conducted general observations of MSHS's front office, guidance offices, morning assemblies, faculty meetings, virtual group chats, and the hallways. During phase two, I actively participated in the school community as an assistant to the Director of Student Services. Additionally, I identified school documents and artifacts related to MSHS's school environment and culture during phase two. Phase three primarily consisted of focused observations based on data collected during phases one and two. Finally, phase four consisted of one-on-one interviews with 26 educators, which constituted 93 percent of MSHS's faculty and staff, and one focus group interview.

Phase One: General observation. I observed general school operations before ongoing participant observation to provide contextualized factors that influenced the participants over the course of data collection. Because participants were asked to offer their perceptions on the school itself, observation was used to capture the culture of the school from an outsider perspective but also identify settings, events, and participants for focused and selective observation as prescribed by Spradley (1980). This included observations on the front office, guidance office, morning assemblies, faculty meetings, group chats, and the hallways. It excluded direct observation of classroom instruction. Through these observations, I was able to determine relationships, key informants, and additional settings and events for focused observations.

Observation was also selected because of RQ3, which sought to determine if there was a relationship between past and present perceptions on increasing graduation rates. The importance of school culture to historical accounts of African American educators and students has been well documented (Morris & Morris, 2002; Siddle Walker, 1996, 2000). By entering the school with a particular interest in school culture, I was able to focus on aspects of the school that existed beyond classroom instruction and interactions.

Field notes were collected using a combination of handwritten and digitally written notes. Handwritten notes were taken using a palm-sized journal that I carried with me, usually in my back pocket. The size of the journal was intentional as opportunities for note-taking were frequent and sometimes unexpected. Since the journal was so small, I was able to quickly access it and take notes. It was primarily used in informal settings such as the front office, guidance office, and hallways. Digital notes were taken using a tablet device and a note-taking application downloaded onto the tablet. Field notes were recorded using a stylus, which allowed me to quickly handwrite notes digitally. The application automatically saved all notes, which can be seen in Image 1:
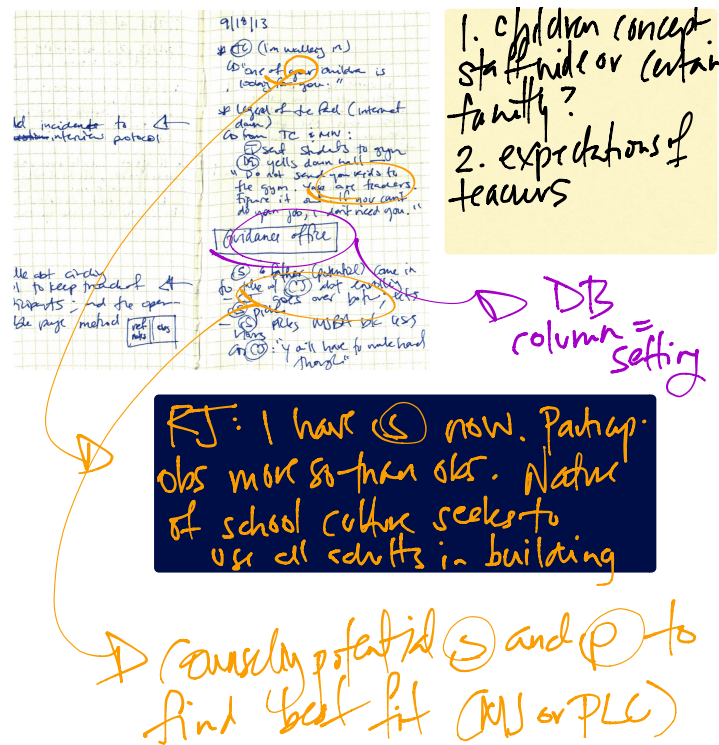
Figure 2. Example of Digital Field Notes. The image shows how I took field notes and used them in the coding and analysis processes.

I digitized handwritten journal notes using a handheld scanner and subsequently imported the notes into the same note-taking application used to record field notes. I chose to digitize the handwritten notes to increase security and efficiency of data collection and analysis. Since the notes were housed in the application, I was able to access them from other digital devices to add to or refer to them. By digitizing my field notes, I was able to access copies in the event the journal was misplaced or destroyed.

Phase Two: Participant Observation and Artifact Collection. Following Spradley's (1980) Continuum of Participation, I began fieldwork with nonparticipation (general observation) and transitioned into active participation after approximately two weeks. At this point in data collection, participants began openly asking for more details

about the project and its methods for data collection. As participants became more comfortable, my participation became more involved as I was granted access to faculty and staff restricted areas and expected to contribute to conversations. By the third month of data collection, I had achieved complete participation and was viewed by participants as a member of the school community. My role as a community member is discussed more thoroughly in the following sections on achieving access through reciprocal duties.

      Phase Three: Participant Observation, Access, and Reciprocal Duties. My observations as a participant were the result of a reciprocal agreement reached between myself and the principal of the MSHS. Guided by Keisha Green's (2013) Double Dutch Methodology, I engaged with the MSHS community as both a participant and observer. According to Mr. Davis, as long as I was collecting data, I would be expected to contribute to the school community in useful and meaningful ways that included providing assistance to the Director of Student Services, tutoring students, and working with the assistant principal on professional development for teachers. As data collection progressed and full access achieved, I was ushered into spaces where intimate work between MSHS leadership and students took place. I documented the shift in my research journal:

      Being in these truancy meetings has provided *so* much insight. Not only do I have a front row seat to a significant strategy for moving students toward graduation, I also have a front row seat to 1) cross-collegial relationships; 2) nuanced educator personas and shortcomings; 3) students' personal, emotional, and academic needs and shortcomings; and, 4) kids in general. Because I'm there, I'm *another* adult

who can keep my eye out. And, I do. And, it is expected (Field notes, October 29, 2013).

I also assisted the social worker by serving as a scribe for faculty and student meetings. During the final months of participant observation, I assisted teachers by tutoring students in study skills.

Artifact Collection. I used school documents to collect data on the school's demographics and graduation rates. Documents available from public district information and the school itself were used to provide demographical snapshots of school's graduation and dropout rates. These documents provided descriptive information about the school and the school population otherwise unattainable through observation and interviews. No confidential student information was used in this study.

Throughout the course of data collection, artifacts were collected digitally. I captured images on the walls of the school and classrooms (Appendix C). At the suggestion of a participant, I expanded the artifact collection to include local newspaper articles and other websites/articles that provide additional information regarding the school's virtual presence.

Phase Four: Interviews. The one-on-one interview guide was semi-structured (Merriam, 2009) and can be found in Appendix D. Items were developed using data collected from observations and school documents. Specific language from historical data collected in Juergensen's (2015) empirical study of African American educators' efforts was used to construct interview items. This is due to the goal of the third research question to locate any parallels between past and present African American educational thought on high school completion.

The interview guide also included exploratory items that were determined based on participants' responses. Considering that the line of inquiry was exploratory, open-ended and flexible questions that generated conversation were valuable in the data collection process. As instructed by the methodology on narrative inquiry, items that allowed for storytelling deepened understandings of participants' personal and professional experiences as well as their perceptions about helping students graduate (Clandinin, Pushor, & Murray-Orr, 2007). I asked participants to "tell me more about…" or "tell me a story about one of your students who has/has not dropped out." I also used the information gathered from the interviews to formulate questions for subsequent and/or follow-up interviews as needed.

Participants for one-on-one interviews included 15 teachers, two administrators, six student support services personnel, and three auxiliary support staff members. Participants for the focus group included one administrator, two teachers, and four student support services personnel. The sample for both individual and focus group interviews included all school faculty and staff positions. Essentially, data sources included field notes (from observations and participant observation) and participants' interview responses. Each phase of data collection is discussed in detail in the following section. Please see Appendix A for the Consent Form participants used to agree to be a part of the study. Please see Appendix B for a list and descriptions of participants.

Focus group. As proposed, the focus group interview was chosen because it fostered discussions between participants about the particular issue of moving students toward graduation (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). The constructivist approach of the group interview was an advantage. According to Patton (2005), focus group participants "get to

hear each other's responses and to make additional comments beyond their own original responses as they hear what other people have to say" (p. 386) thereby constructing and reconstructing their positions. Focus group data was used to identify effective strategies employed by a variety of school personnel. It was compared to the data collected from the observations and one-on-one interviews. The interview guide was constructed using data from observations, school documents, and one-on-one interviews. See Appendix E for the interview guide.

Originally, the focus group was designed to incorporate educators' voices regardless of participants' race or culture. However, data collected from observations and one-on-one interviews indicated that only educators who identified as African American possessed culturally relevant beliefs as outlined by culturally relevant pedagogy. As such, the educators who participated in the focus group were exclusively African American. Also, because the focus group occurred in the final phase of data collection, I was acutely aware that research question three (RQ3) remained underexplored as compared to research questions one and two. In response, I decided to use the focus group to zoom in on African American educators' historical efforts for moving students toward graduation as indicated by the design of the interview guide. Previous studies have indicated that African American educators often prefer to engage in collaborative and organized ways of exchanging ideas and practices both historically (Baker, 2006; Siddle Walker, 2009) as well as contemporarily (Lee, 2002); and, these collaborations benefit the collaborators and their students. As such, the configuration of the focus group provided a semi-structured space for the participants to pointedly discuss their perceptions of dropout

prevention in their school as it relates to their culture—a topic that could be talked about in their every day school lives, but likely not in this forum.

Summary of data sources and collection methods. In sum, each data source was used to address all three of the research questions. During Phase One of data collection, data from observations of communal meetings and spaces completed early in the process were expected to reveal tendencies toward educators' beliefs and practices that could be culturally relevant and/or reflective of a historical African American model. During Phases Two and Three, data from participant observation and artifact collection were expected to provide richer examples of educators' beliefs and practices. As such, data were able to be collected in both formal (e.g. faculty meetings) and informal spaces (e.g. teacher lunch room) due to my participant status. In the final phase of data collection, I focused on the individual and focus group interviews to seek clarification of observation data and ensure that the data collected to this point could be triangulated via participant responses. A chart of data sources can be found in Table 1:

Table 1

Data Sources Chart Showing Data Collection Phases, Activities, and Sources

Phase	Activities	Data sources for field notes	
1 (Sept. 2013)	General observation	Front and guidance offices Morning assemblies Faculty meetings	Group chat Hallway
2 (Sept. – Dec. 2013)	Participant observation Artifact collection Focused observation	Truancy court Intervention team Group chat Front and guidance offices	Teachers' lunch room School documents Digital artifacts
3 (Jan. 2014)	Participant observation Focused observation	Truancy court Intervention team Group chat	Front and guidance offices Faculty meetings Teachers' lunch room
4 (Feb. – June 2014)	Interviews Participant observation	One-on-one, focus group, follow-up interview responses Front and guidance offices Morning assemblies Faculty meetings	

Data Analysis

I used a combination of typological and inductive analysis methods that took place in four phases; some of which occurred simultaneously. As discussed in Gibbs, Friese, and Mangabeira (2002), there is a range of technological approaches available to qualitative researchers for digitally collecting, analyzing, reporting, and archiving materials. Data from field notes and interviews were collected, coded, and analyzed using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software to determine participants' beliefs and practices toward increasing graduation rates. Please see Appendix F for examples of codes and code definitions used in analysis.

In the first phase of analysis, I engaged in a three-pronged approach to coding and analyzing the data. First, because the study sought to explore educators' perceptions as they acted in their real life contexts, simultaneous data collection and analysis allowed me to plan future data collection sessions and address the research questions in a more focused way throughout the course of the study (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Hatch, 2002). In terms of coding, the first level was conducted as prescribed by Miles and Huberman (1994) by bracketing information. Afterwards, sections of text from field note data was identified. This field note data was significant to the research questions and it satisfied the criteria for typologies of successful educators of students placed at risk, culturally relevant practices, and historical African American efforts. Since all collected data were digitized and uploaded to the software, I conducted the same process of bracketing and labeling for observation field notes, artifacts, and interview transcripts. I also used the data collected during this first phase to begin cataloging emergent themes. It is important

to note that the computer-assisted software forces this automatically by requiring a thematic tag when bracketing information.

In the second level of analysis, I searched for patterns by clustering large themes to pull them together into a meaningful whole. The computer-assisted software allowed me to cluster themes using its "code system" function. Meanings were identified through sustained contact with the data, which included reading, rereading, and reflecting on patterns across individual observations conducted over time. From there, I began the process of "data reduction" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 10) by developing salient themes, assigning each theme a code, and sorting out the data collected that was outside of the parameters of the study. By rereading and reflecting on the data, I was able to refine the salient themes.

Next, the third phase of data collection involved using the salient themes from the second level of analysis to create the thematic categories that are presented as the findings of the study. These categories represented themes that emerged from data common to participants' beliefs and practices toward increasing graduation rates. I then developed matrices by research question from the second level codes. Having already analyzed data before completing data collection, I returned to earlier steps in the data analysis process to get a better sense of the data as a whole (Hatch, 2002) and search for data I might have overlooked or that seemed insignificant at the time. I did this by using the thematic categories developed in the third phase to refer back to data collected earlier in the study.

In the fourth and final phase of analysis, I used the charts generated by the computer-assisted software to examine representations and frequency of codes across

data sources. I also used the charts to engage in constant comparison as prescribed by Glaser & Strauss (1967) to locate any misbehaving data (Siddle Walker, personal communication, 2013). To do so, I revisited the data and asked myself, "What is going on here that does not fit?" The process of examining representations, frequencies, and misbehaving data served as a way to determine if I had reached saturation.

Reliability and Validity

To ensure the quality and rigor of the project, the following strategies were used throughout the data collection process: (a) triangulation between observation, school documents, interview, and focus group; (b) contextual completeness, which describe the history, physical setting, and other environmental factors; (c) long-term observation, which included data collection over a long period of time to increase the reliability of the study's findings (approximately 450 hours), (d) member checking to ensure accuracy and completeness of participants' statements, and (e) researcher reflection, which allowed me to critically think about and discuss assumptions and orientations to the case being studied.

More specifically, each method of data collection was used to cross-examine data provided from one or more other methods being used for the study. For example, information collected from the observations was used to triangulate data from interviews, the focus group, and school documents. Using each data collection method as a tool for validity, I was able to verify data as well as draw robust conclusions about educators' perceptions regarding dropout prevention and high school completion.

In addition to my recursive approach to data collection, I kept handwritten and digital research notes to reflect on all components of data collection processes and

methods. This was to offset the limitation of being the primary data collector and analyzer (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). I used the notes to engage with participants and colleagues about the conclusions being drawn both as data collection was taking place and upon the distillation of findings. The handwritten research journal was kept in the same journal as the field notes. I purposefully only took field notes on the right side of the journal and reserved the left side for reflection. When adding to my digital research journal, I added a graphic to the document within the note-taking software that allowed me to keep my reflective notes separate from my field notes.

Data storage and retrieval. All data were systematically catalogued, labeled, and stored using password protected computer-assisted software. I maintained a document system that allowed me to organize field notes and participant responses. Field notes were organized by date, time, event, and location while participants were organized by position title, race/culture, gender, and experience.

