

## ABSTRACT

The Credit Recovery High School: Who are the students and why are they there?

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Academic success is the most essential aspect of a student's life. Consistent low performance or failure may lead to a student being at risk for not graduating from high school. Factors such as unstable family structure and low family income among many others contribute largely to a student's at risk status. Credit recovery is one of the programs enacted to help increase graduation rates among students. The present study examines who the students in credit recovery high schools are and why they are there. The sample for this study consisted of students and staff members of a credit recovery high school. Interviews and surveys were used as the primary means of data collection. Among the students enrolled, Hispanic was the most largely represented race followed by African American. Results indicated that students are enrolled in a credit recovery school due to variety of reasons as stipulated such as poor attendance, family structure, and family income. This type of education is vital in reducing high school dropout rates in our society. Therefore, viewpoint of students enrolled in a credit recovery high school is essential in order to bring focus to the program's strengths.

The Credit Recovery High School: Who are the students and why are they there?

by

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A Thesis

Approved by the Department of Educational Psychology

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES .....	vi
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	vii
DEDICATION .....	viii
CHAPTER ONE .....	1
Introduction.....	1
Purpose of Study.....	3
Research Questions.....	4
CHAPTER TWO .....	5
Literature Review .....	5
Credit Recovery Programs .....	5
How is Credit Recovery Different from an Alternative School? .....	7
Who are the Students in Need of Credit Recovery? .....	8
Socioeconomic (SES) Factors Related to Poor Academic Achievement .....	8
Family Structure .....	11
CHAPTER THREE.....	15
Method.....	15
Setting .....	15
Participants .....	15
Procedure.....	16
Data Analysis Techniques.....	17
Measures .....	17
CHAPTER FOUR.....	19
Results .....	19
Demographic Information.....	20
Selection Criteria.....	20
Student Demographic Characteristics .....	20
Survey Content Analysis.....	21
Family Structure of Student Participants.....	21
Family Income .....	21

Student Participants' Employment Information .....	21
Interview Session Results .....	21
Staff Interviews .....	21
Student Interviews.....	27
Summary .....	31
CHAPTER FIVE.....	32
Discussion.....	32
Research Question 1: What is the Demographic Profile of a Student in an Urban Credit Recovery High School Program? .....	33
Research Question 2: What is the Typical Family Structure of these Students?.....	33
Research Question 3: How do these Students Describe their Reasons For being in a Credit Recovery Program? .....	34
Research Question 4: How is the Urban Credit Recovery Program Implemented? ..	34
Future Research .....	34
General Conclusion.....	35
APPENDIX.....	37
APPENDIX.....	38
Survey Instrument .....	38
REFERENCES.....	42

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.0 Students' Demographics.....	20
Table 2.0 Student Interview Participants' Demographics.....	28

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## DEDICATION

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

According to Dessoiff (2009), nearly one-third of high school students fail to graduate with a diploma, with an average of 7,000 dropping out every day. The problem is even more severe among African-American and Hispanic students, with nearly 50 percent not completing high school on time. In the present day educational setting, the importance of ensuring students' academic success has become the primary focus of state and local boards of education. With increased pressure coming from federal legislation and re-established awareness regarding curriculum rigor, schools are therefore refocusing on instructional programs, structures and methods that will increase the chances that students will succeed academically and graduate. One such structure is the "credit recovery" school program (Sharp, 2013). The credit recovery schools are charged with the responsibilities of giving special attention to students who are at risk of not graduating high school.

The term "credit recovery" was born out of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The law was passed into action in 2001, and NCLB mandated all U.S. states to set precise goals for improving test scores and boosting high school graduation rates. Test performance then leads to the evaluation of how schools are progressing (not "leaving any child behind"). There is still a high rate of students dropping out of high school irrespective of the standard of the student data information systems use to compute graduation rates. Credit recovery schools and programs emerged primarily to help increase graduation rates by giving students who are lagging behind the opportunity to

"recover" credit through various methods. There is currently very little that is known about credit recovery programs. Some unanswered questions are: How are these schools and programs organized? Who are the students attending these credit recovery programs, and what has brought them there (McCabe & St. Andrie, 2012)? In the review of literature using key words such as credit recovery high school, credit recovery program and its curriculum, and students in credit recovery school, five research articles were found and only two were empirical.

