Finding a deeper understanding of the intersection among trauma, social-emotional learning, and dropping out: A phenomenological study

by

Donna Zerr

B.S., Fort Hays State University, 1987
M.S., Fort Hays State University, 1990
Ed.S., Pittsburg State University, 1997

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Department of Educational Leadership
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2020

Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological interview study was to examine the lived experiences of five childhood trauma survivors who dropped out of high school in central Kansas within the past three years but eventually decided to pursue their diploma in an adult learning center. With the state of Kansas implementing the Kansans Can (2015) initiative, which emphasizes social-emotional learning and high school graduation, this qualitative study explores the intersection of trauma, social-emotional learning, and dropping out. Using purposeful sampling and in-depth interviews, the participants shared their lived experiences at home, in school, and the community as it relates to their ultimate decision to discontinue their schooling.

The results of this study deepen our understanding of how trauma and social-emotional learning played significant roles in the participants' decisions to leave school. However, specifically they revealed how deep relationships and emotional connections factored into their decisions to pursue a high school diploma.

This study elevates conversations about the need to articulate the strengths and differences found in the implementation of social-emotional curricula and trauma-informed teaching in schools. Additionally, the participants' stories support the need for more profound levels of emotional connectedness with traumatized students in schools and raise questions about how much teachers are prepared for or feel comfortable with – building those kinds of relationships with their students.

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to my family, who inspire me each and every day. Tom, Mariah and Carlos, Riley, Cade: You are an amazing family, and I'm not sure I would have completed this without your never-ending patience, laughter, and encouragement. I appreciate and love you all so much! To my mom, who is almost 90: You give me so much inspiration. You are incredible, and I love you!

Chapter 1: Introduction

Brian had celebrated his 18th birthday two days earlier when he and his mother walked into my office and announced that he was signing out of school. "I just can't do it anymore!" There were three weeks of school left before Brian would walk across the stage to receive his high school diploma. Brian was passing all his classes; however, his mother was supportive of him dropping out of school. She was tired of arguing, begging, pleading, and persuading him to stay in school. After a two-hour conversation, Brian signed himself out of school and walked out the door.

Every time a student, usually with a parent, walks in and wants to sign out of school, I get this sense of sickness in my stomach. The tension created, due mostly because of my position, causes extreme stress and feelings of failure and frustration. As a veteran high school principal in central Kansas, and as a former school counselor, I have the responsibility to make sure all seniors walk across that stage and leave with a diploma in hand. When this does not occur, such as in Brian's case, I am left with a lingering urge to understand why students drop out and what has influenced that decision. This desire motivated me to more deeply understand this phenomenon, mainly since schools and school leaders are in a unique moment of change in our state. In this moment of change, the state of Kansas is putting a new emphasis on asking high schools to ensure all students earn a diploma and be ready to venture out for post-secondary success.

In October 2015, the Kansas State Board of Education launched a new vision for education in Kansas – Kansas leads the world in the success of each student – and Kansans Can became the branded motto for the vision. As part of this vision, the expectation is that "a successful Kansas High School graduate has the academic preparation, cognitive preparation,

technical skills, employability skills and civic engagement to be successful in postsecondary education, in the attainment of industry-recognized certification or the workforce, without the need for remediation." (Kansans Can, 2015, p.4). Specifically, five outcomes were identified to help measure the progress toward achieving the new vision.

1. Social-emotional growth measured locally

2. Kindergarten readiness

3. Individual Plan of Study focused on career interest

4. High school graduation

5. Postsecondary success (Kansans Can, 2015, p. 4).

Having a conversation with Dr. Randy Watson, the Kansas Commissioner of Education, who is leading this school reform effort, I told him the story about Brian. He replied:

> Most students who drop out of high school can do academic work, despite possibly being behind in academic work, but usually, the reasons students do not complete high school fall into the social-emotional domain. In schools, most interventions are to catch up students academically on credits and therefore do not address the underlying social-emotional problems that may have caused them to drop out of school. Thus, we have listed the social-emotional piece at the top for schools to focus on. (Watson, personal interview, October 12, 2018)

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is the world's prominent organization advancing one of the most critical topics in education: "the practice of promoting integrated academic, social, and emotional learning for all children in preschool through high school" (CASEL, 2018, p. 1). Social and emotional learning (SEL) is

The process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships and make responsible decisions. (CASEL, 2018, p. 1)

The skills, including intrapersonal and interpersonal abilities, such as self-awareness, social awareness, problem-solving, and decision making, are taught through the practice of SEL and are foundational to student success in school and life. Elias, Zins, Weissberg, Frey, Greenberg, Haynes, Kessler, SchwabStone, and Shriver (1997) defined SEL as "the process of acquiring core competencies to recognize and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, appreciate the perspectives of others, establish and maintain positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle interpersonal situations constructively" (p. 2). The focus of SEL programs is to foster the development of five inter-related sets of cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2005). These competencies, in turn, should provide a foundation for better adjustment and academic performance as reflected in more positive social behaviors, fewer conduct problems, less emotional distress, and improved test scores and grades (Greenberg, Weissberg, O'Brien, Zins, Fredericks, Resnik & Elias, 2003).

One of the necessary attributes - less emotional stress – is difficult to attain, especially for students who experience trauma in their lives. Trauma can be defined as a psychological, emotional response to an event or an experience that is deeply distressing or disturbing. According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2000), a traumatic event is a "frightening, dangerous, or violent event that poses a threat to a child's life or bodily integrity"

(p. 1). Initial reactions to trauma can include temporary effects such as sadness, anxiety, fear, and confusion. However, Perry (2006) elaborates that individuals who have experienced repeated chronic or multiple traumas are more likely to display marked symptoms and consequences, including a host of psychological and physical health problems. Trauma, in turn, causes complications in attaining the cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies developed throughout childhood and into adulthood. If these competencies go unlearned, students are unable to reach the social-emotional needs described by CASEL in the previous definition. Over time, mastering SEL competencies results in a developmental progression that leads to a shift from being predominantly controlled by external factors that may have been caused by trauma to acting increasingly in accord with internalized beliefs and values, caring and concern for others, making right decisions, and taking responsibility for one's choices and behaviors (Bear & Watkins, 2006).

Moreover, as a counselor and a principal, I encounter many students who indeed experience trauma and have difficulty with the personal attributes associated with SEL. With stories such as Brian's, I was interested in the relationship between trauma, SEL, and dropping out, and it became vital for me to learn and understand more. With this new vision for education in Kansas focusing on social-emotional learning and graduation, this study aimed to help us better understand the connections between trauma, social-emotional learning, and how those might influence decisions to drop out of school.

Rationale for the Study

Historically, among the most significant challenge facing public education in the United States is ensuring all students graduate with a diploma. According to the Alliance for Excellent Education (2011), one in six students drops out of high school every year, and nearly 7000

students in the United States become dropouts every day. Furthermore, 3,500 Kansas public school students dropped out of school during the 2016-17 school year (Kansas DropINs, 2012, p. 1). This statistic is equivalent to about 19 students dropping out every school day in Kansas. With data such as this, it was imperative to explore and try to understand why students such as Brian and many others drop out of school and what can be done to prevent this from occurring.

Since a high school diploma is a minimal requirement for the majority of employment opportunities, graduation not only paves the way for postsecondary school, but also helps with higher rates of employment, and advanced earnings. Each dropout costs the nation approximately $292, 000 in lost earnings, taxes, and productivity over a lifetime (Kansas DropINs, 2012). Kansas DropINs (2012) also points out that those dropouts have a higher tendency than graduates to be in prison, get divorced, live in poverty, be unemployed, have poor health, and utilize public assistance. High school dropouts often have lower wages, are more defenseless during difficult economic times, and are associated with poor health and higher rates of divorce (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011). Sum, Khatiwada, and McLaughlin, (2009) found that dropouts have a much higher incarceration and institutionalization rate (6.3%) compared to high school graduates (1.0%). Also, high school dropouts lead to concerns about lost income tax at national and local levels, increased spending on social programs, and difficulty enticing industries that rely on a highly educated workforce (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011). Rumberger (2011) examines not only the consequences for individuals but the ever-extended consequences for the whole society.

> The low human capital of high school dropouts robs the economy of skills needed to fuel economic growth and enhance U.S. competitiveness in the global economy. The increased criminal activities from dropouts- arson, robbery, theft, rape, murder, family

violence - exact tremendous economic, physical, and emotional harm on victims. The

low voter and civic engagement of dropouts undermine our democratic way of life. The

higher rates of teenage pregnancy and nonmarital births among dropouts have lasting

consequences on their children. (p. 131)

Despite impacting young people's lives, high dropout rates threaten higher education, our

local communities and businesses, the economy, and the well-being of our nation as a whole.

Lacking a high school diploma, these individuals might spend their lives periodically

unemployed, on government assistance, or cycle in and out of the prison system. It is clear that

the decision to drop out of school impacts more than just that individual and their future; it also

has broader consequences for the greater society. Still, while Rumberger (2011) argues the

society level factors related to dropping out, he also identified individual, family, school, and

community factors – the settings in which the student lives. He stresses how early intervention

specific to these factors might be the most powerful and cost-effective approach to tackle the

dropout issue, while also pointing out that the presence of trauma in the students' lives can also

be associated with dropping out.

   Perry and Szalavitz (2017) estimate that "40 percent of American children will have at

least one potentially traumatizing experience by age eighteen" (p. xxv).   According to the

National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2000), a traumatic event is "a frightening, dangerous,

or violent episode that creates a threat to a child's life or violates their human rights" (para. 1).

Events include the death of a parent or sibling, ongoing physical abuse and neglect, sexual abuse,

or the experience of a severe accident, natural disaster, or domestic violence or other violent

crime. All children respond to trauma in different ways, and not all traumas dramatically alter a

child's life; however, Perry and Szalavitz (2017) go on to estimate that eight million American

children suffer from severe, diagnosable, trauma-related psychiatric problems. Millions more are involved in less dangerous, but still, disturbing concerns.

A growing body of research suggests that experiencing trauma during a critical developmental period, such as childhood, can lead to toxic stress. This toxic stress "disrupts brain architecture, affects other systems and leads to stress-management systems that establish relatively lower thresholds for responsiveness that persist throughout life, thereby increasing the risk of stress-related disease and cognitive impairment well into the adult years" (Shonkoff, Boyce, & McEwen, 2009, p. 2256). Therefore, early experiences of trauma may influence academic learning and school success through the impact of these neurobiological systems (Porche, Fortuna, Lin, & Alegria, 2011). Furthermore, approximately one-third of abused children will have some emotional problems as a result, and physical problems like heart disease, obesity, and cancer can be more likely to affect traumatized children later in their lives (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017).

One of the leading bodies of work associated with trauma has grown from a study on ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences). The CDC-Kaiser Permanente ACEs Study shows that most people in the U.S. have at least one ACE. People with four ACEs— including living with an alcoholic parent, racism, bullying, witnessing violence outside the home, physical abuse, and losing a parent to divorce — have a considerable risk of adult-onset of chronic health problems such as heart disease, cancer, diabetes, suicide, and alcoholism (Felitti, Anda, Nordenberg, Williamson, Spitz, Edwards, Koss & Marks, 1998). ACEs harm children's' developing brains and changes how they respond to stress, which also damages their immune systems so profoundly that the effects show up decades later. This type of trauma stores in the nonverbal part of the brain, and it is not easily identified, talked about, or expressed verbally. It tends to

emerge only through behaviors that may be inappropriate and raise concerns. ACEs also cause much of our burden of chronic disease, most mental illness, and are at the root of most violence (ACEs Connections, 2012). Jackson Nakazawa (2015) claims ACEs as the "emotional trauma we face when we are young, which changes the architecture of our brains and the health of our immune systems, influences our overall physical health, and longevity into adulthood" (p. 10).

Many children and adults are affected by trauma and ACEs and thus suffer psychological consequences such as anxiety disorders and depression (Yule, 1998). Trauma has a tremendous impact on our learning and social-emotional development. Morrow and Villodas (2017) suggest that engagement may be critical for high school students with high ACEs who often lack external assets such as family support. They also examined other areas of engagement, including reading achievement, emotional and behavioral problems, and peer influences. Their study confirmed that trauma contributed to the disruptions in developmental processes, thus causing effects on multiple domains of functioning, which add to the dropout tendencies. They agreed that the relationship between trauma and dropouts is complicated. The researchers concluded that the prevention of dropouts of youth with high ACEs would require a personalized approach that considers a multitude of factors relating to the individual with regards to the emotional, cognitive, and behavior facets. According to CASEL (2005), SEL programming incorporates educational strategies to enhance school performance and youth development. These strategies promote personal and environmental resources so that students feel valued, experience greater intrinsic motivation to achieve, and develop a broadly applicable set of social-emotional competencies that mediate better academic performance, health-promoting behavior, and citizenship (Greenberg et al., 2003). Undoubtedly, there is value in further exploring the relationship between trauma and SEL.

Traumatic events are experienced by students in every school in our nation, and they can have a significant impact on academic success and high school graduation (Rumsey & Milsom, 2017).   Porche et al. (2011) conducted a study with a nationally representative sample of young adults and explored correlates to dropout status. Their study presented both mental health and childhood traumatic events as factors that may affect school achievement. Childhood exposure to trauma was related to a higher risk for school dropout as mediated by childhood psychiatric diagnoses. Other research has linked trauma to academic underachievement such as that of Schwartz, Lansford, Dodge, Pettit, and Bates (2013), who found that indicators of trauma in the home environment were a predictor of declines in academic functioning such as cognitive development and learning difficulties.

This body of research points to the importance of SEL programming in schools for students who are affected by trauma and need to learn the skills necessary to survive and cope in various situations. A 2017 meta-analysis by Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, and Weissberg, (2017) shows evidence of SEL's long-lasting impact. The study indicates 3.5 years after intervention of SEL, students' academic performance averaged 13% higher than students not receiving SEL interventions. Additionally, behavior issues, emotional distress, and drug use were significantly lower for students who had been through an SEL program, and students showed stronger social and emotional skills, as well as positive attitudes toward self, others, and school. SEL programs are vital to helping students feel supported and able to thrive despite the trauma they have experienced. SEL enhances students' capacity to integrate skills, attitudes, and behaviors to deal effectively and ethically with daily tasks and challenges. An integrated approach promoting intrapersonal, interpersonal, and cognitive competencies may be essential to students' success in completing school, particularly students who have experienced trauma.

Among the vast body of research on dropping out, scholars have also pointed out that dropping out is less of an event, but more so, a culmination of a long process that begins sometime before the decision is made to stop attending school (Doll, Eslami, & Walters, 2013). As with the experience of Brian, educators must understand the reasons why he would choose to leave school with three weeks remaining and comprehend the series of life experiences both in and out of school that led to this decision. According to Jordan, Lara, and McPartland (1994), push, pull, and falling out factors provide a framework for understanding why students would drop out of school. Push factors include school consequences on attendance or discipline, resulting in suspensions and expulsion. Pull factors might include reasons outside of schools such as a job, family, or friends. Apathy, frustration, disengagement, and disconnection to school refer to the falling out factors not caused by school or other outside pulling influences. In their study, the researchers concluded it was apparent that the pull factors produced the highest rates of drop out reasons. Even so, there was a need to understand better how trauma might be associated with these factors and simultaneously explore the role of SEL in this long series of events and lived experiences, which led to the decision to drop out.

If Kansas is going to lead the world in the success of each student, then it is imperative to focus on getting every student to graduation day and gaining a deeper understanding as to why students like Brian drop out of school. Kansas CAN declares that high school graduation and social-emotional learning are vital to achieving success. As a former school counselor and a practicing principal, my experiences motivated me to understand the relationships between trauma and SEL more fully and dropping out. The literature clearly shows there is a relationship between childhood trauma and dropping out, and also the SEL programs improve student success. However, there was less literature that focused on understanding the cumulative

process that eventually influenced the decision to drop out, particularly how students perceived the influence of trauma and their social-emotional learning opportunities on the decision to drop out. Given that Kansas is currently emphasizing both graduation rates and social-emotional learning, there was a need to understand this intersection better, so that educators such as me might be more prepared to adapt their practice and interrupt the series of events that eventually lead to another student dropping out.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of five childhood trauma survivors who dropped out of high school in central Kansas within the past three years. In particular, this study focused on understanding the participants' lived experiences and thought processes that led to dropping out, with a focus on exploring how the work of Durlak et al., (2011) with CASEL's SEL framework might be most applicable to deepening our understanding of these students' experiences.

Research Questions

The following questions guided this study:

1. How do participants describe the role of childhood trauma in their social-emotional learning and the decision to drop out of school?

2. How do participants describe the influence of school, family, and community on their social-emotional learning and decision to drop out?

Methodological Frameworks

This dissertation was a phenomenological study that utilized the work of Durlak et al. (2011) with CASEL for Systemic Social and Emotional Learning. This framework focused on the development of five inter-related sets of cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies:

self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (CASEL, 2005).

The purpose of phenomenological research is to explore the meaning of the lived experiences of people to identify the heart of human experience as described by individuals. Moustakas (1994) described phenomenological research's aim "is to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experiences and can provide a comprehensive description of it" (p. 13). In Brian's case, this undoubtedly made for a detrimental decision; in my opinion; however, he and his mother viewed it differently. The researcher is obligated to be intentional in every step of the research process and to become an "intuitive-thinking being" who offers accurate descriptions of what is being presented (Moustakas, 1994, p. 32).

As Giorgi (1997) explains, "phenomenology has had an impact on 20th-century thinking not only because of its rigorous descriptive approach but also because it offers a method for accessing the difficult phenomena of human experience" (p. 235). The individuals must reflect on their experiences in as much detail as possible. Moustakas (1994) states, "phenomenological research involves studying a small number of subjects through extensive and prolonged engagement to develop patterns and relationships of meaning" (p. 114). According to Crotty (1998), one can "engage with phenomena in our world and make sense of them directly and immediately" (p. 79). The original intent of phenomenology included an understanding of the processes to discover the meaning of the phenomenon as the individuals experienced it. If one studied the phenomena entirely, a theme emerged among the individuals and participants (Crotty, 1998).

Phenomenology regards people's understanding of their lived experiences of a particular or specific phenomenon. The events and decisions, over an undoubtedly long period that led up to the participant's actual decision to drop out of school, rise as the real phenomenon. The individuals needed to know or recollect their experiences and what occurrences happened at specified times throughout their life. The reflection occurred to see if those experiences played a role in their decision or affected their desire to drop out of school. One idea of phenomenology suggests that if we lay aside the common understanding of the phenomena and revisit our immediate experience with it, the possibilities for new meaning emerge for us (Crotty, 1998). Thus, if the participants and I were able to create new meaning towards collaboratively understanding this phenomenon, then they might gain a more in-depth understanding of their situations. If the individuals gain value and meaning themselves, I would help and advise them in their endeavors. With my background, I felt confident in doing this; however, it was not my role or purpose in this project. Phenomenology is an "attempt to recover a fresh perception of existence, one unprejudiced by acculturation (Sadler, 1969, as cited in Crotty, 1998, p. 80).

The framework of SEL, specifically the work of Durlak et al. (2011) with CASEL (2005) for Systemic Social and Emotional Learning, was used as a strategic, systematic approach that involves everyone, from the district and school leaders to community partners to family members, working together to ensure students receive the support they need. SEL provides schools with a framework for preventing problems and promoting students' well-being and success. Effective SEL programs begin at an early age and continue through high school. Some skills can be learned and mastered, just as much as language, math, or reading can be. According to Zins, Weissberg, Wang, and Walberg (2004), there is a great deal of research evidence to indicate that students perform better when academics are combined with SEL. Schools that

satisfy students' basic needs benefit from students' improved attitudes and behavior. In addition to helping their students learn and grow—academically, socially, emotionally, and ethically—these schools also help the students avoid problem behaviors ranging from emotional distress to drug use to violence. Promoting academic achievement is, of course, an essential goal for schools, but outcomes in these other areas are also critical (Learning First Alliance, 2001).

CASEL (2005) defines five core social and emotional competencies in students that SEL programs work to develop:

• Self-Awareness

• Social Awareness

• Self-Management

• Relationship Skills

• Responsible Decision-Making (p. 5)

CASEL revised these core competencies in the widely used framework, in conjunction with districts, schools, classrooms, families, and communities that can educate hearts, inspire minds, and help students navigate the world more effectively. See Figure 1.

Figure 1. CASEL Competencies – Developed by Collaborative for Academic, Social, Emotional
Learning and used by permission (CASEL, 2018).

Figure 1. Social and Emotional Competencies of CASEL's Program

When implemented carefully, appropriately and successfully, SEL is central to how schools, families, and communities value and support the social, emotional, and academic development of their children.

Phenomenology emerged as a natural fit for this topic as individuals described personal experiences with exiting their high school days without a diploma in hand. The foundation included the personal experiences and perceptions of the students who had dropped out of school in central Kansas. Data was collected primarily through interviews of the participants (recent high school dropouts who were trauma survivors). The interviews enabled me to look at the experiences of these students in a close, detailed approach. In completing high school and going on to be a successful adult, it is essential to look at the SEL of these individuals and learn if this played an integral role in their decision to drop out of school. The cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies from Durlak et al. (2011) in CASEL (2005) are focused on: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making.

The study used strategic site selection and purposeful sampling in order to find young adults who were not far removed from their decision to drop out of high school. As Patton (1990) describes, "the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth…those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term purposeful sampling" (p. 169). The site was chosen to find participants at adult learning centers throughout central Kansas, where students were attending classes to complete their high school diploma. The learning centers are explicitly set up to attain a high school diploma and not a GED. These individuals were removed

enough from the process of dropping out to reflect on their decision, yet they were still not too far removed to recall in-depth information about that decision.

Furthermore, I precisely wanted to involve students who had experienced trauma and were willing to share their perspectives. So among these students at the adult learning centers seeking their high school diploma, I used questionnaires as a way to accurately identify individuals who experienced some form of childhood trauma as defined by the ACEs body of research. Through this purposeful sampling, I hoped to find what DeMarrais and Lapan (2003) describe as "the deliberate selection of information-rich sources" (p. 242) as a way to also help develop a deep and thorough understanding of their lived experiences the way phenomenology demands.

Likewise, three separate interviews with the five participants who had dropped out of school were conducted in a face-to-face format. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and prepared for analysis. Interviews were coded, along with research notes, using NVivo (2015) software. Designed for use in qualitative research, NVivo facilitates the coding and organizing of data, and the storing and retrieving of it with revitalized and up-to-date methods and techniques (Richards, 2002).

Regarding my subjectivities, I bracketed the potential influence of particular subjectivities through acute self-awareness and kept a reflective journal. Hamill and Sinclair (2010) suggest keeping a reflective journal "to document your thoughts, feelings, and perceptions throughout the research and examine your position on issues raised and emerging themes. Bracketing is a method used by some researchers to alleviate the potentially harmful effects of preconceptions related to the research (Tufford, & Newman, 2012). Given the sometimes close relationship between the researcher and the research topic, bracketing is also a

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method to protect the researcher from the increasing effects of examining what may be emotionally challenging material. Keeping a research journal throughout the study helped me bracket out my thoughts, biases, and experiences (Creswell, 2013).

Value and Limitations of the Study

The long-term value of this study could benefit educators and administrators in Kansas, and elsewhere, as we work toward achieving the new vision of our state outlined by Kansans Can. As prioritized in the plan and backed by the research and outlined in the Rationale, increasing graduation rates by better understanding the connection between trauma, SEL, and dropping out is advantageous for schools. This study builds our understanding of these topics so that we might have a better approach to SEL and be responsive to students' educational needs that have experienced trauma.

Additionally, this study was not quantitative, and the results were not generalizable. However, faithful to phenomenology, I intended to gain a deeper understanding of the events and human experiences associated with the dropout process for students. With this as the priority, the value of this study was that it might provide greater in-depth understanding, complete with richly detailed stories, which could then inform qualitative and quantitative studies moving forward, as well as praxis associated with SEL and dropout prevention. Most of the research on dropouts, trauma, and social-emotional learning includes a lot of numbers and statistics. I found less research revealing the stories students tell about dropping out. We can assume the trauma in their lives had a direct impact on not finishing high school. However, there seems little demonstrated understanding of what these students' actual thought processes were as they decided to drop out of school. Prevention cannot occur and be fully implemented with fidelity for long-term sustainability until students involved are recognized, heard, and supported as equal

members of the educational system. This study proposed to begin this process by further researching and hearing the stories of those who were at the very heart of the issue- students who have dropped out of high school.

The particular students who were interviewed may limit the extent of the research as well. The students may be somewhat distant from the events and decision-making that led them to drop out up to three years ago; however, there is also value in talking to the students who are in a more mature and selective state of mind since they are back in school, trying again to get their diploma. These participants did not have an academic background on trauma and SEL and did not use the technical vocabulary such as ACEs, SEL, and trauma; therefore, I had the responsibility to interpret what they were saying and make connections to the SEL framework, along with other scholarly literature. I chose to tell the stories of these students because I hold the belief that in order to better serve a population of future students with varied experiences, each of us in our role, as a practitioner, researcher, volunteer, or fellow student, should hear their stories. My involvement over the years has allowed me to work with dropouts like these students, and the literature I have read has given me logical reasons why students like Brian might make decisions regarding their education and leave school; however, I wanted to know more.

It is important to note that there were advantages and limitations to the data collection type chosen for this study. I entirely trusted the participant's honesty to provide reflections of their childhood as they communicated their uniquely constructed social contexts through their own lived experiences. Feeling uncomfortable or lacking memory in revealing childhood experiences may have altered the accuracy of their recall. A situation might arise when the participant cannot finish and discontinues the interview. Face-to-face interviews are advantageous in capturing the "lived" experience of the participants, as they are only ones who

can provide historical information on their experience. According to Creswell (2007), the interview method of gathering data poses limitations that include (a) the memory of the interviewees; (b) truthfulness of the interviewees; and (c) the potential of the researcher's presence to cause biased responses from participants. These limitations have been accounted for and are explained in Chapter 3.

Further, with the interviewer serving as the primary data collector and analyzer, the narrative described may be influenced by my subjectivities. I carefully reported the data in narrative form (Norum, 2000). Participants' own words were used throughout the narratives in the attempt to communicate a holistic picture of their stories of educational experience and bring the lived experience to life (Butler-Kisber, 1998).