Chain of evidence. I used the computer-assisted software to develop the chain of evidence that authenticate the findings of this study. As recommended by Yin (2009), the chain of evidence was established by developing a case study protocol, which clearly indicates the links between the data and the research questions. The chain of evidence was created using digital documentation of data sources, data collection, and coding procedures.

Limitations. Since the project is a case study, this study is susceptible to the common limitations inherent to case study research. First, the study's findings are not generalizable beyond the school site. To overcome this limitation, findings from this study could be used to achieve what Gall and colleagues (2007) term "applicability."

Applicability is described as a process of applying case study findings to other cases also representing a similar phenomenon. In so doing, what is learned from a singular case can be related other cases, both similar and dissimilar. As regards this study, subsequent case-level research that purposefully samples educators to explore their historical and contemporary perspectives on high school completion could be compared and analyzed whether they are in a traditional school or not.

Although the study sought to include oft-unheard educational voices, it excludes other important voices such as students and parents. As a result, participants' perspectives on the effectiveness or outcomes of their practices cannot be examined from the viewpoint of the students or families who experience them. According to Bridgeland and colleagues (2006), the perspectives of students and their families who have dropped out of school are already underrepresented as compared to those of educators and researchers. In response, I expect to expand this project to include the voices and experiences of students and parents in further research.

Researcher positionality. In addition to IRB approval from Emory University and MSPS's Department of Research and Accountability, school-level access was granted through a web of personal and professional connections. MSHS is located in the city and state where I was a traditional classroom educator for four years. As related to MSHS in particular, I taught at the school for one year before leaving to attend graduate school. I have maintained my relationship with the school and its personnel since this time in both informal and formal ways. Informally, I have continued to be in contact with the administration and faculty through electronic communication and regular unscheduled visits as changes have taken place. Formally, I worked with the English

teacher who was my replacement and entering her first year of teaching as a co-creator of curricula and a mentor. In addition, I delivered the commencement speech for the 2011 graduation and was an invited speaker for one of their daily assemblies. For both events, I ate lunch with the faculty and spent the day at the school visiting with teachers, support staff, and the administration as well as talking with students.

Through these experiences, I was granted preliminary access to conduct interviews in preparation for the dissertation study. I interviewed the principal, director of student services, and the administrative assistant regarding their culturally relevant beliefs about increasing graduation rates of students at their school. Having already achieved access as a result of my relationships, contributions, and preliminary interviews, I was able to re-enter the school with minimal disruption and ultimately achieved full participation.

Although this level of familiarity could have presented the potential for bias, the passage of time reduced the effects of this limitation. First, I have not taught at the school since 2008. In that time, the majority of the faculty I worked with had retired or are no longer teaching at MSHS. Second, due to the increase in school size, a significant number of new faculty and staff had been hired since my employment. Lastly, I have no prior relationships or knowledge of the current students enrolled at MSHS. As such, while MSHS possesses the same overall goal of increasing graduation rates as when I was teaching there, the structure, personnel, and student body differ greatly from what I experienced.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this ethnographic case study was to explore one school's efforts to

increase its graduation rates. This was done by using educators' personal, professional,

and cultural perspectives to illuminate how the school approaches dropout prevention

with its majority African American population. Specifically, the study explored the

beliefs and practices of educators to better understand how they work to move students

toward graduation.

Findings are divided into four sections. The first section describes details about

the school's climate and culture to contextualize participants' characteristics. The next

section is in response to RQ1 and presents data on the participants' broader beliefs and

practices toward helping students graduate. The next section addresses RQ2 and

describes participants' culturally relevant efforts to move students toward graduation.

Finally, the last section attends to RQ3 by discussing participants' beliefs and practices

that reflect African American educators' historical ideas about helping students graduate.

Considering that I have chosen to elevate a select group of participants in each section, I

also conclude each section with a comprehensive chart to show the relationship between

all participants and the overarching themes of the study.

Structurally, each section is constructed in a way that allows participants' voices

and experiences to take precedent in the work. Representative educators have been

selected for elevation throughout each section. They will either provide a collective

picture of a majority of the sample or share perspectives particularly unique to the study.

In the following paragraphs, I begin with a description of the culture and climate of

MSHS to establish setting and better situate the findings in relationship to the research questions.

Culture and Climate of MSHS

During the yearlong study as a participant observer, I was able to experience and observe the culture and climate at MSHS. The culture and climate at MSHS can be described as (un)expected, (in)formal, and (un)orthodox, which I observed primarily through day-to-day interactions with faculty and staff, taking inventory of the posters and literature on the walls, and engaging with faculty and staff during formal and informal meetings.

MSHS: The school. Even though MSHS is a nontraditional high school for students on the margins of academic success, MSHS is still a public high school. Walking in the building, I have to sign in at the front desk. Unlike a traditional public school, however, I have to take the elevator to the third floor to get to the school because MSHS shares a building with two other community entities. When the elevator doors open, my first introduction to MSHS is a floor-to-ceiling poster with a description of the school, a large image of the mascot, and another poster with the school's creed. Each poster represents the intended culture and climate of the school, which serve to orient visitors and remind students, parents, and the educators who work there that MSHS is a different kind of school altogether.

Essentially, MSHS describes itself on the floor-to-ceiling poster as a school that provides a flexible learning environment for students to recover high school credits toward earning their diploma. This flexibility is observable in the climate and culture of the school in formal and informal ways. Formally, MSHS states in their mission

statement that students are to be "provided with a variety of instructional approaches to support their learning." Informally, this mission takes many shapes. For example, students are able to make their own schedules when work and home life conflict with school. Another way MSHS is flexible is that students are allowed to work on coursework at their own pace. This means that when a student finishes a course, he or she can move on to another course needed for graduation without waiting for the next semester or school year. Due to this infrastructure, some of the more motivated students complete as many as eight credits in a school year, double what they would be able to do in a traditional high school. And, each time they complete a credit, they ring a large bell in the front office for the school to hear.

In addition to flexibility, MSHS also relies heavily on its mascot–a phoenix–to communicate a culture and climate of resilience. According to the principal, Mr. Davis, the phoenix was selected as the mascot by the group of teachers, administrators, and students who began with the school when it opened in 2008. In Greek mythology, the phoenix represents regeneration and rebirth as it rises from the ashes of its predecessor. For students at MSHS, the mascot is appropriate given that students who enroll are symbolically rising from the ashes of their former academic failure to be reborn as students confident in their academic abilities. Having the mascot in the main entranceway and along the hallway reminds students that MSHS is an opportunity for a new beginning. It especially reminds MSHS's educators that students are works in progress on their way to academic success. In these ways, the MSHS mascot speaks to an overall ethos of renewal despite struggle.

The intended culture and climate of the school are represented in the school's

creed as well, which is in the entranceway, on classroom doors, and recited at the end of

every morning assembly. It reads:

> We believe that anyone who has an active desire to change his/her circumstance
>
> deserves the opportunity to work toward that goal.
>
> We believe that knowledge and success stem from a quality, personal education;
>
> the courage to face our fears, our failures, and our past and move beyond them;
>
> the ability to see a new path when the one we're travelling compromises who we
>
> are and how we see ourselves; and, a resilience that finds us firmly on our feet
>
> when we stumble along the way.
>
> We believe that the lessons we learn here are for us in part but for others on the
>
> whole.
>
> We believe that anything worth having should be difficult to get.
>
> We believe that positive contributions to our community and school will only
>
> breathe more life into all the things we will accomplish.
>
> We believe that our experiences do not dictate who we are or who we will
>
> become.
>
> We believe that it is our right to strive for the greatness we know we can achieve.
>
> We believe that the sky is the limit[10].

As evidenced in the lines of the school creed, the culture and climate of MSHS is

intended to establish a place where students can and are expected to reach for their

highest potential. Ideally, it is a place where academic and community expectations are

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[10] The phrase, "the sky is the limit," is in remembrance of a student who was one of the first to enroll at MSHS when it opened. She was murdered a few months shy of graduation. Her name was Skye, and her personal mantra was "the skye is the limit."

high and where possibilities abound if students and educators have the vision, patience, and determination to make them so.

The artifacts collected and observed for this study are at once examples of how MSHS represents its desired culture as well as how MSHS communicates its intended culture to students, staff, and visitors. As observed, MSHS's intended culture and climate is consistent with the literature on the importance of school atmosphere to high school completion (Calabrese et al, 2012; Rumberger, 2004).

MSHS: The educators. The culture and climate of MSHS is inextricably linked to the faculty and staff who work there. MSHS employs 28[11] faculty and staff; 27 of which participated in the study. Demographically, MSHS educators are majority African American with ages that range from 22 to 71. Sixteen are African American and eleven are white. In terms of gender, 21 educators are female and six are male. Each educator's role is broken down as follows:

- 12 teachers

- Two inclusion teachers

- Two regular substitute teachers

- Two administrators

- Two guidance counselors

- One graduation coach

- One social worker

- One student volunteer from a community organization

- One guidance counselor intern

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[11] The one educator who did not participate in the study resigned during the first semester of the school year and asked to have all data related to her removed from the study.

- One administrative support staff

- One school resource officer

- One in-school suspension supervisor

Please see Appendix B for a list and descriptions of participants.

Data from interviews more prominently display how participants view themselves and their work at MSHS especially as they relate to the culture and climate. One of the interview questions asked participants to describe the culture and climate of MSHS and, subsequently, how being at MSHS informed their practices and beliefs for moving students toward graduation. Educators overwhelmingly reported that the culture and climate at MSHS was in sync with their educational beliefs and practices. In fact, educators stated that the culture and climate actually allowed them to work more closely with students especially compared to working in traditional school settings. In one example, Ms. Jackson, notes that she "really has to know where each student is and what's necessary for [her] to help them to get to where they need to be," which would have been out of the realm of possibility at her previous school where she had over 100 students.

In another example of educators' perceptions of the culture and climate at MSHS, one of the substitute teachers, Ms. Crosby, who is an African American educator with 40 years of teaching and administration experience said the following during our interview:

> At [MSHS], I see it as a family and being a part of a family means that you…
> you… you engulf everyone and you see everyone as being the same, and I see the
> same type of concern given to every student. The same type of support given to
> every student. We couldn't do that at the big high schools. And I realize that you

can't get to everyone. But it seems like here, they're mentors and they're support

people who make sure that students have what they need. Get what they need.

Monitor them to keep them on track. Mentor them. They are role models. I see

it all coming together to form what it is, what it takes to get these students

graduated and out.

Ms. Crosby's view confirms the literature on the importance of a schooling environment

that is safe, familial, and inclusive (Miller-Cribs, Cronen, Davis, & Johnson, 2002). In

addition, Ms. Crosby speaks to the literature that shows the relationship between teachers,

caring school communities, and academic achievement (Bowen & Bowen, 1998; Sanders,

1998).

Of note, Ms. Crosby, like eight other educators at MSHS, worked with Mr. Davis

at an area traditional high school before coming to MSHS. According to Mr. Davis, he

handpicked who he wanted to join him at MSHS when it opened; and, it was educators

who had a record of working with students on the margins of success. During one of our

interviews, Mr. Davis recalls recruiting his colleagues to join him at MSHS in 2008:

I would tell them… look… what you do here [at the traditional high school] is

great. But, what can you do with a school full of kids who need this kind of

attention? You could stay here and help a few at a time. Or, you can come with

me and help as many as you can. It will be hard as hell. It will be what you do

now times ten. But, it will also tell you what kind of educator you are.

Mr. Davis went on to describe how he needed to be able to trust the people who would

work with MSHS's students. At this level of selectivity, arguably Mr. Davis was able to

build the type of culture and climate he wanted to see at MSHS through his hiring

practices. As a result, Mr. Davis explains that he did not have to convince his faculty and

staff to believe in his vision for moving students toward graduation. Instead, he ensured

that the educators working at MSHS would possess a shared vision of a culture and

climate that was positive, inclusive, and dedicated to students' overall personal and

academic success.

RQ1: Participants' Beliefs and Practices

In addition to MSHS's culture and climate, educators' beliefs and practices for

moving students toward graduation were observed and documented during the yearlong

study. Although I was able to observe educators' beliefs and practices for the entire

academic year, much of what I witnessed regarding culture, climate, and educators'

practices was demonstrated during my first day on site as a researcher:

It's 8:00am on a Thursday morning in the final days of September; high school

students are entering the school's main hallway. Faculty and staff line the walls

greeting students, checking in with them, and playfully goading them to get to

class on time. I peer all the way to the opposite end of this very long hallway and

see the principal and one of the guidance counselors talking to a student. It looks

serious. I head toward them to investigate and the most respected teacher on the

hall is also on her way. We arrive at the same time. She says, "Thanks, guys" to

the principal and guidance counselor and then turns to the student, "I've been

looking for you. Now, what can we do to help you get caught up in your classes?"

He is laughing and smiling at first, still in disbelief that the busiest people in the

school are confronting him about a few missed days. Then, he tells the teacher

about his work schedule and why he is working during school hours; it is a

familiar story at MSHS. The teacher, principal, and guidance counselor listen to

him, look at each other, and the guidance counselor says, "Come to my office

after first period so we can create another schedule for you until you can figure

out a better work schedule." Then the principal says, "Do I need to call your boss

to tell him how important it is that you are at school or will you take care of it?"

The student says he will take care of it and walks to class.[12]

This was my first day as a researcher at MSHS. This anecdote evidences a particular

commitment to students' academic success that extends beyond traditional practices.

In a traditional school, we might expect the student to be punished for being

absent from school without a note from a parent (Lagana-Riorda et al., 2011). Worse, we

might expect that no one–surely not the principal–would even be aware of how many

days the student had missed, let alone where the student worked and how to get in contact

with his boss. Instead, observed here is a logical conversation about choices,

consequences, and alternative options between faculty and a student in an effort to keep

the student on track to graduation. MSHS educators utilize quick thinking, teamwork,

listening, relationship building, high expectations, and flexibility. In so doing, MSHS

educators demonstrate respect and responsibility for their students and one another. As

shown here, educators at MSHS generally possess beliefs and practices that are

(un)expected, (in)formal, and (un)orthodox when working with students at risk of not

graduating from high school; and, at the very least, this example demonstrates the

expected approach based on the mission of the school. Although educators in traditional

schools could very well possess the same beliefs and practices, data from the study

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[12] From expanded field notes: September 26, 2013.

suggest that the structure, climate, and culture of MSHS provides opportunities for these beliefs and practices to surface on a regular basis.

Expectation for graduation. Results indicate that educators in the study largely expect students to graduate despite the personal and academic barriers facing their students. Results from observations and interviews show that the majority of MSHS educators hold medium to high graduation expectations for students as a part of their belief system. This was observed during day-to-day interactions, student meetings, faculty meetings, and school-wide assemblies. However, in some instances, educators' practices did not fully align with the belief that all students had the potential to achieve academic success and, ultimately, graduate from high school.