According to Dessoiff (2009), there is also a good deal of variability in how a credit recovery school operates. For example, some school districts depend primarily on the regular face-to-face communication between teachers and students in the credit recovery program; other districts opt for online solutions provided by commercial vendors. Still, other districts put into practice programs that combine face-to-face interaction between teachers and students and online instruction. There are also programs of instruction free from online resources and who design their own curricula. In some states, education agencies and virtual schools provide complete programs. However implemented, the ultimate goal of the credit recovery school seems to be to provide students who have failed courses due to poor grades, or absenteeism, or who have dropped out of school because of several risk factors to have an opportunity to recover the lost credits and proceed to the next grade and eventually graduation (Dessoiff, 2009).

Students can fall behind in their academics and fail to achieve because of many factors. Research demonstrates that an unstable family structure and history, poverty and low social economic status, and teenage pregnancy are among the strongest predictors of school dropout and poor academic performance (Sun & Li, 2011, Amato et al., 2015).

Family structure has been consistently found to be the deciding factor in a wide range of child behaviors that directly influence academic performance, including emotional and psychological distress, attention disorders, social misbehavior, classroom misbehavior, substance abuse, sexual activity and teen pregnancy. Children in unstable families had higher rates of stress, depression, anxiety and low self-esteem, particularly as teenagers and children from single-parent homes suffered from more physical health problems (Schultz, 2006).

According to Schultz (2006), students from unstable homes were 30 percent more likely to miss school, be tardy, or cut class than students from intact homes; this may be, in part because single parents had more difficulty monitoring their children. These children were also at a higher risk for smoking, using drugs and consuming alcohol. Teenagers from such a home environment were more likely to be sexually active and had higher rates of pregnancy (Schultz, 2006). Research has also shown that by the time children who were in a single-parent or step-parent home were 10 years old, they were more than twice as likely to be arrested by age 14. Children who never lived with their own father had the highest likelihood of being arrested, and majority of U.S. children will have spent a significant part of their childhood in a one-parent home by the time they reach 18 (Schultz, 2006).

### *Purpose of Study*

The objective of the current study is to investigate the students in credit recovery schools and the factors that play into why they are there. In particular, these students' family structure and history as well as their levels of socio-economic status will be

examined for the role they may play in students' attending a credit recovery school or program.

### *Research Questions*

The current study is framed by four main research questions. First, what is the demographic profile of a student in an urban credit recovery high school program? Second, what is the typical family structure of these students? Third, how do these students describe their reasons for being in a credit recovery program? Fourth, how is the urban credit recovery program implemented?

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

Given the research questions framed to guide this study, the literature is reviewed using the following key domains: 1) credit recovery programs and factors that are related to poor academic outcomes with reference to family structure, 2) social economic status and 3) family income.

#### *Credit Recovery Programs*

According to the Center for Public Education, defining a credit recovery program is becoming more and more difficult due to the proliferation of different types of programs being labeled credit recovery. Notably, there is no current federal definition of credit recovery, although the federal government supports credit recovery programs through Title I, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Enhancing Education through Technology (EETT), the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA), and other funding programs (McCabe & St. Andrie, 2012).

Similarly, there is no consistent definition coming forth from the states that cite credit recovery programs in law or regulatory code. According to the Education Commission of the States (McCabe & St. Andrie, 2012), policy definitions of credit recovery vary between advising students on graduation expectations to unfolding the essential components of locally administered credit recovery programs. One specific definition available is in the North Carolina State Board of Education's 2011-12 Policy Manual; it indicates the term credit recovery will be used to refer to a set of instructions

that is less than the total standard course of study for that course. The duration of credit recovery courses shall be determined by the skills and knowledge the student needs to recover and not be a fixed length of seat time. Credit recovery is most commonly defined, however, as simply a structured means for students to earn missed credit in order to graduate from high school (McCabe & St Andrie, 2012).

Different programs allow students to work on their credit recovery classes over the summer, on school breaks, after school, on weekends, at home on their own, at night in school computer labs, or even during the school day. Some programs have mandatory prerequisites, such as a minimum attendance record for the original class, a specific class year, or minimum number of total missing credits. Oftentimes priority is given to older students (McCabe & St Andrie, 2012). As of today, most credit recovery programs take place in high school, as compared to traditional remediation efforts, which can begin in elementary school. Credit recovery programs are decentralized; even within a district, some schools may opt to participate while others may not. While the number of district-initiated online learning programs is unknown, credit recovery gives the impression of being the leading driver among other means of reducing dropout rates (McCabe & St Andrie, 2012).