As an educator, I possess an extensive background in counseling and could refer the individuals as necessary to professionals if the situation arose. Furthermore, as a building principal, I participated in many state-required counseling sessions in which parents come to school to sign a waiver that allows their minor child exemption from compulsory attendance laws. The insight gained from such sessions played a role in providing the direction for this study. However, I acknowledged that the sessions might lead to bias or subjectivity. DeMarrais and Lapan (2003) explain, "subjectivism is the position that the knower imposes meaning on the known" (p. 175). Therefore, including information about myself as the researcher appeared throughout the study. The reader must understand my background and thorough knowledge of students as an educator, a counselor, and a building principal to comprehend why there may have been subjectivities in this research. The focus of this study was of great personal concern to me, and the desired goals and outcomes prove excellent benefits to assist secondary principals and all educators as well. A greater understanding of the thoughts, actions, and decisions students made,

which eventually resulted in their early exit from high school, may allow educators to provide support and strategies to meet the needs of students with social-emotional needs. In working with students who are at-risk of dropping out, I have become aware of the issues these students face. This awareness motivated me to conduct this study that created a space for student voices to be heard. I believe that once these voices are heard, and I, as an educator, will gain insight into the trauma and SEL that students may have had and how that shapes their experience with education.

Operational Definitions

ACEs – Adverse Childhood Experiences – The term given to describe all types of abuse, neglect, and other traumatic experiences that occur in individuals before the age of 18 (Felitti et al., 1998).

CASEL - The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning is the world's prominent organization advancing one of the most important and current topics in education-: the practice of promoting integrated academic, social, and emotional learning for all children in preschool through high school (CASEL, 2005).

Dropouts – Any student who leaves school and does not enroll in another school or program that culminates in a high school diploma (Kansas Graduation and Dropout Information, 2017)

Relationship Skills - Handling emotions in relationships effectively, establishing and maintaining healthy and rewarding relationships based on cooperation, resistance to inappropriate social pressure, negotiating solutions to conflict, and seeking help when needed. (CASEL, 2018, p. 1).

Responsible Decision Making - Making decisions based on an accurate consideration of all relevant factors and the likely consequences of alternative courses of action, respecting others, and taking responsibility for one's decisions. (CASEL, 2018, p. 1).

Self-Awareness - Knowing what we are feeling in the moment, having a realistic assessment of our own abilities, and a well-grounded sense of self-confidence. (CASEL, 2018, p. 1).

Self-Management - Handling our emotions, so they facilitate rather than interfere with the task at hand; being conscientious and delaying gratification to pursue goals; persevering in the face of setbacks and frustrations. (CASEL, 2018, p. 1).

Social Awareness - Understanding what others are feeling, being able to take their perspective, appreciating, and interacting positively with diverse groups. (CASEL, 2018, p. 1).

Social-Emotional Learning - The process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships and make a responsible decision. (CASEL, 2018, p. 1).

Trauma – Any event that is "extremely upsetting, at least temporarily overwhelms an individual's internal resources, and produces lasting psychological symptoms" (Briere & Scott, 2014, p. 10).

My Positionality and Subjectivities as a Former Counselor and Current Principal

Practicing currently as a principal in central Kansas for several years provided valuable context for this study. My career includes time in a classroom as a teacher for five years, a counselor for 12 years, and a high school principal at two different schools, one for seven years, and I am currently in the 10th year of a mid-size school with approximately 670 students.

Throughout my career, I have witnessed many students and their families make the life-changing decision to drop out, even after extensive counseling to stay in school. Throughout these experiences, I have conducted many state-required counseling sessions in which parents come to school to sign a waiver that allows their minor exemption from compulsory attendance laws. These personal experiences have directly influenced this study. The story of Brian, who decided to drop out of high school with three weeks of school remaining, made a tremendous impact on me. Every time any student comes in to sign out of school, this immediately triggers personal feelings of frustration, failure, and defeat as an educator. At the same time, I acknowledge that the experiences I bring to the topic of dropping out are built upon a collection of lived experiences that are different from students such as Brian. I have not experienced extensive trauma in my life, nor did I have feelings of wanting to drop out of school. As Peshkin (1988) states, "subjectivity is like a garment that cannot be removed. It is insistently present in both the research and nonresearch aspects of our life" (p. 17). I do not know what students have been through, are currently thinking, or know all the facts relevant in their lives. Spending as much time as possible with the student and families, engaging in ongoing personal reflection, and journaling throughout the research process helps me provide a greater understanding of their circumstances and situations. Throughout the process, I acknowledged the need to recognize the limitations my subjectivities created.

Nonetheless, I take these experiences very personally, and many times I have worked diligently to convince students to stay in school. These sessions can linger on for hours; however, my thoughts lead me to doubt that I can change their minds. The decision usually did not occur immediately, and it was not an impulsive decision. Instead, I consider how the conclusion likely happened over time, influenced by a variety of events, which ultimately

resulted in them deciding to end their educational voyage. While I carry my subjectivities, the experience with Brian and his family and all the other students who dropped out of school encouraged me to initiate this study and better understand this phenomenon. Ultimately, my career has brought me to this point, and although I do not carry the same lived experiences as students like Brian, I did want to deepen our understanding of their stories so that other counselors and educational leaders might improve their practice.

Summary

Through this study, I hoped to generate a better understanding of the phenomenon of dropping out of school through the eyes of five students who made that decision. Through interviews, I anticipated learning more about their thoughts, actions, and past experiences, which eventually resulted in their early exit from high school, and I hope this work encouraged educators to explore how to provide support and strategies better to meet the needs of students with social-emotional needs.

As I reflected on Brian and his decision, and I considered what was possible when students who do experience trauma, and yet persevere and succeed, I consider the words of Jackson Nakazawa, (2015):

> How extraordinary it is that 64% of Americans – women and men – who have had Adverse Childhood Experiences, nevertheless, so often build remarkably loving and decent lives, exhibit such courage and forbearance, and prosper emotionally so much of the time. (p. 113)

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Thinking back on Brian's story, and all the students I have counseled to stay in school as a principal and a counselor, I was motivated to understand the reasons, influences, and motives that resulted in students dropping out of school. This project aimed to help us better understand the connections between dropping out of school and the social-emotional learning experiences of students who chose to drop out with a particular emphasis on students who have experienced trauma. The literature review outlined general research on high school dropouts in both national and local contexts, examining specific topics such as the history, research, and consequences to all stakeholders affected by this event. Then I discussed research about social-emotional learning (SEL), precisely what it is, and the benefits of implementation in schools were explored and connected to childhood trauma and the plethora of information that has arisen with this rather new term placed on an age-old subject. I also explained the origins of the ACE study, the research surrounding childhood trauma, and the information that has been gathered on childhood trauma and the connection to dropping out of school. Finally, I discussed the need for literature connected with trauma and SEL and specific to the dropouts in Kansas and the educational change occurring with Kansas Can.

There is a significant amount of research on the dropout phenomenon (Doll et al., 2013; Lansford et al., 2016; Rumberger, 2011; Schreiber, 1964) and even a more substantial amount of recent research on childhood trauma (DeBellis & Van Dillen, 2005; Perry, 2006; Porche et al., 2011; Sandi, 2013; Schwartz et al., 2013; Terr, 1991). Current research emphasizes SEL and the benefits it generates for students (Durlak et al., 2010; Durlak et al., 2011). However, there is little research specifically exploring the more complex intersection between all three topics: childhood trauma, SEL, and dropping out of high school. The literature in this review

summarized the body of research and provided further evidence supporting the need for additional studies on completing high school that helps us build a deeper understanding of the intersection of trauma, SEL, and students' decisions to drop out of school.

History and Research on High School Dropouts

Although this study focused on students in central Kansas dropping out of school, there is substantial evidence that this is a national issue across the United States. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2018), "between October 2015 and October 2016, approximately 532,000 15- to 24-year-olds left schools without obtaining a high school credential" (p. iii). These dropouts accounted for 5.2 percent of the 10.9 million 15- to 24-year-olds enrolled in grades 10 through 12 (McFarland, Cui, Rathbun, & Holmes, 2018). Furthermore, this is not a new concern as in 1872, when the graduate, rather than the dropout was the exception; a paper on the causes and remedies of "early school leavers" was presented at a national meeting of school administrators (Schreiber, 1964). Fuller (1927) found that school dropout spans from as early as a 1927 monography, that labeled it "school leaving" and associated those at-risk with possible mental inferiority (p. 1). Related studies on this topic began to appear in journal articles and other sources shortly after secondary schools were introduced.

Historically, among the most significant challenges facing public education in the United States is not only achieving the goal of ensuring all students graduate with a diploma but at the same time, navigating the systems designed to prevent students from dropping out of school altogether. A high school diploma has become a minimal requirement for a majority of the employment opportunities. It also paves the way for postsecondary school, higher rates of employment, and advanced earnings. Despite this importance of graduating from high school, too many students leave high school without that diploma.

According to the Alliance for Excellent Education (2011), one in six students drop out of high school every year. The numbers of students who are at risk of not completing high school, students from low socioeconomic families, and racial, ethnic, and linguistic minorities, are increasing in the nation's schools (Rumberger, 2011). The national high school graduation rate, an all-time high in 2016 was 84.1% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Is the United States satisfied with 16% of its students not graduating from high school? America's Promise Alliance (2018) is an organization, along with the Alliance for Excellent Education (2011), Civic Enterprises, and the Everyone Graduates Center at the School of Education at Johns Hopkins University that has started a campaign entitled Building a GradNation. The goal of GradNation is "to increase the on-time high school graduation rate to 90% by the Class of 2020 and put millions of more young people on the path to adult success" (p. 1). According to the Alliance for Excellent Education (2011), meeting the GradNation goal of a 90% high school graduation rate would likely create more than 65,000 new jobs and boost gross domestic product by $11.5 billion annually. Also, that is for just one high school class. To reach this goal, these organizations are increasing awareness, having dialogues, taking action, and making an impact. Over 125 public media stations work with more than 1,700 partners across the country among those doing their part in communities to improve student outcomes and increase the nation's high school graduation rate to 90% by the Class of 2020. To raise the 2016 national graduation rate of 84.1% to 90% by 2020, an additional 219,000 students will need to graduate from high school. The Grad Nation's emphasis currently is to focus on students of color, low-income students, English language learners, and students with disabilities as these groups are at unacceptably low levels. The National Center for Education Statistics (2018) documents 77.6% of low-income students graduated on time in 2014, compared to 90% of non-low-income students. Students

with disabilities fall 19% behind the national graduation rate at 65.5%. Black and Hispanic/Latino students graduate approximately 8% and 5% below the national average, respectively. Grad Nation is one of many interventions that have been implemented to bring together individuals, schools, communities, businesses, and organizations to work together for the success and high school completion of our nation's students.

Societal Costs and Consequences of Dropping Out

Dropping out of school causes economic and social concerns for the student and the entire country. Rumberger (2011) says that dropouts have difficulty finding jobs and, thus, earn significantly less than those students, and many times require public assistance than those people who earn a high school diploma. Dropouts also have poor health and may have higher mortality rates. Criminal behavior and individuals in jails and prisons are indicative of a lack of a high school diploma. Rumberger (2011) also found that those who drop out are less likely to vote and pay taxes. During the 2012 presidential election, 4% of dropouts voted compared to 24% of youth with a high school diploma and 37% with a college degree (America's Promise Alliance, 2018). Economic and educational trends could cause further issues in the future. As the United States economy moves toward a higher-skilled workforce, a high school diploma will become a premium commodity for all. Our country must address the dropout matter to improve the lives of individuals and reduce the societal costs of the effects of dropouts. High school dropouts were up to three times more likely to experience negative consequences such as being arrested, twice as likely to have been fired, four times more likely to be on public assistance, twice as likely to be using illegal substances in the past six months, and were more than twice as likely having complicated health issues by age 27 (Lansford et al., 2016). See Table 1 below.

Table 1.

High School Dropouts versus Graduates on Socially Relevant Outcomes

Age 27 years outcome	% of dropouts	% of graduates
Government assistance	67.9	17.6
Fired more than once	31.5	15.2
Arrested since age 18 years	65.4	20.6
Illicit drug use in the last six months	43.9	22.9
Poor health (self-reported)	21.8	9.4
None of these outcomes	10.5	47.7
Four or more of these outcomes	19.3	0.8

(Lansford, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 2016)

As stated, high school dropouts cost the United States' economy from $250,000-$300,000 over the lifetime. This amount is due to the reliance on public assistance, criminal activities, poor health, and failure to contribute to taxes. The annual median income for a high school dropout is $25,000, compared to $46,000 for an individual with a high school or equivalent diploma (Lansford et al., 2016, p. 2). It is evident that a student who leaves school without a diploma has many implications for overcoming and contributes issues in society.

The Alliance for Excellent Education (2011) specified that every school day, nearly 7000 students in the United States become dropouts. Annually, that adds up to approximately 1.2 million students who will not graduate as scheduled. These individuals are more likely to spend their lives looking at high unemployment tendencies, being on government subsidies, and

possibly being in and out of incarceration. The average annual income of a high school dropout can be up to $10,000 less compared to a high school graduate. Along with that, the nation's economy depends on skilled labor. Businesses have difficulty in finding qualified employees with the skills, training, and education to meet their company's needs (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011).

As evident from the research described, the problem of school dropouts should be treated as a public health problem since education is such a strong predictor of long-term health for both the individual and the country. As previously stated, dropouts will possibly experience significantly more chronic and acute health problems than those individuals with a high school diploma. The American Public Health Association (2105) estimates that eliminating the dropout issue could save more than $17 billion annually in Medicaid and other health expenditures, as well as additional billions in welfare, criminal justice, and increased tax revenues.

Graduation Rates and Dropout Rates in Kansas

In reviewing the literature, the dropout rate is many times referred to as a negative term, and therefore researchers will use the term graduation rate. It is vital to note that the dropout rate and graduation rate are not interchangeable, and the dropout rate is not the inverse of the graduation calculation. The following information is taken from Kansas Graduation and Dropout Information (2017): In Kansas, the dropout rate is calculated annually and reflects the number of 7th-12th-grade students who drop out in any one school year. A dropout is any student who exits school between October 1 and September 30 and does not re-enroll by September 30. The annual dropout rate is calculated using one year of data, while the graduation rate is calculated using four years of data. The dropout rate is calculated on 7th-12th grade students, while the graduation rate is calculated on 9th-12th-grade students. In past sources, the graduation

rate in Kansas was figured by dividing the number of graduates by the sum of graduates plus dropouts for years one through four of high school. In 2010, Kansas began using the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate. This method delivers a more precise measurement of graduation rates as it tracks the movement (mobility) of individual students. The four-year cohort graduation rate is the percentage of students in a cohort, adjusted for transfers into and out of the school, district, or state, who graduate with a regular high school diploma within four years of entering high school (Kansas State Department of Education, 2018). Kansas also has a five-year adjusted cohort graduation rate. For comparison in the research, only the four-year cohort graduation rate will be used.

According to the Kansas Graduation and Dropout Information (2017), Kansas had a graduation rate of 86.1% in 2016, 85.7% in 2015, and 86.1% in 2014. Kansas had a dropout rate of 1.7% in 2016, 1.6% in 2015, and 1.5% in 2014. In Kansas, 62% of the dropouts are male, and 7% are African American males and 16% Hispanic males. Males from low socioeconomic backgrounds account for 28% of the dropouts.

Kansas State Department of Education has a dropout prevention initiative, Kansas DropINS (2012). DropINS are committed to seeing all children and adults in Kansas graduate from high school ready for the next phase of life. This initiative was created in 2009 under the Kansas Department of Health and Environment with America's Promise Alliance and State Farm funding.

Information on the Kansas DropINs website stated 3,500 Kansas public school students dropped out of school during the 2016-17 school year. This number is equivalent to about 19 students dropping out every school day. Each high school dropout costs the nation approximately $292,000 in lost earnings, taxes, and productivity throughout his or her lifetime.

For the 3,500 dropouts, that equals approximately $1 billion for their lifetimes. Those dropouts are also more likely than their graduating peers to be in prison, get divorced, live in poverty, be unemployed, have poor health, and utilize public assistance (Kansas DropINS, 2012).

The Kansas DropINs dropout prevention initiative asked students who had dropped out to share information with students who are thinking about dropping out. Some prominent responses included:

"Do it if you want, but later in life, you'll realize flipping patties can turn into a lifetime job without a diploma."

"It is a big mistake. I am 26 and working on my diploma now so I can provide a better life for my children because I can't get a job that has benefits and pays well without having to work all the time."

"I am 29 years old and still trying to get mine so that I can take care of myself and three kids. So I would advise you not to do it. Have patience. Tell whoever is hating to keep hating. Don't let anyone bring you down."

"In the economy these days, even a high school diploma is not going to be the best to support a family. You are going to need at least a Bachelor's in college."

"Once you do it, it is really hard to get a job that will support you and your family." (Kansas DropINs, 2012)

Kansas DropINS (2012) found these reactions; however, it was only through anecdotal data collection and not through a rigorous qualitative study. Therefore we are lacking the research that allows us to develop a deeper understanding of the thoughts, stories, emotions, and decision making processes of students who had dropped out of school. Furthermore, this

research does not make strong connections to students who experience trauma. The connections are particularly important since graduation rate and SEL are current priorities in Kansas.

Reasons for Dropping Out

Understanding why students drop out of school might be the single best solution to addressing this educational issue. However, ascertaining the reasons for dropping out is extremely difficult. Rumberger (2011) considers the causes of dropping out are influenced by dynamics related to the student, the family, the school, and the community in which the student resides. Even though students give a multitude of reasons for dropping out such as "missed too many days, easier to get a GED, failing grades, don't like school, too much schoolwork" (p. 326), the real causes are not discovered as to what contributes to students' attitudes, behaviors, and academic performance preceding their decision to drop out of school (Rumberger, 2011). Much information can be found on reasons why students drop out of school; however, it is less of an event, but more so, a culmination of a long process that begins sometime before the decision is made to stop attending school (Doll et al., 2013). A comprehensive study of seven nationally represented studies on school dropout was analyzed using factors established by Jordan, Lara, and McPartland (1996) and Watt and Roessingh (1994). These factors included 1) push factor, 2) pull factor, and 3) falling out factor and compiled with the seven national studies to explain the dropout experience (Doll et al., 2013). A student is pushed out possibly due to attendance, discipline, or behavior issues, and getting a job, family situations, and economics can pull students away from school (Jordan et al., 1994). Falling out of school may be due to disengagement, failure to make academic progress, and apathy (Watt & Roessingh, 1994). The overall findings of the seven national studies from the 1950s to the 1980s are that students reported the most dominant factor related to dropping out was pull factors in that jobs and family

have a strong influence on students' reasons for discontinuing their schooling. After the 1980s, push factors rose to the top with reasons such as getting along with teachers and students played an important role in students' decision to drop out of school (Doll et al., 2013).

Rumberger (2011) probed into the reasons students gave who had dropped out of high school. He identified two types of factors that contribute to the probability of students dropping out; Individual Factors and Institutional Factors. The first is an individual's characteristics, attitudes, behaviors, and experiences, and the second are factors associated with the students' families, schools, communities, and peers. Individual factors may include demographics in which high dropout rates are generally found with males, African Americans, Hispanics, immigrants, and language minorities. Attitudes play a role, including low aspirations, behaviors such as absenteeism, discipline, and pregnancy, and low academic achievement are all strong reasons for dropping out. Mobility, grade retention, and academic achievement also may predict withdrawing from school (Rumberger, 2011). Institutional factors include family backgrounds such as socio-economic status, parental education, and marital status. Schools have a tremendous influence on students including the social composition of students, size, location, and public vs. private. Student/teacher ratios, teacher quality, and policies and procedures all contribute to students withdrawing from school before completion. In addition to family and schools, communities and peer groups may impact students' decisions to stay in school. The quality of neighborhoods, the resources available such as after-school programs and employment opportunities, and peer influences all play a role in keeping students in schools (Rumberger, 2011).

Socioeconomic status, academic performance, and absenteeism are apparent predictors of students dropping out of school. Parr and Bonitz (2015) studied demographic factors and family

environment, academic performance, and students' school-related beliefs and behaviors, including absenteeism. The results of their study indicated that these are all factors in predicting students dropping out of school. Socioeconomic status was a stable, predictive demographic indicator, as well as parental involvement in a student's education. The academic piece specifically showed high performance in both English and mathematics resulted in a lower likelihood of dropping out of school. Finally, the study found that students with high absenteeism rates had a higher probability of dropping out.

Another study examined dropout tendencies for students with disabilities. The study looked at academic achievement, school absences, grade retention, and behavioral factors, including school suspensions and emotional engagement, seeing if these previously identified predictive factors for dropping out for the general population of students were also associated with students with disabilities (Zablocki & Krezmien, 2013). The researchers specifically wanted to explore the effects of the disability classification on dropout rates among students with disabilities. The researchers discovered consistencies with previously identified factors for dropping out; however, the students' disability classification was not a substantial predictor alone when combined with academic achievement, school absences, grade retention, and behavioral factors. Students with emotional and behavior disorders had a higher tendency to drop out, but those specific disability classifications were not noteworthy concerning the academic factors. The behavior (suspensions specifically), grade retention, and low academic performance were associated with a higher probability of dropping out.

The Kansas DropINs (2012) initiative conducted a youth survey and collected information from over 500 Kansans in eight regional locations in the state. Of the surveys collected, 37% were from individuals who dropped out of high school, and 35% responded they

had thought about dropping out of high school. The most common reasons for leaving school early as shared by the Kansas dropouts who completed the survey were:

Personal or family problems (31.1%)

Got in trouble at school (24.2%)

School environment (19.3%)

To get a full-time job (19.2%)

Money problems (17.9%) (Kansas DropINs, 2011)

A narrative question on the survey was presented as "What made you want to drop out of school?" A few responses included:

"A feeling of being overwhelmed with school work"

"I didn't see how what I was learning in school was pertaining to my life outside of school"

 "Because of my mom. She has a lot of health problems and I wasn't able to get my work done"

 "Because many people told me I wouldn't be able to do anything with my life"

 "Not being able to go to a school where I have more freedom and respect"

 "People did not care about me or my future" (Kansas DropINS, 2012)

Considering Kansas operates within a unique social, cultural, political, and economic environment, this research begins to help us better understand what is going on behind the numbers within our state boundaries. However, while this research helps us generate a specific understanding of our students who are dropping out, this survey research only allows us a surface

level understanding of the thought processes behind dropping out. There is a need for research specific to Kansas that can help us gain a much deeper understanding of the lived experiences that lie behind these anecdotes.

Dropout Prevention

The research indicates hundreds of dropout prevention programs available to schools and agencies across the nation. Many are costly and ineffective, and some have been positive and successful. In the explanation of dropout prevention, and by definition, prevention efforts should occur before the problem or issue arises. However, it would be difficult to find too many schools where no dropouts have occurred, and most schools put extensive effort into some dropout prevention and interventions.

The Grad Nation's supporters are striving for a 90% graduation rate as they are confident the country would have a $3.1 billion increase in annual earnings, create more than 14,000 new jobs, and save $16.1 billion in health care costs. That is for just one class of students reaching a 90% graduation rate. The Grad Nation Campaign has a belief that all children can thrive if they are provided with the Five Promises: caring adults, safe places, a healthy start, effective education and opportunities to serve (America's Promise Alliance, 2018).

The Kansas State Department of Education (2018) lists the ABCs of dropout prevention. Attendance – missing more than 10% of the possible school days in a period is a strong predictor of students that are at risk for not graduating with their class and dropping out. Behavior – detention, suspensions, and office referrals may all be indicators of students who are in jeopardy of dropping out. Coursework – not reading at grade level in 3rd grade, failing either math or English in middle school, and failing any core class in 9th grade are all dangers of students who may not finish high school (KSDE, 2018). Ensuring each student has a relationship with a

trusted, caring adult in school may be the most important thing schools can do to keep students in school.

Tyler and Lofstrom (2009) reviewed several dropout prevention approaches and found "close mentoring and monitoring of students appear to be critical components of successful programs" (p. 77). They also looked at the successful programs that had the components of family involvement and outreach, curricular reforms, and those that gave attention to students' out-of-school problems and not just in-school issues. Freeman and Simonsen (2015) conducted an extensive study to determine common elements of programs for prevention and interventions for reducing dropout rates. Intervention components should be matched with subgroup needs, such as academic difficulties, behavior concerns, family issues, and other problems. A systematic, tiered, preventative approach is recommended. The dropout programs that Tyler and Lofstrom (2009) examined had common elements that had favorable results: 1) close mentoring and monitoring of students, 2) case management of individual students, 3) family outreach, 4) curricular reforms, and 5) attention to a student's out-of-school problems that can affect attendance, behavior, and performance. (p. 1)

The Preventing Dropout in Secondary Schools, an Educator's Practice Guide (U.S. Department of Education, 2017) suggests recommendations for a successful dropout prevention program and then delves into extensive details as to how a school or organization would implement the recommendation. The recommendations are as follows:

1. Monitor the progress of all students, and proactively intervene when students show early signs of attendance, behavior, or academic problems. (p. 8)

2. Provide intensive, individualized support to students who have fallen off track and face significant challenges to success. (p. 20)

3. Engage students by offering curricula and programs that connect schoolwork with college and career success and that improve students' capacity to manage challenges in and out of school. (p. 28)

4. For schools with many at-risk students, create small, personalized communities to facilitate monitoring and support. (p. 40)

As the stakes are high for schools to have all students complete high school, it is essential to continue to find solutions for the dropout problem. Future research must focus on developing a deeper understanding of the complex individual needs of students who represent various populations and subgroups. Furthermore, there are specific personalized issues associated with their relationships with schools and the community, and there is a need to understand these social environments better. In this context, it is essential to look into literature that connects dropping out to social-emotional learning and experiences with childhood trauma

General History, Research, and Background on Social-Emotional Learning

The success of young people in school and life is inseparably linked to healthy social and emotional development. As Jones and Kahn (2017) explain, "Major domains of human development – social, emotional, cognitive, linguistic, academic – are deeply intertwined in the brain and behavior, and are all central to learning (p. 4). The term "social and emotional learning" emerged from a meeting in 1994 hosted by the Fetzer Institute, a foundation based in Kalamazoo, Michigan. The foundation was established by a broadcast pioneer, John E. Fetzer (1901-1991), to use philanthropic resources to help build the spiritual foundation for a loving world (Fetzer Institute, 2018). The 1994 meeting included researchers, educators, and others involved in education organizations to promote positive development in children. These forerunners came together to address a concern about ineffective school programming and a lack

of coordination among programs at the school level. Thus SEL and the Collaborative for

Academic, Social and Emotional Learning-CASEL were launched.   The distress of these

developers emerged due to schools inundated with a plethora of positive youth development

programs such as sex education, civic education, drug prevention, violence prevention, and many

others. SEL developed as a framework to address the necessities of young people and help align

and coordinate school programs.

In 1997, a groundbreaking book developed by CASEL and the Association for

Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) laid the foundation for providing practical

strategies for educators to develop wide-ranging and coordinated SEL programming from

preschool through grade 12. The unprecedented book, *Promoting Social and Emotional*

Learning: Guidelines for Educators provided the essential resource for schools and other

educational entities to deal with areas necessary for school success other than academics.