In an example of how high and low expectations were observed, the guidance department implemented regular "After Graduation" group meetings that included all juniors and seniors regardless of their academic standing toward graduation. The "After Graduation" meetings were facilitated by a recent college graduate who volunteered as an assistant to the Graduation Coach as well as a graduate student intern completing her Master's degree in school counseling. These meetings mostly consisted of students sharing their academic goals, analyzing students' transcripts, and exploring admission requirements at a variety of colleges and universities in the area. Ultimately, students were provided the opportunity to take field trips to local universities and community colleges. When asked about the development and implementation of the "After Graduation" meetings, one of the faculty members who initiated the meetings said, "We just want to be sure the students are prepared to go somewhere after this. So, we have to

be real with them—it's not enough to say you're graduating. What's your destination!"

(December, 2013).

It is important to recognize that not all participants shared this sentiment. Indeed, at least three of the faculty and staff used faculty meetings to openly question the point of students with low GPAs and criminal records missing class for "After Graduation" meetings. Of note, those educators who supported the "After Graduation" meetings were all African American with three of the eleven White teachers being the ones who questioned the viability of the meetings for all students. Considering that educators' expectation levels directly impact students' motivational levels (Cortez, Sorensen, & Coronado, 2012), data that revealed feelings of low expectations toward students and their success (or lack thereof) were particularly problematic. In one case, two educators–both White–demonstrated their low expectations on the virtual faculty chat regarding a student's academic progress:

> Educator A: So, I asked a student how he planned to pass [my English class]
>
> when he was 40 assignments behind. He said, "Knock it out the park on the exam."
>
> Educator B: not passing math either then.
>
> Educator A: hee hee (April, 2014).

Expressed here is one educator's lack of concern for the student over time and another's lack of confidence in the student's general potential to succeed. Both indicate a lack of overall respect and support that stood in contrast to the intended climate and culture of the school.

Notably, teachers who espoused such negative attitudes toward students' academic struggles were not isolated or unnoticed by colleagues. As with most small schools,

educators at MSHS spent a sizeable amount of time together–eating lunch together in a colleague's classroom that served as the teachers' lounge. Interestingly, teachers shared their views freely here (as well as on the virtual faculty chat), which were not always in alignment with the intended culture of the school. As such, several participants freely discussed their colleagues' expectations of students (or lack thereof) and the frustration it caused them. For example the school's social worker, Ms. Johnson, notes the following:

> It bothers me sometimes when it appears that some teachers get a joy when they say 'oh, they're failing', as if there's some banner that they're wearing that my kids are failing. Rather than saying, you know, that they're struggling and we need to figure out what to do about it. I just have an issue with that (April, 2014).

Although Ms. Johnson clearly communicates that not all educators at MSHS believed every student could and should graduate, she disturbingly introduces a more disturbing aspect of some educators' position on the expectation of graduation.

Sense of autonomy. MSHS educators also possessed a sense of autonomy that was primarily demonstrated in their ability to be flexible about students' circumstances. For example, students were allowed to design their own school schedules to accommodate work and family obligations. Educators also made decisions about students completing coursework in other teachers' classrooms and moving through curricula at the student's pace. Importantly, MSHS educators were not expected to address these decisions with the principal because they were considered equal, trusted decision-makers. As noted by one of the school's academic counselors, "We all have the power to 'call an audible'[13] with a student when we feel the situation warrants it. Even if we went to Davis

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[13] Typically used by quarterbacks in American football to change the play at the line of scrimmage.

[the principal] for permission, he'd just say 'Do what you think is best'" (September, 2013).

Educators also demonstrated autonomy by advocating for students' academic and emotional wellbeing. A significant aspect of MSHS's school culture was how educators advocated for students with whom they had developed a particularly strong relationship and felt empowered by the administration to do so. Some examples include petitioning the principal to reduce suspensions for students, working closely with the guidance department to ensure students clearly understood what courses they needed to graduate, or posting on the virtual faculty chat that a student needed additional emotional support throughout the day due to events outside of school. An example of educators' position as equal, trusted decision makers occurred during an observation of the principal's office. This particular incident began in the hallway when the physical education teacher was informed that one of her advisees was being suspended for not coming to Friday School[14]. During lunch, she located the principal in his office where she asked him about the details of the suspension. She shared with the principal the student's circumstances on the Friday in question and personally volunteered to ensure he would not miss the next one. I recorded the exchange in my notes:

> Principal behind desk. Coach Patton standing in front of him. She says student
>
> didn't have a ride. He's a good kid and will do what he's supposed to do if he can.
>
> Principal says something to the effect of the rules being what they are for a
>
> reason. Coach Patton says she knows, but the rule is going to hurt this student in

---

[14] Friday School is unique to MSHS. To accommodate students' work and family schedules as well as give teachers more time to work one-on-one with students, MSHS's schedule is Monday-Thursday from 7:30am-5:00pm. Friday School is also used for students to make up missed days or material. However, if a student is assigned to Friday School but does not attend, he/she will be suspended for one day.

the long run. She offers to personally make sure this won't happen again and

continue to be in contact with his parents about his progress. Says she will give

student her personal contact info. Principal says, "If you really think this is a

better course, then that's what we'll do." He then tells Coach Patton to inform the

student he's no longer suspended (Field notes, October 2, 2013).

As a teacher, Coach Patton had to address the student's suspension with the principal;

however, she did not hesitate to approach him to advocate for her student. As a researcher

watching this exchange unfold, I observed how confident she appeared to be that her

suggestions would be considered seriously, which they were.

Unfortunately, this approach often led to feelings of frustration for some of the

participants. Several educators indicated that feelings of frustration were most dominant

on the topic of discipline as related to dress code, students' cell-phone use during

instructional time, and reasons for students being sent to in-school suspension. For

example, one of the Language Arts teachers discussed a few of the double-edged aspects

of having an autonomous work culture at MSHS. In her interview, she stated:

I think there are times when our egos and our little chiefdoms get in the way of the

larger issues we should be talking about. And I feel like occasionally [a teacher]

will yell about how kids need to be where they're supposed to be, but when it's

time to review for her test–those kids don't need to be anywhere but in her room.

And so that is a little bit of what are we doing (April, 2014).

As previously mentioned, the structure of MSHS allows students to complete courses at

their own pace. However, due to state attendance laws, students are expected to

physically be where they are scheduled to be by the school. In an effort to satisfy both of

these goals, MSHS allows students to move on to another course, but they are expected to complete that work in their original teacher's classroom. Here, the Language Arts teacher is articulating frustration about another teacher who often attempts to regulate students' whereabouts, but occasionally violates the policy when it comes to her coursework. As with this particular teacher, many faculty and staff members felt caught between the school's expectations of students and their own and the expectation that they be flexible about students' personal issues.

Celebrating small successes. Seeking small successes was evidenced both as a school and educator trait. Consistent with Calabrese et al (2005), educators understood that seeking and celebrating small successes motivated students. In addition, faculty and staff regularly communicated when students completed courses, were promoted to the next grade, or served the school and/or larger community. Specifically, teachers were expected by administration to meet and discuss students who were doing well and/or most improved. From such meetings, teachers would determine the "Top Ten" list, which was also presented at the biweekly morning assembly. Categories included student of the week, attendance, and course completion. The "Top Ten" students were then photographed and their pictures placed on the hall along with the category for which they were being awarded. See Figure 3:

Figure 3. MSHS's Top Ten List of "Most Valuable Students."

In addition, teachers also created awards for their own classes. Teachers posted the

students of the week and the most improved students' pictures outside their doors and in

their classrooms. According to the principal, Mr. Davis, students felt pride and were

motivated to succeed since a majority of MSHS's students came from broken educational

backgrounds where they did not personally know academic success and praise.

In another example, the teacher-led Advisory Committee posted a class

graduation photo from the previous school year. The picture was on the main wall just

outside the main office. See Figure 4:

Figure 4. Photograph of Graduating Class of 2013. This was posted in the main hallway of MSHS.

When the picture was first presented, teachers and students stopped to look at it so often that I was encouraged by the principal to observe the hallway, and specifically student reactions to the class picture, which Mr. Davis stated was "pretty damn cool" (September, 2013). On several occasions, I witnessed students heading to the bathrooms or water fountains and stopping for several minutes to point out students they remembered. In most cases, administrators, teachers, and other staff joined students to admire the picture. These brief interactions often led to conversations with students about how and when they would "make it up on that wall" (September, 2013).

Engaging in reflective practice. Educators at MSHS engaged in reflective practice about their relationships with and responsibilities to students. Forming and maintaining meaningful relationships with students often superseded instructional concerns. As such, educators openly questioned their beliefs and practices when intervening with students. One teacher in particular queried:

Is it better that [student] is in my room reading a book because she wouldn't give [a teacher] her cell phone. Is that better for her because we keep her at school and let her decompress? Or is it worse because we're letting her avoid whatever's

going on with her and the teacher? We made that decision and the unintended

consequences were? We now lost this group of kids as a result? Or our

relationship with this kid is more tenuous? Maybe that wasn't such a great idea.

What should we have been thinking about when we made this snap decision? To

keep revising advisory so quickly for example. And so just watching and thinking

about what did we gain and what did we lose, and was it worth it? (March, 2014).

In another example, the principal, Mr. Davis, calls on the faculty to be reflective about

not only their teaching, but why they decided to join MSHS. He stated the following in an

email to all MSHS faculty and staff after a particularly difficult week for everyone that

included fist-fights between students and arguments between students and teachers:

I implore you to be the reflective practitioners I know you to be, to constantly

remind yourself why you decided you wanted to work here. Not at [area

traditional high schools] or any other school, but here. At MSHS. It's because you

know how much these kids require of you and you committed to giving it and

then some. And many of you have and will continue to do so.

Here Mr. Davis attempts to remind MSHS faculty and staff that they should remain

aware of their choice and commitment to the work required of them at MSHS through the

practice of self-reflection. As noted by Larrivee (2000), self-reflection is a deeper

examination into teachers' beliefs and values and expectations for students, which Mr.

Davis signals as an important practice for MSHS educators.

Through reflective practice, MSHS educators were also able to pursue and

maintain respectful collegial relationships by holding high expectations for one another.

As a small school, collaboration between colleagues was essential. Educators regularly

communicated formally and informally about students' academic progress. Educators

also engaged in critical conversations with one another about the effectiveness of

curriculum and intervention practices. Such critical conversations led to the faculty and

staff deciding to abandon the current curriculum and design their own for the following

school year.

In one example, Ms. Adwell, who was also the only teacher who regularly sought

me out for discussions about her teaching and intervention practices, created a diagram in

an attempt to help her understand what she could do better to fill academic gaps for her

students. The image is below in Figure 5:
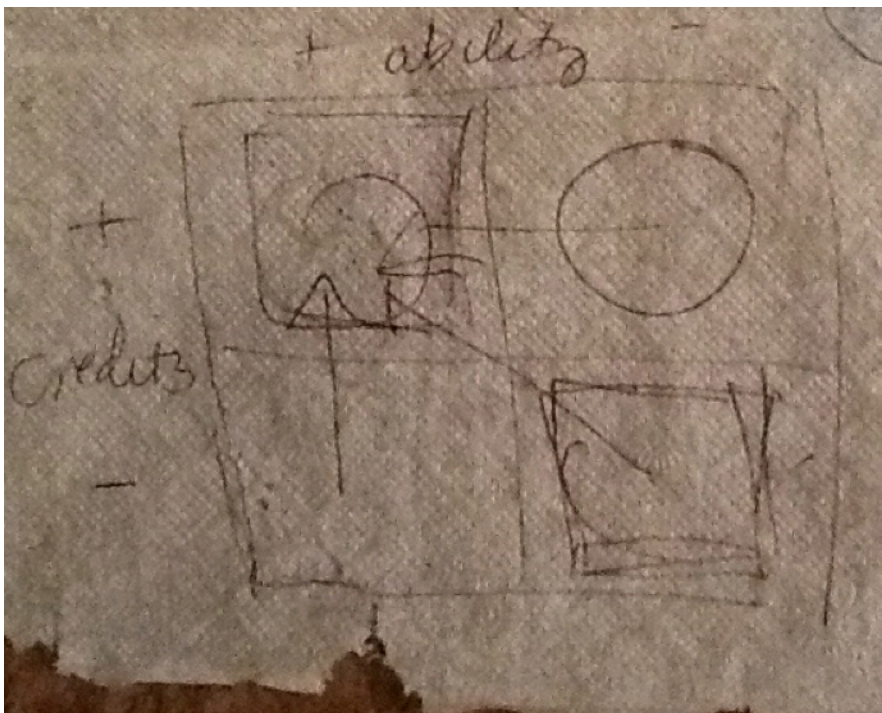
Figure 5. Adwell Model. This figure is the actual drawing of Ms. Adwell's model for
filling students' academic gaps. It was conceived on a napkin.

In our discussion about what each of the quadrants represents, Ms. Adwell explained that the goal was to get every student to the top, left quadrant–high ability, maximum course credits. By "ability," she meant what students can do and what they are also intellectually curious about. By "credits," she meant the hour values assigned to courses when students pass classes.

Having first shared the diagram with a few of her colleagues during lunch, she was encouraged show it to Mr. Davis as well. From here, Mr. Davis asked her to present the diagram to the entire faculty and staff at the next faculty meeting. After she was done, Mr. Davis instructed all teachers to complete the diagram for all of their students. He later told me that he hoped that would help every teacher know more precisely what their students needed to pass their classes and ultimately graduate. In a conversation with Ms. Caldwell about the diagram, she stated that that "homework assignment" for the teachers might provide an opportunity for them to see their students' individual needs. She said, "As soon as you put a kids' name in the box, that's a child. You have to think about who that child is and what that child needs."

Using identity as an asset. The data reveal educators relied on one or more identity markers when working with students depending on the students' needs and their relationship to the student. Educators in the study varied by race, gender, class, sexual orientation, age, and teaching and school experience. One teacher explained how she uses her identity as a student when she was in high school:

> I think that oftentimes my underlying identity is someone who struggled in school but who could wing it just enough to get by… So, I look at those kids who may not get it and may benefit from having some extra questions answered or from the

teacher really toughing it out with them a little bit. And that's what many times

guides me with how I'm working with students and who I'm working with (April,

2014).

Similarly, several educators viewed their identities as assets to be exercised in their daily

interactions with students. Another participant said,

What I see are kids that are going through the same things I felt like I went

through, which was I just wanted somebody to care. And sorta help me and guide

me. I knew from a young age I wanted to be in the schools, but I had no concept

of what that meant because nobody in my family had gone to college. So, you

know, my father didn't graduate high school. My siblings had graduated, but no—

my oldest sister decided to go to college. She went the year before I did, so

education was not pushed in our household. It was important that you had to go to

school, but there was never that talk really about what are you gonna do when you

get out of high school. So, I got a lot of that from teachers at my high school. Like,

you need to start thinking. So, there's a lot I think our kids don't know. I feel like

they did: I wasn't a great student, you know. *I was not a great student* (emphasis

hers). But it didn't matter. I still had what it takes to go ahead, and they need to

see that (March, 2014).

Self-awareness is critically important in this setting as it is the primary mode of

relationship-building with students. It is also often the driving force behind several

participants' high expectations for students and creates confidence in their decision-

making.