As mentioned in the introduction, the types of credit recovery programs range from regular classroom learning to online studies. Students are often given a choice of programs such as fully online, blended and in person (Franco & Patel, 2011). In the fully online choice, students can recover lost credits through online curricula, where all learning is done online. Online curricula can be provided through software from a number of sources: the district or school itself, state-run virtual schools, charter schools,

non-profit vendors or for-profit vendors. Typically, there are no face-to-face meetings or opportunities for real-time instruction; work is done at home or in school labs with little to no supervision. Course lengths vary greatly. The blended-learning credit recovery opportunities mix face-to-face and online learning. These courses are usually self-contained and pre-programmed. Instructors, who may be either certified teachers or uncertified proctors, oversee and aid as needed. Other blended online courses also offer real-time interaction with teachers (Dessoff, 2009). However, since there are no established best practices, there is variation regarding the degree to which the online component is integrated into the curriculum. In-person credit recovery programs most closely resemble the traditional summer school classes. The setting is traditional and usually there are no online components. Classes take place after school or at night a few times a week during a semester, over the summer in concentrated and abbreviated sessions, or on weekends (McCabe & St. Andrie, 2012; Dessoff, 2009; Franco & Patel, 2011).

### *How is Credit Recovery Different from an Alternative School?*

Today, distinguishing between a credit recovery program and an alternative high school is oftentimes impossible as they share structures and missions, prompting some to merge. Students may take one or more classes at an alternative high school to regain credits, but still graduate with a diploma from their home school. For example, in Colorado's Jeffco Public School district, seniors can participate in the 'Graduate on Time' program, where they attend their home school regularly and take up to one credit at an alternative school in the evenings during the school year (McCabe & St. Andrie, 2012). Credit recovery and alternative schools are similar in that the goal is to prevent drop out;

however, one major difference is that alternative high schools support students getting either a GED or a high school diploma. Credit recovery programs focus on students getting a diploma. In addition, alternative high schools are designed primarily for students who need to learn in a non-traditional setting. Credit recovery often restricts admittance to older students, even though ninth grade remains the most predictive year of degree acquisition (McCabe & St. Andrie, 2012).

### *Who are the Students in Need of Credit Recovery?*

There is very little research describing the profile of students attending a credit recovery high school program. One report does give some details. For example, students that qualify for credit recovery programs are typically students that have missed an entire course because of an illness/health problems, have failed a course (semester or full year), or are behind in credits for other reasons. These students may also be those who, want to graduate early, their home school does not offer a course that they need for college, their school social environment is unacceptable (bullying, peer pressure, substance abuse, etc.), have been suspended, expelled, are into physical activities, or are involved in extracurricular activities (National High School, 2015).

### *Socioeconomic (SES) Factors Related to Poor Academic Achievement*

Educational attainment differs across socioeconomic groups and, in particular, there is a strong positive correlation between family income and educational outcome (Dustmann, 2004). Tucker-Drob and Harden (2012) proposed that SES is one of the demographic factors that have a profound effect on cognitive abilities. Genetic influences have been found to account for roughly 50% of academic performance, whereas the other

50% is related to environmental influences. Environmental influences are manifested through a number of indirect modalities that are related to familial SES (Bradley et al., 2001). Not only does SES affect access to resources and the development of cognitive abilities, it has been found to strongly predict academic achievement (Sirin, 2005).

Students from lower SES backgrounds are more likely to come from homes where parent(s) did not attain a degree beyond a high school diploma (Merritt & Buboltz, 2015). Additionally, students who originate from a home where no college degree has been earned are less likely to be encouraged by parents to study hard and attend college, and they are likely to hold misconceptions about postsecondary education. A significant amount of research has focused on SES and how it relates to the availability of financial aid, academic guidance, and encouragement from parents, as well as access to institutions of higher learning (Merritt & Buboltz, 2015).

The home environment from which a student originates impacts the level of academic performance of such student. Lower SES homes have been characterized as being less organized and providing fewer learning opportunities (Vernon-Feagans et al., 2012; Merritt & Buboltz, 2015). Dilworth-Barth (2012) stated that individuals who came from a higher SES background were likely to receive constant and consistent care-giving, psychological resources, and more favorable learning opportunities. Individuals who come from a lower SES social class are less likely to experience parental teaching, receive less cognitive stimulation, have reduced exposure to grade-level appropriate books, and are taught fewer academic skills (Tucker-Drob et al., 2012). The characteristics of the home environment, which are related to SES, affect the scholastic attitude, and the academic skills that a student develops. It also affects the quality of the

educational resources that individuals have access to. In sum, low SES homes and environments do not afford children the same opportunities to develop the cognitive abilities, academic beliefs, and academic aspirations that more affluent environments may offer (Merritt & Buboltz, 2015).