Emotional developments and relationships affect how and what students learn; therefore, schools

and families must effectively concentrate on these areas of the educational process (Elias et al.,

1997). Elias et al. (1997) defines SEL as the process of attaining core abilities to recognize and

manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, appreciate the viewpoints of others, establish

and preserve positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and control interpersonal

situations positively. The goals of SEL programs are to foster the development of five inter-

related sets of cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies: self-awareness, self-

management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (CASEL,

2013). Optimistically, after going through a SEL program, students receive the foundation for

improved academic performance with positive social behaviors, fewer emotional issues, fewer

conduct problems, and higher test scores and grades. Most schools implementing a SEL program

deliver a curriculum designed to promote social-emotional competencies in developmentally and culturally appropriate methods. As Schonert-Reichl, Kitil, and Hanson-Peterson (2017) describe:

> SEL emphasizes active learning approaches in which skills can be generalized across curriculum areas and contexts when opportunities are provided to practice the skills that foster positive attitudes, behaviors, and thinking processes. In the face of current societal economic, environmental, and social challenges, the promotion of these non-academic skills in education is seen as more critical than ever before with business and political leaders urging schools to pay more attention to equipping students with skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and self-management – often referred to as "21st Century Skills." (p. 3)

CASEL (2005) defines social and emotional learning as "the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills they need to understand and manage emotions, set and accomplish positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions" (para 1). So they can be successful in school, career, and life, students must be taught the social and emotional skills, just as they are taught reading, math, and science. SEL curriculum teaches the skills employers are seeking, such as communication, adaptability, decision-making, and problem-solving. The U.S. Department of Education (2013) defines these *employability skills* as "general skills that are necessary for success in the labor market at all employment levels and in all sectors" (p. 1). SEL curriculum has other comprehensive aids for students in school, in their careers, and possibly in their life. An intensive study looked at students 13 to 19 years after they received adequate SEL training and found that teaching these skills in kindergarten leads to students being less likely to live in public housing, receive public assistance, or to be involved in

criminal activity (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011), all of which have been show to also be associated with dropping out as described previously.

Jones, Greenberg, & Crowley (2015), found that kindergarteners with stronger social and emotional skills are more likely to graduate from high school and college and have stable, full-time employment while being less likely to commit crimes, be on public assistance, and have drug, alcohol, and mental health problems. According to Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich, & Gullotta (2016), other benefits include:

- More positive attitudes toward oneself, others, and tasks, including enhanced self-efficacy, confidence, persistence, empathy, connection, and commitment to school, and a sense of purpose.

- More positive social behaviors and relationships with peers and adults.

- Reduced conduct problems and risk-taking behavior.

- Decreased emotional distress.

- Improved test scores, grades, and attendance (p. 1).

Long-term paybacks of better social and emotional competence can increase the likelihood of high school completion, readiness for postsecondary education, career success, positive family and work relationships, better mental health, reduced criminal behavior, and engaged citizenship (Hawkins, Kosterman, Catalano, Hill, & Abbott, 2008). Ultimately, social and emotional competencies encourage a shift to an internal locus of control, allowing individuals' choices and actions in agreement with their values. These competencies relate to "soft skills" and personality traits that, according to Heckman and Kautz (2012), predict success in school, the labor market, and in life. Social and emotional competencies do not just raise academic achievement and educational accomplishment. They also foster personal satisfaction

and growth, help individuals become better citizens, and reduce risky behaviors like violence and drug use (Durlak, Weissberg, and Pachan, 2010).

SEL helps students reach their full potential as caring, contributing, responsible, and knowledgeable friends, family members, coworkers, and citizens. It is foundational to the success of students and the success of our education and society. Integrating SEL with academic instruction allows students the opportunity to learn the skills and brings about meaningful and sustainable changes to education practice and policy.

CASEL's Competencies

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is a trusted source for knowledge about high-quality, evidence-based social and emotional learning (SEL). CASEL's (2005) widely used framework identifies five core competencies (see Figure 2 and Table 2) that when prioritized across settings – districts, schools, classrooms, families, and the wider community – can educate hearts, inspire minds, and help students navigate the world more effectively (p. 1).

Figure 2. CASEL's Social-Emotional Learning Framework- Developed by Collaborative for Academic, Social, Emotional Learning and used by permission (CASEL, 2018).
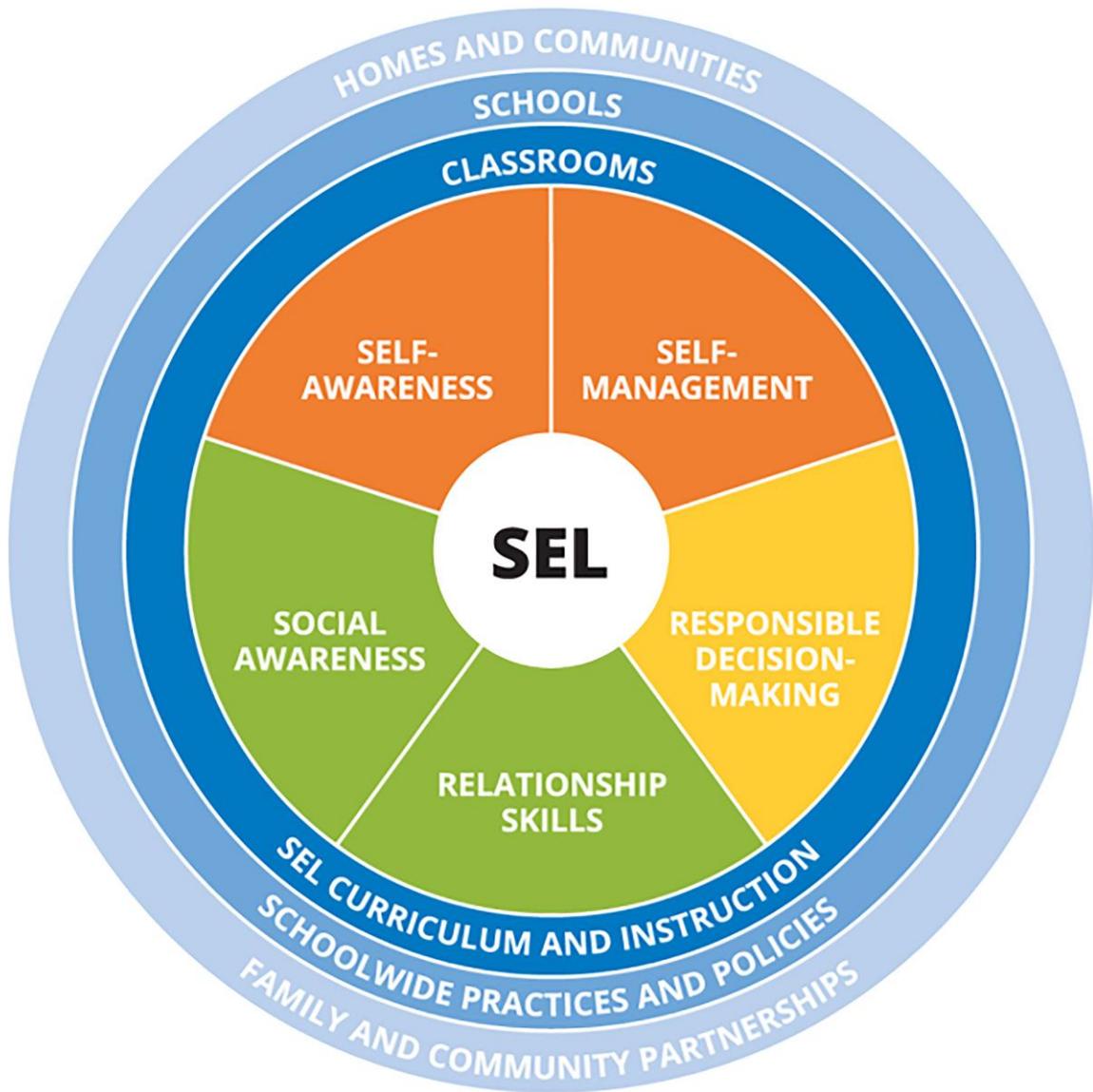
Figure 2. Five Social and Emotional Competencies of CASEL's Program.

Table 2.

CASEL's Five Core Competencies

Self-awareness – The ability to accurately recognize one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior. The ability to accurately assess one's strengths and limitations, with a well-grounded sense of confidence, optimism, and a "growth mindset."

- Identifying emotions
- Accurate self-perception
- Recognizing strengths
- Self-confidence
- Self-efficacy

Self-management – The ability to successfully regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations - effectively managing stress, controlling impulses, and motivating oneself. The ability to set and work towards personal and academic goals.

- Impulse control
- Stress management
- Self-discipline
- Self-motivation
- Goal-setting
- Organizational skills

Social awareness – The ability to take the perspectives of others and empathize with them, including those from diverse backgrounds and cultures. The ability to understand social and ethical norms for behavior and to recognize family, school and community resources supports.

- Perspective-taking
- Empathy
- Appreciating diversity
- Respect for others

Relationship skills – The ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding

relationships with diverse individuals and groups. The ability to communicate clearly,

listen well, cooperate with others, resist inappropriate social pressure, negotiate conflict

constructively, and seek and offer help when needed.

- Communication
- Social engagement
- Relationship-building
- Teamwork

Responsible decision-making – The ability to make constructive choices about personal

behavior and social interactions based on ethical standards, safety concerns, and social

norms. The realistic evaluation of the consequences of various actions and a

consideration of the well-being of oneself and others.

- Identifying problems
- Analyzing situations
- Solving problems
- Evaluating
- Reflecting
- Ethical responsibility

Developed by Collaborative for Academic, Social, Emotional Learning and used by permission
(CASEL, 2018).

In summary, SEL has become an important part of the educational landscape with clear

benefits for improving graduation rates. Furthermore, Kansas has made it a priority to address

SEL as part of its achievement vision. Educators continue to see the effects of students who are

aided with learning SEL techniques, especially those who may have suffered some type of childhood trauma.

General History, Background, and Research on Trauma

In 1976, a Chowchilla school bus carrying 26 children, ages 5-14, was kidnapped, and the children were buried alive. They rescued themselves after 27 hours. This condition "childhood trauma" was studied within a few months and fully described (Terr, 1981). A few years later, Terr (1983) conducted a long-term study and assessed the term "childhood trauma." According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2000), "A traumatic event is a frightening, dangerous, or violent event that poses a threat to a child's life or bodily integrity. Witnessing a traumatic event that threatens life or physical security of a loved one can also be traumatic" (p. 1). These experiences may bring on intense feelings and physical responses that can continue for a considerable length of time, or forever, after the event. This endangerment can come from outside of the family, such as a natural disaster, car accident, school shooting, or community violence or from within the family, such as domestic violence, physical or sexual abuse, or the unexpected death of a loved one. Almost half of the children in the United States – approximately 35 million (48%) – have experienced one or more types of trauma (National Survey of Children's Health 2011). One study found that 70 percent of children endure three or more adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) – highly stressful or traumatic events – by the time they reach six years old (Clarkson Freeman, 2014). Trauma is not the same as life stress as it causes intense fear, terror, or helplessness that is not normal for typical experiences. Common types of trauma include abuse and neglect, parental mental illness or substance abuse, prolonged separation, and serious injuries or painful medical procedures. Over time, this leads to chronic stress, which produces changes in the brain and is then linked to poor physical health and low

cognitive performance. Terr (1991) divided trauma-stress conditions of childhood into Type I

and Type II childhood trauma categories. Type I consists of a single, sudden, and unexpected

happenings, and Type II is the long-standing or repeated ordeals. Crossover of Type I-Type II

occurs when the stress of a single event creates a long-standing series of adversities. She referred

the Type I as simple, the Type II as complicated and defended that complicated traumas are more

difficult to treat than single events.

Wright (2017) deems that trauma is not an event in itself, but it is the reaction to

extremely stressful life circumstances. Trauma occurs when an external event overwhelms one's

ability to cope, leaving one temporarily helpless (Terr, 1991). If trauma is determined by the

reaction to an event rather than the details of the event, it is relevant that what may be traumatic

to one child may not be to another. Trauma is not only defined by the type of incident that

causes it, but also by the meaning the child attaches to it. Reactions to trauma can take on various

forms, including ongoing emotional issues, depression and anxiety, behavior changes, self-

regulation difficulties, attachment disorders, academic struggles, nightmares, and other physical

problems such as chronic aches and pains. Older children may use drugs or alcohol, have risky

behavior, and engage in unhealthy sexual activities. Traumatic stress can also lead to increased

use of health services, mental health services, and increased involvement with the child welfare

and juvenile justice systems. Young people exposed to chronic trauma had a higher risk of

dropping out of high school, according to Porche et al., (2011). Some adults may eventually

have difficulty in establishing relationships with others and maintaining employment. Both Terr

(1991) and DeBellis and Van Dillen (2005) have specified four characteristic reactions common

to forms of childhood trauma, including vivid memories repeatedly recalled, repetitive behaviors,

trauma-specific fears, and negative or changed attitudes about people and life. The ability to re-

see or re-feel an awful event or series of occasions is a response, as well as repeating the behavior that was traumatic such as child abuse or sexual misbehaviors. Fears related to traumatized children might include the dark, strangers, looming objects, being alone, being outside, food, animals, and vehicles. Most children have some type of fears; however, traumatic fears may linger well into adulthood. Thinking about the future and life is essential and ordinary in children, yet children with trauma have a sense of limited future and are guarded in their attitudes about people and their life in general.

By chance, even when children experience a traumatic event, many times, they do not always develop continuing traumatic effects. Many factors contribute to symptoms, including whether the child has experienced trauma in the past, and shielding factors at the child, family, and community levels can reduce the opposing effect of trauma. According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2000), some factors to consider:

> **The severity of the event.** How serious was the event? How badly was the child or someone she loves physically hurt? Did they or someone they love need to go to the hospital? Were the police involved? Were children separated from their caregivers? Were they interviewed by a principal, police officer, or counselor? Did a friend or family member die? (p. 1)

> **Proximity to the event.** Was the child actually at the place where the event occurred? Did they see the event happen to someone else, or were they a victim? Did the child watch the event on television? Did they hear a loved one talk about what happened? (p. 1)

Caregivers' reactions. Did the child's family believe that he or she was telling the truth? Did caregivers take the child's reactions seriously? How did caregivers respond to the child's needs, and how did they cope with the event themselves? (p. 1)

Prior history of trauma. Children continually exposed to traumatic events are more likely to develop traumatic stress reactions. (p. 1)

Family and community factors. The culture, race, and ethnicity of children, their families, and their communities can be a protective factor, meaning that children and families have qualities and or resources that help buffer against the harmful effects of traumatic experiences and their aftermath. One of these protective factors can be the child's cultural identity. Culture often has a positive impact on how children, their families, and their communities respond, recover, and heal from a traumatic experience. However, experiences of racism and discrimination can increase a child's risk for traumatic stress symptoms. (p. 1)

According to the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2014), trauma negatively impacts early brain development, learning, social-emotional development, ability to attach to others, and physical health. Young children who experience trauma show cognitive and language delays that place them at risk for early learning difficulties and later academic challenges (Stahmer, Hurlburt, Horwitz, Landsverk, Zhang, & Leslie, 2009). Childhood trauma leaves its marks on the brain (Sandi, 2013) with unseen scars, as evident in brain research (RB-Banks, & Meyer, 2017).

Trauma changes the brain and affects the capacity to acquire new cognitive information and retrieve stored information (Perry, 2006). These are both essential to function effectively with the educational system. Traumatized children may do poorly in school and then fail in the

one area that might have been safe, comfortable, and without trauma. Reduced self-confidence in academics and difficulties in learning may result in these children hating school and giving up on themselves. Fortunately, children are resilient, and their brains are flexible. Given the right conditions and appropriate interventions, the severity of trauma symptoms can be reduced (Davidson & McEwen, 2012).

The ACE Study

The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study had a difficult time gaining validity in the very place it was developed. In 1985, Vincent J. Felitti, MD, chief of the Kaiser Permanente Medical Program in San Diego, first made a startling discovery in patients that were grossly overweight or obese also had traumatic incidents in their childhood (Felitti et al., 1998). Later in 1990, Felitti presented his findings at a national obesity conference. He told his colleagues that he believed that many public health issues had core causes from life experiences that were kept hidden by shame, secrecy, and social taboos. Felitti was accused of making excuses for health issues. He pursued until an individual advised him at the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) to partner and did a study of patients with various health issues and not strictly obesity. Robert Anda, MD from CDC had been studying coronary heart disease and depression. The study was launched, and Felitti and Anda gave a questionnaire to 17,000 patients. The research was conducted in a primary setting to define the long-term association of childhood experiences to critical medical and public health problems. The questions focused on ten types of adversity or Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and investigated the patients' childhood and adolescent histories. Baseline data is used to get an overview of the occurrence and interrelation of introductions to childhood mistreatment and family dysfunction. Then the relationship is described between the number of categories of these harmful child exposures and risk factors and

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those diseases that trigger many of the primary reasons for death in adults (Felitti et al., 1998, p. 246).

The questionnaire used three categories of childhood abuse: psychological, physical, and sexual. There were four categories of exposure to household dysfunction during childhood: exposure to substance abuse, mental illness, violent treatment of mother or stepmother, and criminal behavior in the household. These seven categories of childhood exposures to abuse and household dysfunction were used for the analysis. The measure of childhood exposure was the sum of the categories with an exposure; thus, the possible number of exposures ranged from 0 (unexposed) to 7 (exposed to all categories) (Felitti et al., 1998). The study also assessed risk factors including smoking, severe obesity, physical inactivity, depressed mood, suicide attempts, alcoholism, drug abuse, parental drug abuse, a high number of sexual partners, and a history of sexually transmitted disease. The results of the study found a strong correlation between exposure to abuse or household dysfunction during childhood and multiple risk factors for several of the leading causes of death in adults. The ACEs have a robust and cumulative impact on adult health status.

The researchers wanted to explore how adverse childhood experiences directly linked to health risk behaviors and adult disease. Further research centered on behaviors such as smoking, alcohol or drug abuse, overeating, or sexual behaviors that may be consciously or unconsciously used for their abrupt benefits as coping devices to handle abuse, domestic violence, or other forms of family dysfunction. These behaviors tend to be repeatedly used as a solution to cope with the anxiety, anger, and depression that go along with dysfunction or abuse.

Since the inception of Fellitti and Anda's study, the ACE study has been used in recent research, although it has been slow to take hold in the literature other than in health areas.

Determining the prevalence of ACEs in a first-year undergraduate population (McGavock & Spratt, 2014) to childhood residential mobility to health problems and underlying ACEs (Dong, Anda, Felitti, Williamson, Dube, Brown, & Giles, 2005), the literature is not exhausted with studies on ACEs. The study conducted on the first-year undergraduate population was to explore the presence of ACEs and the association that the population had with social services. The individuals who had an ACE score of 4 or higher would be determined to receive prioritized social services. The study concluded that childhood adversity is common and widespread. Professionals must identify individuals who experience a high number of adversities as early as possible to implement interventions. Interventions may reduce the impact of the adversities and assist in resilience before physical and mental health is compromised.

The ACE study has been slightly altered from the original in that it now measures ten types of childhood trauma. Five are personal — physical abuse, verbal abuse, sexual abuse, physical neglect, and emotional neglect. Five are related to other family members: a parent who is an alcoholic, a mother who is a victim of domestic violence, a family member in jail, a family member diagnosed with a mental illness, and the disappearance of a parent through divorce, death or abandonment. Each type of trauma counts as one to total a score. (See Appendix A) There are many other types of childhood trauma — racism, bullying, watching a sibling being abused, losing a caregiver (grandmother, mother, grandfather), homelessness, surviving and recovering from a severe accident, witnessing a father being abused by a mother, witnessing a grandmother abusing a father, involvement with the foster care system, involvement with the juvenile justice system, and more. The ACE Study included only those ten childhood traumas because those were mentioned as the most common, and those traumas were also well studied individually in the research literature (Felitti et al., 1998).

Dong et al. (2005) set out to determine if childhood residential mobility affected health problems during adolescence and adulthood. The intent was also to explore the prevalence of ACEs and the frequency of mobility. The first finding in this study was the relationship between the frequency of childhood residential moves and harmful health outcomes, including early sexual activity, teen pregnancy, depression, attempted suicide, smoking, and alcoholism. The researchers discovered a strong relationship between residential mobility during childhood to ACEs. As the number of ACEs increased, residential mobility also amplified. They also determined that ACEs may be concealed among families with high residential mobility. The results of their study indicated a relationship between childhood residential mobility and adverse health outcomes due to the effects of a high frequency of ACEs.

Much of the research consists of studies on the relationship of ACEs to health outcomes. Giovanelli, Reynolds, Mondi, and Ou (2016) conducted a study to assess the impact of ACEs on educational attainment, socioeconomic status, crime, mental health, and health behavior in early adulthood. The researchers wanted to explore if cumulative ACEs predict multiple indicators of well-being, besides environmental and demographic risk. In this study, the children came from low-income, were minorities, and grew up in the inner city. The study was vastly different from much of the research and especially the original ACE study by Felitti et al. (1998) as it contained primarily white, educated, middle-income participants. The results of this study suggest that ACEs have harmful effects for previously unexamined measures of adult well-being, above and beyond the effects of environmental or poverty and demographic risk. Although tackling the negative impact of poverty is essential, high priority must be given to reducing the incidence of ACEs and offsetting their effects.

This study was imperative to the body of literature as very little research has been documented on ACEs and the link to educational attainment and socioeconomic status. This qualitative study contributed to the body of research as a quantitative method compiles numbers to compute a score. Less literature is found on the actual stories of the trauma survivors who report their ACE scores and the fallout as a result of high ACE scores, such as dropping out of school.

SEL and Trauma and the Connection to Dropping Out of School

Harris (1983) conducted a study on the possibility that potential dropouts in a Midwestern middle-class suburban community may have experienced significant trauma and may exhibit symptoms of psychosocial maladjustment. She explored the chance that students, who drop out or have the potential to drop out, may not merely be expressing boredom but may be indicating a need for help after being subjected to traumatic events. The results of the study indicated that 67% of the dropout population had been victimized by physical abuse, incest, or sexual assault and *97% of the dropout population had experienced at least one type of trauma*. Likewise, 49% of the dropouts had experienced three or more different types of trauma. The significant implication of the results of this study is the need for additional research. This study may have been the first of this association of trauma with high school dropouts. Unfortunately, this study, conducted in 1983, did not have much follow up until 1998 when Felitti and others conducted their research and termed ACEs. Even then, ACEs were tied to health problems and not so much with educational concerns.

A student's decision to drop out of school is often complicated and influenced by a multitude of factors, including individual, family, and school. One specific and vital factor moving ahead concerning school dropout is childhood trauma (Porche et al., 2011). Research

suggests that experiencing trauma during developmental periods of childhood can lead to toxic stress that "disrupts brain architecture, affects other organ systems, and leads to stress-management systems that establish relatively lower thresholds for responsiveness that persist throughout life, thereby increasing the risk of stress-related disease and cognitive impairment well into the adult years" (Shonkoff et al., 2009, p. 2256). Consequently, early experiences of trauma may hinder academic achievement and school success through the effect of these neurobiological systems. Educators need to know and understand this traumatic stress so they may help their students when they struggle and lack achievement in school. "Early traumatic stress affects psychological, social, and physiological development, which disrupts learning and academic achievement" (Porche et al., 2011, p. 983). A study explored the trauma experiences, or ACEs of students who had repeated ninth grade (Iachini, Petiwala, & DeHart, 2016). All but two students experienced at least one ACE, and the majority had experienced two or three ACEs. This study alone indicates the importance of assessing the trauma experiences of students who are at risk of dropping out. Digging into these experiences, hearing the stories, and learning about the effects is advantageous for educators and communities to assist these individuals. Early trauma may have a significant impact on academic achievement and put students at risk for dropping out, yet only a trifling of attention has been directed to educational support and intervention services. It is imperative that we more fully understand the experiences and provide support and strategies to help all students graduate with a high school diploma, even trauma survivors.

Research by Streeck-Fisher and van der Kolk (2000) describes chronic trauma as negative consequences for students' learning ability. Consequences include problems with attention, sensory perception, reduction in learning by experience, and memory problems.

Explaining the negative academic consequences following trauma and loss, Dyregrov (2004) included,

- intrusive material makes it hard to concentrate on school subjects

- change in information processing

- depression that slows down cognitive functions

- loss of motivation

- disturbing intrusive memories or fantasies interfere with concentration and memory

- difficult to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information

- moods overwhelm the ability to self-regulate and lead to behavior problems and control. (p. 80)

The home setting provides an essential foundation for building the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral skills involved in forming a connection to the school. Facing adversities in their home during the early childhood years, many children do not establish the needed emotional, cognitive, and behavioral skills. When children with trauma experiences begin school, the new environment may be challenging for them to handle due to insufficient stimulation to prepare for the academic and behavioral expectations at school, poor interpersonal skills may be at school, and new settings and people may be threatening and cause increased stress in children. Morrow and Villodas (2017) suggest that engagement may be critical for high school students with high ACEs who often lack external assets such as family support. They also examined other areas of engagement, such as reading achievement, emotional and behavioral problems, and peer influences. Their study confirmed that traumatic experiences contribute to the disruptions in developmental processes, thus causing effects on multiple domains of functioning, which

contribute to the dropout tendencies. They agreed that the relationship between trauma and dropouts is complicated. The researchers concluded that the prevention of dropouts of youth with trauma and high ACEs would require a personalized approach that considers a multitude of factors relating to the individual with regards to the emotional, cognitive, and behavior facets. Thus, there is a clear indication of a need for research that deepens our understanding of the relationship of trauma, SEL, and dropping out of school. It is here that this study helps fulfill a need in the literature, particularly for Kansas.

Filling a Need: Exploring the Intersection of Trauma, Social-emotional Learning, and Dropping Out in Kansas

While many studies have explored the numerous social factors associated with dropping out, particularly in the context of trauma and SEL, there is minimal literature that explicitly explores the intersection of all three topics in one study: trauma, SEL, and dropping out. Furthermore, many studies help us understand the variables that connect these topics, but they are often framed in a quantitative context that helps us comprehend the topic in a more general sense. However, these often fall short of doing an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences and socially constructed meanings behind those experiences as phenomenology seeks to accomplish. While there are numerous phenomenological studies including those that have explored high school dropouts' pursuit of higher learning (Englert, 2018), the lived experiences of high school dropouts with disabilities (Harris, 2016), meta-analysis of social-emotional learning outcomes (Ferrell, 2017), trauma in military personnel (Moravits, 2017), and childhood trauma and post-secondary success (Brogdon, 2015) – these studies did not explore the intersection of all three topics.