Beliefs about education and graduation. Finally, participants in the study shared their general beliefs about the value of education in their day-to-day actions as well as our conversations. At various times during my yearlong inquiry, I was privy to participants' views on the role they believed graduating from high school could play in the lives of their students. Often couched in beliefs around productive citizenship and a successful life beyond high school, many of the participants discussed and demonstrated a firm belief system on the importance of education to all students and how their role as an educator fit into that system. For example, Mr. Davis, the principal, explains his beliefs about education and graduating from high school as follows:

> …Both are vitally important for our population. It's not enough just to get a high
> school diploma and stop there. There needs to be some sort of continuance in
> terms of either technical school, professional school, college, or the armed forces.
> Life requires you to have some sort of evidence you can do school based work
> and follow directions. Do what you need to do to get from Point A to Point B.
> And graduation and education are both examples of that (January, 2014).

For Mr. Davis as well as other faculty and staff, high school graduation provided a solid foundation for a productive and successful life after high school.

Importantly, several members of MSHS faculty and staff held the similar belief that graduation is important but differed on *why* it was important. Ms. Paulson, one of MSHS's Exceptional Children (EC) teachers discussed her beliefs about why education–and thus graduation–was not only important academically, but emotionally as well:

> Well, first of all, I think the importance of graduation is–or education–let me take
> that one first–it's more to it than just the academic aspect. I think that having a

student matriculate through school gives them self-confidence, imagination. It gives

them the opportunity to expand what they know; to be more creative with what

they've learned; and, to go out into the world and succeed. As far as graduating–

all those things that I said prior–is gonna assist them in becoming productive–

productive citizens. But I think that's the main goal–that they will know they can

soar as high as they wanna go (May, 2014).

Consistent with the literature on the positive social and emotional impact graduation has

on students (Rumberger, 2008; Somers & Piliawsky, 2004), Ms. Paulson represents a

trend among educators at MSHS who perceive graduation as more of a symbol of success

than a measure of it.

As a participant observer, I found myself immersed in explicit discussions on why

it was important for students to finish high school and thereby consistently witnessed

participants' varied beliefs in action. Both of MSHS's primary intervention practices–

Intervention Team and Truancy Court–involved essential school personnel, students who

met the criteria for intervention, a parent or family member/ally of the student, and a

twenty minute discussion on the student's barriers to success leading to the intervention.

Summary of themes: RQ1. The importance of educators' beliefs and practices

cannot be overstated. MSHS faculty and staff largely agreed that effectiveness hinged on

their beliefs about high expectations, professional autonomy, reflective practice, and self

and professional awareness. As table one demonstrates, an overarching look across all

educators provided themes that show a majority of participants possessed beliefs and

practices that clearly supported students while a small portion possessed beliefs and

practices that were not supportive. Overall, of the 27 educators observed and interviewed

during the course of this yearlong study, the majority of them demonstrated helpful

beliefs and practices and perspectives in the effort to move students toward graduation.

Contrastingly, however, hurtful beliefs and practices were also observed. In this case,

hurtful beliefs and practices such as low expectations and frustration with MSHS's

culture and policies impacted educators' ability to be helpful in their work with students.

According to Calabrese and colleagues' (2005) study on the attitudes and beliefs

and practices of successful teachers of students at-risk, helpful beliefs and practices are

those that include forming relationships, high expectations, self-awareness, and a sense of

professionalism. Hurtful beliefs and practices are defined as those that mitigate efforts to

motivate students. Most important for this study, however, helpful beliefs and practices

are those that MSHS educators indicated as being effective from their perspective.

Likewise, harmful beliefs and practices were defined by participants' views on efforts

that impeded their ability to move students in theory and in practice.

Table 2

Percentage of MSHS's Educators' Beliefs and Practices Across all Emerging Themes from RQ1

		School-wide %
Helpful Traits	Expectation for Graduation	74%
	Sense of Autonomy	81%
	Seeking Small Successes	63%
	Reflective Practice	70%
	Collegiality	85%
	Advocacy	56%
	Using Identity Markers	81%
Harmful Traits	Low Expectations	26%
	Frustration	63%

RQ2: Participants' Culturally Relevant Practices

This section uses participants' cultural identities and experiences to address RQ2 and describe participants' culturally relevant efforts to move students toward graduation. Much like the section dedicated to participants' general beliefs and practices toward helping students graduate, this section also describes details about the school's climate and culture to contextualize participants' practices as they engaged with students on a day-to-day basis. The findings in this section are divided into three parts: culturally informed relationships, culturally congruent instructional practices, and culturally responsive intervention practices. As with the previous sections, representative educators have been selected for analysis. They either provide a collective picture of the majority of the sample or share perspectives particularly unique to the study.

Culturally Informed Relationships

Several participants discussed their belief in the importance of relationship-building with students to encourage graduation. Important to this study, however, is that African American educators at MSHS were more likely to explicitly reference their blackness as a means for building relationships with their students who were mostly African American. As noted by Milner (2006), culturally informed relationships are the result of shared cultural experiences or what Irvine (1990) calls cultural synchronicity. Although Milner was speaking primarily about African American teachers and students, this study finds that relationships between MSHS educators and students extended beyond shared culture to include non-African American educators who were also able to build meaningful, culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1994) relationships with students as well.

Several MSHS educators pointed to the school's leadership when talking about the need to build relationships, which contributed to the culture and climate of the school. For example, Mr. Thompson, one of the guidance counselors, noted that building meaningful relationships with students was "more than knowing what classes they take. It's going above and beyond, and that's the standard set by our leadership" (September 2013). Indeed, as evidenced by interviews with and observations of the principal and assistant principal, this expectation that faculty and staff go "above and beyond" to create and sustain relationships with students was essential to the overall goals of the school. By using shared and observed cultural lenses, both Mr. Davis, the principal, and Ms. Lewis, the assistant principal, acknowledged the importance of culture in building relationships with students at MSHS.

Mr. Davis, the principal, proudly stated that he's "made it a point that in [his] school, no child doesn't have an adult that has a relationship with them." As the principal, he modeled relationship building by using his race, gender, personal experiences, and/or personal interests. He says, "I'll use anything to create the potential for a relationship" (September, 2013). For example, he candidly discussed how he talks to female students as if they are his own daughters. The father of two young African American girls, he uses this aspect of his identity to talk with female students about their worth as "more than physical objects for men" because that's what he hopes a teacher or administrator would say to his own children if they were more focused on romantic relationships than succeeding in school. In another example, Davis talked about a regular family event where he played video games with students but more importantly has the opportunity to get to know his students and their families beyond traditional school interactions. And, it

is in these edge-of-school spaces (Johnson, 2014) that Davis more deeply discusses the shared cultural experiences of being male and African American with his students.

Similarly, the assistant principal, Ms. Lewis, uses her race, gender, and personal experiences to model for the faculty and staff how to build and maintain relationships with students. Although White, she talks about seeking to understand who her students are and what they want so she can help them get there. When asked to discuss how she handles resistance to this approach, she explained that a lot of the students do resist at first, especially "being a blonde, white lady coming at them." She says many students just "throw their hands up and don't want to talk to [her], but [she's] persistent in treating them like a human being" (September, 2013). In this way, she uses her whiteness as a beginning point for talking with students about mutual respect regardless of their differences. Having worked at MSHS for four years, she understood that most of her students would likely reject her at first because she's White, a reality she notes is due in part to the general mistrust African-American students often feel. Instead of allowing the rejection and mistrust to be the defining aspects of her relationships with students though, she shows that she cares about her students as people by persistently getting to know them and their families. In her persistence, Ms. Lewis notes that what matters most to her when students graduate is not that they simply got a diploma, but that they can say, "Yeah, Ms. Lewis cared about me."

In another example of how faculty and staff use their shared cultural experiences to build relationships with students, Ms. Zeller, the graduation coach, explicitly referenced how being African American fuels her passion for education and helps her connect with students and motivate them to graduate. In talking about the connection

between African Americans and education, Ms. Zeller explained how passionate she is about African Americans getting an education:

> As an African-American, as a culture, we've been disadvantaged and education was one of the areas in which it's been harder for us to achieve… And so I get angry. But I think just as a whole dating back in our history, it's just been one thing after the other with us trying to obtain education. So, I think education is one weapon we have to use against those that have tried to hold us back (May, 2014).

Ms. Zeller also went on to include how she uses being African American to identify with the students. She described her own childhood as one characterized by many of the same experiences facing her students—a low-income Black family living in a low-income Black neighborhood. In Ms. Zeller's case, however, she was raised on the south side of Chicago in an area that would make her students' neighborhoods "look like Beverly Hills" she says. Further, Ms. Zeller did not simply talk about herself; she incorporates similar narratives of family, friends, and former students to "keep examples in front of these kids all the time of how people made it out and beyond." When she shared these realities with students, her objective was twofold: to provide insight into her life and the lives of others and to provide testimonies to the power of education that hopefully inspire her students to persist through school.

Throughout my time at MSHS, the concept of shared culture and its role in creating relationships became clearer as my participation at MSHS deepened. By this I

mean that it was not until I achieved full member status[15] that I began to observe more

exactly how the African American faculty and staff built relationships with their students.

Often these observations occurred during impromptu meetings between MSHS faculty

and were affectionately referred to as "POC" (People of Color) meetings. It was in these

meetings where faculty and staff would discuss African American students' concerns

about perceived mistreatment from White teachers and/or observed mistreatment in terms

of unfair discipline decisions and low expectations. In this way, culturally informed

relationships were not just in regards to the educator-to-student relationship, but in the

educator-to-educator relationship as well.

Culturally congruent instructional practices

As previously discussed, MSHS's instructional design allowed students to work at

a self-determined pace to complete coursework required for graduation. Essentially, this

means that students could complete upwards of five or six courses in a semester; thus,

they could recover credits from their original high school or, even better, get ahead and

possibly graduate early. In several cases, students wanted to work at a feverish pace to

complete course assignments and tests. In an effort to facilitate students' ability to

complete courses more quickly, MSHS used a virtual high school curriculum for each of

its core subjects. This is important to include in the section on culturally congruent

instructional practices because the curriculum was pre-packaged and often left the

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[15] According to my research journal, by November 2013 I had become a trusted researcher and member of the community. I write, "This was a short week in terms of data collection. I was able to get to the school on Tuesday, but was sent home and did not come back until Thursday. I was, however, able to find out what I had missed and who I should talk to about certain events. Being out so many days, I also realized how much I have come to trust (and be trusted by) the people at the school. So much of what I was told when I returned was prefaced with something like, "We knew you would want to have this for your research" and "Several of your students are looking for you today." I'm looking forward to this week, so I can follow up on these items (November 2013).

teachers feeling restricted to reductive, narrow treatments of their content area. Although a small cadre of faculty and staff encouraged the use of outside instructional materials, most teachers continued to exclusively use the virtual program, citing that "it would be too much work to develop an entire curriculum" (October, 2013).

Of those teachers who incorporated students' out-of-school and cultural experiences and held high expectations for their students, they reported students were more engaged with the material, their class, and them as teachers and people. Corroborating this account were students who participated in MSHS's end-of-year Advisory Council Meeting. The meeting was led by Mrs. Caldwell and included all members of the administration and student support services team. In addition, community members were in attendance as well as students and parents. The goal of the meeting was to discuss positives and negatives from the school year from the perspective of all stakeholders. In one exchange, Ms. Caldwell posed a question to the Council about what engaging activities teachers were doing in the classroom. One student commented on a Language Arts teacher who had them read Walter Dean Myers' novel, *Monster*. The student says that, at first, she did not see the point in reading the book, but as she continued to read she could see why it had been assigned. She said in the meeting:

> It kinda makes sense for us to read something like that.   I mean, I've never been in juvie, but I know lots of people who have. And I can see how the book kinda talks about some of the things I go through. Making good decisions and stuff. So, yeah. I could relate it to my life. And, we had to answer questions about how it related to us.

The student goes on to talk about how she thought it was a good assignment and wished more teachers incorporated outside material that related to their lives.

As another example of appropriate and culturally relevant teaching practice, the English teacher, Ms. Adwell, who is White, discussed how she centers an essay assignment around what her students want to do with their diploma. For this particular assignment, Ms. Adwell first talks with each student individually to determine if he/she plans to attend college or enter the workforce. She talks in depth with them about their aspirations, their families, and how who they are matters to this decision. Depending on whether students plan to attend college or enter the workforce, they are tasked with writing either an essay or a job letter. Once written, Ms. Adwell steps in to assess the quality of the writing, but the students also share their writing with one another and provide feedback.

Throughout the assignment, she encouraged them to consider the totality of their experiences–race, gender, economic status, and sexual orientation for example. For her, this is a thoughtful attempt at preparing her students for what they can expect in the next phase of their lives either as college students or employees with identities that are sometimes considered as roadblocks. In order to create an assignment such as this, however, she had to teach outside the confines of the virtual high school program to craft an assignment that allowed her students to express who they were in the context of what they wanted to do with their lives.

When asked how she came to develop culturally relevant and appropriate teaching practices, Ms. Adwell interestingly pointed to her previous experiences teaching to students in another state at risk of not graduating from high school. She explains that she

carried certain beliefs about Black and Brown children that crept into her teaching, but she has since come to understand those as hurtful assumptions that can be countered through constant reflection. She states:

> If I'm gonna be brutally, bluntly honest, early on I did have some of that, 'I need to bring the majority culture to the Brown students. And we can bridge the gap. But the reality was quickly that I need to learn from these kids, and listen, and pay attention. And I still tussle with this—'am I looking at this in an accurate, fine-tuned way, or am I still falling back on some assumptions about who you are because you're in this neighborhood or you talk this way?' (October, 2013).

Due to her previous teaching experiences and willingness to reflect on her teaching, Ms. Adwell was able to center her students by learning from them about their cultures and identities.

As noted by Milner (2006), to be culturally congruent extends beyond direct instruction to include beliefs about students and their potential. He states that culturally congruent instructional practices means "teachers often see expertise, talents, and creativity in their students, and they insist that students reach their full capacity to learn" (p. 101). One participant who spoke to this sentiment was Ms. Caldwell, the director of student support services at MSHS who was also African American. Of note, Ms. Caldwell and I shared an office while I conducted research at MSHS. In my estimation, our proximity to one another personally and professionally made me privy to all manner of administrative conversations as well as informal ones involving her candid beliefs and opinions about MSHS, its faculty and staff, and its students. According to the data,

however, the topic she discussed the most[16] in the year I spent at MSHS was high

expectations for students.

One of our more notable office conversations about having high expectations for

students and believing in their potential occurred at the beginning of the school year and

trended as an on-going topic throughout the year. At the start of the school year, MSHS

received word from the school district that they would need to enroll at least 200 students

to justify the budget for the year. As a result, the administration decided to revise the

criteria for enrollment to include students who passed the entrance exams but did not

necessarily fit the social and emotional profile of the MSHS student. In so doing, many of

the new students had a more difficult time adjusting to the self-paced environment and

started acting out in response to the frustration. The common refrain from teachers in the

hallways and during lunch was that "the students aren't the same as last year" (September,

2013).

Unfortunately, Ms. Caldwell observes that because the students were different,

less self-sufficient, and more difficult to teach, teachers seemed less enthusiastic about

their jobs. In her own frustration, Ms. Caldwell says to me, "I just want to know what

they were expecting when they showed up to a school as teachers. It's not like the school

bus rolls up and drops off cats, and we say to them, 'teach cats.' Children get off those

buses. Teach them!" (September, 2013).