Usually, researchers refer to two main understanding of how a family's income can be related to children's educational outcomes: the *investment* (or resource) and the *family process* (or family stress) explanation (Duncan et al., 2014). The investment perspective highlights to what extent a family's income allows for outlays which might support the child's education (Elstad & Bakken, 2015). A higher income often offers the financial resources such as better possibilities for buying books, technology, internet access, enlightening cultural consumption, private tutoring, summer courses etc. Children from high-income families could also benefit from better schools, for instance, high-income neighborhoods attract more competent teachers. High parental income may also allow for long-term economic support of children's higher education, while a low and unstable parental income could make such investments too risky (Goldthorpe, 2000; Sun & Li, 2011).

The family process perspective, on the other hand, focuses on the effects of income on family relations. Poverty and low income may generate adverse family interactions (Conger et al., 2010). Strained household finances could result in parental conflict and emotional stress, which hamper children's school work (Bodovski, 2010; Heckman & Mosso, 2014).

Higher income can be converted into environments that may offer opportunities to enhance educational outcomes through material, interactional and psychological

pathways. Researchers have also argued that effects of income vary with the timing of family income. Developmental psychology indicates that children are especially sensitive to environmental stimuli in the first years of life, implying that family income during the preschool years will be particularly important (Heckman & Mosso, 2014). Also, income volatility may be relevant; if family income varies significantly, parents may avoid long-term financial commitments to their children's education and the children's schoolwork may suffer as a result of unstable household finances (Morrissey et al., 2014).

### *Family Structure*

Historically, psychologists such as Piaget and Vygotsky promoted the view that the earliest years of a child centers round the home, parents and siblings. The family plays an active role in the child's development; the family is the first group that interacts with the child after birth. The family can be viewed as a small social group normally composed of a father, mother and one or more children in which the children are reared to become self-controlled and socially motivated. A family involves a group of people united by the tie of marriage, blood or adoption, constituting a single household, interacting and inter communicating with one another and creating a common culture (Berk, 2007).

In the past few decades, family structure type has drastically changed as marriage rates have declined and non-marital fertility, step family, cohabitation and divorce rates have increased. These changes have increasingly diversified the living arrangements for American children and fewer children are raised by both biological parents in continuously married families (Martin, 2012; Sun & Li, 2009). American children born to married, two- biological-parent families are likely to experience parental divorce or

separation before they reach adulthood and many of them will further encounter multiple post-divorce family transitions as their custodial parents live together with new partners, remarry, or leave these new unions. The consequence of growing up in such increasingly diverse and changing family environments are profound, and many studies are still analyzing such implications in various aspects of children's lives such as education (Sun & Li, 2009). Research has shown that the increase in single-parent families as indicated in the high rates of divorce and non-marital childbearing is the primary cause of school failure and related problems of delinquency, drug use, teenage pregnancies, poverty, and welfare dependency in American society (Pearlstein, 2011; Popenoe, 2009). Research has also shown that low income explains as much as 50% of the lower educational achievement of children in single-parent families; lack of parental supervision and involvement explains a sizable amount of the difference (Reardon, 2011).

Several previous studies have agreed that growing up in various alternative family structures has negative educational outcomes. Compared with peers raised in two biological parent families, children growing up in single-parent families typically showed lower levels of academic achievement, exhibited lower educational expectations and had lower chances of graduating from high school, attending and graduating from college (Sun & Li, 2011). Simultaneously, children in stepfamilies were also found to do less well than their peers in two-biological parent households on GPAs, standardized tests, high school graduation rates, and college attendance. Studies comparing single-parent and stepfamilies, however, often reported similar child outcome levels, with neither group having a clear educational advantage over the other (Sun & Li, 2011).

Assessment of family environments arises from family systems which sees family as an emotional unit and uses a systems approach to understand the complex interactions that occur within families. One way family environments are assessed is through the impressions children have towards their family environment. The way a child or adolescent sees his or her family environment is either positively or negatively correlated to adjustment during basic transition points, such as the college transition (Johnson et al., 2010). Among high school and college students, perception of the family environment can predict social adjustment in school, career development, decision making and academic performance (Gartia, 2012).