Furthermore, when one acknowledges that Kansas operates in a unique social, political, cultural, and economic context (as mentioned previously), the research specific to Kansas helps broaden our understanding; however, it is very anecdotal such as the Kansas DropINs data. Given Kansas' new emphasis on improving outcomes associated with SEL and high school graduation, there is specific need for literature that 1) operates at the intersection of three topics, 2) takes a deeper qualitative dive than what has already been done, and 3) broadens our understanding of a specific phenomenon that is directly connected to the five educational outcomes in Kansans Can.

Summary

The impact of trauma and the benefits of social-emotional learning have been widely researched. Many students do not drop out of school despite the traumatic events that have occurred in their lives. However, this does not mitigate the need for continued research regarding their experiences and the necessary need to know how to help these students. Several students who experience trauma develop methods to cope with and overcome the negative impact of the experience. Despite the challenges and negative experiences, students endure; they can and often are resilient.

Scholars have recognized the unpopular outcomes and ripple effects of traumatic events, and research has acknowledged the benefits of social-emotional learning; however, limited information was found on qualitative studies conducted on students who had dropped out and what this phenomenon was connected to. Given the movements such as Kansans Can and the pressure to increase graduation requirements, and the increase of trauma and SEL issues with students, it is imperative that scholars, practitioners, leaders, and policymakers better understand

the stories behind students' decisions to drop out of school. With more research conducted, real

reform can begin to occur, with all perspectives presented and understood.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Recall the purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of five childhood trauma survivors who dropped out of high school in central Kansas within the past three years. In particular, this study focused on understanding the participants' lived experiences and thought processes that led to dropping out, with a focus on exploring how the work of Durlak et al., (2011) with CASEL's SEL framework might be most applicable to deepening our understanding of these students' experiences. Furthermore, the methodological approach to this study was built in a manner that acknowledged that the participants each had a unique and contextualized understanding of their lived experiences related to trauma, SEL, and dropping out of high school. Therefore, the methods chosen were intended to take a deeper dive into finding the essence of those lived experiences as they saw it while acknowledging that I bring my subjectivities to the research.

In this chapter, I explained the theoretical frameworks that informed this study, along with how I used Moustakas' (1994) framework for phenomenological research design preparing, collecting, analyzing, and representing the data. Seidman (2013) also contributed a decent amount of information on interviewing, analyzing, interpreting, and sharing the interview material. Furthermore, I addressed topics related to academic rigor and trustworthiness, subjectivities, and ethics associated with researching participants who have experienced trauma.

Research Questions

The following questions guided this study:

1. How do participants describe the role of childhood trauma in their social-emotional learning and the decision to drop out of school?

2. How do participants describe the influence of school, family, and community on their social-emotional learning and decision to drop out of school?

Rationale for Qualitative Study

According to Bhattacharya (2017), qualitative research "aims to work within the context of human experiences and how meaning is made out of these experiences" (p. 6) and because individuals experience the world based on their perceptions and interpretations (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013) a qualitative approach was most appropriate. Fundamentally, this was a study of human experience and differed from various quantitative approaches (Moustakas, 1994). Qualitative methodology is described as allowing for information to be gathered, analyzed, and interpreted in a manner adding to the understanding of complex human experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Qualitative research provided an excellent opportunity to gain new insights, a more in-depth understanding, and the development of new theories on a phenomenon, by engaging in an extended conversation with participants and learning more about their actual, lived-experiences with the phenomenon (O'Brien, Harris, Beckman, Reed, & Cook, 2014).

Qualitative studies are usually conducted through prolonged personal contact with the participants and in this study, through in-depth interviewing. The interview, which I describe in-depth later in this chapter, was used as a means for exploring and gathering experiential material (Seidman, 2013 & Van Manen, 2014). In this study, I used phenomenological interviews (DeMarrais & Kaplan, 2003) to better understand the essences of individuals' lived experiences rather than through the use of quantitative measurements or instruments. As described in Chapter 2, substantive quantitative research has already been done on the topics of dropping out, trauma and ACEs, and SEL, yet a deeper qualitative dive into their stories has yet to be done at the intersection of all three topics, particularly in Kansas.

This qualitative interview approach was chosen since a comprehensive understanding of the students who have experienced the intersection of these topics required a deep descent into the stories of those individuals (Patton, 2015) and qualitative interviews are the most appropriate for exploring students' experiences (Bitektine & Miller, 2015). Their lived experiences provided new knowledge into understanding how trauma and social-emotional learning may have contributed to the lengthy decision making and experiences that led to their dropping out of school. This knowledge, in addition to teaching and learning of social-emotional competencies in the educational, family, and community settings, may be beneficial so that all students can complete their diploma, even trauma survivors. Furthermore, as Denzin and Lincoln (2005) describe, there is a "crisis of praxis" (p. 20) in which traditional research can often become trapped in the traditions and language of academia and fail to translate to actual representation. Qualitative research such as this helps bridge the gap with deeper reliance on human stories, which can sometimes better connect with practitioners.

Standards to Address Quality Research

Since qualitative research is fundamentally trying to build knowledge and understanding in ways that are different from quantitative research, it should be assessed by a different set of standards. Tracy (2010) presents eight criteria of quality qualitative research referred to as *Big Tent* criteria. This can be used to assess what good qualitative research looks like, and I wanted my work to be considered under these criteria:

- Worthy topic – The research topic is interesting, timely, relevant, and significant. It is avoidant of obvious and well-established concepts and not completed out of convenience.

- Rich rigor – Spending time to gather significant data and then to have an effective method to analyze the data is indicative of a rigorous study. The study should be reasonable and appropriate with time, effort, and be thorough and complete.

- Sincerity – Displaying transparency and honesty about the subjectivities, goals, and challenges of the research are keys to sincerity. Self-reflexivity helps researchers to look at their strengths and areas of improvement and to be transparent about the research process.

- Credibility – Good quality research is dependable with thick descriptions and explicit detail. Obtaining multiple points of data, viewpoints, theoretical frameworks, and looking at the data with various lenses increases the credibility of the research.

- Resonance – When the research affects an audience, transferability is achieved, and the merits are meaningful and valuable. The impact may promote empathy and identity with the research even if the reader has no experience with the topic.

- Significant Contribution – The research subsidizes knowledge and practice and is noteworthy and useful. It supplements the research and may also be new and insightful.

- Ethical – A variety of ethical practices must be addressed, including procedural, situational, relational, and exiting ethics. Researchers must be cognizant of how they treat human subjects, cultures, be respectful and mindful in their study, and how the results are shared.

- Meaningful Coherence – The study must accomplish what it sets out to do, use procedures that align with the goals, and connect the design, data collection, and analysis with the framework and goals.

Methodological Framework: Phenomenology

Qualitative research seeks to explore the meaning of human experience or aims at exploring the meaning of an experienced phenomenon (Van Manen, 2014). Phenomenology accounts for people's understanding of their lived experience of a phenomenon. Bhattacharya (2017) describes a fundamental idea of phenomenology is "if we had experienced a phenomenon in our past, as we recall our experiences, then perhaps we can find possibilities for new ways of understanding those experiences through making new meanings and gaining new insights" (p. 64). This study employed a qualitative, phenomenological interview design to explore the lived experiences of high school dropouts, who had experienced trauma in their lives and to understand the decisions that led up to their leaving school without a diploma.

Phenomenology: History, Foundations, and Purpose

Phenomenological research seeks to deeply describe the meaning of individuals and their lived experiences (Creswell, 2007). Van Manen (2014) and Moustakas (1994), leading phenomenological researchers, described phenomenology in the context of qualitative research not as merely a problem to be solved or a research question to answer, but as a study of human experience through a process of discovery and wonder. From the collection of data through individual interviews, I explored all aspects of the lived experiences, encouraging participants to share aspects of their childhood trauma along with their educational experiences and their thoughts leading up to the decision to drop out of school. The interviews were designed to understand the essence of their experiences better and work to understand better how they constructed the meaning behind these life experiences.

Phenomenology has its roots in the works of Edmund Husserl, a German mathematician, at the start of the 20th century (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Phenomenology and other

European continental philosophies of the period were in direct contrast to the analytic philosophical traditions of England and the United States that emphasized the importance of scientific, empirical analysis of analytic philosophy. Husserl contended that the constructed reality of an experience is dependent on the person enduring the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology has a history of more than one hundred years of development through the work of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995), Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1907-1960), Clark Moustakas (1923-2012), Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005), (Sokolowski, 1934-present), and (Van Manen, 1942-present).

Van Manen (2014) described phenomenology as a method of reflecting on existence as the lived experiences of humans. The phenomenologist's primary focus is to investigate the lived experiences of individuals, reflecting on life as experienced. According to Van Manen, "There is nothing more meaningful than the quest for the origin, presentation and meaning of meanings" (p. 27). He deliberates further in that phenomenology pertains to the unique essence of an event, and a phenomenological question explores what happens in times of experiences as we live through them. Moran (2000) describes phenomenology as a methodology that "emphasizes the attempt to get to the truth of matters, to describe phenomena, in the broadest sense as whatever appears in the manner in which it appears" (p. 4). Its purpose can be described as "what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and can provide a comprehensive experience of it" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). The individuals in the study have the first-hand experience with the phenomenon of dropping out of high school and have experienced trauma in their lives. Patton (2002) describes the meaning of the individual lived experience "how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with

others" (p. 104). Savin-Baden & Major (2013) terms it, including "thoughts, images, and feelings" (p. 215). Phenomenology has become a widely used approach in the social sciences due to its strong philosophical component and emphasis on *how and what* an individual experiences during a phenomenon. The goal of phenomenology is to identify and understand the meaning of a phenomenon.

Hermeneutic phenomenology seeks to gain a better understanding of everyday experiences, precisely their nature or meaning (Van Manen, 1990). It is a reflection of an experience that has already passed or has already been lived. Processing through a hermeneutic phenomenology requires the researcher to have serious interest in the phenomenon, investigate the experience as it was lived, reflect on essential themes, describe the phenomenon by writing and rewriting, maintain a strong orientation to the phenomenon, and balance the research context by comparing parts to the whole (Van Manen, 1990). Furthermore, hermeneutic phenomenology implies that multiple realities exist and that individual meanings given to experiences need to be studied. Therefore, to interpret the lived experiences of the participants in this study and to describe and interpret their meanings, the use of a hermeneutic phenomenology was deemed appropriate.

"I interview because I am interested in other people's stories" (Seidman, 2013, p. 7). The study used multiple cycles of interviews with data gathered in each cycle, informing the interview questions for the next. The interviews allowed for a much deeper exploration of a phenomenon than that beyond the capacity of quantitative research. This phenomenological study was aimed at better understanding the essences of the experiences of these trauma survivors, their social-emotional learning environments, and their decisions to drop out of school. In using this theoretical approach, I wanted to provide detailed descriptions of their

experiences so that it might allow others to understand what these individuals experienced in their lives and how it might have affected their decision to drop out of school. "At the heart of interviewing research in an interest in other individuals' stories because they are of worth" (Seidman, 2013, p. 9). Overall, their stories might also offer a more comprehensive understanding of how social-emotional learning has a connection to completing high school and earning a diploma.

Research Design

The research design process describes how I collected, analyzed, and organized the data using Moustakas' (1994) seven methods to guide a well-planned study. A full schedule of the research design can be found in Appendix B, which incorporated most of these procedural steps identified by Moustakas:

1. Discovering a topic and question rooted in autobiographical meanings and values, as well as involving social meanings and significance;

2. Conducting a comprehensive review of the professional and research literature;

3. Constructing a set of criteria to locate appropriate co-researchers;

4. Providing co-researchers with instructions on the nature and purpose of the investigation, and developing an agreement that includes obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, and delineating the responsibilities of the primary researcher and research participants, consistent with ethical principles of research;

5. Developing a set of questions or topics to guide the interview process;

6. Conducting and reporting a lengthy person-to-person interview that focuses on a bracketed topic and question. A follow-up interview may also be needed;

7. Organizing and analyzing the data to facilitate the development of individual textural and structural descriptions, a composite textural description, a composite structural description, and a synthesis of textural and structural meanings and essences. (p. 103)

Step 1: Identify a Topic

The first procedural step of a phenomenological research study is to identify a topic or question that has rooted personal meaning and value to determine if a phenomenological approach is appropriate for the research problem. As a former school counselor and an administrator (my subjectivities as described in Chapter 1), I selected research questions that have significance and are meaningful in my career path and educational field. This topic is personal and meaningful to me, as well as timely and relevant to education.

Step 2: Review of Literature

The second procedural step involves conducting a comprehensive review of related academic literature. In Chapter 2, I reviewed literature related to high school dropouts, trauma, and social-emotional learning with particular attention to its relevance to Kansas.

Step 3: Identify Co-Researchers

The third procedural step is to identify research participants who have experienced the phenomenon under study. Through purposeful sampling, I identified five trauma survivors who have dropped out of high school and are now taking classes to obtain their high school diploma at adult learning centers in central Kansas. Purposeful sampling was used for this study in that it was needed to fit the specific lived experiences identified in the study; students who have experienced the phenomena of dropping out of high school and experienced trauma in their lives. Purposeful sampling is widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom,

Duan, Hoagwood. 2015). Purposeful sampling provides specifics as to who will be selected to participate in the study, how many participants are needed, and what locations would serve the study most adequately (Creswell, 2007). Also, Creswell (2007) urges researchers engaged in a phenomenological study to choose participants who can reflect on and provide full descriptions of their lived experiences.

Furthermore, Creswell (2013) explains how the focus of a phenomenological research study is on the shared experiences of people. It is crucial that the participants are not only familiar with a joint event or experience but can articulate their perceptions. This type of research is personal and intimate, and because of its' nature, the optimal size is determined by the experience. The number of participants may be 3-5 or up to 10-15 (Creswell, 2013). It was vital for me to find students who were willing to divulge information about their lives and be able to "reconstruct" (Seidman, 2013, p. 90) their experiences to me. Thus, I wanted to seek out five young adults who dropped out within the last three years, but who had also begun the process of pursuing their high school diploma.

Specifically, I was looking for students who fit the following criteria:

1) The student must have dropped out in the last three years and be actively enrolled in a program to obtain their high school diploma;

2) The student must have an ACE score of 3 or higher (described below);

3) The student must be willing to divulge personal information about their traumatic past.

Recruitment of all participants was accomplished by email contact (see Appendix C) with the coordinators of all adult learning centers in central Kansas who shared a common demographic and geographic profile to one another serving rural populations. Initial contact was made by emailing adult learning center directors pursuing permission to find students willing to

participate in this study. I was able to secure the purposeful sample of five participants through this method.

After contacting the adult learning center directors, I traveled to each center to begin the process of recruiting participants who fit my criteria by using a short questionnaire and the ACE survey. Questionnaires can assist in collecting demographic information from the participants that are relevant to the study (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2010). The first thing I did was to administer a short questionnaire seeking to identify 1) the year the student dropped out, 2) gender, and 3) socioeconomic status (see Appendix D). The questionnaire helped me determine participants who best fit my criteria above, and it allowed me to group particular demographic profiles. Next, those same students were given an ACE survey (see Appendix A) to determine their ACE score and learn more about the types of trauma they have experienced. It is noted that I am not quantitatively analyzing the results; however, I just used the survey to identify participants who fit my selection criteria so that I would have enough information to group like-participants if possible.   The survey was essential to identify participants best suited for this study. According to ACEs Too High (2012), there are ten types of trauma measured in the ACE survey:

> Five are personal – physical abuse, verbal abuse, sexual abuse, physical neglect, and emotional neglect. Five are related to other family members: a parent who is an alcoholic, a mother who is a victim of domestic violence, a family member in jail, a family member diagnosed with a mental illness, and the disappearance of a parent through divorce, death or abandonment. (p. 1)

Each type of trauma counts as one. Participants were asked to be in my study if they had an ACE score of three or higher. As stated previously, Harris (1983) found that 49% of the dropouts had experienced three or more different types of trauma and ACES Too High (2012)

also indicated a score of three or higher likely increased the risk of disease, social, and emotional problems in one's life. According to the Child Welfare Information Gateway (2015), more than three ACEs between birth and age 18 can disrupt brain development and limit social, emotional and cognitive functioning and are the root cause of many serious academic, social and behavioral problems that have the potential to prevent a child from receiving the full benefits of education. During participant selection, I chose to have at least three ACEs as the threshold to help align this study with the research above. In summary, the goal was to have five participants identified within four targeted adult learning centers in central Kansas.

Step 4: Interview Protocol

In the fourth step, questions were developed, and an interview protocol was established that aligned with the research purpose and research questions. The protocol considered appropriate open-ended approaches to interview questions along with suitable locations for face-to-face interviews.

By interview location, I am describing the physical location where the interview is carried out and the social context in which the exchange of information between research and participant takes place (Elwood & Martin, 2000; Herzog, 2005). Interview location can be defined as both a physical *space* and a *place* where dynamics, social relations, and meanings unfold in multiple ways. The interview is not just an opportunity to gather information by asking questions and engaging in conversation but is also an opportunity for participant observation. According to Elwood and Martin (2000), there are many means that interview locations provide insights into a research project. During an interview, it is essential to consider the physical attributes of the site and to observe the people who are present and their interactions with each other and with the interview participant. It is necessary to take notes about the surroundings

before, during, and after the interviews. Herzog (2005) contends the interview becomes simultaneously part of the knowledge, and of the process by which that knowledge emerged from the issues addressed in the study. These, in turn, became an integral part not only of the findings and their analysis but also of the construction of the reality under study.

It is most evident that conducting the interviews at the adult learning center where the individuals are going to school would be quite different from conducting them at the school location where they dropped out of school. The location was fundamental in how I approached the individuals compared to how I conduct typical interviews in schools when a student discusses the idea of dropping out of school. Also, while this research design does not employ formal observations, these observations before, during, and after the interviews were documented through note-taking, analytic memos, and were considered while journaling.

I offered to conduct the interviews either at the adult learning centers or at another location convenient to the student. All the participants chose to use the learning centers as the interview location. It was essential to allow them to choose the location where they felt comfortable and were in a safe environment enabling them to share in-depth information.

I invited each participant to ask questions they had about the expectations of the study, their role as participants, or anything else that could arise. Once each participant felt all questions were answered satisfactorily, I asked them to sign an informed consent form that also guaranteed confidentiality (see Appendix E) and provided them a copy with both of our signatures. The consent form was needed to participate in the study and to have the interviews recorded. Later in this chapter, I explain further the ethical considerations in the study. This step concluded after obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, agreeing to place and time commitments, and obtaining permission to record and publish collected data (Moustakas, 1994).

After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board, I proceeded with the proposed study.

Step 5: Develop Questions

The fifth step was to develop a set of questions to guide the interview process. To dive deep into their lived experiences, I utilized open-ended questions that allowed the participants to communicate how they have constructed their understanding of their decision to drop out, without leading questions that led to my subjectivities overly influencing the data. Borrowing from Seidman's (2013) framework for in-depth, open-ended, phenomenological interviewing, I conducted three separate interviews with each. Seidman (2013) describes these steps as:

1. Focused Life History: "In the first interview, the interviewer's task is to put the participant's experience in context by asking him or her to tell as much as possible about him or herself in light of the topic up to the present time" (p. 21). The context of the participants' experiences was established;

2. The Details of the Experience: "The purpose of the second interview is to concentrate on the concrete details of the participants' present lived experience in the topic area of the study" (p. 21). The participants were asked to reconstruct the details of their experiences;

3. Reflection on the Meaning: "In the third interview, we ask participants to reflect on the meaning of their experience" (p. 21). The participants were asked to focus on their understanding of their experience.

Within these three interviews, each one lasting approximately 30-60 minutes, I remained flexible, making allowances for the natural unfolding of student responses to the open-ended questions that were written. According to Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009), a range of six to ten open-ended questions along with prompts should be scheduled. An interview guide and

questions for these interviews can be found in Appendix F. To explore students' experiences

fully; an allowance was made for follow-up questions as well. According to Seidman (2013),

when using an in-depth interviewing approach, the key to asking questions "is to let them follow,

as much as possible, from what the participant is saying" (p. 84). Seidman (2013) discusses

further that "while interviewers may develop present interviewing guides to which they will refer

when the timing is right, interviewers' initial basic work in this approach to interviewing is to

listen actively and to move the interview forward as much as possible by building on what the

participant has begun to share" (p. 84). Probing or exploring is the skill of following up with a

question on what the participant has said in order to go deeper into the interviewee's response

and gain a deeper understanding of what the interviewee is saying (Patton, 2002; Seidman,

2013). My experiences of being a school counselor aided tremendous in this approach, and I had

no difficulty keeping the interview going or getting the participants to continue with their stories.

Step 6: Individual Interviews

The sixth procedural step was to conduct, record, and transcribe interviews with research

participants. After I obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board - IRB and completed

the informed consent, I began the data collection process through individual interviews.

Before the interview, I informally chatted with the participants about the study and

explained how the interview would be conducted. I attempted to establish somewhat of a rapport

with the participants; however, according to Seidman (2013), "the rapport an interviewer must

build in an interviewing relationship needs to be controlled. It must be marked by respect,

interest, attention, and good manners on the part of the interviewer. As in teaching, the

interviewing relationship can be friendly but … not a friendship" (p. 99). I let them know that I

hoped the interviews would flow like a conversation without awkwardness and that I would do

all I could to help them feel relaxed and answer all questions or concerns they might have. All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed.

To gain an understanding of the lived experiences of these individuals, I conducted in-depth interviews to investigate the lived experiences of the participants and to create a particular understanding of the world using their voices (Noblit, Flores, & Murillo, 2004). I found support from Clandinin and Connelly (2000) for the inclusion of a personal narrative voice into the research writing. Tips and strategies for compelling interviews were taken from Bhattacharya (2017), DeMarrais and Lapan (2003), Seidman (2013), and Spradley (1979) with the interview protocol outlined in Appendix B. Specific protocols I gleaned from these scholars included: 1) Keep the interview conversational, 2) Ask more open-ended questions instead of closed-ended questions, 3) Be mindful of subjectivities and take appropriate notes throughout the interview process, 4) Be comfortable with silence, and 5) Be mindful of nonverbal communication.

These interviews were audio-recorded with consent from the participant, and I took notes during the interviews that were primarily focused on my role as an active listener and facilitator. My notes were intended to document behaviors, such as nods of agreement or nervous actions that do not translate in audio form. Based on the work of Creswell (2013); Moustakas (1994); and Seidman (2013), participants were asked to "reconstruct" what they experienced in terms of the phenomenon (dropping out of school) and what circumstances and settings may have impacted their experiences with the phenomenon. Seidman (2013) suggests, "Avoid asking participants to rely on their memories. Ask participants not to remember their experience but rather to reconstruct it" (p. 90).

By scheduling follow-up appointments with each participant, I provided the student with opportunities to validate or correct their transcribed interview responses, a process otherwise

known as member checks. Member checking is basically what the term implies – an opportunity for the participants (members) to approve (check) particular aspects of the interpretation of the data they provided (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The completed transcriptions would have been shared with each participant to verify the accuracy of the participant's description of his or her experience with the phenomenon. However, not one of the participants wanted to meet to member check. All of them expressed confidence in me that I would ensure their stories were being told accurately and appropriately, and they would be properly represented.

Step 7: Organizing and Analyzing the Data

The final step in conducting a phenomenological study was to organize and analyze the data. Research completed with in-depth interviewing is labor and toil intensive. Due to the vast amount of data I collected, I was unsure how the process might unfold.

To work with the material that interviewing produces, the first step in organizing the data is transcribing the audio to text. The advantage of having the recordings was that I could preserve the words of each participant and always refer back to them to check for accuracy. After each interview, I transcribed the recording verbatim with the use of the online software *Trint*. *Trint* is software that allowed me to upload the recordings and then transcribes them for a fee into a Microsoft Word document. I listened to the recordings and cross-checked the accuracy and edited if needed, the transcription produced by *Trint*. Transcription provided me a deeper understanding and familiarity with the data, and according to Crotty (1998), a review of participants' responses reveal the essence of the phenomenon under study.

Upon completing the transcription, the data was organized and analyzed using the NVivo (2015) software. NVivo is a qualitative data analysis software package produced by QSR International. It has been designed for qualitative researchers working with vibrant text-based

and multimedia information, where deep levels of analysis on small or large volumes of data are required. Due to the amount of data collected through the interviews, the real challenge is bringing it all together in a meaningful way. For this study, NVivo software gave me a place to organize, store, and retrieve information so I could work more efficiently, save time, and back up all the findings with complete evidence.

A tremendous amount of text is created through in-depth interviewing, and in order to make sense out of this data, it must be reduced to what is most significant and of interest to the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Creswell, 2014; Seidman, 2013). Reducing the material can be a complicated process because the researcher must let go of some of the data that has been collected. When in doubt about what to keep and what to omit, it is better to err on the side of including data (Seidman, 2013). According to Seidman, the reduction process must be done inductively, not deductively. The researcher must be open to what emerges from the text and not enter the process with a preconceived mindset.

I listened to the recordings in between interviews but did not analyze the information. I only wanted to determine if topics needed further exploration and possibly help shape second and third-round interview questions. Tentative interpretations began as soon as the interviews started, documented by an ongoing stream of notes taken before, during, and after interviews. It was not until I finished all three interviews did I begin to analyze the textual information.

This process of identifying what may be essential, categorizing it, and organizing it is referred to as coding, which involves selecting parts of texts and labeling those texts using descriptive detail that reflects an interpretive understanding of the researcher (Saldaña, 2013; Seidman, 2013). I used Nvivo to code words and passages from the text that were interesting and seemed significant to the study. These codes were then put together into categories as a way

to look for any patterns, with the expectation that the categories will continually evolve and merge as broader connections are made (Saldaña, 2013).

All the transcripts were put through a process of coding, categorizing, and theming through which I tried to find the essence of their lived experiences as it related to the research purpose and questions. As I sorted the data, I searched for "connecting threads and patterns among the excerpts within the categories and for connections among the various categories which might be called themes" (Seidman, 2013, p. 127). Then the interviews can be presented in a thematically organized manner.

I used memos and journaling to write reflections on these themes, all of which were stored in NVivo alongside the transcripts. The memos and journals allowed me to explore deeper into my interpretations of the data, while at the same time become more aware of my subjectivities. All transcriptions were first examined for "significant statements" and then "clusters of meaning" from which these significant statements were documented into emerging themes (Creswell, 2013, p. 82).

The Role of the Researcher: Acknowledging Insider-Outsider Dynamics

The role of a qualitative researcher is complex and multifaceted. Dwyer and Buckle (2009) discussed researchers who are members of the population being studied and those outside of that group. Both positions have advantages and disadvantages and need to be considered in the design of a qualitative study. However, Dwyer and Buckle (2009) discuss that a competent qualitative researcher does not have to be an insider or an outsider:

> Instead, we posit that the core ingredient is not an insider or outsider status but an ability
> to be open, authentic, and honest, genuinely interested in the experience of one's research

participants, and committed to accurately and adequately representing their expertise. (p. 59)

As stated previously, I am not an insider in that I have not suffered trauma, nor did I drop out of high school. However, I have a close connection to the context with many years' experience as a high school counselor. Fay (1996) explained that you do not "need to be one to know one" (p. 20). He gathers that one does not need to be part of the group that is being studied to know the experiences of the group. Sometimes individuals are so caught up in their experiences that an outside person can better understand the experiences. Also, an outside person can weave through the complex issues that the individual may not be able to. A person looking in from the outside, such as I, can give another perspective and be able to have a clear picture of what the person is trying to reveal and describe.