While Ms. Caldwell admits that the new students are not the fully the type of

student MSHS usually enrolls, the point she is attempting to make here is that a shift in

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[16] By the most, I mean that she was both the participant who spoke the most about high expectations out of all the participants and it was also the topic she discussed the most in our interviews and observations. Because I did not control for our proximity during data collection, I cannot say unequivocally that she was the most concerned about high expectations out of all the faculty and staff, just that she was observed discussing the topic more than any of her colleagues.

student characteristics should not on its own inspire a shift in how teachers approach their work with students. In my expanded field notes, I write about this exchange:

> Here, [Ms. Caldwell] and I have a conversation about teachers' recent comments
> regarding how different the students are this academic year (read: more
> challenging academically and personally). [Ms. Caldwell] talks about how
> administration received pressure from downtown to up the numbers of enrollment.
> Pressures include the possibility of losing a teaching position. To this, [Ms.
> Caldwell] explains that, public education is their students' "destiny." She said,
> '[We] can't be casual about it.' She acknowledges that because of the enrollment
> demands, they have had to recruit and accept students outside of the traditional
> boundaries of a [MSHS] student; however, she questions how the faculty will
> respond. Will they "rise or fall?"

By this she meant would the teachers rise to the occasion of being the kind of teachers she had come to expect as committed, flexible, and fearless or would they fall short of her expectations in the face of these changes.

Further to this point, Ms. Caldwell later in the year specifically addressed the student demographics at MSHS and how she perceived what other faculty and staff were or were not doing in the way of high expectations for students:

> [MSHS students] are not horribly impoverished but they're not wealthy. They are
> minority kids, for the most part even though we got a decent mix this year. They
> tend to be Black and Brown and a minor Caucasian population. And I think the
> struggle is, not that they've told me, but I sense the struggle is that it's a natural

tendency to feel if a child is disadvantaged, you cannot put more pressure on him

or her because they're already carrying a heavy weight (February, 2014).

Here, Ms. Caldwell is offering her understanding of why teachers at MSHS are struggling

to motivate this particular group of students. Much like the literature on how White

teachers sometimes are uncomfortable being authoritative with Black and Brown children

(Curran, Tomlinson-Clarke, Weinstein, 2004), she is speaking to her colleagues' soft

approach to students' harsh experiences. She continues:

But young people tend to be strong, and the more weights you put in our hands

appropriately, we just get stronger. I just think we have a large number of staff

members who, out of compassion, may not realize that we only get stronger by

picking up heavier weights. So, I think that there may be almost a misguided

empathy where I don't wanna impose another hardship... even if it would benefit

them because I wanna be kind. I want to be caring. And I want to be good. And I

think for a lot of educators that somewhat defines who they are because they are

service providers who committed themselves to children (February, 2014).

Ms. Caldwell concludes her comments by noting how important it is to not lower

expectations as the result of students' experiences. Instead, she believes that it is far

worse to accept students have come as far as they can go by the time they reach MSHS

and far better to believe that their students can reach their full capacity to learn and be

successful. She said:

But I think when people are in need— if I went to the doctor and he wanted to be

kind, caring and loving and good, and I needed a medicine to make me better,

even if it was not gon' be a pleasant medicine, I need what I need. And I think

sometimes with our educators, typically the middle class and often Caucasian

service providers— I think sometimes it's hard for them to believe that tough love

will benefit me more than warm coddling. And I don't know that I felt this done

out of an honest awareness as much as a sense of trying to protect me from one

more harsh reality. But life is a harsh reality that's less harsh if you're more

prepared, less harsh if you have vision, and less harsh if you have the confidence

in your ability to impact your own life (February, 2014).

In essence, Ms. Caldwell stresses the importance of having high expectations of students

and believing that they are capable of academic success regardless of their social,

economic, or emotional realities. In so doing, Ms. Caldwell points to the central reason

she believes teachers at MSHS accept less than excellent work from students and do not

push them toward graduation as forcefully as she believes is necessary.

Culturally responsive intervention practices. According to the research on dropout

prevention programs, Kendall and Shin (2012) posit that interventions typically take a

wide range of forms from reading remediation to tutoring and mentoring with an

emphasis on creating caring and meaningful relationships with students. Missing from the

literature, however, is the use of specific, culturally relevant school-level interventions

that incorporate the trademarks of dropout prevention practices.

At MSHS, there seemed to be a clear vision and ideology that shaped how the

principal viewed dropout prevention in his school. Importantly, one of the benefits of

leading a small school was that the faculty and staff were able to embrace Mr. Davis's

vision, which is "Every child, every day–any way." Even though faculty and staff did not

utilize practices that enforce this mantra in all situations, the leadership constantly

reminded them in meetings and through email and virtual conversations that the expectation was that they find a way to help every student graduate.

The vision of "Every child, every day–any way" was carried out further in quite concrete terms. For example, two years before I entered MSHS as a researcher, Mr. Davis and the Student Support Services team developed an intervention structure that addressed students' risk for not graduating very early in the dropout process. The structure–Intervention Team and Truancy Court–included two distinct groups with a similar goal: talk with individual students to determine what barriers he/she was experiencing and what can be done to alleviate them. During the course of the study, I observed six Intervention Team meetings and seven Truancy Court meetings. Most impactful were the ways in which the faculty and staff talked to the students and their guardians about their grades, their choices in and out of school, and their desire to persist through high school.

These meetings involved real discussions between each student and his/her stakeholders about how to best intervene as early as after two absences or two missed assignments. In both Intervention Team and Truancy Court meetings, the entire administrative and student support services teams were present. This means the principal, assistant principal, guidance counselors, social worker, and graduation coach are all aware of each student who was showing signs of academic failure. In addition, the student's parent/guardian or adult ally was brought in. As evidence of what Intervention Team and Truancy Court represented, Mr. Davis, when starting an Intervention Team meeting, looked around the conference table and says to the student, "Do you see how important you are to us?"

For example, during one Intervention Team meeting (October, 2013), Mr. Thompson (guidance counselor), Mr. Davis (principal), and Ms. Johnson (social worker) took turns asking questions to a student who was returning to school after a year as a dropout. As the questions turned from the student, who indicated transportation was the reason she could not get to school, the Intervention Team began questioning the grandmother about why she lets her stay at home all day after missing the bus. When the grandmother says, "It's better than in the streets," Mr. Thompson says to her, "Ok, well we're gonna need you to help her get here. Even if she's late, late is better than nothing. We can adjust her schedule to less classes a day to get her used to being back in school." As the meeting continues, Ms. Zeller, the graduation coach, passed around the student's progress report from all of her classes and informed the group that she has talked to all the student's teachers; they have confirmed that they are willing to help her get back on track. The last item on the agenda was to have the student and the grandmother sign the Student Commitment Form, which Ms. Johnson, the social worker, says, "reaffirms that you want to be here, and you'll come back and be on pace." They signed it, the meeting was adjourned, and the Intervention Team called in the next student. On this day, the Intervention Team met with seven more students and their families.

Summary of themes: RQ2. As observed, the hallmark of MSHS's intervention strategy was a firm belief in the impact of a caring environment where students are expected to reach their full potential. Essential to this approach was demanding that faculty and staff develop meaningful relationships with students. Equally essential was the expectation that teachers adopt culturally relevant and appropriate instructional practices to increase engagement in school. By having regular meetings where family and

friends who support the student were invited, MSHS demonstrated its commitment to family and community. Lastly, by using tough love, MSHS also exhibited authoritative yet loving language to understand and motivate their students; thus, their practices can be characterized as culturally responsive. In Table 2, I have included a comprehensive chart to show the relationship between participants and MSHS's culturally relevant efforts to move students toward graduation. Due to the contrast between African American and non-African American educators on the topic of culturally relevant practices, I show the percentages for each group to elevate for discussion the differences between the two groups.

As illustrated in the table, MSHS's laser-like focus on meaningful relationships is consistent with the results of this study with 89 percent of the 27 educators studied using culturally relevant practices to build and maintain relationships with students. As far as instruction and intervention, MSHS educators overall used less culturally relevant practices when it came to curriculum and even less when specifically intervening in the dropout process for their students. Perhaps most interesting is that African American educators at MSHS utilized culturally relevant practices at higher percentages than their White counterparts on every measure: relationships, instruction, and intervention.

Table 3

The Percentage of MSHS's Educators who employ Culturally Relevant Practices by Race

		School-wide Culturally Relevant %	AA Culturally Relevant %	nonAA Culturally Relevant %
Culturally Relevant Practices	Relationships	89%	100%	73%
	Instruction	78%	88%	64%
	Intervention	67%	81%	45%

RQ3: Relationship to Historical African American Models

The final findings section focuses on research question three, which asks to what extent, if any, do educators' beliefs and practices reflect African American educators' historical ideas about moving students toward graduation. In this section, I use the voices of three educators selected as representatives: Mr. Davis (principal), Mrs. Caldwell (counselor), and Ms. Morrison (administrative assistant). Results from this study indicate that African American educators at MSHS demonstrated several characteristics similar to African American educators working in segregated schooling communities. From resourcefulness (Savage, 2001) to a caring atmosphere (Siddle Walker, 1996; 2002; 2009; Roberts, 2010) to educational philosophies (Milner, 2006) to teacher preparation (Fairclough, 2010), educators at MSHS possessed observable practices for dropout prevention that mirrored the historical efforts of African American educators whether they did so intentionally or not.

Similar to African American schools in the historical moment where educators had to be resourceful regarding personnel, facilities, and supplies (Savage, 2001), MSHS

has had to "stick within [their] means" (Mr. Davis, personal communication, 2013) to provide personal and academic supports that move students toward graduation. As a result, a significant amount of the faculty held more than one formal position in the school. For example, the lead guidance counselor was also responsible for the school's truancy and intervention programs; the second guidance counselor was also completing an administration internship and served as the administrator over discipline issues; the teaching faculty delivered content and was also required to participate in the school's Faculty Advising Program; and, Ms. Morrison, held three separate administrative support positions and also provided informal counseling to students.

In another similarity to Black schools during segregation, all three participants indicated that the culture of MSHS hinges on the caring atmosphere created and sustained by the adults in the building. Better known as "institutional caring" (Siddle Walker, 1996b), MSHS's ability to use interpersonal and institutional relationships and expectations reinforced the school's vision as a caring school environment. For example, Ms. Morrison calls MSHS "a real family atmosphere," which allowed the adults to know the students and the students to know the adults in more meaningful and transferrable ways. This reciprocal knowing, according to Mr. Davis, provided him the opportunity to use humor and even physical contact with the students in order to build and maintain relationships.

The caring culture that Mr. Davis worked to create was also evident by the ways the students participated in other-mothering (Collins, 1990; Howes et al., 2003) relationships with both Ms. Morrison and Ms. Caldwell. Students routinely referred to them as "mom" or "sister," and these relationships were often used to motivate students

and even redirect students' behaviors. Interestingly, there appeared to be no preference regarding which familial label students assign to the participants. As described by Ms. Morrison, "I can be their mother. I can be a father. I can be a counselor. I can be an administrator. I can be a teacher. I can jump into all those roles when they need me to do so" (April, 2014). Ms. Morrison sees her flexible roles as an opportunity to offer "something a lot of the kids just really don't have, and that is a family."

As a "family," MSHS also celebrated minor and major milestones during their daily morning assemblies, which also served as a platform to remind students of the high expectations the faculty holds for them. Regular assemblies have also figured prominently in the historiographies on Black schools in the segregated South. In Vanessa Siddle Walker's (1996) seminal work on Caswell County Training School in North Carolina, she informs that students were required to attend these assemblies and perform and/or recite material but to also be celebrated and motivated. Similarly at MSHS, when students completed courses, they were celebrated during the assembly. The students in the audience knew that each student passed the course with an 80% or higher. Having all experienced traditional schools before attending MSHS, the idea that more is expected of them than elsewhere in the district is clear–elsewhere else in the district, passing is 70%.

In the same vein as family atmosphere, Mr. Davis and Ms. Morrison talked about the importance of relationship building to the culture and climate of the school. Mr. Davis was clear that he intentionally seeks out nonacademic aspects of students' lives to use in building meaningful relationships. For example, he regularly visited students' after-school jobs, plays basketball, and coordinates video game tournaments. In addition, he spent time outside of school watching television shows and listening to music students

are discussing. His objective is "to be a part of their lives." Similarly, Ms. Morrison used lunch as a time to be intentional about learning students' outside-of-school lives. She calls it her "session time with the kids" where she described their time as follows:

> They come and just talk to me. They come and talk to me about their weekend. I'll have a group of them around me. [They] might be dancing or just laughing and giggling. I might be talking seriously or having a group discussion with the girls about what's going on.

What Mr. Davis and Ms. Morrison demonstrated here, Ms. Caldwell describes succinctly; she says she does "a lot of listening." In so doing, she, like Mr. Davis and Ms. Morrison, came to know students on deeper, more personal levels that can be either superficial or serious. Consistent with research on why students often decide to drop out of school (Bridgeland, DiIulio, Morison, 2006), the intensity of the event in their personal lives matters less than the degree to which an adult has validated the event (and by extension, the student) through listening and being a part of students' lives in concrete ways.

Interestingly, Ms. Caldwell identified open-listening as a strategy she primarily used with African American students. According to Ms. Caldwell, non-Black students do not respond with the same ease, so she usually relied on a more rigid, but no less effective, practice of question and answer. She attributes the comfort African American students have with her to "the shared cultural expectation of communal engagement." Through this method, Ms. Caldwell was usually able to gain insight about the contexts surrounding the child, which further assisted her with meeting students' overarching needs.

As discussed in the literature on school climate, schools' discipline practices have been associated with high dropout rates (Alexander et al., 2001; Christle et al., 2007). Mr. Davis demonstrated an acute awareness of the connection between discipline and dropouts as he stated that he did not order discipline referrals from the district's warehouse when the school opened. Most striking about Mr. Davis's decision to open a school without discipline referrals was his belief that "there was a better way to do it." Despite the realistic probability that the school would be the academic home to students who had regularly been written up and suspended while attending traditional schools, Mr. Davis engaged in dialogue with students and faculty to better understand the underlying causes leading to office referrals. Mr. Davis believed that this approach to discipline management was the sole reason MSHS had the lowest referral and suspension rates in the district.

Mr. Davis's perspective on discipline does not vary significantly from historical accounts of Black educators' dispositions to student misbehavior. Historically, Black educators relied on strict yet compassionate management styles to create structured learning environments (Milner, 2006). As a result, they were more likely to respond to undesirable behaviors internal to their classroom. In contrast, Mr. Davis noted that his experiences as an administrator have allowed him to observe certain referral patterns of Black versus non-Black faculty. He stated:

> I knew from suspending all those kids in the traditional school–it was the same kids over and over again. And when you talk with them, there were a lot of misunderstandings about behaviors they were having in class – whether they were talking with peers– not cheating, but actually conversing about the work. Whether

it be their behaviors like tapping their fingers or making music or making noise–

little things that non-African American faculty interpreted as disruptive that

African American faculty never mentioned to me. They just thought it was the

student being the student and they moved on. They don't even address the

behavior because it's not really disruptive. That's the student's coping mechanism

as far as I can find–as far as the research that I've read–the moving, the tapping,

the needing to get up and move around the classroom.