Several good reasons exist for assuming that the number of parents in a household affects a child's academic achievement. First, children in single-parent households have a lower standard of living compared to children in two-parent households. Family income, in turn is a good predictor of a child's school grades and test scores. Second, parents are important sources of social capital and provide many resources to children, including emotional support, encouragement, everyday assistance, and help with homework. Parents' provision of social capital, in turn, is positively associated with children's school success. Children who live with single parents, however, have less access to these social resources, in general, than do children with two parents in the household. Finally, many children with single parents have experienced the disruption of their parents' unions, and many of these children endure additional parental transitions before reaching adulthood (Amato et al., 2015). The increasing amount of household instability or disorder in children's lives is associated with a variety of problematic outcomes, including school performance and school attainment (Amato et al., 2015).

Also, a family offers children a primary sense of security, accountability, and stability. Family structural instability (defined as one or more changes in family structure) compromises children's trust in such security and imposes emotional stress on children (Demo & Fine, 2010), both of which are likely to relate negatively to child outcomes. Further, establishment of new union and termination of existing ones also introduce changes in family resources, rules, and parenting practices and may adversely affect children by further increasing their stress level related to adjustments to new family environments. Since multiple transitions amass and extend children's anxieties, they have the potential to aggravate their effects on children on the long run (Beck et al., 2010; Demo & Fine, 2010; Lee & McLanahan, 2015).

There are many questions that remain about credit recovery programs. For example, there are few descriptive studies regarding the social demographics of these students and their own perceptions of what has led them to the credit recovery program. Seemingly, research over the years has shown that family structure and the socioeconomic status (SES) are some of the important factors related to poor students' academic achievement.

Again, the research questions framed to guide this study are; first, what is the demographic profile of a student in an urban credit recovery high school program? Second, what is the typical family structure of these students? Third, how do these students describe their reasons for being in a credit recovery high school program? Fourth, how is the urban credit recovery high school program implemented?

## CHAPTER THREE

### Method

The current study was qualitative using interview and a survey instrument (see appendix) that included multiple-choice and open-ended questions. This method was preferred because of the descriptive nature of the study. Parent consent and student assent forms were required from all participants following IRB approval of the project. Students, teachers, counselor, and the principal of the school were interviewed as part of the data collection.

### *Setting*

The study took place in a low income credit recovery high school in Central Texas. The school is structured exactly like a typical high school; however, it has a morning session which starts at 8 am and an afternoon session which starts at 12:30 pm. The flexibility of the school hours is to encourage students to come in and work on their credits at the most convenient time. The school has a principal's office, the administrative office, classrooms and a break room. There are about 216 students and 8 teachers in total. The data collection process took place in a room at the high school in the space of two weeks.

### *Participants*

The sample for this study consisted of students, teachers, counselor and principal at a credit recovery high school in Central Texas. Parental consent and student assent forms were required from all participants. All participants were between the ages of 16

and 21. Of the approximately 100 consent forms distributed, 40 were signed and returned, and all 40 filled out the survey which was completed in one sitting. As soon as the surveys were completed, ten participants were randomly stratified in terms of age, race and sex for the interview sessions. Interviews were conducted individually with each student that was randomly selected to give room for freedom of expression. All names and personal information were kept confidential, and each student had a code assigned to him or her to ensure anonymity (Creswell, 2007).

### *Procedure*

To begin the research, a research proposal was submitted to the IRB board for approval. After it was approved, the interview questions and survey instrument were given to a research associate to go through for content scrutiny and suggestions on improvement; based on suggested edits the instrument was modified. Then, the researcher went to the school site to ask for permission to conduct the study from the school administrators. After permission was granted to conduct the study, the researcher distributed consent and assent forms to the staff members and potential students in both morning and afternoon sessions. The survey instrument was administered individually to all the students as soon as parental consent was granted. After the surveys were completed, the researcher randomly selected ten out of the 40 participants that completed the survey for the interview sessions. The interview sessions were conducted in a room at the school site. Each interview session was recorded using a voice recorder; the students were allowed as much or as little time as they needed to respond to the questions. Participants were encouraged to feel comfortable in answering, and expressing themselves as much or as little as they may desire.