I have worked in education for 32 years in Kansas, with 17 of those years in high school administration. None of the participants in the study have a direct relationship with me that represented a conflict of interest that may have imparted subjectivity on the study. With my background in school counseling and administration, I was confident that I had been trained in the skills necessary to carry out the study. Kansas state statutes require students and (if under 18) an adult guardian to participate in an exit interview with the school. I have worked extensively with many students who have considered or decided to drop out of school. I believe the work I have done with these students has enhanced my knowledge, recognition, and sensitivity to the elements of this study. Hoping to have a pre-existing understanding of the participants, the process of recollecting, and sharing their experiences with me will likely be less stressful and reduce anxiety. As Dwyer and Buckle (2009) explain, "The benefit to being a member of the group that one is studying is acceptance. One's membership automatically

provides a level of trust and openness in your participants that would likely not have been present otherwise" (p. 58). Limitations present themselves in that I was not a high school dropout, and I did not experience trauma in my childhood. However, I have a strong association and possibly an understanding of the participants based on my many years of experience in school counseling and administration. I have personally participated in at least 50 such interviews throughout the years of educational work. It is essential to point out a distinct difference in these interviews and the interviews I conducted with my participants. When meeting with high school students considering dropping out of school, I work diligently to understand their situation but also hold a motive to persuade them not to decide to quit school. In this study, staying faithful to phenomenology, my motive was now entirely focused on going deeper in trying to only understand their lived experiences around the series of decisions to drop out. It was different as I was not trying to convince them to stay in school anymore but understand their experiences. It was imperative that the participants understood my role as a researcher and not as a school administrator or official passing judgment on decisions they have made in their past. I communicated that information explicitly at the beginning, and I believe all the participants understood and respected that.

I was hopeful that the participants found it helpful to be interviewed by someone familiar with their circumstances and that I would understand the terminology and experiences they are revealing even though I was not a high school dropout, and I did not experience trauma in my childhood. The conversations of the topic were able to flow unimpeded, and participants were not distracted by having to explain the minute details to me.

Although qualitative research inherently carries assumptions associated with the purpose and desire to delve into a topic of study, taking specific steps to expose the assumptions serves to

lessen the limitations and account for them (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Further limitations are identified in this study. First, as the researcher, I brought assumptions to the research study because interest in this topic stems from the direct observation of the decision making of students who drop out of school. I believe more should be done in the educational process to address trauma issues and enhance social-emotional learning for students. Coinciding with the Kansans Can movement, I hope that Kansas education places emphasis on these topics as schools work towards the outcomes in this new vision.

Second, because generalizability is often not the focus of qualitative researchers, the research study was relatively small, and the potential of generalizing outcomes was limited (Creswell, 2013). The sampling location was restricted to adult learning centers in central Kansas. Moreover, participants primarily represented young adults who had dropped out within the last three years.

Methodological Considerations which Acknowledge Researcher Subjectivities

Researcher subjectivities were outlined in Chapter 1; however, here I discussed them individually in the context of methods. Working effectively with individuals who have dropped out of high school often requires a person to suspend his or her personal beliefs. Doing so involves a conscious acknowledgment of one's subjectivities and personal experience to listen to the participant's narrative. If I can do this without rendering personal judgment but instead focusing on the presentation of information, I have a better chance of helping them indeed recollect the experiences. Creswell (2013) states qualitative research methods such as phenomenology should be used to "empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices and minimize the power relationships that often exist between the researcher and participants in a

study" (p. 48). My story is not the same as the participants in the study. I am not the same person.

I kept a reflective journal and worked with professionals in education to monitor my subjectivities. Both Patton (2002) and Creswell (2013) stated that a necessary step in the phenomenological study is a phenomenological reduction or bracketing. Bracketing involves analyzing the data removed from the context. The researcher isolates the information in search of underlying connections, themes, and relevance. In this process, the researcher hopes to find the essence of the phenomenon. Preconceived notions are put aside to look for a more in-depth understanding (Creswell, 2013). Data is not framed or analyzed by the literature; instead, new perspectives emerge from the study of the phenomenon (Patton, 2002). Because of my professional positions as an administrator and as a counselor, I recognized personal subjectivities I had regarding education and its processes. A research journal was kept through the duration of the data collection phase of this study (Moustakas, 1994). I took notes and revisited them, so the experiences of the participants are captured with an acute eye on whether or not my judgments influenced the findings. As I examined my notes, I reflected on my own "biases and prejudgments," so I could have "authentic encounters" with each participant (Moustakas, 1994, p. 89). During this process, I wrote out my subjectivities and prejudgments as I became aware of their existence and worked diligently not to allow them to affect my discoveries.

I spent significant time in reflection both before and after I interviewed participants, paying careful attention to each thought I had, related to the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). I journaled after each interview and specifically wrote down personal feelings I had regarding the participants' stories. Those journals were analyzed alongside the interview transcripts. I also made notes and reminders to ask, clarify, and explain more clearly the next time I interviewed

them so as not to render my own opinions or judgments. Consideration was given to each thought that did not relate to the phenomena, and they were dismissed (Moustakas, 1994). At this stage, I gained new perspectives on drop out decisions by trauma survivors.

Reciprocity and Ethical Considerations

I confirmed that ethics remained a top priority throughout this study. I obtained IRB approval from Kansas State University before collecting data. An informed consent form was given and reviewed with each participant before the interview. The letter of Informed Consent followed U.S. federal guidelines, as outlined by Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (2008) including "a fair explanation of procedures, description of risks reasonably to be expected, a description of benefits reasonably to be expected, an offer of inquiry regarding the procedures, and an instruction that the person is free to withdraw" (p. 75). The risks to human subjects associated with this study were minimal. All participants were over 18 years of age and did not demonstrate any impaired mental capacity, as determined by their ability to continue to work on completing their high school diploma at the adult learning centers. All recorded materials will be erased after five years, following final approval by the research committee, minimizing any future risks related to confidentiality.

I was hopeful that I could quickly develop a rapport with the participants, and they might regard me as a positive role model in their lives. I anticipated they might have issues with their childhood upbringing or their schooling regarding not having a mentor to help them or assist them with problems they had throughout their childhood. The participants had the option of selecting a pseudonym to ensure anonymity if they chose to. I was prepared to direct them to appropriate agencies for them to seek assistance, such as professional counseling if they desired.

Ethical standards were followed throughout this study using the American School Counselor Association Ethical Standards for School Counselors - ASCA (2016).

> ASCA specifies the obligation to the principles of ethical behavior necessary to maintain the high standards of integrity, leadership, and professionalism. The ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors were developed in consultation with state school counseling associations, school counselor educators, school counseling state and district leaders and school counselors across the nation to clarify the norms, values, and beliefs of the profession. (p. 1)

Maintenance of the standards served as a guide for ethical behavior and responsibility, as well as providing support, guidance, and direction to me as a counselor, educator, and administrator. One of the specific standards of this study included my responsibility to the students. Keeping respect and dignity as a priority for all individuals, regardless of their beliefs, values, race, religion, and background maintained at the forefront at all times.

Summary

The goal of this chapter was to outline the research method and design of this phenomenological study. A discussion of the procedure, participants, data collection, and interview questions outlined the specifics of how the study was conducted and who participated in the study. Data analysis procedures were justified. Ethical considerations and trustworthiness factors were attended to and presented. A phenomenology approach was used to deeply understand the experiences and perceptions of high school dropouts who had experienced trauma; what factors or conditions led them to the decision to leave high school.

Chapter 4 Findings

In Chapter 4, I began by presenting information that helps describe the participants in this study. I introduced all the participants, providing information not only about their schooling but also about their home life and experiences through childhood. This information helps provide context to the research findings as they relate to the lived experiences of the participants. Following the participant overview, I share more information from the group, including the ACES and trauma they have experienced, to get a thorough understanding of their lives.   It is also essential to explain my subjectivities as a principal and counselor to this study in this chapter.   A discussion on the understanding I gained from the participants' stories follows with meaningful quotes and anecdotes for support. Finally, I connect the trauma endured by these participants, the social-emotional learning, and the decisions that led up to leaving school without a high school diploma.

Overview of the Participants: Stories of Trauma, Chaos, and Instability

My study started with five participants; however, I ended with four participants who completed all three interviews. One participant, Renee, very much wanted to partake but did not complete her final interview due to various reasons: she was struggling financially, having issues with her boyfriend, and not attending school very often. Even though her interview was incomplete, I felt she was still a vital participant in the study, and she expressed how she wanted to be a part of it. Both of her interviews were long and she gave an enormous amount of relevant information. Each of these participants is currently a student attending an adult learning center in central Kansas to complete their high school diploma.

Furthermore, all of the participants had dropped out of high school within the last three years and had an ACE score of three or higher. As a reminder, the ACE score is the number of

adverse childhood experiences as determined by the CDC-Kaiser Permanente ACEs Study (Felitti et al., 1998). For my study, I wanted to better understand the experiences of participants with an ACE score of three; however, I ended up with all participants having five or more, as shown in Table 3.   To preserve confidentiality and, at the same time provide rich, relevant data, the participants were given a pseudonym, and identifying material was removed for all schools, education centers, teachers, and other relevant people or places.

The participants included three men and two women. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 22 years old. None of them were married, but three were living with a domestic partner, one lived by himself, and the other one lived with an aunt. Over five weeks, I conducted three interviews at the adult learning center they were attending with each participant, except Renee, who I only interviewed twice.

Table 3.

Participants

	Ashley	**Darren**	**Harrison**	**Bethany**	**Renee**
Age	19	21	18	22	19
Gender	Female	Male	Male	Female	Female
SES	Free Lunch	Free Lunch	Free Lunch	Free Lunch	Free Lunch
ACES	6	5	7	6	5

Ashley: "You can't believe everything I've been through in my life"

Ashley was the first participant I interviewed. She is a 19-year-old girl with very crooked teeth, disheveled hair, and dirty, torn clothing. It appeared she had maybe slept in her clothes and came to school without brushing her hair or doing much of anything to herself this morning. She started extremely distracted and could not focus for the first several minutes. She asked if she could smoke a cigarette, so we suspended the interview for about fifteen minutes so she

could go outside. It was essential to allow her time to cope with whatever was making her preoccupied. I was unsure if revisiting her trauma was triggering her lack of focus, but I wanted to be respectful and not press if she was not ready. When she came back, she was prepared to get started. Ashley appeared to be nervous and unfocused each time I interviewed her. She explained that she had always been that way with ADHD, and "this is just the way I am." She told me right up front that "you can't believe everything I've been through in my life." Eager to have gained attention from me, she was willing to elaborate on anything I asked her and did not seem to want our time together to end. I gathered that she enjoyed the kindness I showed toward her, and maybe it was therapeutic, in a way, to tell her story. Her motives for sharing were evident as she mentioned several times that she wanted to "help me," so others "don't do what I did and just quit school."

The main topic of all our interviews included Ashley's mother, whom she had a roller coaster of a relationship with, but was also sick and in a nursing home. Eventually, I found out that Ashley's mother had Parkinson's disease, and Ashley felt hugely responsible for taking care of her, visiting her, and helping her whenever she could. She and her mother had a tumultuous relationship throughout her childhood, at least until her mother got sick. She stated:

> I used to scream and cuss at her. We argued about everything and she would rant and rave continuously. She would get mad at me for everything and I never obeyed her. Sometimes I hated her and I think she hated me. Other times we loved each other so much and she would tell me so many times "I love you, I love you and I'm so sorry for your life."

Ashley was living with an aunt for the last year and a half while her mother was in a nursing home. Her father had left the family some time ago, and she had a brother who was in

foster care in another city. Her brother had Down's syndrome and was not able to take care of himself. He was older than Ashley. She also mentioned an older sister, but she did not know where she was or what she was doing.

When Ashley was very young, she lived with her mother and father. Ashley's parents both did "a lot of drugs" and they "drank 'til they puked all the time." She was afraid of them when they were "messed up." Recalling how frequently her parents yelled and screamed at each other, she could not remember a time when they did not. So her childhood home was chaotic, loud, unstable, and due to a lack of healthy relationships – also lonely.

Going into foster care when she was in the fourth grade did not appear to offer any remedies to the instability and loneliness. Ashley moved to as many as six different homes, although she was unsure of the exact number. She mentioned that she went into foster care because her parents could not take care of her or her siblings. Despising the foster care system, it was always scary to her where she might end up and what kind of home it would be. Her memories of foster care were not pleasant, as she remembered a time when she was with a family of eight foster children and she was the only white girl. She recalled terrible memories:

> They dragged me by my hair down the stairs! They hated me and I was afraid of them! They were black and they were racist! I told my social worker but she don't care. No one cared. No one listened to me and nobody cared if I was alive or dead.

Ashley also described another time in foster care when she was in a car wreck and was severely injured and remained in the hospital for an extended period. Thinking back, she expounded:

> My family was in a van and we got hit by a semi. I broke my back and had to be taken to the hospital. I screamed for my mom, but no one told my mom for a long time. I was

hurt for a long time and no one visited me. I was all alone in the hospital. I kept asking

people to call my mom, but they wouldn't do it. They didn't care. No one cared and no

one came and saw me.

The instability and loneliness of her childhood were not mitigated within the foster care

system. After turning 14 years old, having endured the uncertainty of several foster homes, an

aunt allowed Ashley to live with her, and she continues to stay with her currently. She is happy

to be living with her aunt and especially her cousin, Beth who is 16 years old and is her best

friend. The two of them are close and spend a lot of time babysitting two younger siblings of

Beth. She described her cousin:

I love my cousin. I would do anything for her. She's the only person that cares about

me. We have a lot of fun hanging out and watching YouTube. A lot of times we ditch

school together and just laugh and have fun.

Ashley had been in special education throughout her school years and said she "can't

read, can't spell, and don't know how to do math." Ashley was "kicked out" of her high school

when she was 16 years old for skipping school, having terrible grades, and "back talking the

teachers." She had the option to attend the adult learning center, but she "was mad at the world.

I hated school and didn't want anything to do with it. They hated me and I hated them." When

she was 18 years old, she decided to go back to the adult learning center and has attended for

over a year. She is very close to completing her high school diploma but is unsure of the number

of classes or credits she needs to graduate.

Ashley tries to visit her mother in the nursing home every couple of days but has to walk

over three miles to where her mother lives. If Ashley has minutes on her phone plan, she calls or

texts her mother as often as possible. She elaborated:

We talk all the time and I love her now. I would do anything in the world for my mom.

She's all I got left. She loves me now and wants me to finish school. I'm doing this

(school) for my mom so I can provide for her. I want her to live with me and I'll take

care of her. I have to get some money. I don't got any money.

Darren: "Well that's what happened to me"

The first time I met Darren, he was a tranquil, subdued, and seemingly sad individual.

His voice was quiet, and sometimes I had to ask him to repeat himself as I could not understand

his mumbling, or I could not even hear what he was saying. He is a 19-year-old male with a

scruffy beard, broken glasses, and wore the same dirty hoodie each time I met with him. He

currently works at a vape shop and attends an adult learning center to earn his high school

diploma. He used a lot of profanity and bad grammar, yet he was honest and upfront in telling

me:

> I'm so depressed and I have crazy anxiety attacks. I take a shit ton of medicine and I
>
> always have. Hell, my mom started me out on pills when I was six years old for ADD. I
>
> can't make it through one damn day without my meds.

Darren remembers being like a "zombie" in elementary school when he took medication

for attention deficit disorder. He said school was always hard for him, and he never liked school,

at least as far as he could recall. When Darren was in fifth grade, his teacher found a poem he

had written about shooting up the school. He explained what happened:

> I really wasn't going to shoot up the school, but my teacher found this stupid poem and
>
> she sent me to the principal's office. I got in a lot of trouble from it and he kicked my ass
>
> out of school. Can you imagine a 10-year-old getting suspended?? Well that's what

happened to me. My mom cried and my stepdad beat my ass over it. I hated everyone after that.

Darren's mother had muscular dystrophy as long as he could remember, and she slept most of the time. She was in a wheelchair and could not take care of herself. They had a nurse that stayed with them the majority of the day until nighttime when his stepdad came home from work. He had a younger brother who also had muscular dystrophy and used a wheelchair. His voice was quiet, yet agitated and animated, he explained:

My brother couldn't take care of himself and neither could my mom. I stayed away from home as much as I could. It was just too damn sad to be there. How could you just sit and watch them in their wheelchairs? It sucked so bad and I hated it. My brother didn't go to school. He was in the hospital a lot and then one day he just died. Shit, I was so pissed! It was awful!

When Darren was a freshman in high school, his mother died, and he had to go live with his father in another state. He lived with him for a short time until his dad's alcoholism, the fighting, and the hitting got to be more than he could take. The two of them had bad feelings for each other:

My old man was the meanest person. He drank too much and was always yelling at me. He would get really drunk and hit me. We got in a lot of fights. I would hit him too. I hated him.

Never wanting to see his father again, Darren later moved in with his grandparents, moved out from there, relocated with his uncle, all the while going in and out of different schools. Finally, when he was 18, he quit school and found a place of his own.   He described it as more of a shack than an apartment:

I live by myself in a trashy one-bedroom place that is falling apart. My grandma pays my

rent. I would like to have a roommate but it ain't easy living with me. I'm depressed all

the time and I'm just in a dark place. My meds keep me going but I'm in a fog most of

the time. I don't like too many people really.

His sole source of support came from his grandmother, whom he likes. He did talk at length

about her, and he smiled when he spoke:

My grandma's the only one who likes me, but she is really old and I can't stay there. She

wants me to finish school and she will pay my rent as long as I'm going to school. I don't

have any friends so if it ain't for my grandma, I ain't got no one.

Harrison: "It was an awful place"

A great big smile, booming voice, and fire-red hair greeted me the first time I met

Harrison. He was pleased to talk with me, very upbeat, and talked non-stop about his son, who

was just under a year old. Frequently going off-topic on tangents unrelated to my questions,

Harrison had to be re-directed countless times throughout the interviews. He enjoyed talking and

would many times forget the questions I asked as he would talk about random things going on in

his life, but that was all right. According to his ACE score, Harrison had endured more traumatic

experiences than any of the other participants (7), and he had plenty of meaningful life

experiences to share. He is 20 years old and only a few credits from completing his high school

diploma, and he is thrilled about the possibilities of life post-graduation. He has big aspirations

to move to a "bigger place with my son and girlfriend and to put in a big swimming pool!"

Harrison came from a large family and recalled his parents never having enough money

to support them. As an example, he explained that many days there was not even enough food

for everyone to eat. Sometimes he stole from the gas station so at least he would have something

to eat. His dad had a drinking problem and terrible anger issues, and Harrison knows they did not pay the rent most of the time, exacerbated by the fact that his dad got fired from multiple jobs. He elaborated:

> It seemed like I was always moving. We would pack up and just move. My dad had a new job all the time and we had to move. I hated moving and never wanted to go to the new school. We never knew what kind of place we would be living in or if we would have any of our stuff. One time my mom let my two old brothers stay and I had to move. I was so mad and I never knew why they got to stay. Starting at new schools just sucked. I was always the new kid who got bullied all the time. I had red hair and freckles and got made fun of all the time.

At school, he remembers trying to fit in but always ended up "running with the wrong kids." Searching for friendships, he told me about joining a group of kids in middle school, and on the first day of school going outside to smoke weed with them. He questioned:

> How do you know who the bad kids are on the first day of school? Amazing! Like I must have had it written on my forehead. But I wanted to fit in so bad, I would do anything with anyone.

One day when he was 14 years old, his family said they were going to move again. He ran away and did not move with his family. He stayed in cars and abandoned houses until he was picked up by the police. Over the next few years, he was in and out of multiple foster homes and group homes. Recalling a specific home, he explained:

> One time I was in a group home and the place was so gross. They made us go to the bathroom outside and it was freezing. There was not enough food, and everyone got beat up. It was an awful place.

When Harrison was in middle school, he loved being the "toughest, meanest bully" in school. Kids were afraid of him, and "even teachers avoided arguing with me." He elaborated:

> I was angry all the time, looking for trouble everywhere, and hated school so much. I got my anger from my dad. He was an angry bastard who beat up my brothers and I all the time. He hit my mom all the time and gave her a concussion one time. My mom drank too much and they would get in the biggest screaming matches. He would throw her against the wall, and I would get in the middle of it. I would fight him so he would leave my mom alone. I hated him so much.

Clearly, he detested his father; however, he also had the same raging anger. In high school, he took all his aggression out on the football field but got kicked off the team when he "beat the crap out of his own teammate" and sent him to the hospital during a practice. Harrison was suspended from school and never came back. At 17 years old, he spent the next year finding odd jobs and living with "buddies." He was incarcerated several times for fighting and using drugs and alcohol. Although Harrison did not expound on his drug and alcohol use, he possibly used substances to try to deal with his anger issues. "I couldn't feel the anger when I was shooting up with heroin," he admitted.

After three years of living in and out of cars, working odd jobs, going in and out of jail, he finally fell in love with a girl who asked him to go back to school. He landed at the adult learning center and went to work to finish up his high school education. Harrison has stayed in touch with his mother, but he detests his father. The last time they had spoken, he got very angry with his father and broke his arm and several ribs, gave him a concussion, and sent him to the hospital. Despite all this, he is very close to completing his high school diploma and looking

forward to a life with his girlfriend, "the love of my life" and his son, who "I didn't know I could love someone more than life!"

Bethany: "No one could help me"

Bethany met me, cradling her brand-new baby in her arms. Meredith was almost one month old and slept completely through every interview without so much as a whimper or opening of her eyes. Bethany was thrilled to be a new mother and was in love with Meredith. She elaborated:

> I'm going to be a much better mother to my baby than my mother was to me. My mother loved my little sister but could care less about my brother and me. My dad died when I was 12 and my mom just gave up on life. She only cared about my baby sister and getting drunk all the time. She had a bad drinking problem. She couldn't keep a job. She was a hot mess.

Bethany was 22 years old and embarrassed that she did not have a high school diploma. She wanted to complete it before Meredith was born, but that did not happen. However, she was back at it working on school just two weeks after the baby was born.

Bethany's father died when she was 12 years old. He was not her biological father, but the only man her mother had been with that she liked and stayed around for very long. Her mother had a baby with him and went into a "bad place" after he died. The drinking became worse and keeping a job did not seem possible. Her family eventually moved in with her grandma but her grandma was sick and did not live long after that.

School was hard for Bethany as long as she could recall. She described how "they flunked me in the 7th grade and I was in the retarded classes all through school." Her use of this

outdated term caught me off guard and made me a bit uncomfortable; however, this is how she remembered school. She went on:

> I remember being so excited to go to school when I was little. Then school was so hard and no one could help me. Every year it got harder and harder. In middle school, my dad died and we moved in with my grandma. My grandma tried to help me with school but I was just too dumb to learn. Kids bullied me and made fun of me for being dumb.

After her freshman year of school, Bethany's mom told her she was going to "home-school" her. In Bethany's eyes, this was an escape from school, a place she did not want to be anyhow. She stayed home for two years but never did any schooling, she explained:

> I had another friend who was staying home too. We never did any school. We just hung out together every day and watched TV and videos. I was supposed to do classes on the internet, but they were hard. No one could help me. My brother was smart and he was popular. He went to school.

When she was 17 years old, she moved in with her boyfriend and went to the local high school. It appears that her two years out of school would result in missed academic skills. Trying to go back to school, Bethany stated:

> My boyfriend talked me into going back to school. He was smart and school was easy for him. I was excited to go back to school, but it was hard. The classes were hard, no one would help me, and I couldn't do it.

She was put in special education classes and joined the Army Junior ROTC. Thinking it was going to be different this time in school, Bethany cried every day and hated school – "it was so difficult." Amplifying the difficulties faced when going back to school after sitting out for an extended time, she got pregnant in the middle of the year. Even though her ROTC sponsor and

the principal talked at length with her about staying in school, Bethany quit and had various jobs

to support her and her boyfriend. Before her baby was born, she went to live with an aunt in

another state. Bethany explained the reasons for the move:

> He didn't like babies. He said I had to get rid of it. I didn't want an abortion so he said I
>
> had to give it up for adoption or he would leave me. I went to live with my aunt in
>
> another state because he didn't want me living with him being pregnant. He said, "you
>
> are fat" and "you are ugly." After I gave the baby up for adoption, I came back home, so
>
> excited to be back with him. He kicked me out the very next day.

Three years of boyfriends, jobs, loneliness, homelessness, and hopelessness followed. School

was not part of these three years, and Bethany was feeling desperate to find something or

someone. She recalled:

> I was in a very dark place. I was moving around with friends, sleeping on couches, and
>
> going hungry many times. I thought about going back to school, but it just never worked
>
> out. I had no money, no place to live, and school was too hard.

She has no contact or support from her own family; nevertheless, she is a beautiful, petite

woman with a sweet disposition and a desire to go to college. Bethany eventually found a

boyfriend, Scott, who encouraged her to go back to school and soon after found herself expecting

another baby. Although she did not plan this, she currently has a new baby, whom she adores,

and a boyfriend who is supportive and encouraging her to complete her high school diploma.

She elaborated how much she cares for her new boyfriend and baby:

> Scott loves me and his family loves me. I'm very close to his mom. I hate my mom and
>
> I haven't seen her in many years. She always liked my baby sister but not me. Scott
>
> wants me to finish school and I want to go to college. He said I could go to college and

he would work. I want to get a good job with money so I can pay for my new baby. I'm going to love Meredith more than my mom did me. I'm not going to raise her like I was raised.

Renee: "It's so hard"

Renee had agreed to and wanted to be interviewed but appeared to be distracted, stressed, and extremely agitated. She asked if she could make a phone call before we started. It was essential to allow her time to cope with whatever was making her unfocused and restless. I was unsure if revisiting her trauma was triggering her distraction and feelings of stress, but I wanted to be respectful and not press if she was not ready. After she made a phone call, she came back and settled down and we were ready to begin. Renee is 20 years old and was dressed very nicely, had beautiful makeup, jewelry and had pretty beads in her perfect cornrow braids. She was a stunning girl with a sad disposition in her eyes. I could tell immediately she had a lot on her mind, and it was difficult to focus on my questions and the interview. I asked her several times if she wanted to continue and she always said she did.