As a result of Mr. Davis's experiences with teachers who referred Black students based

exclusively on disruptive behaviors, he had developed hiring and retention practices that

reinforce the culture of the school as one that "tries to minimize suspensions."

Ever present in the data is the intentionality with which MSHS's characteristics,

culture, and climate were established and have been maintained. In essence, the faculty

and staff at MSHS set out to create a family atmosphere that is imbued with expectations

and understandings about behavior and academic success. As the school grew, the

administration and the faculty have been able to develop further reaching programs and

supports for students, which was most evident in the guidance program led by Ms.

Caldwell.

MSHS's formal and informal guidance structures. In both MSHS and African

American schools during Jim Crow, the guidance department emerged as a significant

component in increasing schools' graduation rates. Historically, guidance programs in

Black schools were widely recommended to keep children in school. The objective of

guidance counselors under the segregated system was two-fold: 1) to interrupt students'

discouraging feelings of "non-success" that often result in leaving school; and, 2) "to help

the pupil find himself with respect to his interests and abilities" (Foger, 1928). Both of these objectives were intended to be met through guidance in health, education, social adjustment, ethics, and vocation. As evidenced, Black educators considered guidance as a comprehensive model that supported students' personal and academic wellness. MSHS's guidance structure was strikingly similar.

When Mr. Davis was assigned to MSHS after being an assistant principal in charge of discipline at a traditional school, he knew he wanted to have a guidance department that structurally addressed students' personal and academic needs. Due to the small size of the school population, Ms. Caldwell, as the only guidance counselor, was responsible for guidance tasks such as scheduling, administering standardized tests, preparing students for college, and counseling students in personal or academic crises. Recently, MSHS added another counselor, and Mr. Davis immediately implemented a two-track guidance structure that streamlined students based on their needs: Ms. Caldwell is director of student support services, and the second counselor is director of student academic services. According to Mr. Davis, the dual track structure operates thusly:

> Student support services–meaning all things that are relevant to their lives–
> whether it be connecting them with a social worker, connecting them with
> services in the community, having them in groups or one-on-one counseling time
> –I wanted [Ms. Caldwell] to focus more on that. The other counselor would focus
> on the academic piece. To date–because of that clear delineation of what students
> need and where to get it–if I need academic support, I go to [the second
> counselor]. 'If I have a question about my schedule, I go see [the second
> counselor]. If my mom's boyfriend is touching me, I go talk to Ms. Caldwell.'

And the kids know that. Is there bleed over? Yes. Does Ms. Caldwell know the

academic piece? Yes. Is [the second counselor] capable of having meaningful

conversation? Absolutely. But separating those two areas out allowed for each

one to focus on that area and therefore give the most to their students in terms of

what they need.

Through this structure, MSHS's guidance department was able to offer comprehensive

supports to students that were fixed yet flexible because it allowed students and

counselors to operate as needed–when needed.

In addition to the dual structured guidance department, MSHS also implemented a

Faculty Advisory Program (FAP), which assigned 10-12 students to each teacher in the

building. Classroom teachers are expected to shift from content deliverers to students'

personal and academic advisors who "check-in with students and therefore their parents

on a weekly basis" (Mr. Davis, personal communication, 2013). Operationally, the FAP

was designed to provide an adult advocate for each student in order to develop a

supportive relationship and also quickly inform other faculty and administration of

barriers or achievements experienced by students. At best, the FAP allows faculty to

distribute student information to the necessary recipients; at worst, and still useful, it

simply provided yet another perspective on the student.

The Faculty Advising Program, as operationalized at MSHS, possessed several

hallmarks of faculty guidance structures in Black segregated schools. Most prominently,

the expectation that teachers function as guidance counselors. In one historical example,

the administration added a seventh period to the school day, known as the "guidance

period," in order for "teachers to familiarize themselves with the data on each student's

grade card." On the fourth Wednesday of every month, "each classroom teacher arranges

private conferences with those pupils in her classes who are having difficulty with their

work in the subjects which she teaches." At this level of involvement, teachers were

provided institutionalized time to "be of service to their students by working with them,

not for them" (McCoy, 1929). While not quite as structured, MSHS utilized an advising

program that also used teachers as guidance satellites to assist students in graduating in

much the same ways as the historical model.

      In a departure from the research on Black educators' attention to increasing

graduation rates, MSHS introduced an innovative strategy for counseling students that is

underexplored in both dropout literature and the history of Black education during

segregation. As previously discussed, MSHS was a small school, with a small faculty, but

with students who are often high need. As a result, administration and guidance had to be

creative with the ways MSHS provided academic and personal supports. As an

unintended outcome, Ms. Morrison emerged as an unofficial third counselor. As

described by Mr. Davis, Ms. Morrison "is an incredible asset to the school. Not only is

she the bookkeeper, receptionists, and [his] admin, she's also our counselor-in-training."

      According to Mr. Davis, Ms. Morrison counseled students so regularly that a

system developed to meet the needs students' are presenting to her. Procedurally, Ms.

Morrison was considered the "front line person" regarding students' personal lives.

Because she was the receptionist, Ms. Morrison answered calls from parents and/or

partnering agencies involved with students from Big Brother/Sister mentor groups to

parole and probation officers. Her position at the front desk allowed her to be the first

staff person that saw students when they enter the school and thus the first staff person to

determine their emotional or physical state. She then quickly disseminated pertinent information to "the right person whether it be [Mr. Davis], Ms. Caldwell, or the second guidance counselor. She is an excellent weather vane" (Mr. Davis, personal communication, 2013). However, Ms. Morrison was not required to share students' information with official guidance counselors or the administration. Instead, Ms. Morrison had the power to decide if "she will handle it herself" or pass the information along to colleagues.

Despite her lack of formal counseling or teaching credentials, Ms. Morrison filled an important gap between students and faculty. Of the barriers participants indicated prevented their students from graduating high school, teen pregnancy and parenting surfaced as the most significant challenge. Ms. Morrison, herself a teen parent, consciously used her experiences as a young mother to "meet the students on their level… and try to let them know that [she's] experienced some similar hard times in her life." As a result, Ms. Morrison was able to connect with the majority of MSHS's students through this shared experience–a connection that she intentionally used as capital to motivate them to come to school and graduate. Similarly to the way Mr. Davis institutionalized her role as a weather vane, Ms. Caldwell began to institutionalize Ms. Morrison's counseling with teenage parents by developing a parenting group for the students. Here, Ms. Morrison, along with other teen parents and Ms. Caldwell, had the opportunity to discuss the challenges of completing school as a young parent and help them think critically about additional barriers to graduation associated with teen parenthood.

Participants' educational perspectives and beliefs. Mr. Davis, Ms. Caldwell, and Ms. Morrison all agreed that the function of education in general was to provide students with the skills to be independent in adulthood. Citing the correlation between earning a diploma and one's earning potential (Rumberger & Lim, 2008), each interviewee viewed education as a key tool in securing one's ability to take on tasks that are required for adulthood and citizenship in a global society. Much like the literature on African American educators and communities during Jim Crow, economic independence figures as a major objective of schooling (Fraser, 2007). Where the participants broke in ideology, however, was on whose responsibility it is to ensure that students graduate from high school with the skills necessary to compete beyond graduation.

Mr. Davis believed that the onus for completing high school ultimately lies with the students. Although acknowledging that historical and social contexts often present barriers–especially for Black students and especially for Black males–Mr. Davis asserted that "it is ultimately their decision alone" whether to stay in school or not. Mr. Davis's view was much more complex than this, however. While he believed that students are solely in control of their educational destinies, Mr. Davis had also intentionally created a school culture and climate that seeks to prevent students from reaching their breaking point with education.

In addition, Mr. Davis also possessed the belief that his educational practices are largely informed by his cultural identity as an African American male. Consistent with the literature on African American principals during Jim Crow (Tillman, 2004; Siddle Walker, 2009), Mr. Davis observed that he had to "do things differently because he is Black." Being the principal of a school with a high percentage of Black males, Mr. Davis

recognized the importance of his position as "one of maybe five African American male educators that his students have encountered during their educational careers who is licensed and degreed and isn't a gym coach or custodian." As a result, he was hyper-conscious about the ways in which his professionalism, approachability, and overall presence were perceived by students, faculty, and superiors. Being male and African American, Mr. Davis understood the unique opportunity he had to expose his Black male students to an educator "who they can look up to who looks like them and who will fight for their right to be educated." For Mr. Davis, approaching education from this ideological perspective provided him with the stamina to cultivate and maintain the caring culture and climate of MSHS.

Similarly, Ms. Morrison believed that the responsibility for keeping children in school until graduation belonged to the parents and the students, but she also discussed her beliefs about educators' role in helping children graduate. Specifically, Ms. Morrison held students and parents responsible for attendance and the school responsible for academics. For example, she stated that "if [students] are there, there's no reason [they] shouldn't make it… because [the faculty] will do its part to make sure each child has the opportunity to graduate." She stated that parents have the power to enforce students' attendance regularity, but that many of their students' parents do not utilize this power. If parents were more involved with making sure students came to school, Ms. Morrison asserted, MSHS's faculty would "have a much easier time doing their jobs."

Of all three interviewees, Ms. Caldwell was the only one who explicitly expressed that the responsibility of keeping children in school until graduation is that of the educators. As a result, she more closely resembles Black educators who taught during

Jim Crow than the other two participants. (Of note, Ms. Caldwell is the product of

segregated schooling until middle school). Consistent with research that shows the degree

to which Black educators thought that low attendance and graduation numbers were a

reflection of them and/or the school (Robinson, 1958), Ms. Caldwell believed that "if the

kids are not succeeding, the adults are failing." She is quoted at length below:

> I'm probably on the far end of expecting that we're responsible for their destiny.
>
> Not because oftentimes they may have a struggle or something that has been a
>
> problem for them, but because they do have a genius within them–and because
>
> we've committed to help them find it–I feel like it's still our burden to help them
>
> find it even if they're not there. I feel like it's not just 'Well he won't come to
>
> school.' And sometimes it is that–if there's an individual–but as a group–if we're
>
> struggling with low attendance or failing students, I'm probably the one who says,
>
> 'We are failing as much as they are. If they are failing, we are failing just as
>
> much.' I'm definitely the one who's going to say, 'If we have X number of
>
> students making two out of four failing grades, it's an internal problem as much
>
> as it's an external problem.

Ms. Caldwell was resolute and clear; the onus ultimately falls on the educators. Since she

accepted the responsibility "up front," Ms. Caldwell was able to perceive this belief as

more of an item of her job description than a burden, which is similar to her historical

counterparts who understood that educating African American children required

extraordinary dedication (Fairclough, 2007). Perhaps here is where we can begin to draw

more distinct connections between Black educators' historical beliefs and preparation,

current educators' practices for keeping children in school, and the possible

transformation of teacher education.

The nature of their knowing. As discussed in the historical literature on teacher

preparation, Blacks were typically prepared in normal schools first for racial

advancement and then to negotiate students and their instructional practices accordingly

(Fairclough, 2007; Fraser, 2007). Unlike their historical counterparts, when the

participants were asked how they acquired the knowledge and experience to design

MSHS in ways that support graduation, none of them indicated that formal education,

schools or coursework informed their beliefs, perceptions, or practices. Instead, each

discussed how much of his/her practices were either in opposition or altogether omitted

rather than in sync with formal educator preparation programs.[17]

Throughout Mr. Davis's interview, he repeatedly referred to his experiences as a

counselor prior to becoming an administrator. Having no educators in his family history

and being a first generation college student, Mr. Davis did not point to familial influences

either. Instead, he pointed to his professional development in psychology–as informed by

his cultural identity as a Black male–as being the most influential to his philosophies and

practices on keeping children in school until graduation. As evidenced by MSHS's dual-

track guidance structure and the Faculty Advising Program, Mr. Davis clearly privileged

students' opportunities to receive counseling and support over the content itself as they

were attempting to finish high school. As he says, "the learning will come, but we have to

strive to remove any barriers that are hindering [students] from that." Interestingly, Mr.

Davis held this belief while also holding a graduate degree in counseling and being

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[17] Since Ms. Morrison had not been prepared to be an educator in the formal ways in which teachers, counselors, and administrators typically are in the United States, she did not respond to interview questions that addressed formal education for teachers, coursework, or credentialing.

presently enrolled in an educational leadership doctoral program–two personal facts about his educational history and life that he hardly mentioned when pushed about the development of his educational philosophies.

Similarly, Ms. Caldwell, who also held a graduate degree in counseling, emphasized that her major influences were African American educators from the segregated school she attended and not "anyone or anything [she] learned or read in the halls of higher education." In addition, she noted that her experiences in schools of education did not require or provide the opportunity for her to incorporate her experiences in a segregated school as a part of her professional development. As an example of the influence teachers in her segregated school had on her, when discussing her philosophy on high expectations for students, she stated:

> And I believe it's probably the vision that I got from these folks–the people I call 'the Ancients.' I think it's the vision that I got from this generation–who shaped me in small and larger ways–whether sometimes in the classroom–because I went up to 6th grade in segregated schools–I was part of this big collective in my public school system to desegregate schools. So I went through the entire process as a pilot student through integration. And even after we integrated, there were still these strong forces there in the school that kept messaging, 'You can. You will. You shall.' And I think it was all of that that had the biggest impression than almost anything in my understanding or really believing the potential is there– that we sacrifice such a great thing when we don't press them to their optimal potential (April 2014).

What Ms. Caldwell described here is first consistent with the extant literature on African American educators in segregated schools and the degree to which they expected students to perform and achieve at their highest potential (Fairclough, 2007; Irvine, 2002; Morris & Morris, 2002; Siddle Walker, 1996, 2000). Second, she made a clear connection between the messages she received regarding her teachers' expectations of her and the expectations she held for her students.

Additionally, Ms. Caldwell commented on novice teacher's preparation who have become her colleagues at MSHS as a point of comparison. She explains that "if you [are] new to the school–and you [are] reasonably new to education–you would not have these answers unless you found someone in the school who almost became a natural mentor and said, 'This is what we do.'" As such, Ms. Caldwell indicated that teachers coming out of teacher preparation programs, at least at MSHS, needed additional mentorship and support to develop their teaching in ways that enhance the schools' ability to move students toward graduation.

Summary of themes: RQ3. These findings are filtered through what we know about African American educators' approaches to increasing graduation rates as discussed in the literature. As observed, educators at MSHS possessed beliefs and practices similar to those of African American educators during Jim Crow in the ways they were resourceful; emphasized a caring, familial atmosphere; utilized culturally relevant, appropriated discipline and intervention practices; and, engaged all adults in the building in the effort to counsel and mentor students. In addition to these more practical similarities, MSHS educators also shared educational perspectives and beliefs about the value of education, the importance of education, and the role each stakeholder plays in

helping students graduate from high school. In Table 3, I have included a comprehensive

chart to show the relationship between participants and African American educators'

historical efforts to move students toward graduation. Due to the contrast between

African American and non-African American educators on the question of whether

MSHS educators demonstrate consistencies with historical African American educators'

efforts, I show the percentages for each group to allow discussion for the differences

between the two groups.