### *Data Analysis Techniques*

After the surveys were collected and the interviews for the staff and students had been completed, the researcher analyzed the information retrieved by triangulating the data in order to give room for more credibility. Then, the researcher winnowed the data into a small controllable set of themes and translated the dialogue and answers from the interview sessions to check for common themes (Creswell, 2007). Thematic analysis was then conducted for the interview sessions. The researcher looked for similar words for each interview question and then looked for similar ideas that stood out for each question which then developed in to themes. These themes signify primary reasons as to why the students are in credit recovery high schools (for example, resilience, fear of dropping out of school, maturity, securing good jobs in the future, and poverty). Findings are discussed in the results section.

### *Measures*

The study collected data through the voice recording of interview sessions and a survey instrument. Important remarks and statements of the interview appear in the results section. The interview aimed to answer these specific questions:

1. Why are you in a credit recovery school?
2. Why do you think it is important to be in school?
3. What is your family structure or story?
4. What did growing up in your family feel like?
5. Tell me about your financial standing
6. Are your parents involved in your school work?

The survey instrument is composed of questions designed to address the students' demographic information and family structure. It was a paper and pencil survey that was completed in one sitting.

There was also another set of interview questions designed for the principal and teachers and counselor:

1. What is the structure of a credit recovery school?
2. Why are the students here?
3. What is the curriculum like?
4. What is the attendance history of these students?
5. What is the percentage of students that graduate from the school?
6. What is the school's policy regarding the students and their education?
7. What are the strengths of the credit recovery program and curriculum?
8. What are the weaknesses of the credit recovery program and curriculum?
9. Do the students have to pass State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) testing before graduating?
10. What does it take to graduate from the school?

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Results

The purpose of the current study was to investigate the students in a credit recovery schools and the factors that play into why they are there. In particular, these students' family structure and history as well as their levels of socio-economic status were examined for the role they may play in students' attending a credit recovery school or program.

The study was framed by four main research questions. First, what is the demographic profile of a student in an urban credit recovery high school program? Second, what is the typical family structure of these students? Third, how do these students describe their reasons for being in a credit recovery program? Fourth, how is the urban credit recovery program implemented?

The results are arranged by first listing participants' demographic information such as race, sex, and age. This is followed by other information as described in the survey such as family structure, family income, and employment information/status. The results of interview content are divided into staff and student interview sessions, respectively, and then thematic analyses are summarized.

## *Demographic Information*

### *Selection Criteria*

The participants for this study consisted of staff members and students enrolled in a credit recovery high school. Consent forms, assent forms and parent permission forms were required from all participants.

### *Student Demographic Characteristics*

A total number of 40 students who met the criteria to participate in the study were given surveys to fill out. There were 17 females and 23 males in the study, and all student participants were between the ages of 16 and 21; the mean age was 18.25 (SD=3.48). The sample of this study is a representation of the total population at the credit recovery high school. Of the 216 students currently enrolled at the high school, 131 (61%) are Hispanic, 68 (32%) are African American, and 15 (7%) are Caucasian. Table 1 below shows the detailed demographics of the participants in the study.

Table 1.0

#### *Students' Demographics*

Race	Male(n)	%	Female (n)	%	Total (n)	Total %
Hispanic	14	35	8	20	22	55
African American	7	17.5	8	20	15	37.5
Caucasian	2	5	1	2.5	3	7.5
Total	23	57.5	17	42.5	40	100

## *Survey Content Analysis*

### *Family Structure of Student Participants*

From the analysis of the survey instrument, when asked if they grew up with both parents, 52.5% ( $n=21$ ) reported that they grew up with only their mothers/female guardian, 45% ( $n=18$ ) stated that they grew up with both parents, while 2.5% ( $n=1$ ) stated that he/she did not grow up with either father/male guardian nor mother/female guardian.

### *Family Income*

When asked what the income of his or her household was when he/she was under eighteen years old, 30% ( $n=12$ ) said they grew up in a lower class family, 32.5% ( $n=13$ ) said they grew up in a lower middle class family, 17.5% ( $n=7$ ) said that they grew up in an upper middle class family while 20% ( $n=8$ ) stated that they do not know their family's income information.

### *Student Participants' Employment Information*

When asked if they have a job and the reason why they work, out of the 40 participants, 16 students stated that they work. Their working hours range from 20-50 hours a week, and the reasons they work are to support themselves, pay off bills, cater for their own children, and help their parents out financially.