Renee recalled her childhood as a happy time, and her parents were married. She did not have any siblings and no close relatives that lived near. In elementary school, she loved recess and lunchtime. However, the one thing she remembers from elementary school was being bullied because she was "black." She alluded to it:

In my school, I was the only black girl. They looked at me like I was weird. They called me "nigger" and "ugly." My mom and dad said I was beautiful, and all these kids started calling me names. That stuck with me forever and then I started hating school.

Middle school became a time that she "started getting really wild." Her parents gave her much freedom, and she loved hanging with kids at the skating rink. She moved to another

99

school and there were "other black kids there like me." It was clear that Renee was trying to fit in or belong to a group. At the skating rink, she hung out with "black kids" and felt comfortable with them. However, she also started running around with older boys who possibly influenced her negatively. She expanded, "I liked the older boys as they gave me a lot of attention. I was happy to be with them and we did a lot of crazy stuff."

During this time of her life, Renee's dad walked out the door one day, and she never saw him again. Renee did not elaborate on this and so I was unsure what went wrong; however, her parents divorced after that. It was just her and her mom now. She was very close to her mother; nevertheless, the divorce was trying on their family. Her mom had to go to work and support them, which was something she never had to do. "My mom always stayed home and now she had to get a job to support us," she explained. The divorce also resulted in her being so angry with her father that she has no contact with him, "I hate him for what he did to our family."

Renee went on to tell numerous stories of being in high school, running from the police at night, getting in fights with kids at school, trying different drugs, and drinks that her friends gave her. She "ditched school a lot," was suspended a few times, and school took a turn for the worse. She also explained how, "one day the principal called me in and told me if I didn't do better, I wasn't going to get to stay in school and how he didn't like me and wanted to get rid of me." I am uncertain as to what actually took place and I am hopeful that the principal did not do this. However, this is the information Renee gave and it was her perception of what occurred at school.

Shortly after that, Renee got pregnant, and things got worse at school and at home. Her mother was working all the time and could not take care of Renee. The school would not let her use the elevator just because she was pregnant. Renee got very frustrated and walked out of

school when she was 17. She did not have an exit interview, and no one inquired as to why she was not in school. She stated, "The assistant principal was glad I was gone!" Again, as a former counselor and current principal, I am hopeful that more occurred than she relayed, that maybe Renee did not know or remember. However, it is her perception and this is how she remembered it.

Then when Renee was 18 years old, her mother died. The only support she had was gone. She currently has a one-year-old and a two-year-old, living with her boyfriend in a tiny trailer house. Trying to finish school is a priority, but having the means to do so is difficult. She attempted to make it clear:

> I have no one left except my babies. I need to finish school so I can take care of my babies. It's so hard. I have no money. My boyfriend has no money. He stays home and watches the babies so I can finish up this school. We have no one and we have nothing. But I love my babies!

That was the last thing she said to me, and we ended the interview. I never saw her again as she did not show up for any of our meetings, nor did she come back to school. I could not contact her and the school lost track of her as well.

Patterns and Shared Experiences across Participants

I interviewed the five students who had dropped out of high school so I could attempt to gain a deeper understanding of their lived experiences and thought processes that led to their decisions to discontinue their schooling. When I interviewed the participants, I did not ask specific questions about childhood trauma in their lives. However, the participants had filled out the ACES survey to identify their eligibility for this study. As detailed in the questions (see Appendix F), I first asked introductory questions to get to know them; next, I asked them to talk

about school; and lastly, I asked them about their home life. However, every one of the participants began by telling me about the details of their past and what they had experienced throughout their upbringing. Although I did not ask specifically about the trauma in their lives, they provided significant and detailed information regarding their trauma as it relates to the purpose of this study, and a deeper understanding of the lived experiences.

Trauma in Families

It is essential to explain the trauma that each participant willingly shared with me. There were definite patterns and similarities among their stories; nevertheless, each divulged unique differences.

Instability Brought on by Parent Divorce, Separation, and Domestic Violence

All participants claimed their parents were divorced or separated sometime in their childhood. Bethany recalled many of her mom's boyfriends spending the night at her house. She explained, "I never knew who would walk out of my mother's bedroom in the morning. I never got to meet my dad but I wish he would have been one of them."   Darren also explained how his stepdad only stayed with his mother because she was sick. He elaborated, "He came home drunk every night. I'm not sure why the hell he even came home. I think he felt like he had to stay with her because she was in a damn wheelchair and couldn't even feed herself." Darren's biological father left the family when he was very young. He visited him occasionally, but his dad was an alcoholic and Darren was afraid of him most of the time. He explained, "I'm glad he didn't live with us. He was terrible to my mom and to me." He unquestionably felt like his life was better without his father; however, his stepdad did not appear to be a positive figure in his life, either. Eventually, Darren chose to discontinue contact with his father and his stepfather.

Renee's parents stayed together until she started high school. It was devastating, though when an unexpected upheaval occurred. Her voice got softer as she told me:

> I thought all was fine but then one day my dad came home and said he was leaving. He had another woman and he left my mom. My mom and I were shocked! What were we going to do? I hate him for that. I don't speak to him at all now. I hate him.

There may have been more that led up to this incident; still, to Renee, it was surprising and startling. She did not know there were issues, and maybe her mother did not either.

With Ashley's father being in and out of jail and prison, her parents were separated on and off most of her life. As she recalled the difficult times growing up, she described the turbulence:

> He was a bad person. He didn't even help us out. He just would get out (of jail) and then go do something bad and he would have to go back in again. My parents did a lot of meth and they were alcoholics. They screamed and yelled at each other. My dad would throw things at my mom.

Ashley revealed more stories of her father as having issues with drugs and alcohol; though, she did tell me that her mother had the same problems. Since the children ended up in foster care, there were apparent complications with her mother and father fulfilling their parenting duties.

Harrison's parents eventually divorced, although he remembered them having so many fights when he was growing up. He commented, "It was better most of the time when dad was gone." He went on:

> He was the meanest person ever. He slammed my mother around a lot and my brothers and me. He would leave and be gone for two to three weeks at a time. Sometimes he came back with some money and sometimes he didn't. Sometimes he came back so

drunk and messed up. I hated him. One time he hit my mom and I had seen enough. I

got so mad and hit him so hard he fell over the balcony on the porch.

Encouraging his mother to divorce his father, she finally had enough and left him. The divorce

occurred after Harrison had already left the family, and the other children were mostly grown up.

Participants and their Families Battling Mental Health Issues

A common subject that emerged from all the participants' interviews was the issue of

anxiety and depression. Some of the participants discussed their parents' mental health problems,

while a couple of them had their own mental health issues they were dealing with.   Darren

talked about his mother's battles with anxiety and depression, as well as his own. He does not

remember when his depression began and he could not identify anxiety until a school counselor

told him what it was. He went on to rationalize his depression:

Would it drive you crazy to be in a wheelchair all day long? My mom was so damn

depressed. I guess she gave it to me too. I can go to really dark places and not come

back for days at a time. My mom would get so damn worried about everything! She was

constantly nagging me all day long. I guess that was her anxiety coming out. She didn't

know what would happen to me. When I was in school I had to go to the counselor

because they said I was depressed. I guess it was because I was always drawing sad,

scary things and guns. I liked to draw people shooting and shit. My mom started me on

medication for ADD when I was 6 years old. Later the doctor put me on depression

meds. I've been on the damn things ever since.

With his disposition, I agreed with his claims of depression, but I'm not qualified to diagnose

him. His mood was usually sad, somber, and he had a hushed voice. Unlike his depressed mood,

I did not ever see signs of anxiety or feel that present in the interviews.

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Harrison was descriptive when he talked about his parents and the mental issues they were faced with. Harrison referred to his dad as "a crazy bastard" and his mother as "so weak." He interpreted their mood swings:

> My old man had anger issues and was mad all the time. That's where I get my anger issues. At least I guess that's where they came from. My mom just cried all the time. I don't think she was right in the head. She got hit too many times and she couldn't think right. She just cried all the time. My mom had to take meds but we usually couldn't afford them. She drank alcohol a lot. I think that helped her with her depression.

Appropriately noted, Harrison felt he got his anger from his dad as if it was hereditary. However, when I inquired about any mental health issues, he felt that his anger was utterly different from his dad's.

Bethany thought about the years she spent at home doing her home school. Her grandmother had died, and she spent so much time alone. She remembered, "I was so sad and depressed. My mom gave me her medicine for it. It didn't help at all." Apparently her mother had her own dealings with depression if she maintained medication for it.

Renee mentioned how she started medication for depression after her parents got divorced and eluded to having a hard time dealing with it. She explained, "I couldn't get it together. I was sad all the time. My mom got sick of it so she took me to a doctor. He told me the medicine would make me happy again. It didn't. I'm still a mess!" It appears that Renee associates her current life situation as a result of dealing with her mental issues.

Ashley's mother took medication for depression, and she talked about how her mother "had a lot of pills. I don't know what they all were but I know some were because she was upset and sad all the time." She also explained how her "mom had a lot of doctor appointments and we

had a lot of medicines at home." Not understanding what the medication was, Ashley assumed

they would help her as well. She said, "Sometimes I took her pills when I was sad. They didn't

help me." Ashley never talked about getting any help or seeing a doctor for her depression that

she attempted to describe.

Abuse and Neglect in the Home: Physical and Mental

Dealing with some abuse or neglect was a topic that arose through the interviews.

Bethany recalled many times her mother leaving her and her brother for several days at a time.

She explained:

Sometimes she took my little sister with her but most of the time we had to take care of

her. She wouldn't leave us any money or food. We never knew when she would come

back. Most of the time, she came back with another boyfriend that moved in with us.

Throughout the interviews, Bethany had talked about different times when she went hungry.

Sometimes it was when she was young and still, other times it was when she was older and

trying to support herself.

Darren's life took a turn after his mother died. His stepdad did not want him to stay

there, or maybe his dad wanted him to move in with him. It was not something he wanted or

enjoyed at all, as he explained:

My dad didn't like me. He just came home damn drunk every night and just beat the shit

out of me. He was always slapping me, knocking me around, treated me like shit. I

hated him. I don't know why he was so mean. I finally had to leave that place.

He ended up living back with his stepdad for a short while, with his grandparents for a stint of

time, and eventually, his grandmother supported him in getting his apartment.

Similarly, Harrison spoke about his dad and the abuse the whole family took from him. It was evident to understand why he did not want to spend time with him and eventually became emancipated from his parents. Emancipation is a process that bestows the rights and responsibilities of adulthood to a minor. He described the abusive behaviors from his dad:

> My dad was always mean to us. He hit on my mom, my brothers and me. He yelled all the time and told us we were stupid, dumb, and worthless all the time. He even said that to my mom. Every day we had to listen to him rant and yell and cuss and then when he got really mad he would throw stuff at us and hit us. He was always knocking us around and hitting us. It was better when he would leave for days or weeks at a time.

Ashley's childhood seemed to have so many situations that were difficult to hear and process. She talked explicitly about a traumatic rape incident when she was 13 years old. As she told the story, I felt tremendous sadness for her. She expressed anger, as well as strong emotional expressions. She described it as scary and disturbing:

> I never wanted to tell my parents. It was awful. I didn't tell my mom until my friend told her. She was mad that I didn't tell her but she didn't do anything about it. I didn't tell my dad. He's in prison and he still doesn't know. I'll never tell him. I was so afraid! I saw the same boy just the other day. He was walking by this school. I hate him. His mother told me I wanted him to do that. I didn't want him to. I have nightmares about it. I want to forget it but I still can't after all these years. I never wanted to do that. He made me. It was awful! I hate him.

After Ashley told me the story, she and I gave each other a big hug, and I told her she was a beautiful person and never deserved for that to happen to her. I told her how sorry I was that happened to her. She never went to counseling or therapy, nor was the rape ever reported to the

authorities. I told her if she wanted help coping with this, I would help her get in touch with someone who could talk with her and be supportive of her. She said, "It's OK. It was a long time ago and I'll be all right."

Alcohol and Drug Abuse: A Family Norm

A common area of adversity, abuse of alcohol and drugs, arose in many of the participants' stories. These stories appear to have contributed to the difficulties that each of the participants was dealing with. I have stated some of this previously but feel it is still worthy of pointing out a few specific incidents.

Bethany spoke about her mother's issues with alcohol. "She was drunk all the time. I don't drink anything because of her. She ruined her life," she said.   Harrison agreed that his drinking intensified his dad's anger issues; he commented about how his dad "got crazy when he was drunk. He yelled and was so mad when he was drunk." Harrison believed his mother had an alcohol problem, as well, possibly due to dealing with the anger abuse from her husband. Many times throughout the interviews, Harrison also discussed his own issues with drugs and alcohol. He knew at one time, he was addicted to heroin and spent time in jail and a juvenile detention center for drug charges. He described how he was trying to "escape all the chaos in my life by doing drugs. I was really messed up."

Darren's mother was ill for most of his life. He did not remember a time when she was not sick, in a wheelchair, and sleeping most of the day. Darren felt like his mother abused her medication to deal with her illness. "I saw her take her pills that the lady was supposed to give to her. She also gave them to me to take. It was like just take pills whenever you damn want to," he revealed. Darren told me about the massive amount of medication he takes to combat his anxiety and depression and how he also uses recreational drugs and drinks alcohol. He told me,

"I smoke weed and it doesn't mix well with my meds. I try not to but sometimes I just want it."

It was difficult to determine if he had issues with drugs and alcohol; however, I might assume he

did at times when he mixed it with all of his medication.

A Deeper Understanding

In trying to find a deeper understanding, I specifically asked about the participants'

knowledge or recollection of formal or structured SEL program being taught to them in school.

None of the participants could recall any kind of program even after I gave them many examples

of what it might have been. Going further, I asked them about their parents or families teaching

them about the main concepts of an SEL program such as decision-making, relationship skills,

and self-management techniques. Again, the participants had difficulty recalling times that their

families may have taught these skills, even if it was by example or role modeling. Therefore, as

they were in the midst of the trials, trauma, and tribulations throughout their lives, they did not

know how to handle the multiple issues that they were faced with. Many educators, parents, and

community people may believe it is visible why a student drops out of school when they have

suffered multiple events of adversity and trauma in their lives. In this study, these incidents

emerged immediately as issues the participants dealt with and endured throughout their

childhood and into middle and high school.

However, going back over the transcripts several times and reflecting on the participants'

stories, I was captivated by the reasons they were back in school. Organically, I learned so much

about their return during the interview process; each participant told me how they made the

decision to go back to school. As they told the stories of childhood trauma and chaos, the word

"love" kept showing up when they spoke about returning.

Love and the Decision to Return

Although I did not foresee discussing the participants' return to school in my study, during the interviews, they naturally explained their decision to return to school, and it became a pertinent part of their story. Eventually, I started to consider how it might help us understand more about the lengthy processes that led to their decisions to drop out. Each of the participants connected someone they loved with their motivation to go back to school.

Darren had hopes of finishing his school before his grandmother passed away. She had told him she "wanted to see the diploma." Sadly, Darren felt like his grandmother was the only person he had in this world who loved and cared about him. He was anxious and committed to getting finished.

Similarly, Ashley attributes her unconventional love for her mother as part of the drive she has for completing school. She explains, "I just want to show her I can do this. She will be so proud of me!" The excitement was evident as she talked about her plans:

> I want to take care of my mother. I can't if I don't have a good job. Working at McDonald's or KFC will not pay enough for my mom's care. I want to go to hair and makeup school so I can make good money. My mom wants me to do it and I want to do it for her too.

Throughout her childhood, Ashley waivered back and forth, loving and hating her mother. She explains how, "when she was doing drugs, I hated her. We got into huge screaming, angry rages at each other. Most of the time, I loved her so much I would do anything for her." It appears her mother's unstable past has seemed to alleviate, and they are on good terms now, contributing to their current status as love, opposed to hate.

Beaming with enthusiasm and a visible adornment, Harrison talked about his baby boy each time we met. He could not believe how much he loved him and was excited to provide for him and give him a beautiful life. He jabbered, "I sit and stare at him (the baby) and cannot believe he is mine! I didn't know I could love someone so much. He is the love of my life!!!" Harrison's girlfriend also loved him – they hoped to get married. She supported and encouraged him to complete his education. She has her diploma and now that he has a baby, he wants to get his diploma more than ever.

Spending quality time with her boyfriend's family, Bethany finally got to experience what she considered a "real family" and people who love her. She chatted about them with ease, "We have dinner together, we play games together, and they truly love and care about me. I couldn't do this (school) without them. They want me to get finished. My boyfriend wants me to finish, too." Bethany went on telling me her hopes to marry her boyfriend. She was excited she had the family she had always hoped for growing up. It was clearly contributing to her pull to finish her high school education.

Even though Renee had a boyfriend she was living with, it was apparent that it was not a strong, stable relationship. However, the two babies she had were definitely the most important people in her life. She loved them so much and showed me pictures of them. They were the reason she was back in school. She wanted nothing more than to give them the things they needed and she knew she needed her diploma to get a good job. She got excited and raised her voice, "I have to finish my education and provide them with a great life. I love them so much! I'm going to get a good job and I can't let them down." Renee was determined to finish her school – she had the desire; however, I am not sure she had the means. She seemed to struggle so much which is possibly why she did not complete the final interview with me. Given the

others' experiences, and how the school also fell out of touch with her, I cannot help but wonder how the strength of her relationship with her boyfriend may have influenced this turn of events.

Undoubtedly, each of the participants returned to school because someone loved them, encouraged them, and supported them with the means to be able to do it. More than that, in describing this, they specifically used the term "love," which implies more than merely a relationship – or even a healthy relationship. Healthy relationships and camaraderie are one thing, but specific use of the term "love" implies an emotional connection, and deep commitment to one another that is built to endure chaos, hardships, and more. As I considered the role of love in their desire to return to school with the excitement and drive that each one of them displayed, it became more apparent how these deeper emotional connections, or lack thereof, played such an essential role in their lives, and their decisions related to school.

Loss, Loneliness, and Apathy: The Beginning of Dropping Out

Every participant elaborated on the people in their lives currently who love them, support them, and mean so much to them. Consequently, as they reflected on their childhood, each participant also alluded to the loss and the loneliness they experienced, and the ongoing breakdown of relationships that occurred throughout their lives. With the spotlight on love in their clear decision to return, it was logical to re-examine their childhood through this lens only to find the absence of love and emotionally important relationships, and the loss they suffered in their lives before ending their schooling.

Renee reflected on her mother's death and how much she missed her. She actually was angry at her mother for leaving and still could not believe she was not coming back. After her death, Renee made many decisions that were currently affecting her as she described:

She was my whole world. I can't believe she just up and died. I'm so mad at her but I miss her so much. She was everything to me. After she died, I didn't want to live. I wished I could die too. I just kind of went crazy. I just started partying, staying out late, sleeping with a lot of boys, and ditching school. I didn't know what to do. I still don't know what I will do without her. She meant everything to me.

She was overcome with grief when her mother died and went on, "I wasn't expecting it! She was the only person I had. It was just awful!"

Darren discussed his mother's illness and how he watched her health decline until she died. His brother also died before his mother. He went on to explain:

My mother was sick my entire life but I still loved the hell out of her! I can't remember a time when she wasn't in that wheelchair. She couldn't take care of herself. We had a lady that took care of her but she wasn't going to get any better. Damn, I knew she was going to die and she got so sick and I remember the day she died. It was the worst day of my life! Hell, my brother died too in his wheelchair. One day he just never woke up. Man that sucked!

Obviously, death can be overwhelming for anyone, but it was clearly so difficult for Darren. He was feeling sad and dealing with his own depression and then lost two people he loved so much.

Bethany stood out as one who underwent significant loss, yet appeared to be cheerful and happy. When she was young, her father died and left the family in a state of despair. Her mother went through a plethora of relationships with men, was fired from many jobs, and unable to provide for her family. She explained, "We all missed daddy so much but that's just the way it was." It appears that Bethany followed her mother in having multiple boyfriends and failed relationships. With one boyfriend, she got pregnant, had the baby in another state, and then gave

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the baby up for adoption to keep her boyfriend. "I couldn't wait to come back home. I had been living with my aunt during the pregnancy. I just knew him and I would be together forever! The day I got back, he kicked me out!" After he left her, she went through a period of tremendous hurt, despair, and love for a baby that was not hers anymore.

Even though Harrison did not have a parent die, he felt a tremendous loss when he became emancipated at such a young age. He could not handle the chaos in his home or another move to a different school; therefore, he moved out and attempted to live on his own. The breakdown of his relationship with his parents and family caused a loss and yearning that he did not expect. "I thought that leaving home would be so great. However, it started a terrible time of me doing bad things- drugs, alcohol, skipping school, getting arrested. I could go on and on," he said.

Ashley had her mother's imminent death looming over her. "If the person you care about most in your life is dead, that's huge," says Ashley, who is preparing herself for her mother to die. The workers at the nursing home have told her she will not live for many years. "I don't know what I will do when she dies! I don't have my brother or sister. I don't have my dad," she exclaimed. Ashley suffered plenty of loss, including her parents' divorce, spending many years in foster homes away from her family, and knowing her mother was not going to live long.

Clearly, as these participants described, they were suffering from the loss they encountered. Rightly so, the death of someone close usually causes a deep and painful grieving process. However, some of these participants underwent a loss that was not a death - parents leaving the family, a boyfriend breaking up, and loneliness in foster homes. These, and more, were all losses for the participants. Loneliness, apathy, and a decrease in motivation and drive

filled their lives at home and at school. A lack of support and connection, coupled with tremendous losses, left the participants feeling isolated and going through life on their own.

The losses the participants suffered seemed to be overbearing and obviously, difficult to cope with. As each one described these losses, they recalled that this is when a turning point occurred in their lives. Their lack of motivation, their drive and determination lagged, and their apathy toward school took over their thoughts, enthusiasm, and eventually their decision-making. Again, it was apparent the participants did not have the SEL skills and techniques to help them cope, deal with, and pull them through these tragedies, nor did they feel support in their families or at school. Instead, they felt very isolated, alone, and their inspiration for continuing school was severely lacking.

Relationship Breakdowns: School and Community

The core competencies of CASEL's SEL program, as described in Chapter 1, are intended to be used together with schools, families, and communities. The aim is to teach students these SEL skills so they can be applied at school, at home with their families, and also in the communities with friends, coworkers, neighbors, etc. All the participants expressed multiple occasions of a breakdown of relationships within and across family, school, and community. The family breakdowns have clearly been established so this section will focus on school and community, including relationships with teachers and other school personnel, jobs they had, and friends they associated with. Specifically, I wanted to share the participants' stories of the breakdowns that occurred at school and within the community.

Harrison recalled coming home from school and packing up their belongings. He explained, "Sometimes we packed up late at night and then we would leave early in the morning. We moved all the time." He elaborated further about his dad not having any money:

I think my dad used all the money on drinking. Sometimes my mom had nothing to feed us with. We ate corn out of a can and sometimes we ate hotdogs every day. My dad didn't give my mom money to buy anything. I would steal stuff for us to have. I might steal food. I even stole toilet paper from school. We didn't have money for anything.

Moving homes frequently seemed to be shared among the participants. As an example, until they moved in with their grandmother, Bethany recalls moving from place to place quite often. She explained:

My mom never had any money to pay rent so we would just leave. Sometimes we didn't even get to take our stuff. We moved a lot with boyfriends my mom had. We lived in some awful places. We didn't have much stuff either.

Ashley remembers leaving all her stuff in a house and moving in the night. So much of what she told intertwined moving a lot and not having any money. She pieced several moves and houses together:

The next day someone burned down my house. All our stuff was in there. They wouldn't let us go get it. We were always moving house to house. Sometimes we lived in trailer houses and sometimes it was an apartment. One time we lived in an apartment for almost a month before we got the electricity turned on. We never had any food. Sometimes I went down to the quick shop and stole food. It was the only time I got to eat that day.

Although Renee had a great family relationship until her dad left the family and her mother died, she talked at length about the negative feelings she had about school. Renee loved school and had such a good experience until she reached high school. She commented:

In high school, when my mom died, no one cared. No one asked me about it. That's when my life fell apart. I didn't want to be there and I didn't care about anything but no one knew it.

As an educator, I can hope this is her perception; however, it was how she saw it through her eyes. She went on to explain another incident that caused her to be frustrated with the school:

In my junior year, I got pregnant. The assistant principal was always on my case about missing school. Hey, my mom died and I'm pregnant! Doesn't anybody care! He was always giving me detention for missing school. He wouldn't give me an elevator key either and I had to walk the stairs. He didn't care that I was pregnant. He didn't like me at all.

The participants perceived that no one cared about them. In Harrison's case, he mentioned one school counselor that he felt he had developed quite a rapport with:

She was so nice to me and seemed very helpful. I shared with her about my addiction to heroin. The next thing I knew, I was talking with the school police and then the real police came, handcuffed me, and I was thrown in jail. I should have never told her that and why did I think she would actually help me?

He thought he would get the help he needed. Unfortunately, the school counselor was being a professional and had a duty to report. However, Harrison did not understand that and only felt vulnerable that he even told her or mostly that he trusted to tell her. Ashley also believes the school is the reason she had to go into foster care. She justifies:

I told my teacher that we didn't have no food or no water. She told someone so I had to go to foster care. I wish I had not told her that. I could have stayed with my mom. Things would have been better.

Again, the school had a duty to report; nevertheless, the perception of the participants was when they did feel comfortable telling someone an issue, then it turned into a bigger problem that disrupted their lives even more.

Darren did not discuss any positive relationships with people at school. He thought the teachers were afraid of him for various reasons. He clarified his thoughts:

> I got suspended one time for drawing a devil on my paper. It didn't mean a damn thing but everyone got all whacked out about it. I really didn't like my teachers much and I don't think they like me. I was a pain in the ass for them. They sent me to the office a lot.

Getting in trouble and having academic issues accentuated the lack of relationship and ties, the participants felt they had with the school. Both Ashley and Bethany had an IEP but perceived they did not get the support they needed in school. Bethany explained, "School was so hard and no one would help me. I hated it." Ashley elaborated more:

> I can't read and spell now so when I was it school, it was so hard. No one helped me in middle school. The teachers didn't like me because I liked to talk so much. The kids didn't like me because I was stupid. I couldn't do the work.

Harrison said he never got any help in school, "No one would help me learn so I hated school. The teachers wouldn't help me and it was too hard." Renee expressed, "school is so hard. I can't learn. I don't read very good and I can't do the work. When I was little, I had a hard time. Now I can't do it either. It's too hard."

Getting suspended or other discipline, skipping school, getting bullied, and earning low grades intensified the poor relationship with school for most of the participants. Harrison mentioned he could not remember how many times he got suspended from school. "I was

always in a fight with other kids or I back talked my teachers all the time." The school that Ashley went to told her if she got suspended again, she could not come back. She was honest in her behaviors:

> I was always sassing my teachers. And I was always fighting kids that made fun of me. I'm not going to just take it from them. I smacked them if they made fun of me.