Results from the data indicate that an average of 56 percent of MSHS educators

reflected the historical efforts of African American educators in their beliefs and practices

for how to help students graduate. As illustrated in Table 3, MSHS educators were

largely consistent with historical efforts related to moral obligation, curriculum

differentiation, and caring practices. MSHS educators were less consistent on attributes

such as professional development, community and parental involvement, and school

climate. They were even less consistent when it came to racial uplift and political

advocacy. Interestingly, MSHS's African American educators were overall more

consistent with African American educators' historical efforts than their White

counterparts.

Table 4

*The relationship between MSHS Educators and the Historical African American Model
for Increasing Graduation Rates*

		School-wide %	AA%	nonAA %
	Professional development	56%	69%	55%
	Political advocacy	11%	19%	0%
	Community involvement	52%	69%	64%
	Parental involvement	52%	69%	45%
Characteristics of AA Educators' Historical Efforts	School climate	59%	69%	64%
	Moral obligation	85%	88%	55%
	Racial uplift	41%	69%	0%
	Differentiatiation	70%	81%	73%
	Ethos of care	81%	100%	73%

Summary of Findings

Contrary to the extant literature on how to intervene in the dropout process

(Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Rumberger, 2008), MSHS's success with graduating the

majority of its students underscores the importance of centering students' cultural needs

when providing academic and personal supports. Given that 95 percent of the students at

MSHS were Black and Brown, educators at MSHS expressed the need to contend with

the cultural experiences and realities of their students in order to help them succeed. In

addition, MSHS educators implemented instructional and interventional practices that centered their students' cultural knowledge and ways of being both through assignments and in the ways they attempt to motivate students.

MSHS's focus on cultural knowledge is consistent with the literature on effective teachers of at risk students. Educators in this study demonstrated the skills and desire to help students meet high expectations (Schargel & Smink, 2013), cared deeply about students' overall well-being (Noddings, 1995), and relied on self-knowledge (Palmer, 1998) and student-knowledge (Bridgeland et al., 2006) to build meaningful relationships. All of these ideas are reflected in the literature on effectively teaching at risk students.

However, this study expands this literature in several important ways. This study finds that the beliefs and practices of educators who work with students who at risk of dropping out encompass practices largely related to participants' personal and professional identities and experiences. In this study, the educators exhibited beliefs and practices about moving students toward graduation that included maintaining high expectations, utilizing reflective practice, having a sense of autonomy, using their personal and professional identities as assets, and holding firm beliefs about the value of education and the role that educators play in students' lives. The educators in this study also exhibited beliefs and practices that hindered their ability to help students graduate. These included low expectations and frustration with leadership. These harmful beliefs and practices, however, presented opportunities for the faculty and staff to be reflective about their interactions with students and are included to show the variation of participants' beliefs and practices as they worked toward effectiveness.

Importantly, this study finds MSHS educators' beliefs and practices about how to

move students toward graduation hinged on culturally relevant practices for dropout prevention and intervention. Consistent with Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (GLB), MSHS educators intentionally used students' cultural experiences, engaged with community, and sought parental involvement in their attempts to intervene in the dropout process. The sophisticated system for intervention, for example–Intervention Team and Truancy Court–albeit time consuming, was viewed by MSHS educators as opportunities to communicate to students their high expectations and overall commitment to students' wholeness. The educators in this study saw culturally relevant practices as essential to their work in moving students toward graduation and are supported by research that highlights the intensive personal and academic support needed to help students finish high school (Sinclair, Christenson, & Thurlow, 2005; Somers & Piliawsky, 2004).

Additionally, the findings of this study link MSHS educators' contemporary efforts to the history of African American educators' dropout prevention efforts. MSHS educators were largely consistent with historical efforts on attributes such as moral obligation (Alridge, 2007, 2008; Du Bois, 1903; Horne, 2000; Gaines, 1996), curriculum differentiation (Alridge, 2008; Anderson, 1988; Bullock, 1967; Walker, 2009), and caring behaviors (Siddle-Walker, 1996; E. V. S. Walker, 1993; V. S. Walker, 1996, 2000; V. S. Walker & Snarey, 2004). The most prominent divergence was the lack of attention to political advocacy, which strongly contextualized African American educators' historical efforts to increase graduation rates through professional and political means during the period when the graduation gap began shrinking (V. S. Walker, 2001).

In sum, the findings of this study both confirm and challenge what is known about dropout prevention for all students in general and African American students in

particular. The findings of this study confirm the research that suggests dropout

prevention should be ongoing (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Rumberger, 2004, 2008;

Porowski & Passa, 2011), tiered (Furstenberg & Neumark, 2007), personal (Kahne,

Sporte, de la Torre, & Easton, 2008; Rumberger, 2004), and academic (Lever et al, 2004;

Mac Iver, 2011; Nowicki, Duke, Sisney, Stricker, and Tyler, 2004). In contrast, the

findings of this study challenge the research on dropout prevention to more thoughtfully

consider how the intersection of educators' identities, beliefs, and practices impact their

ongoing, multipronged interventional efforts.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Chapter five is a discussion of the research findings with a particular emphasis on the most salient themes that emerge from the study data. Essentially, this final chapter of the dissertation seeks to highlight key implications for dropout prevention, teacher education, and future research.

Implications for Dropout Prevention

Examining MSHS and its educators provides several lessons for dropout prevention; the first is in direct relationship to the importance of school culture and climate. According to the report, *Building a Grad Nation: Progress and Challenge in Enduring the High School Dropout Epidemic* (2012), creating a positive school environment is one of the chief ways we will be able to turn at risk students into high school graduates. The National School Climate Center (2015), defines school climate as such:

> School climate refers to the quality and character of school life… and is based on patterns of students', parents', and school personnel's experience and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures.

The findings from this study suggest that educators have to be intentional and methodical about cultivating a school culture and climate that supports students through school. As evidenced at MSHS, a caring, supportive environment is essential for moving students toward graduation. From signage to stakeholder meetings to a commitment to celebrating

small successes to compassion and care, educators at MSHS widely practiced their belief in the impact school culture and climate has on student achievement.

Importantly, focusing on school climate and culture shifts the attention from students to schools when identifying risk factors contributing to the dropout process. This finding confirms what students offer as reasons for dropping out—primarily boredom and disengagement from school (Bridgeland et al, 2006). Research shows that students at risk of dropping out of school often link their school experiences with their determination to finish school. This includes their interactions with teachers and administration (Logana-Riodan et al., 2011). In essence, school-related factors such as climate, culture, and teacher expectations matter greatly when determining which variables contribute to students' decisions to drop out of school (Rumberger, 2008). With the relationship between students and schools at the core of MSHS's practices, the nuanced ways school-related factors impact students' desire and ability to finish high school are centered when intervening in the dropout process.

Another lesson to be learned is the importance of a school-wide vision for dropout prevention. By this I mean that the school, its educators, and its students should largely subscribe to the belief that all students can reach their potential. Consistent with the literature on small and/or alternative schools (Lagana et al., 2011), MSHS was in a better position to intervene in students' dropout process than a traditional school due to its low enrollment and specialty school status. As another result of being a small school, MSHS was also better able to build and sustain personal relationships with students and their families as evidenced by efforts such as Truancy Court and Intervention Team. While these realities limit the generalizability of the study, findings suggest that dropout

prevention at the school-level begins first with educators who see high school graduation as much their responsibility as curriculum and instruction.

Lastly, returning to the theoretical assumptions undergirding the study (Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Appreciative Inquiry) provides implications for dropout prevention efforts. As noted by several Appreciative Inquiry methodologists, seeking the "best of" experiences of the participants (Bushe, 2011; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001; Ludema et al, 2003) provides participants with the opportunity to reflect on the effectiveness of their practices. Through this inquiry into what works for helping MSHS students graduate, the practices identified by MSHS educators as effective were essentially culturally relevant. Contrary to dropout prevention literature that continues to trend toward identifying risk factors as the first step in intervening in the dropout process (De Witte et al, 2013; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015), the findings of this study suggest that adapting dropout interventions using culturally relevant practices is a perhaps more effective way forward in reducing the dropout rate, especially for African American students.

Implications for Teacher Education

Teachers, teacher educators, and educators in general should think more about the ways educators can become agents for dropout prevention. Considering the long struggle to increase America's high school graduation rates, there exists a unique opportunity to link teacher quality to graduation rates. As mentioned by Shin and Kendall (2012), research on dropouts and dropout prevention is relatively silent on the particular practices educators bring to retention and completion outcomes at the school-level. In addition, the authors posit that little educational research focuses on the influence that systematic,

historical racism has on dropout prevention and intervention. Although the findings of this study provide examples for school-level practices that move students toward graduation, only a small group of educators at MSHS talked with students about the impact of racism on their educational experience and even fewer used their knowledge and experience of social injustice to inform their practices. Thus, here is where dropout prevention and colleges of education have the potential for a partnership.

According to Nieto (2000), colleges of education need to "radically transform their policies and practices if they are to become places where teachers and prospective teachers learn to become effective with students of all backgrounds" (p. 180). This means that teachers and prospective teachers need to be better prepared to work with their colleagues to challenge social inequities, question unjust instructional and institutional practices, and be open to personal transformation where they critically examine their own identities and experiences. Similarly, dropout prevention efforts will need to shift the focus from the individual to the institution in an attempt to disrupt the larger systemic injustices at work in the lives of students who leave school early. By putting teacher education and dropout prevention together and then filtering their aims through a social justice lens, pre- and in-service educators would have the opportunity to collaborate and possibly develop curricula and practices that engage students and help them become more critical of the world in which they live.

In addition, the findings of this study suggest that teacher preparation could assist with dropout prevention efforts by partnering with other fields such as counseling and child psychology. One of the most salient themes of the study is the degree to which counselors were in leadership positions at MSHS. For example, the principal and director

of student support services had advanced degrees in family and child psychology, but no teaching experience. As such, they potentially brought with them distinct, expert knowledge on the distinguishing characteristic of counseling psychology–"an emphasis on preventive interventions to reduce negative psychological outcomes as well as promote the positive development of children and adults" (Kendall & Shin, 20012). Notably, one of the principal's beliefs about working with students at risk of not graduating was that the learning will come, but only after students' psychological, social, and emotional barriers have been addressed.

Similarly, the director of student services talked about the importance of building students' confidence in decision-making so that they may be able to withstand the real-world experiences that await them. As the leaders of the school, their vision of MSHS as a warm, welcoming place for students to know success was filtered through their experiences as family and student counselors. In both cases, curriculum is secondary to students' wellbeing, which is evidenced in the overall structure of the school, the kinds of educators hired to teach there, its culture and climate, and its intervention practices.

Finally, this study holds implications for teacher education as it relates to the historical African American model for educational success (Croft & Pogue, *forthcoming*). Since the study uses historical data on African American educators to explore current educators' beliefs and practices for keeping children in school, Jennifer Milam's (2010) conceptual orientation of "missed historical moments" can be used to reclaim their historical efforts. Milam argues that teacher education fails in part due to the lack of studies that "have taken seriously the historical situation and evolution of teacher education and its relationship to the present" (p. 5). Knowledge and understanding of the

history of teacher education, Milam asserts, has the potential to transform existing

philosophies and ideologies in teacher education that further perpetuate racial, cultural,

political, social, and economic status quos. Inherent to Milam's theory is that reclaiming

lost historical moments provides a multitude of transformative possibilities for present

and future teacher education agendas.

The findings of this study suggest that teacher education has missed an important

historical moment in the history of African American education in particular and

American education in general. Historically, Black educators perceived their profession

as a calling to uplift the race (Banks, 1996; Fraser, 2007). As a result, much of Black

educators' training prepared them to enter schools with the goal of educating Black youth

out of their abject social positions.[18] This stands in distinct contrast to many current

teacher education programs' narrow goal of preparing preservice teachers to deliver

content (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Understanding this historical connection between

Black educators' preparation and the subsequent largest increases in Black graduation

rates presents a historical moment worth investigating. By reclaiming this historical

moment–Black educators' ideological perspectives and success with increasing Black

graduation rates–and examining them alongside contemporary iterations, pre-service and

in-service teachers might be able to "de/reconstruct existing practices and ideologies"

(Millam, 2010, p. 31) that impose and/or remove barriers for students at risk of not

completing high school.

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[18] Much has been written on the differing educational philosophies about the best form of education–vocational or liberal–for African American children in particular and the community in general (Alridge, 2007, 2008; Fraser, 2007; Du Bois, 1903; Watkins, 2001; Woodson, 1933). Regardless of their debates, however, Black educators expressed markedly similar ideas about the importance of completing school and the strategies schools could use to that end. In essence, while disagreement occurs regarding what students should learn, Black educators still overwhelmingly agreed on the strategies to keep students in school.

Future Research

Further documentation and observation of students' perceptions of educators' beliefs and practices are needed. Data from this study reveals that educators at MSHS possessed beliefs and practices that were both supportive (helpful) and not supportive (hurtful) when working with students at risk of not graduating from high school. However, the effectiveness or outcomes of these educators' practices were not examined from the viewpoint of the students who experience them. According to Bridgeland and colleagues (2006), the perspectives of students who have dropped out of school and their families are already underrepresented as compared to those of educators and researchers. Future work will be significant because it will directly address this gap in representation by adding the much neededand often excluded voices of students to the dropout discourse.

In addition, further examination of students who graduated and dropped out from MSHS would also serve to help better understand the impact of school-level efforts. In educational discourse, "tracking" is a term typically used to refer to the practice of grouping students by academic ability. However, in reference to students who graduate or dropout of school, the term "tracking" could take a broader definition in that it can refer to maintaining contact with students once they leave the public school system either as graduates or dropouts. Since federal funds are linked to student progress *in* school, schools are only required to show progress related to current student achievement in order to receive federal funding (Orfield, 2004). With little incentive to track students no longer in school, most schools report attendance, academic progress, and graduation rates (Biesinger & Crippen, 2008) but not how students are performing in life beyond school

(Hawkins, 2011). Future projects that report data on students no longer in the public

school system but also provide feedback for schooling communities interested in helping

students graduate and succeed beyond graduation could be fertile ground for later

research projects.

       Another area where further research is needed is on how educators use their own

culture and identities to inform their dropout prevention practices. While educational

research largely accepts that successful educators of African American students possess

certain characteristics and experiences that assist them in being effective (Delpit, 1995;

Ladson-Billings, 1996, 2000), much of that literature does not account for the role

educators' cultural identities play when intervening in the dropout process. Data from this

study show that both African American and White teachers attribute effectiveness to their

awareness of their own marginal experiences. The extent to which educators use their

marginal identities (i.e. race, culture, gender, sexuality, and/or economic status) to inform

their dropout prevention practices is then fertile ground for better understanding the

beliefs and practices of effective educators for students at risk of not completing high

school.

       In addition to understanding how educators use their identities and cultures as

assets, future research will include how educators' beliefs and practices – particularly

white educators' – could be informed by implicit biases about race, class, gender, or other

marginal identities. As noted throughout the study, white educators at MSHS were more

likely to exhibit harmful beliefs and practices as compared to their African American

counterparts. What are these biases; how do they manifest in educators' beliefs and

practices for helping students graduate; and, to what extent are these beliefs and practices

impacted by educators' implicit biases? These questions I hope to take up as a part of my ongoing research on the role educators play in the dropout process.