## *Interview Session Results*

### *Staff Interviews*

The entire school staff at the time of this study which included the principal, counselor and five teachers were interviewed. There were a total of one female and six

male staff members who all identified as Caucasian. The staff members' years of teaching experience at the school ranged from six months to four years. For the purpose of anonymity, the principal and counselor will henceforth be referred to as administrators.

The questions asked during the interview session are:

- 1) What is the structure of a credit recovery high school?
- 2) Why are the students here?
- 3) What is the curriculum like?
- 4) What is the attendance history of these students?
- 5) What is the percentage of students that graduate from the school?
- 6) What is the school's policy regarding the students and their education?
- 7) What are the strengths of the credit recovery program and curriculum?
- 8) What are the weaknesses of the credit recovery program and curriculum?
- 9) Do the students have to pass State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness testing (STAAR) before graduating?
- 10) What does it take to graduate from the school?

Out of the 9-13 minutes interview session with each staff member, the following themes emerged after thematic analysis.

- 1) The students are in a credit recovery school because they are lagging behind in their school work due to poor attendance, pregnancy, health issues or behavioral problems in their previous high schools
- 2) The curriculum is computer based, and there are teachers available in each classroom to help the students

- 3) Credit recovery high school is flexible, and it provides students the opportunity to work at their own pace; however, some students suffer poor academic progress due to poor attendance.
- 4) Credit recovery high school is not the same as a behavioral/alternative school
- 5) The students need to pass 22 credits and STAAR testing before graduating
- 6) Between 50-60 students graduate from the school each year

Theme 1: The students are in a credit recovery school because they are lagging behind in their school work due to poor attendance, pregnancy, health issues or behavioral problems in their previous high schools

This theme describes the specific reasons as to why students end up in a credit recovery high school. A major reason emphasized by all the staff members is that most students have poor attendance history in their high school and that is why they fall behind on their credits.

*Administrator 1: "Generally, the main requirement is that students must be two or more grade levels behind in school to come in here. In my opinion, I feel like a lot of these kids are probably here because they have poor attendance in school."*

*Administrator 2: "The kids come here in the morning or afternoon for 4 hours and they work on the computer those 4 hours doing 'grad point' and they are trying to make up credits that they have lost either through attendance, health issues or behaviors that they have had that caused them to get behind on their credits."*

*Teacher 3: "The students are here because they had difficulty getting their credits completed in the regular school setting due to attendance, failure to listen in class, being behind in reading is probably the major reason because the kids will of course get frustrated with the reading process."*

*Teacher 7: "The students are here for a variety of reasons, for dropping out of school who want to go back to school, who are lacking in credits, some students can't function in a regular high school but they don't come in here as a discipline problem. They may have issues in high school, it could be social, attendance, health, bullying issues or just that they want to get credits quickly."*

Theme 2: The curriculum is computer based, and there are teachers available in each classroom to help the students

This theme explains the type of instructional curriculum used in the high school. The school combines face-to-face interaction between teachers and students and online instruction. There are teachers in each classroom to help tutor students, and there are also teachers in each subject field to give further help to students.

*Administrator 1: "The high school is basically computer based using a program called 'grad point' where they can put time in on their subjects until they are eligible for graduation. Basically, the curriculum is varied, I mean we have all the subjects' uh most of the kids are on the minimum program which requires 22 credits for graduation and we cover all those subjects and yes we have teachers in each field."*

*Teacher 1: "Well basically they (students) can take any of the major courses like English, math, sciences, social studies and electives and it's all online and they (students) go through lessons and uh take tests on all those lessons and then when they finish everything that's when they qualify for the credit and we are always there to monitor and facilitate and if they have questions or need help, some students need a lot of help with vocabulary and terminology especially special education students that may have some disability in reading or math"*

*Teacher 5: "We have a computer based program called grad point which has all those ticks in the program, you get credit for the class once you have finished but you still have to take end of the course exams and pass those because that's part of the requirement for getting a high school diploma in Texas"*

Theme 3: Credit recovery high school is flexible, and it provides students the opportunity to work at their own pace; however, some students suffer poor academic progress due to poor attendance history.

The school has the morning session and the afternoon session in order to provide flexibility for the students. Each session lasts for 4 hours, the morning session starts by 8 am and ends by 12 noon while the afternoon session starts by 12:30 pm and ends by 4 pm. Each student works at his/her own pace on a computer in a classroom, and there are

teachers in each class to help in case they have any questions. All the staff members stated emphatically that even though the school is structured this way in order to accommodate the students', poor attendance is a major problem that the school is faced with and most students suffer poor academic progress due to poor attendance. The Students either come late to school or try to leave early or even miss school.