As an administrator, I found it difficult to accept that these students were treated this way since most schools do not tolerate this – at least that is my vantage point. However, I have to acknowledge that I also carried assumptions related to their stories about trauma, and clearly found that I lacked a certain depth of understanding that I had to confront. Therefore, given that this study is intended to understand the students' perceptions more fully, it is consistently accurate that these participants believed the school did not do anything to help them. More than that, some of them believed the school was actively betraying them, or working against them, even if the school personnel did not understand it that way.

At some point, all the participants felt little connection to anyone at school. Due to the lack of family relationships linked with little connection at school, their overall disposition continued to deteriorate. I wanted to see if the participants had any ties to their community or with friends. All the participants discussed various jobs they might have held at one time or another. Obviously, these jobs occurred as they became old enough to work. Many of the jobs were typical teenage employers, including fast food and miscellaneous yard or household jobs. Harrison said he started working as soon as he was able to get a job. He explained, "I wanted to have a job but I didn't have a car. I didn't have decent clothes to wear. Also, I got angry a lot so I got fired a lot." Ashley mentioned that she was not "smart enough to work." She explained the various jobs she had:

Sometimes I worked at McDonald's and KFC. Everyone always got mad at me because I couldn't figure out how to do the things right. Like, I didn't know how to cook or clean. I didn't know how to run the cash register. I can't count money.

Always having some job was what Bethany recalled. She explained, "I babysat for people, I worked at fast food places and I worked at a hotel for a while." Darren also recounted working for his neighbor:

He wanted me to rake all his leaves. That's a bunch of shit. I didn't want to do that. His yard was huge! He also wanted me to clean his shed. It was nasty and gross. I looked for other jobs. Sometimes I went back to my neighbor. He always let me work but I didn't like any of the jobs he wanted me to do. Working is a bitch. I didn't want to do it.

So it was evident they had a difficult time getting, and maintaining a job to have some purpose and to feel successful. Each participant spoke briefly about friends they have currently or had in the past. Telling repeatedly, none of them had a large group of friends, and with most of the participants moving so much in their childhood, they could not hold on to friendships for very long. Ashley talked about her mom and her cousin being her best friends. However, throughout her childhood, she and her mother had the most tumultuous relationship.

Now my mom is dying and she is all I got left. I love her and I want to finish school and show her I can do this. I don't have time for any other friends. I have my dog, my cousin, and my mom. That's all I have and all I need.

Darren currently lives by himself, and when asked about friends, he mentioned that he does not have any and stays to himself. He recalled in his younger days of not having many friends at school. He also did not ever have friends over or stay the night due to his mom's health issues. Harrison talked about his family never had enough money to have friends over.

He explained, "Our house was a mess and I would never have friends over. I didn't really even have any friends to have over."

Understandably, we all have some level of need for friendships and relationships, but the difficulty in doing so was prominent in each participant's story. The participants seemed to progress and move into a stage where caring deteriorated, the drive was gone, and they could not prioritize much of anything. As Darren recalled, "I was sad all damn day." Moreover, Harrison said, "Drugs got me through the days." They were unmotivated, interest in school was diminishing, they felt lost and detached from their family, friends, and community. They shuffled through jobs, they used drugs and alcohol to cope with issues, and their lives were spiraling. School was not a priority, and making it through each day was their focus. Did anyone at school know what was going on with them? Someone loved them enough to go back to school . . . However; did anyone love them enough to keep them in school?

Due to the participants' high ACE scores and the many stories shared relevant to their social-emotional learning, it was difficult, on occasion, to keep track and represent all the trauma and instability in their lives. Frankly, given their life experiences as described above, the act of dropping out of high school, at times, seemed minor. However, I felt there was a need to pull it all together to see a bigger picture of the group as a whole, which allows us to see the similarities and differences across participants more vividly.

Table 4 is included to help chart all the trauma, pandemonium, and volatility experienced across the participants, as revealed through the interviews. I separated the pertinent information into four key categories including the trauma they mentioned, their experiences of loving relationships, the different losses they suffered, and their relationships (or lack thereof) in school and community.

The column of loving relationship included those people whom the participants felt were significant and held a unique bond and influenced them to return to school. The school and community column lists the thoughts, attitudes, perceptions, and opinions of the participants as they perceived their experiences with school and the community and the breakdown in the relationships. The column of loss was built around the consequential loss (and sometimes multiple loss) that each participant suffered and started the thoughts to discontinuing school.

Table 4.

Patterns and Shared Experiences across the Participants

	Trauma in Families	Love and the Decision to Return	Relationship Breakdowns: School and Community	Loss, Loneliness, and Apathy: The Beginning of Dropping Out
Ashley	"My parents did a lot of drugs" "I was raped when I was 13 years old" "Parents drank 'til they puked" "My foster mom dragged me by my hair" "I broke my back in a wreck"	"I love my mom so much" "I'll do anything for her" "My cousin is my best friend" "Thank goodness I get to live with my aunt now"	"I can't read, can't spell, and don't know math" "Kicked out of school sometimes" "The principals hated me and I hated them" "I back talked the teachers" "Someone burned down my house"	"My dad is in prison" "All of us kids went into foster care" "I've haven't seen my brother or sister forever" "My mom is in a nursing home" "I think my mom's going to die soon"
Darren	"My step-dad beat my ass" "I have crazy anxiety attacks" "The hitting got to be more than I could take" "My dad's an alcoholic"	"My grandma's the only one who likes me" "Grandma will pay my rent as long as I stay in school"	"School was always hard" "I never liked school" "The principal kicked my ass out of school" "Working is a bitch. I didn't want to clean shit"	"My mother died when I was a freshman" "One day my brother just died"
Harrison	"I stole food at the gas station" "My dad was drunk all the time" "I was in and out of foster homes" "I got beat up" "My dad was an angry bastard" "My dad was in and out of jail"	"Fell in love with a girl who asked me to go back to school" "My baby boy – love him more than life"	"We were always moving" "Smoke weed with kids on the first day of school" "I told the counselor about my addiction . . . I was thrown in jail" "I got fired a lot" "I never had friends over"	"Ran away from home" "Living with buddies" "I have no contact with my dad- I hate him"

Bethany	"The drinking became worse" "Keeping a job did not seem possible for my mom" "I got pregnant in the middle of the year" "There was no food"	"Scott loves me" "His family loves me" "I am thrilled to be Meredith's mother"	"They flunked me in 7th grade" "I was in the retarded classes" "No one could help me" "Kids bullied me" "Stayed home from school for two years"	"My dad died when I was 12" "Grandma was sick and didn't live long after" "My boyfriend said I had to give it up for adoption"
Renee	"My dad walked out the door" "I got pregnant" "My mother couldn't take care of me" "My mom died when I was 18"	"I need to finish school to take care of my babies"	"Bullied because I was black" "The assistant principal wanted to get rid of me" "My friends and I ditched school a lot" "Hung out at the skating rink with the wrong crowd"	"I needed my mom" "I hate my dad for what he did to our family"

School Counselor, Principal, and Mother: Reflecting on my Exhaustion

When I chose the topic for my study, I felt confident and secure in my decision to explore high school dropouts as I had spent many years in the education field and had counseled many students considering leaving school. I am educated and have plenty of experience working with high school students as a school counselor, a principal, and as a mother. However, nothing could prepare me for the exhaustion and fatigue I felt after each interview. Not only was I physically drained, but the mental toll sapped my energy and enthusiasm as well.

I have to assume the stories they told were real, and even if their recollections may have misconstrued some details, it was the participants' perceptions, and they believed them to be true. Truthfully, their lives carried much deeper and multidimensional stories of trauma than I assumed I would encounter upon entering the project. These stories have prompted me to reflect on the assumptions I bring to my work every day. Specifically, when working with students as a counselor and a principal, I have to ask myself: Have I ever truly understood just how deep, complex, chaotic, and confusing trauma survivors' lives can be? Is it even possible for me to actually understand? How have my life experiences limited this understanding, and how has it influenced my empathy when working with children as a teacher, counselor, and principal? While I carry my own life experiences with trauma, they were isolated and manageable. Nevertheless, these students experienced many severely traumatizing and compounding events that make dropping out of school seem like a minor event. Unlike them, my own children had a reasonably safe, secure childhood without the distress and commotion these participants endured.

Each time I completed an interview, I had to wait a few days before I could go back over the interview, listen to it again, and transcribe it. It was so emotionally draining to hear their stories the first time, much less listen to them again. I tried to keep my role as a researcher

separate, allowing them to tell their story, but I found myself feeling sympathy, empathy, and overall sadness for my participants and the life they had so far. At the same time, I was also inspired by their tenacity and desire to return to school and stabilize their lives as best they could. Nevertheless, I also find an essential question that is worth acknowledging: If this was so draining for me, someone who is listening to and analyzing their stories, what sort of emotional toll have they had to carry living through these experiences?

When I began the interviews, I wanted the participants to view me as just another person and not as an educator. Based on my experience, many times, students who drop out of high school have unhealthy attitudes toward school personnel, and I did not want to distract them from their stories. I also did not want to come across as an academic or professional researcher who was only trying to extract their stories. It was a conflict I knew had to be overcome by building a relationship early with each participant in a short time to get them to see me as a person who did care about them and their stories. I elaborated on the need to help students in the future so educators could help keep students in school and support them in their journey to completing their education. Amazingly enough, each participant expressed their desire for other students not to drop out, not to quit, and to complete their education.

We did not talk much about me and my role until the interviews were all over. Then I took the time to tell them a short synopsis of my life as a school counselor, a principal, and a mother. Most all of them were shocked to learn of this and were very curious and wanted to know more. When I entered this project, I knew I would be working to build at least an introductory level relationship with the participants; but what I did not expect was the degree to which I would become emotionally invested in them after a few interviews. I grew to care about each participant and felt comfortable sharing a short segment of my life with them. They wanted

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to know about my husband, my children, and all about my years of being a counselor and principal. While I had to remind them throughout the interviews that this was about them and not about me, after the interviews were over, it was enjoyable to share some of my life with them. Given all the details about their lives they had just told me, it was the least I could do.

Upon completion of the interviews, I did contact each participant to ask them if they wanted to review my findings and for member-checking purposes. However, each one did not want to revisit their stories, nor did they want to review the materials. They each told me that they believed and trusted me to portray their stories in a thorough, accurate manner. Given the emotionally charged stories they shared with me, I did not want to make them feel pressured to revisit them once again. Overall, I have tried to depict their lives as they shared them with accuracy, integrity, and honor. I value their reliable information and hope I represent them well.

It bothered me greatly as a professional educator to hear some disturbing information regarding some of their school experiences such as when they stated, "they hated me and I hated them", "I was in the retarded classes", "he didn't like me and wanted to get rid of me", or "the assistant principal was glad I was gone." Giving me their perception that the teacher did not care, no one would help them, or school was too hard was very disheartening to me. I can only hope that teachers did help them; however, it clearly was the participants' perception that they did not receive much support or assistance. Maybe the help was there, and the students did not know how to utilize it, or even recognize it as help? Possibly the students were not prepared or ready to accept the assistance? Sadly, maybe the teachers just did not fully understand their needs or did not take the time to listen and learn about their issues and concerns? Did they take the time to get to know their students on a personal level? Did they take the time to get to know their students on an emotional level? After so many years in the field, and considering the deeper

understanding that I was granted after a few interviews with specific questions, I am now questioning if I ever reached the depth I needed in order to better counsel certain students.

After doing the interviews, I reflected on the many exit interviews I have conducted, such as Brian's, when students are thinking about discontinuing their schooling. If I would have asked many more questions, and possibly the right ones, would I have been able to understand better what Brian and all the other students needed from school? What were they trying to tell me? What were their issues, and how complex were they? What was essential to them? How could I have better helped them? Did I take the time to get to know my students on a personal level? Did I take the time to get to know my students on an emotional level?

Conclusion

Having been in education for 32 years, I understand how important it is for students to be connected to the school and have healthy relationships with students, faculty, and staff within the school. It seems all children start in elementary school, loving school, and excited for each new day and year. However, their relationships at home and across the community are also influencing their perceptions, and just like the participants, as students move into middle school and especially high school, that excitement and enthusiasm can dwindle, drain, and then sometimes disappear entirely. Given these participants' stories, it is evident that breakdowns occur across all levels: home, school, and in the community.

I have deep empathy for those participants who suffered time and time again in the failure of the relationships they encountered, whether it was in their family, in the community, or the school. As an educator, I have great difficulty processing the perceptions of these participants that the school did not care or did not do anything to help them. In schools, it feels like we go to great lengths to help and assist students. However, sometimes for whatever

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reasons, we cannot reach them or fulfill their needs or possibly they refused the help or did not regard it as such. Nonetheless, central to this is that we are trying to understand their world through their lenses, and these participants plainly perceived that the educators did not care.

Possibly we, as educators, never truly understand the depth of love, caring, and empathy that our students need from us. Do they all need this? Understandably, the answer is that not all students require it. However, graduating all students with their high school diploma necessitates educators to be able to reach these students. We need to be able to touch those students who do need our sincere love, compassion, and emotional attachment to be able to navigate the journey, despite all adversities, to completing their high school education.

In Brian's case, I clearly did not truly understand all the issues leading up to him coming into my office to sign out of school. Did I know, or even ask about the baggage he was carrying? I should have put more effort into listening to him and his mother, asking more questions, rather than putting all my energy in trying to convince him to stay in school because it was in his best interest. Was it in his best interest? What was in his best interest?

Chapter 5 – Conclusion and Implications

Looking back on my relationship with Brian - it was lacking. I knew him, and I knew what his school history had been. Surely someone in my school knew more about his life, his frustrations, and his struggles? That someone starts with me and ripples out to all school personnel. We must be intentional and purposeful with all students and especially the Brians and those that have experienced trauma in their lives.

For this study, I have used my experiences as a school counselor and a school principal to inform the study. I have written through a scholarly yet personal voice. Undoubtedly, I have attempted to tell the stories of Ashley, Darren, Harrison, Bethany, and Renee. I wanted to articulate their side of the story, as they communicated it, attempting to set aside my viewpoints as an educator as best I could, so I could truly learn from these amazing individuals. I learned so much! I hope I accurately relay the power and spirit of these students in the stories they told me.

Social-Emotional Learning

Instead of having appropriate emotional and social skills, the participants often engaged in trauma-responsive survival skills (Cook et al., 2005), such as defiance, shutting down, struggling with relationships, becoming overly self-reliant, or being too dependent on others. Bethany talked about the difficulties she had with other students at school. "I just kept getting bullied and I just said you know what? I'm done!" Darren remembered having no motivation for school and not knowing what to do. He said, "I didn't want to do crap. I just wanted to curl up in a ball and disappear." As discussed in Chapter 1, CASEL identified five competency areas of social-emotional learning as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2018, p. 1). Grasping the participants' social-emotional learning was integral to deepening my understanding of their decisions that led to

dropping out of school. Three of the five competencies emerged from the interviews as noteworthy, including self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Although the participants conceded shortfalls in all of the competencies, these three appeared as more prevalent than the other two.

Self-management

Self-management is the ability to successfully regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations. Students need this skill to manage stress, control impulses effectively and motivate them. The ability to set and work towards personal and academic goals pertains to managing yourself effectively (CASEL, 2018). Each of the participants discussed the implications of having ADD or ADHD, which resulted in impulse control issues. Harrison had issues with outbursts that resulted in discipline by the school. He commented, "I used to get so angry and then I just exploded. I didn't care about nothing or nobody." The stress of dealing with issues at home was continually causing them the inability to regulate their emotions and behaviors. Darren admitted how sad and depressed he always was. "I didn't give a crap about anything. I didn't want to do nothing and just tried to get through every damn day," he stated.

With no one giving them direction or helping set goals, they lacked the vision of where they were personally headed in school, along with the self-discipline and motivation to keep going to school and making progress to graduation. The participants had difficulty getting through each day, much less looking towards a future with academic and personal goals. Bethany recalled a time in school when they talked about goals, and she wanted to be in a beauty pageant. She could not remember much about the lessons or the instruction, and she did not believe it helped her set realistic goals and not toward her education. Ashley told a teacher she wanted to do hair and makeup when she finished school. With a sad look, she went on to tell

me, "Everyone laughed at me. I guess it's because I'm so ugly. My hair is always a mess."

Clearly, the school attempted to teach goal setting, but from Ashley's perception, the goal she

aspired to was not good enough for others. The act of expressing the goal resulted in her being

made fun of and possibly, in her mind, she did not want to talk about her goals again.

Understandably, the stress the participants had in their lives was challenging to deal with,

and they did not know how to handle it. The repeated traumatic experiences caused them to live

in a constant state of emergency.   Teachers can provide ways to help them manage their stress

and emotions. The strategies provided by (CASEL, 2018) for self-management would have been

most appropriate for these students. Engage them in journaling activities, deep-breathing

exercises, role-playing, and relaxation techniques, to name a few would have benefited these

students. I want my own teachers to encourage students to seek help if they feel their stress or

negative emotions are becoming unmanageable. We need to provide them with appropriate

resources and means to get the assistance they need.

Relationship skills

Relationship skills are critical to students' success. The ability to maintain healthy and

rewarding relationships depends on clear communication, listening, cooperating with others,

standing up to peer pressure, and seeking and offering help when needed (CASEL, 2018). Even

beyond their unstable family relationships described in the previous chapter, each participant

also acknowledged that attending and transitioning into many different schools hurt their

schooling as they had difficulties establishing relationships with teachers and students. Ashley

moved several times in and out of foster homes and her own home. She stated, "I went to so

many schools I can't remember them all. I was always the new kid in school." Darren did not

have to change schools too many times until middle school. He said, "I didn't have any friends.

I hated kids really." Navigating the school systems was problematic and stressful. The insecurity and distrust of whether teachers, administrators would accept them, and other students contributed to the participants settling into a new school and building relationships.

All the participants described a contentious relationship with at least one of their parents. Earlier, Ashley talked about her mother, "I hated her at times and I love her so much." Bethany felt much rejection from her mother. She told me, "My mom liked my sister better than my brother and me. She spoiled her but she didn't like us." Frustration, humiliation, and resentment provided difficulties cooperating and seeking help at school when they needed it. Although, ironically, the participants felt no one would help them. Often, when the participants did reach out to school personnel, issues increased with disciplinary actions following or law enforcement getting involved. The participants had a tremendous lack of trust for the school to help them in any manner.

The participants also found rebellious activities and were unable to resist inappropriate social actions such as skipping school, alcohol, drugs, and sexual behaviors. Renee and Ashley told about skipping school on more than one occasion. Harrison had many instances of alcohol and drugs. He communicated to me about going to a rehabilitation facility. He said, "I was so messed up but I wasn't going to talk to anyone there. I hated that place."

Each of these students needed help to establish, develop, and restore caring, nurturing relationships. Teachers can promote positive and healthy peer-to-peer relationships by giving students plenty of opportunities to practice teamwork and collaborate. CASEL (2018) provides many ideas for teachers, such as teaching students to resolve conflicts peacefully, how to give and receive constructive feedback, and teach lessons to develop social skills. I have learned that I need to encourage my teachers to foster strong educator-to-student relationships by sharing how

they might have overcome a traumatic or stressful situation. This sharing may build the bridge to a connection that might be missing.

Responsible decision-making

Making appropriate decisions is a fundamental key to students' success in school. Responsible decision-making is the ability to make constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on ethical standards, safety concerns, and social norms. Students are presented with choices in a variety of contexts and feel their thoughts and opinions can be expressed and valued (CASEL, 2018).

Each of the participants lacked the skills to make appropriate decisions, such as dropping out of school. None of them mentioned their parents demanding they stay in school or even caring if they were in or out of school. Remember that Bethany's mother gave her the option to stay home and complete school on the computer. The decision-making skills her mother modeled for her resulted in Bethany doing minimal school work for two years. When Renee started middle school, she began to make many bad decisions. She said, "I started smoking weed, staying out really late, and skipping school." The participants made other decisions that resulted in dire consequences such as fighting, drugs, and other promiscuous behaviors. Due to the number of issues the participants had with discipline at school and with law enforcement, it was evident they had difficulties determining the differences between appropriate and inappropriate behaviors and could not explain the consequences of their actions. Maybe at the time of the incidents, the participants just did not care about the consequences. Alternatively, perhaps they did not have anyone help them understand these actions as destructive and wrong. Harrison regrets the many poor decisions he made. He told me, "I did so many bad things. I don't want my own son to do what I did. I'm going to help him make decisions. No one was around for me

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like I will be for him." By chance, if Harrison and the others had adults, such as teachers, employers, and family members to teach the decision-making skills needed, many of the behaviors and incidents might have been avoided.

Decisions students make, from the most simple, routine decisions made daily, to the decisions that may impact them for the rest of their lives, such as continuing school, involve a process that must be communicated and thoroughly taught to young people. Responsible decision-making has to be explicit to students, and by helping them to practice these skills in the classroom, we will help them to be more successful in school and the future in general. Trying to make his life easier, Darren said quitting school was the only thing he could come up with. "No one told me not to and I didn't know what in the hell else I was going to do." It is our duty and obligation for my teachers to see the importance of teaching responsible decision-making in our students. CASEL (2018) provides a curriculum for teachers to help their students with activities to recognize and understand their obligation to engage in ethical, safe, and legal behaviors. Identifying and developing values to promote honesty, reliability, and accountability is also in the curriculum provided. The range of decisions might vary from friend choices, using drugs, or more complicated such as deciding to stay in school or not.

Deep Connections Matter

All the participants had chaotic, trauma-filled lives, and so do many students. However, the primary, common ideas these participants revealed were the role of relationships or lack thereof. Many studies, as discussed in previous chapters have explored the numerous social factors associated with dropping out, particularly in the context of trauma and SEL. However, this study examined a closer look at the lives of these participants and peeled back the layers of the obvious reasons one might have difficulty staying in school. Discovering the loss of loved

ones and not having a sense of belonging, feeling lost without relationships – these were imperative to truly begin to understand the implications of these participants and why finishing school was not a priority for them at that time in their lives.

"It's overwhelming to be a teenager," Harrison expressed as he talked about growing up. "I didn't have anybody to look up to and I had no one to talk to. It was really hard," he concluded. Gaining insight from these individuals reinforces the importance of solid relationships with adults who genuinely care, and also learning the valuable skills necessary to earn their high school diploma. Educational leaders, teachers, families, and all who work with young people can benefit from the perceptions of these participants. Bethany wishes someone would have cared more about her school situation. She remarked, "They flunked me in 7th grade and I was on an IEP. Kids made fun of me all the time and nobody did anything about it." She felt like there was not a sound support system at school, and she expressed that her mother did not like the school system either. Her mother gave her the option to do home-schooling. When Bethany complained about kids teasing and bullying, she told me, "My mom was just like, hey, if you don't want to go back, just stay home and so I did."

Findings are indicative that these young people do not have the social-emotional learning required to accomplish the goals and expectations the education system has put in place. "I should have been focusing on school, but man, I just couldn't. My mom died, and I started living really bad, doing bad crap. Just living day to day, not thinking about the future," Darren recalled. "I don't know if anyone knew or cared," he added. Many educators have turned to SEL as a means of providing that support to students who suffer from trauma (Jagers, Rivas-Drake, & Borowski, 2018). CASEL (2018) reiterates SEL is a type of learning in which students can gain knowledge and practice around real-life skills that are outside of the usual content area classes.

These skills are just as essential to be successful in higher education or the workforce, so it seems natural to include them as part of the education of young people. Many schools have joined forces to implement a type of SEL curriculum that teaches students these skills and prepares them for the world outside of K-12 school. In an ideal world, SEL would live in some form in every classroom throughout the school, and all teachers would be trained to be able to incorporate even small SEL practices or examples into their content area classes.

An important question arises, though: Is implementing a curriculum enough? An extensive study documented that SEL programs yield significant positive effects in students on their competencies and attitudes about self, others, and school (Durlak et al., 2011). Furthermore, they state, "SEL programs also enhance students' behavioral adjustment in the form of increased prosocial behaviors and reduced conduct and internalizing problems, and improved academic performance on achievement tests and grades" (p. 13). As stated previously, SEL is the capacity to recognize and manage emotions, solve problems effectively, and establish positive relationships with others, competencies that are essential for all students (Zins, Elias, & Greenburg, 2003). Nevertheless, is a social-emotional learning curriculum enough for students that have multiple and compounding traumatic events in their lives?

After learning these participants' stories, there is a need to deliberate how the participants experienced a deeper form of traumatic experience, multiple events paired with ongoing instability in their relationships. Traumatized students are especially prone to difficulty in self-regulation, negative thinking, being on high alert, difficulty trusting adults, and inappropriate social interactions (Lacoe, 2013; Terrasi & de Galarce, 2017). Trauma-informed teaching focuses on creating a positive and safe learning environment, building social-emotional

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competencies in students, and developing deep connected relationships between school personnel and students (Phifer & Hull, 2016).

For students who have experienced the level of trauma that these participants have, implementing the SEL curriculum and, more importantly, connecting it to trauma-informed practices is the direction that becomes the priority for schools. Educators need to consider the students who experience intense and overwhelming emotions that may be connected to traumatic experiences. The goal of trauma-informed practices or teaching is to help all students feel like they belong, they are known, and they are supported. The advantage is that using trauma-informed teaching strategies can benefit all students, regardless of their experiences. Schools will anticipate the need to provide intensive supports to students and address the challenges that students may be dealing with, including the traumatic occurrence or the ongoing chronic stress from trauma.

There are several strategies involved in trauma-informed teaching; nonetheless, the most crucial is that relationships must be specific, intentional, and deeply connected. Many times just building a relationship is too vague, artificial, or forced by teachers. An SEL curriculum might give techniques to relationship building; however, to reach students such as the ones in this study, educators likely need to take it a step further. Students need to have educators who genuinely care, ones they can trust and will be there to help them when needed. Renee felt like no one at school cared about her at all. When she was pregnant, she said, "I was in a high-risk pregnancy and they wouldn't give me an elevator key. I had to go up the stairs every day so many times. No one cared and not one person even helped me! My mom died and I'm supposed to be pregnant and not even know anything." Surely someone at school could have advocated for her and been there to help her when she needed it? Maybe they did, but that deeper connection

was not present? Trauma-informed practices include support for all, thoughtful interactions, and fostering a feeling of safety. Ashley struggled so hard in school, "I was bullied and no one cared. I went to school with dirty clothes, my hair wasn't brushed. Not one person asked me if I needed anything." What changes could have made a difference for these individuals? Would a trauma-informed school, with intentional systems to acknowledge the need for deeper connections with students to make them feel welcome and safe, prevented some of these participants from deciding to drop out?