Conclusion

Given the exacerbated social and economic consequences of not holding a diploma for students who live in poverty and/or are members of marginalized groups, high school graduation continues to be the civil rights issue of our generation as it was for those generations who came before. Educators in this study appear to understand that high school graduation is a formidable way forward in combatting social injustice and inequality. They are actively involved in creating a caring, compassionate environment where students are given the opportunity to succeed, and thereby interrupt socio-historical and political mechanisms of oppression. Although MSHS's students come to them knowing too well personal and academic failure, rejection, and disappointment, MSHS educators are intentional about undoing the impact of those previous schooling experiences in an attempt to move them toward graduation and their life goals.

This dissertation aims to highlight the practices of educators who work with students at risk of not graduating from high school. An examination of school climate and culture and classroom practice has provided information regarding best practices for moving students toward graduation. In addition, this study considers how MSHS educators negotiated their identities and experiences in order to develop practices that support students during school. The ways in which MSHS educators discussed their practices led to an evaluation of what works for students on the margins of success and reveals important insights for how we can reconsider the purpose of our schools and our purpose for working inside them.

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Appendix A: Consent to Participate Form

Title: Increasing Our Holding Power: Educators' Perceptions on Increasing High School Graduation Rates

Principal Investigator:
Miyoshi B. Juergensen
Doctoral Student, Emory University
Division of Educational Studies
1784 N. Decatur Road, Suite 240
Atlanta, GA 30322

Introduction:
You are being asked to be in a research study conducted at Durham Performance Learning Center in Durham, NC. This form is designed to tell you everything you need to think about before you decide to agree to be in the study or not to be in the study. It is entirely your choice. If you decide to take part, you can change your mind later on and withdraw from the research study. You can skip any questions that you do not wish to answer.

Before making your decision, please carefully read this form or have it read to you. Please ask questions about anything that is not clear.You can take a copy of this consent form to keep. Feel free to take your time thinking about whether you would like to participate. By signing this form you will not give up any legal rights.

Study Overview
The purpose of my research is to examine the cultural complexities of African American educators' perceptions on increasing the graduation rate at DMSHS. It does not aim to privilege African American educators, but to elevate particular methods of moving students toward graduation that may be relevant to cultural identities and understandings. Specifically, I aim to understand the ways in which Black educators go about keeping children in school until graduation in both formal and informal ways and if these strategies are part of a long history of African American educators' attention to increasing to graduation rates.

Procedures
I will first ask you to participate in an online questionnaire where items are related to your culture and its relationship to your philosophies about keeping children in school. I will then also ask you several to participate in both one-on-one and focus group interviews. The interviews will be conversational in form and you will have the opportunity to explain your answers as you see fit. The interviews will be tape recorded. Notes, transcripts, and tape recordings of this interview will not be filed under your name and confidentiality will be maintained through the use of assigned codes for identification. You will be given the opportunity to review my notes of this interview and provide feedback as you deem necessary. The interview will last for approximately thirty minutes; the focus group will last approximately an hour. Both

are completely voluntary. Confidentiality will be maintained but your identity will be known to other participants if you choose to participate in the focus group; no personal questions will be asked during the focus group. You may choose to withdraw from this study at any time. The researcher also reserves the right to remove you from the study at any time. Lastly, I will be observing daily activities at DMSHS, but not participating in them. I will function solely as an observer.

Risks and Discomforts
If you choose to participate in the focus group, your identity will be known to other study participants. Only general questions will be asked during the focus group and you may request to withdraw from the group at any time. Your identity will not be revealed to any other persons outside of the focus group without your consent.

Benefits
This study is not designed to benefit you directly. This study is designed to learn more about Black educators' culturally relevant beliefs about keeping children in school until graduation. The study results may be used to help others in the future.

Compensation
You will not be offered any payment for being in this study.

Confidentiality
Certain offices and people other than researchers may look at study records. Government agencies and Emory employees overseeing proper study conduct may look at your study records. These offices include The Office for Human Research Protections, the Emory Institutional Review Board, the Emory Office of Research Compliance and the Office for Clinical Research. Emory will keep any research records we create private to the extent we are required to do so by law. A study number rather than your name will be used on study records wherever possible. Your name and other facts that might point to you will not appear when we present this study or publish its results unless you request it. Study records can be opened by court order. They may also be produced in response to a subpoena or a request for production of documents.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal from the Study
You have the right to leave a study at any time without penalty. You may refuse to do any procedures you do not feel comfortable with, or answer any questions that you do not wish to answer.

Contact Information
Contact Miyoshi B. Juergensen at 704-277-5663 if you have any questions about this study or your part in it, or if you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research.

Contact the Emory Institutional Review Board at 404-712-0720 or 877-503-9797 or irb@emory.edu:

- o If you have questions about your rights as a research participant
- o If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research
- o You may also let the IRB know about your experience as a research participant through our Research Participant Survey at http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/6ZDMW75.

Consent

Please, print your name and sign below if you agree to be in this study. By signing this consent form, you will not give up any of your legal rights. We will give you a copy of the signed consent, to keep.

_____

Name of Participant

_____

Signature of Participant   Date   Time

_____

Signature of Person Conducting Informed Consent Discussion   Date   Time

Appendix B: Participant Descriptors

	Participants by Pseudonym	Position Title	Department	Ethnicity	Gender	Years of Experience	Yrs at PLC	Age
1	Weber	Teacher, Spanish	Instruction	White	F	24	4	46
2	Lewis	Assistant Principal	Administration	White	F	9	4	42
3	Bookshelf	Teacher, English	Instruction	White	F	8	0	36
4	Johnson	Social Worker	Student Support Services	African American	F	8	4	60
5	Patton	Teacher, Health/PE	Instruction	White	F	35	4	58
6	Sanders	Teacher, Math	Instruction	White	F	29	6	52
7	Thompson	Director of Academic Support	Guidance, SSS	African American	M	4	3	33
8	Crosby	Substitute Teacher	Instruction	African American	F	40	2	66
9	Adwell	Teacher, English	Instruction	White	F	10	2	40
10	Davis	Principal	Administration	African American	M	15	7	41
11	Gerard	Supervisor, In-school Suspension	Aux Administration	African American	F	35	2	
12	Harris	Teacher, CTE	Instruction	African American	F	9	6	30
13	Jackson	Teacher, Math	Instruction	African American	F	11	0	38
14	Paulson	Teacher, Exceptional Children	Exceptional Children	African American	F	7	4	51
15	Caldwell	Director of Student Services	Guidance, SSS	African American	F	10	7	53
16	Dabney	Teacher, Social Studies	Instruction	White	F			
17	Michaels	Teacher, Math	Instruction	African American	F	12	1	32
18	Zeller	Graduation Coach	Student Support Services	African American	F	2	2	37
19	Rushmore	Teacher, Math	Instruction	White	M	1	1	24
20	London	Substitute Teacher	Instruction	African American	M	52	6	71
21	Little	Teacher, English	Instruction	White	F		2	
22	Laws	Teacher, Exceptional Children	Exceptional Children	African American	M	13	2	38
23	Jacobs	School Resource Officer	Security	White	M			
24	Healy	Teacher, Science	Instruction	White	F	5	2	30
25	Morrison	Administrative Assistant	Administrative Support	African American	F	19	7	43
26	Smitty	CIS Volunteer	Student Support Services	African American	F	0	0	22
27	Angier	Guidance Intern	Guidance, SSS	African American	F	0	0	26

Appendix C: Examples from Artifacts Log

Artifact	Medium	Date Collected	Notes
Student Essay	Digital Image	9/5/13	T gave it to me as evidence of student work. Said she was one of her best writers.
Wall poster	Digital Image	9/11/13	Reads, "graduation" about the main office door – with Spanish translations. Colorful. (This poster is all over the school.)
Wall poster	Digital image		MLK, Jr. quote Has MSHS emblem + phoenix
Mural	Digital image	9/16/13	The one the students painted with student speaker during MM. Where is it? Where will it go?
Student T-shirts	Digital images	9/16/13	"Success is my path" "Bull City" Students given permission to wear them to school the next day
Wall poster	Digital image	9/18/13	Same poster reading, "believe it. Achieve it. High school graduation. graduate" as the one above the main office. This one is on the first floor.
Flyer on wall	Digital image	9/18/13	College fair flyer: "access to success" Next to "graduate" poster
Wall poster	Digital image	9/24/13	Quote from Mark Twain "…explore. Dream. Discover." Has MSHS emblem + phoenix
Poster on classroom door	Digital image	9/24/13	Picture of Barack Obama with quote, "we are the change…"
Wall poster	Digital image	9/24/13	"MSHS Advisory MVS" Names and what each student received award for "If you see me out of dress code this week, ask me how you can too!" A huge phoenix is the background
Framed wall picture	Digital image	9/24/13	MSHS Class of 2013 Graduation pictures
Laminated wall poster on classroom door	Digital image	9/24/13	MSHS Creed
Wall poster	Digital image	9/24/13	Open house for UNCG
Standing poster	Digital image	9/24/13	Approx 6ft high At the entrance of 3rd floor Four bullet points describing the school
Wall poster	Digital image	9/24/13	Pheonix Black, with fiery phoenix
Wall poster outside of classroom	Digital image	9/30/13	Students of week with how they got the award

Bulletin Board	Digital image	9/30/13	"Core Values" for each month *definitions and descriptions of "values" also on board
Flip chart board in classroom	Digital image	10/3/13	"Masculinity" written on board—students and T having a conversation about it
Flip chart paper on wall	Digital image	10/3/13	"Apex Success" – Tips for using Apex "Copy the correct answers for resets" (How is this rigorous?!)
Wall posters in English classroom	Digital image	10/3/13	1. "You deserve equal access to structures of power… critical thinking… society" 2. Quote from Black Teachers on Teaching: "W/o education, what are you going to be…" 3. financial breakdown of rappers' income
Hand-drawn maze	Digital Images (2)	10/15/13	Hand-drawn On whiteboard in ISS room "Where you are" and "Where you want to be"
"Real World" posters, prices, action shots	Digital images (31)	10/30/13	Real World exhibit See Notability Notes * get student packet from JC
Team activity	Digital image + video	10/30/13	Faculty and staff in hallway dancing for fitness Line dancing (Wobble, Cupid Shuffle, etc)

Appendix D: One-on-one Interview Guide

1. In general, what are your beliefs about the value/importance of education? Graduation?
2. What are your beliefs about moving students toward graduation?
   a. What role, if any, do broader equality issues play in your philosophy on how and why to get kids to graduate?
3. Does your cultural background play a role in how you talk to/work with your students? Explain.
4. In your experience, do you think there are strategies specifically effective for certain students? If so, what are those strategies and for which students do they apply?
5. What strategies do you use to engage and connect with students? Are these strategies ever influenced by students' backgrounds? Which ones (cultural)?
6. Have you worked in a traditional high school? If so, has your educational philosophy on keeping children in school been influenced by being in a nontraditional school for students placed at risk of not graduating? Explain.
7. Is the MSHS climate in sync with your educational beliefs and practices? Explain.
   a. Do you think the MSHS faculty holds high, medium, or low expectations for students' academic achievement? Explain.
8. What do you consider to be the barriers facing your students' ability to acquire a high school diploma?
9. Whose job is it to make sure students graduate from high school? (Yours in particular?)
10. What do you think you could do to be more supportive of students as they try to graduate?

Appendix E: Focus Group Interview Guide

AAE "holding power techniques"	Questions formed using measures on PTSA study on dropouts (1957)
Adjust school day	What is your position on students being able to sign in and out on their own? Leave early? Come late?
Differentiate curriculum	In what ways is the curriculum differentiated for MSHS students? Does this even matter? If so, matters to what?
Differentiate curriculum/ Examine curricular implications	What aspects of the curriculum work for MSHS students? Don't work?
Utilize guidance programs	Describe the guidance department programs. How did they come to be? (EEE, two-counselor system, student support services in general, intervention team, truancy court, etc.)
To this we dedicate ourselves	What is the educator's role in increasing his/her school's graduation rate?
AAE "holding power techniques"	Questions formed using measures on PTSA study on dropouts (1957)
Research	How do you determine the causes for a student dropping out? And the relationship of the school program to those causes?
Research	How does the community at large work with the school? How important is community involvement to the mission of the MSHS? Your respective mission as an individual?

Parental involvement	In what ways are parents involved in the mission of the MSHS?
Utilize guidance programs	Does the guidance program provide any type of support for students who drop out from the MSHS? What happens to the students you lose?
Utilize guidance programs	Is there a policy in place for reaching out to students who have dropped out? To have them return to school?
Utilize guidance programs/ Student-teacher relationships	How do you counsel students against leaving school?
Professional development	What recent trends in dropout prevention, if any, are currently being employed by MSHS? Specific educators in the building?
Professional development – praxis	How have you – collectively or individually – contributed to/influenced a student's decision to drop out of school?
Political advocacy	Are any of you involved in advocacy groups for children/students/educators?
Education and freedom	Talk me through your beliefs about (and/or limits of) education's power to liberate people—of color/margins in general. Historically and/or contemporarily. How does this belief play/ play out at the MSHS (daily practices, larger structures, etc)

Appendix F: Examples of Codes and Code Definitions

Codes	Code Definitions
Beliefs about Profession/Teaching/Education	Participants' beliefs and values about being educators/being in the field of education.
Expectations	Practices and/ideas related to educators' expectatios/faith/belief in students.
Identity markers/experiences as assets	Practices and/ideas related to participants' use of their personal identities/experiences in helping students graduate.
Value of Education	
It takes a village	
Parents/Guardians	
"Whatever it takes"	
Students' academic needs	
Faculty/Staff	Practices and/ideas related to faculty/staff relationships/collegiality.
Negative Attitudes/Approaches	Practices and/ideas indicating educators possess negative attitudes/low expectations/frustration.
Frustration	
Teaching/Instruction/Curriculum	
Teacher preparation	
Reflective/Critical practice	
Race/Culture	
Caring attitude	Practices and/ideas related to caring for students/creating a caring environment for students.
Flexibility	
Tough love	
Motivating students	Practices and/ideas related to encouraging students.
Sense of Family	
Relationships with students	
Students' nonacademic/emotional/personal needs	
Counseling students	
School culture	Practices and/ideas related to the quality and character of school life.
Parent contact	
Attendance	
Alumni	
Returning alumni	
Community Partnerships	
Clear graduation goal	
After high school	
Advocating for students	
Student voices	
Exposure to "real world" opps	
Intervention strategies	Practices and/ideas related to (in)formal strategies for intervention (e.g.intervention team and truancy court).
Discipline	Practices and/ideas related to disciplining students.
AAE historical efforts	Practices and/ideas related to African American educators' historical efforts to move students toward graduation (e.g. whole-child approach, resourcefulness, moral obligation, political action, racial adjustment, and/or school/curriculum adjustments).
Whole-child approach	
Responding to S's nonacademic needs	
School/Curriculum adjustments	
Racial uplift	