Even though the fundamental beliefs of SEL overlap with the principals of trauma-informed teaching, the difference is on the intensity. According to Pawlo, Lorenzo, Eichert, and Elias (2019), the two concepts' differences are on intensity – "both the intensity of the stress children are experiencing and the intensity of the instruction required in helping them" (p. 37). Countless students experience strong and overwhelming emotions that may be connected to an acute traumatic occurrence, which limits students' information processing ability and social-emotional functioning. Therefore, trauma-informed practices anticipate the need to provide intensive support to students and address particularly acute and chronic challenges if the situation demands it (Pawlo et al. 2019). In Harrison's case, he had tremendous anger, just like his father and got into numerous fights at school. "I was just beating up anyone who got in my way. I was mad at everyone but mostly my dad," he said. Schools must take this under consideration when determining what will assist our students the most. Many students, such as the participants in this study, have endured a multitude of traumatic experiences and need intensive support and not just a primary SEL curriculum to assist them in making it through each day, each month, and each school year.

Creating a positive school climate and integrating social-emotional learning skills can establish more trusting and productive relationships among students and teachers. Establishing routines and activities that emphasize students' strengths rather than their deficits and improving the culture and climate helps students develop a definite purpose (Hatchimonji, Linsky, DeMarchena, Nayman, Kim, & Elias, 2018). However, for many of our students, we must focus on trauma-informed strategies and not just skills alone. Allowing students to feel a sense of belonging in our classrooms and being present in their lives needs to become part of the programs we implement and teach. To reach traumatized students such as the ones in this study, teaching school has to involve more about the social-emotional side of the students we teach.

Children who experience stress and disturbances struggle to learn new information as they operate in a fear state because the brain, when affected by trauma, is significantly limited in its capacity to receive and integrate new information such as the social-emotional skills (Van der Kolk, 2014). Harrison reached frustration limits many times, especially when he was living on his own. He said, "I felt like I was running into walls everywhere I turned. I just started getting in fights! I was mad at everybody!" The inappropriate behaviors, missing school, defiance, and others accentuated the problem of not having any relationship with school personnel, and thus the frustration builds, and that puts them one step closer to giving up and quitting.

Trauma-informed teaching provides a means to identify, discuss, and practice appropriate social-emotional skills. More so, trauma-informed teaching goes further to provide educators and students with language and strategies they can use to address specific behavioral and emotional challenges related to the countless issues students struggle with. Therefore, training our teachers to be trauma-informed prepares them for the level of emotional intensity that students who are traumatized may bring to school and provide instruction required to teach them

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effectively. As an educator, I believe in the benefits of teaching our students the social-emotional skills through an SEL curriculum. As mentioned previously, the trauma-informed practices provide more emotional support and deeper connections with students than a stand-alone SEL curriculum. Undoubtedly, this study reinforces the value of trauma-informed teaching and how combined with the implementation of an SEL curriculum, it will contribute to the success of all students and especially those whose compounding traumatic experiences may be leading them to decide to discontinue their schooling.

To summarize and emphasize the emerging themes, I included Table 5 to sort out and recap the events leading up to the decision made by the participants to discontinue their schooling. The first column represents the trauma the participants endured throughout their life. Their life stories contributed to the outcome, along with the other columns. The next three columns are indicative of their lack of SEL skills, and the final column is the connections to school that were not present. It is important to remember that the participants reported this to me, and therefore, it is evidence that concluded in them not completing their high school diploma.

Table 5.

Decisions Leading to Dropping Out of School

	ACES/Trauma	Self-Management	Relationship Skills	Decision-Making	Lack of School Connections
Ashley	Sexual abuse Divorce Domestic violence Alcohol/drugs Mental illness Incarceration	"I went to school with dirty clothes, my hair wasn't brushed" "Back talking the teachers all the time"	"I was always the new kid in school" "Sometimes I hated her . . .other times we loved each other"	"It was such a bad decision" "Don't do what I did"	"I was bullied and no one cared" "Not one person asked me if I needed anything" "My teachers didn't like me"
Darren	Physical abuse Divorce Alcohol/drugs Mental illness Neglect	"I just wanted to curl up in a ball and disappear" "I didn't give a crap about anything"	"I hated kids really" "I didn't have any friends at all"	"No one told me not to quit and I didn't know what in the hell else I was going to do"	"I don't know if anyone knew or cared" "Never did I talk to one damn teacher about my life"
Harrison	Physical abuse Divorce Domestic violence Alcohol/drugs Mental illness Incarceration Neglect	"I just exploded. I didn't care about nothing or nobody" "I was the toughest, meanest bully in school"	"No one was around for me" "I was mad at everybody" "He was an angry bastard and I hated him so much"	"I did so many bad things" "I smoked weed on the first day of school"	"I didn't have anybody to look up to and I had no one to talk to" "I was running into walls everywhere I turned"
Bethany	Physical abuse Death Domestic violence Alcohol/drugs Mental illness Neglect	"I just kept getting bullied . . . I'm done" "I was just too dumb to learn"	"I'm going to be a better mom than my mom" "I was moving around with friends, sleeping on couches, and going hungry many times"	"My mom said I could just be home-schooled" "He said I had to give it up for adoption or he would leave me"	"Kids made fun of me all the time and nobody did anything about it" "They flunked me in 7th grade"

| Renee | Physical abuse
Death
Divorce
Alcohol/drugs
Neglect | "I was bullied because I was black"

"We have no one and we have nothing" | "My friends and I ditched school all the time"

"I liked the older boys as they gave me a lot of attention" | "I started smoking weed, staying out really late, and skipping school"

"My dad walked out when I was 17" | "No one cared and not one person even helped me"

"The assistant principal was glad I was gone" |

"Love my students? I teach content!"

Most of the participants lacked the social-emotional skills necessary to navigate the systems of the school. More importantly, though, the participants felt no one at school supported them, knew them, or even loved them. Darren recalls, "Never, did I talk to one damn teacher about my life." Remember that someone loving them is what sent them back to school. Would someone loving them keep them in school? Previously, the participants talked briefly about a teacher or staff member they thought might have cared about them; but it was short-lived and did not result in anything meaningful in a long-term sense. In other words, these students lacked deeper emotional relationships at home, and they were not found at school either. This discovery prompts the questions: If we know students experience this level of compounding trauma at home, and educators know that one of the only stable places for them to find these deeper relationships may be at school, then what are the roles and responsibilities of the educators? If we ask our teachers to not just "build relationships with students," but "build deep, loving, emotionally connected relationships with students," how will teachers respond to that notion in current praxis? Plainly, it depends on the culture of each building, but one might anticipate that there will be some hesitation and discomfort with some teachers.

Many teachers, especially secondary teachers, display strong abilities to engage students in the content they teach. It has become evident over time, and rightly so, our role has changed. Now our job as teachers and educators is to make sure we learn about our students; we connect with them, show respect for them, and affirm their worthiness. Do we take it a leap forward and make sure we love our students and form that bond of security, of hope that many of them desperately need? After hearing the participants' stories, I firmly believe it is essential for every student to have at least one meaningful connection with a caring adult and not just an essential

relationship of respect and rapport – a deeper one based on a concentrated level of care. Can the caring adult be a teacher who works hard to develop a bond, a connection, a relationship, and take it further into maybe even having a loving rapport with that student?

By conservative estimates, about 40 percent of American children will have at least one potentially traumatizing experience by age eighteen: This includes the death of a parent or sibling, ongoing physical abuse and neglect, sexual abuse, or the experience of a severe accident, natural disaster, or domestic violence or other violent crime (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017). We must create the conditions in schools in which all students have secure human connections no matter the adversities they have been dealt. Students need to feel valued, need to feel safe, need to feel like they belong, and they need to feel loved, and cared for in our schools.

In the early years of school, students typically express a great love of school and learning and usually have a good relationship with their teacher. However, as students develop and age, from my vantage point, frequently, the gap between students' perceptions of their teachers and their love of learning grows and widens. Therefore, it is just as crucial that secondary teachers foster that relationship with their students, as well. All the participants in this study started out enjoying school and their teachers. Bethany remembered being so excited to go to school in first grade. She mentioned, "My teacher was so nice and kind to me. I liked school, and it was fun to learn." Harrison's eyes lit up as he remembered starting school, "I was so excited to ride the bus and go to school every day. I loved it." Their love of school was evident, and their enthusiasm was robust, very similar to most children's elementary school memories.

That excitement and enthusiasm of the participants changed as they entered middle school and continued to decline as they entered high school. "My teachers didn't like me. I was nothing but trouble to them," recalled Ashley. She knows her behaviors were not always

appropriate but did her teachers know what she was dealing with at home? Harrison thought back to middle school and remembered the school work getting harder. "I didn't want to do my homework. No one would help me and my teachers didn't like it when I didn't have it done," he stated. Did his teachers know what was going on in his life and why he did not have his homework completed?

As a secondary principal and counselor, I hear resistance from teachers in forming relationships, much less any strong bond of love for their students. One teacher I had a conversation with said:

> Some students are so hard to like. I just do everything I can to put up with their behavior and lack of motivation. How would you expect me to form any kind of relationship with students who are so difficult?

Another teacher commented, "I teach content. I'm not here to love students."

I am confident that the relationship between teachers and students can have a lasting impact on the development of a student. Reflecting on the teachers in my building, those that have strong bonds with students, and more so, those that love their students are so effective in their teaching roles. When my students view these teachers as role models, maybe even a partner rather than an adversary, they are more open to learning. When there is a positive teacher-student relationship, students feel safe, and there is a strong tie of trust within the classroom. Students are not afraid to take risks and understand that making errors are all part of the learning process. Students are more likely to feel positive about school and have a higher chance of developing a real love for learning. It is noticeable in my building those teachers who are not afraid to develop a deep connection to their students.

Positive teacher-student relationships promote a sense of school belonging and encourage students to participate cooperatively. Teachers can assist students with motivation and goal setting, and students can turn to them for advice and guidance. If each of the participants would have had a strong bond with one teacher, would it have made a difference?

There are many strategies that teachers can incorporate to show they love and care about their students. These strategies include showing interest in students' personal lives, greeting students as they enter the classroom, touching base with students who display strong emotions, listening with sincerity to students, and empathizing with students. Having constructive interactions with students and showing an interest in the well-being of their lives will foster a healthy relationship. Some teachers even make it a point to regularly attend extracurricular activities, such as sporting events or fine arts events, so that their students know they care about them both within and outside of the classroom. Undeniably, teachers have a responsibility to foster a welcoming and motivating learning environment for their students.

As I think back on my recollections in education, my own children's experiences, and the participants' school days, there is an evident difference in elementary-teacher and secondary-teacher relationships with students. Many times, secondary teachers do not feel comfortable, do not believe it is their job, or do not have the skills to form a bond with their students. How can they build relationships or even love their students if they do not know how? How do you do that with challenging students? This study points to a need for research in the differences between elementary teachers and secondary teachers and their perceptions about their role in building deep, loving relationships with students. It is essential that all teachers, regardless of grade level or content taught, form a tie, a connection, or, hopefully, a caring, loving relationship with their students.

A definitive discovery from this study is that each of the participants found someone to love and someone that loved them. This love drew them back to school to accomplish the goal of completing their coursework for their diploma. Their life stories revealed that many times they were abandoned, rejected, or even abused, which might have played a part in their withdrawing from school. Would a strong relationship with a teacher, staff member, or administrator – someone who loved them - been enough of a bridge to keep them in school? I believe so. Each one of the participants found someone outside of school to love them, someone who encouraged and motivated them. Consequently, they decided that it was a priority to get their diploma and have found the desire and the drive to move forward in getting this accomplished.

Students spend hundreds of hours with their teachers in a typical school year. That is enough time to build a relationship that could ignite a student's lifetime love of learning and enhance the skills a student benefits from to help them power through the adversity they face in their lives.

Teachers must learn how to help their students grow in many different facets of their lives and ensure students have a prosperous future for themselves and those around them. When students recognize that a teacher truly wants the best for them, they are willing to try harder in the classroom. Successful teachers are those that can maximize the learning potential of all students in their class. Developing positive relationships between a teacher and student is a fundamental aspect of quality teaching and student learning. So learning from Brian – and from all the other students whom I have met with – and Ashley, Darren, Harrison, Bethany, and Renee – I now understand better what may have been needed from me. Maybe it was love for these students – a bond that made them feel like they belonged – a deeper relationship that welcomed

them, accepted them, and motivated them to continue to stay in school and navigate the requirements to complete their education.

Kansans Can

If Kansas is going to the lead the world in the success of each student, according to the vision launched by the Kansas State Board of Education in 2015, then it is imperative to focus on getting every student to graduation day and gaining a more in-depth understanding as to why students like Brian, and Ashley, Darren, Harrison, Bethany, and Renee drop out of school. Kansans Can declares that high school graduation and social-emotional learning are vital to achieving success. Given that Kansas is currently emphasizing both graduation rates and social-emotional learning, it is essential to have a greater understanding of the needs of students, especially those who have suffered trauma. Based on the results of this study, it is evident that our schools, and specifically our educators, must be prepared and equipped with trauma-informed practices. Furthermore, an SEL curriculum that is as vital to the curriculum as the core academics such as reading, math, social studies, and science is essential in every school. It will take both of these strategies, working together and complementing each other to meet the essential needs of *all* students.

As with the Kansans Can initiative, many schools, teachers, and staff have gone through endless reforms and changes. Countless programs, activities, and undertakings have been implemented throughout the years in education, and educators may doubt the change process. When working with limited resources, it can be a challenge then, to consider the simultaneous implementation of trauma-informed practices, *and* SEL curriculum with collective buy-in from all stakeholders. Furthermore, Elias (2009) discusses the importance of educators leading the initiative and having a sense of ownership. The educators must be included in the logistics of the

instruction, such as when should it take place, how it fits into the school day, and who is responsible for teaching it. School leaders need to be diligent in carving out the time, space, and resources needed to get educators trained and prepared with trauma-informed practices and SEL curriculum. Hence, they become invested in the results it can produce.

Moving Kansas as leaders of the world in the success of each student will be challenging, stimulating, and rewarding if we are willing and intentional in meeting the absolute needs of our students. Mainly, the findings of this study prompt me to consider how the implementation of SEL curriculum alone might not be enough for students who have experienced such high levels of compounding trauma as these participants. Nevertheless, simultaneously training school personnel in trauma-informed teaching practices might help take Kansas towards achieving this lofty vision. Ultimately, that might not translate to significant jumps in graduation percentages in a per-pupil resource allocation mindset; however, it could add an explanation to the investment needed to reach those students who need it the most – and help them graduate.

Limitations

While this research helps give us a deeper understanding of these participants' stories, this study is primarily limited to a particular context. The participants were back in school three or fewer years following the initial dropping out of high school. They were also explicitly screened to meet the criteria to be interviewed. While these stories might find shared understandings with others outside of the context, the interpretive nature of this study acknowledges that one cannot create findings that would generalize for an entire population. At the same time, future studies could explore how love, deeper relationships, SEL, and trauma-informed practices might impact students on a more generalizable scale. Furthermore, while I discuss these nuanced differences between trauma-informed teaching and SEL in this last

chapter, these discussions are inspired by the findings; however, they are still based largely on my own subjective interpretations as a veteran counselor and principal.

Future Research

A variety of areas could be further investigated with qualitative or quantitative studies to expand and deepen the findings of this study. Some of those areas are listed below:

- Differences between social-emotional learning curriculum and trauma-informed practices and the benefits of both.

- Teacher and leader perceptions around making deeper emotional connections with their students at the elementary and secondary levels.

- Resource analysis to implement trauma-informed practices and SEL curriculum.

- Identifying levels of trauma and tendencies to respond with trauma-informed practices and SEL curriculum.

Although I could use pieces of my study to influence the aforementioned potential studies, each of them would need additional data collection and different participant criteria to explore in-depth.

Another area of focus for future research would be the exploration of secondary trauma on educators as they too deal with their own lives, but carry the weight of the trauma of their students. This focus is, of course, related to the overall challenge of teaching. Nevertheless, it leads to the simple acknowledgment that it is unfortunate to focus on the students solely. We will not be able to succeed with our students if we do not also have success with our adults.

Finally, the results of this study have shed light on a previously under-examined aspect of schools, that of the perceptions and experiences of the students who endured through high levels of trauma and ultimately graduated. The voices of this population are needed to gather more

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detailed and substantial information from this valuable source. Would they potentially identify critical relationships that kept them engaged in school? What would their stories tell us?

As we learn more about the effects of trauma on children and adults, studies with students who have endured stress, disturbances, and chaotic ordeals throughout their lives must remain prevalent. Research must continue to explore specific skills students need and how relationships benefit those students so that educators, such as me, might be more prepared to adapt practices and interrupt the series of events that eventually lead to another student dropping out.

Conclusion

Going back to Brian's story and all the students I have counseled to stay in school as a principal and a counselor, I was motivated to understand the reasons, influences, and explanations that result in students leaving school. The stories told by Ashley, Darren, Harrison, Bethany, and Renee provide much hope that the findings of future studies on high school dropouts will show a resounding improvement in what causes a student to decide to discontinue their schooling. Surprisingly enough, I also discovered what inspired my participants to go back to school to finish their high school education.   I believe educators and administrators need to dive deeper into these students' lives to determine how schools can better assist all students, even those that have suffered trauma in their lives, so they have the appropriate skills to navigate the educational system to stay the course to earn their high school diploma.

In conclusion, I find myself reflecting on the old teaching adage, "Students do not care how much you know until they know how much you care." To my current and future colleagues, coworkers, and all who work in the field of education with students: At the end of the day, I hope you can reflect and ask yourself if you did all you could to deeply care for your

students, to make a positive difference in their lives, and to do your best because they deserve

our best!

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Appendix A – ACE Survey

While you were growing up, during your first 18 years of life:

1. Did a parent or other adult in the household **often** …
Swear at you, insult you, put you down, or humiliate you?
or
Act in a way that made you afraid that you might be physically hurt?
Yes No If yes enter 1 _____

2. Did a parent or other adult in the household **often** …
Push, grab, slap, or throw something at you?
or
Ever hit you so hard that you had marks or were injured?
Yes No If yes enter 1 _____

3. Did an adult or person at least 5 years older than you **ever**…
Touch or fondle you or have you touch their body in a sexual way?
or
Try to or actually have oral, anal, or vaginal sex with you?
Yes No If yes enter 1 _____

4. Did you **often** feel that …
No one in your family loved you or thought you were important or special?
or
Your family didn't look out for each other, feel close to each other, or support each other?
Yes No If yes enter 1 _____

5. Did you **often** feel that …
You didn't have enough to eat, had to wear dirty clothes, and had no one to protect you?
or
Your parents were too drunk or high to take care of you or take you to the doctor if you needed it?
Yes No If yes enter 1 _____

6. Were your parents **ever** separated or divorced?
Yes No If yes enter 1 _____

7. Was your mother or stepmother:
Often pushed, grabbed, slapped, or had something thrown at her?
or
Sometimes or often kicked, bitten, hit with a fist, or hit with something hard?
or
Ever repeatedly hit over at least a few minutes or threatened with a gun or knife?
Yes No If yes enter 1 _____

8. Did you live with anyone who was a problem drinker or alcoholic or who used street drugs?
Yes No If yes enter 1 _____

9. Was a household member depressed or mentally ill or did a household member attempt suicide?
Yes No If yes enter 1 _____

10. Did a household member go to prison?
Yes No If yes enter 1 _____

Now add up your "Yes" answers: _____ This is your ACE Score

Appendix B – Interview Guide

IRB Approval and Identifying Participants	Approximate Time Frame: Two Months Identify research participants at adult learning centers Develop interview protocol Develop interview questions Contact participants and sign consent forms Journaling
First Round of Interviews with Focus on Life History	Approximate Time Frame: Two Weeks Introductory meeting with participants to establish relationship/rapport. Conduct Interviews (record) Journaling
Preliminary Analysis between First and Second Round of Interviews	Approximate Time Frame: 1 Week Listen to recording of interviews and take notes This preliminary data analysis is to inform development of second round of interview questions. Develop second round of interview questions based on CASEL analysis. Journaling
Conduct Second Round of Interviews on Details of Their Experiences	Approximate Time Frame: 2 Weeks Conduct Interviews (record) Journaling
Preliminary Analysis between Second and Third Interviews	Approximate Time Frame: 1 Week Listen to recording of interviews and take notes This preliminary data analysis is to inform development of third round of interview questions. Develop third round of interview questions based on CASEL analysis. Journaling
Conduct Third Round of Interviews on Reflect on Their Experiences	Approximate Time Frame: 2 Weeks Conduct Interviews (record) Journaling
Conduct Final Data Analysis	Approximate Time Frame: 2-4 Weeks Transcribe all interviews and take detailed notes regarding CASEL framework application. Code transcription using CASEL framework as the lens for analysis. Comprehensive coding analysis Codes/categories/themes will be grouped Subjectivities coded A review of journaling
Write up Findings	Approximate Time Frame: One Month Recreation of shared narratives
Member Check	Approximate Time Frame: 1 Week Narratives offered to participants Check for accuracy
Write up Discussion	Approximate Time Frame: One Month
Finalize Dissertation and Defense	Approximate Time Frame: Two Months

Appendix C - Email Contact

To: Adult Learning Center Directors

Hello,

My name is Donna Zerr and I am doing a research project on students who have dropped out of high school. I would like to visit your learning center to determine if you have students who would be willing to participate, and also meet the criteria for the project.

I would like to come to your center in the next couple of weeks to administer a short questionnaire and survey to any student willing to participate. I will only take a short time with each student and will do my best to not disrupt your center. If you approve, I will reply with a date and time for my visit.

If students from your center are participants in my project, I will need to come to your center three times to interview the students and again I will do my best to not disrupt your center. Thank you for your consideration and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,
Donna Zerr

Appendix D - Participant Questionnaire

Hello, my name is Donna Zerr and I want to thank you for visiting with me today about my research project.. I'm interested in knowing more about students who have dropped out of high school.

If you are willing to, please fill out the questionnaire below to see if you meet the criteria to participate in my research project.

Name _____

Age _____   Gender_____   Today's Date _____

Year you dropped out of high school _____

Did you qualify for free or reduced lunches when you were in school? _____

Adult Learning Center name and location _____

Appendix E - Informed Consent

CONSENTING TO THIS STUDY AND CONSENT FORM

Finding a Deeper Understanding of the Intersection among Trauma, Social-emotional Learning,
and Dropping Out: A Phenomenological Study

Introduction
The purpose of this form is to provide you information that may affect your decision as to
whether or not to participate in this research study. If you decide to participate in this study, there
is a one-page consent form at the end of the study that you can sign to record your consent. The
purpose of this study is to understand the lived experiences of five high school dropouts who
were trauma survivors and had returned to school to complete their high school diploma.

You were selected to be a possible participant because you meet the above criteria.

What will I be asked to do?
If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to engage in a minimum of three
interviews and disclose information your life and about the decisions that led up to you dropping
out of high school. These interviews will be audio taped and the information you provide will be
analyzed for themes. I will follow up with you to review the information, to check for accuracy,
and verification.

What are the risks involved in this study?
There is no foreseeable risk for participating in this study. At any point participants can exit the
study if one feels uncomfortable without penalty.

What are the possible benefits of this study?
There is no direct benefit for you to participate in this study.

Do I have to participate?
Your participation is voluntary. You can exit the study anytime without any penalty or prejudice.

Who will know about my participation in this research study?
The records of this study will be kept confidential. No identifiers linking you to this study will be
included in any sort of report that might be published or presented. Research records will be
stored securely and only my dissertation chairs, Dr. Robert Hachiya and Dr. Alex Red Corn will
have access to the records.

Whom do I contact with questions about the research?
If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact Donna Zerr at 316.371.5647, or at
dzerr@ksu.edu or donnazerr@gmail.com or Dr. Robert Hachiya or Dr. Alex Red Corn at
rhachiya@ksu.edu or aredcorn@ksu.edu.

Whom do I contact about my rights as a research participant?
This research study has been reviewed by the Human Subjects' Protection Program and/or the Institutional Review Board at Kansas State University.

Signature
If you agree to participate in this study, then please read the consent form on the following page, ask any questions you have about the study, and sign at the bottom to demonstrate understanding of your expected role in this study.

_____ _____ _____
Researcher Signature   Date

_____ _____ _____
Participant Signature   Date

Consent Form

I, _____, agree to participate in a case study as part of a doctoral dissertation by Donna Zerr chaired by Dr. Robert Hachiya and Dr. Alex Red Corn from the Department of Educational Leadership at Kansas State University titled *Finding a Deeper Understanding of the Intersection among Trauma, Social-Emotional Learning, and Dropping Out: A Phenomenological Study.*

I understand that my participation is voluntary. I can stop taking part without giving any reason, and without penalty. I can ask to have all of the information about me returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed.

The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experiences of five high school dropouts who were trauma survivors and had returned to school to complete their high school diploma.

If I volunteer to take part in this study, I will be asked to do the following:
1. Attend three one-hour interviews with the researcher.
2. Clarify any follow-up questions the interviewer might have when interpreting my words.
3. Check for accuracy in the researchers' transcripts and findings when depicting my information.

I understand that:
• The researcher will audiotape conversations and interviews that occur between the researcher and me.
• The data will be kept by the researcher and will be shared while maintaining confidentiality with Dr. Robert Hachiya or Dr. Alex Red Corn.
• The researcher will analyze the data and keep it for no longer than one year for educational and research purposes after the last date of data collection.
• There is no direct benefit for me participating in the project.
• No risk is expected but, if I experience some discomfort or stress during observations or conversations, then I can choose to discontinue my participation in the study without any penalty.

No information about me, or provided by me during the research, will be shared with others, except if it is necessary to protect my welfare (for example, if I were injured and need physician care) or if required by law. I will be assigned a pseudonym which will be used in interview transcript and all other data documents. The researcher will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the course of the project.

I understand that I am agreeing by my signature on this form, to take part in this research project and understand that I will receive a signed copy of this consent form for my records.

_____ _____ _____
Researcher Signature   Date

_____ _____ _____
Participant Signature   Date

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Appendix F - First Interview

First Round Interview

These questions are used for the first round of interviews. Additional questions may arise as the interviews are conducted. One question may lead to others and answers may lead to additional probes. Some questions are being asked to develop a relationship with the participant. The first round of questions as described by Seidman (2013) are on Focused Life History.

Introductory:

1. How long have you been in the adult learning center? Tell me about your decision process to enroll here and pursue your diploma?

2. Is this your first time back to school after dropping out?

3. Can you describe your current job experiences?

4. Tell me about your friends and free time activities.

School:

5. Tell me about your elementary school experience? What is one thing you really liked? What is one thing you really didn't like?

6. Tell me about your middle/junior high school experience? What is one thing you really liked? What is one thing you really didn't like?

7. Tell me about your high school experience? What is one thing you really liked? What is one thing you really didn't like?

8. Tell me about your short term and long term goals.

<u>Home:</u>

9. Tell me about your living arrangements.

10. Tell me about your home life growing up.

11. Your ACEs score was _____. Can you tell me about the experiences you answered YES

    to on the survey?

12. Is there anything you want to tell me that I did not ask?