*Teacher 4: "On the average, attendance is heartbreaking. We have a lot of students who want to be here, they come in and work on their subjects but it seems attendance is getting worse."*

*Administrator 1: "Generally, the attendance history is poor, in my opinion I feel like a lot of the kids are probably here because they had poor attendance at their high school and when you have poor attendance I think the law is when you have more than 10 unexcused absences you will not receive credit for the courses. Uh even though, it's hard for me to understand when you are only in school for 4 hours like we have a morning 4 hours and an afternoon 4 hours session, still we have trouble with getting kids to come to school or kids coming late and kids that want to leave early."*

*Administrator 2: "Some of the kids are really good with attendance, they come all the time. Uh a lot of the kids, attendance is not really good uh probably on average right now about 58% come in which sounds terrible. The reason why attendance is so bad is that the reason why we get these kids is because they had attendance issues at their high school and that's why they are behind on their credits. A lot of times the attendance issue is motivation but a lot of times it's because these kids have to work full time to support their family, sometimes they have to support their parents or moms because their dad is not there, we have a lot of dads in prisons. So a lot of time, the attendance issues is that they have to work to make it uh so that's a lot of the issues."*

*Teacher 5: "I can't give the official attendance history but I do know that it's not good that's a main problem a lot of these kids have and they've had. They either work or just don't attend school properly."*

Theme 4: Credit recovery high school is not the same as a behavioral/alternative school

As in all interviews, questions pop up outside the set interview questions, and in this case the question that came up was the difference between a credit recovery school and an alternate school. The researcher decided to report this question as a theme because it might be informative for the purpose of future studies.

This theme distinguishes between credit recovery high school and alternative schools. Students basically come into the school to work on their subjects in order to earn credits and then graduate; however, it does not serve as a behavioral or alternative school.

*Teacher 7: "Most people believe that alternative school is based on discipline while credit recovery is based on academics."*

Theme 5: The students need to pass 22 credits and STAAR testing before graduating

All the staff members stated that passing all the required 22 credits and STAAR exams is required for all students to graduate in a credit recovery high school.

*Teacher 1: "The students have to pass STAAR testing just like the regular school and the end of course exams, the only exception would be I guess uh, sometimes when we have special education students, committee can meet and they can be exempted from having to retest if they have taken it several times and still haven't passed. To graduate, they have to earn 22 credits plus they have to meet the state requirements."*

*Administrator 2: "The students have to pass all five tests and some kids have taken it over and over again. We do have tutorials but the problem is a lot of these kids just don't go to tutorials and they end up not passing their tests because they do not go to tutorials. In general, a student has to have a minimum plan of 22 credits and must have passed all five STAAR tests."*

Theme 6: Between 50-60 students graduate from the school each year

It was hard for the staff members of the school to come up with the percentage of students that graduate each year because the rate of students' absenteeism is high. Most of the teachers were not sure of the actual number of students that graduate from the school on a yearly basis. Administrator 2 was, however, able to give some information about the number of students that graduate.

*Teacher 4: "I don't know the percentage but I would guess it's about half."*

*Teacher 1: "Uh I couldn't uh answer that, because I wouldn't know. I just know that usually when they come to school on a regular basis they are able to graduate on time, the ones that don't come are the ones that have hard time finishing."*

*Administrator 1: "Uh, I don't know that I could quote a percentage."*

*Administrator 2: “Well, that’s kind of hard to because every year in the last 3 years that I’ve been here we’ve had 50 or 60 students graduate each year that being the ones that graduate in June and August because we have two graduations. Uh, it’s hard to say percentage because this is like a revolving door around here, we get kids in here all the time and some kids that come with 15 credits that aren’t considered seniors yet may end up finishing and some kids that have 19 credits here that are considered seniors may never come, so percentage-wise it’s hard to put a percentage on it.”*

### *Student Interviews*

A total number of 40 students who met the criteria to participate in the study were given surveys to fill out, and the students were aged between 16 to 21; the mean age was 18.25 (SD=3.48). Ten students were then randomly selected in terms of age, sex, race for the interview sessions. The questions asked during the interview session are:

- 1) Why are you in a credit recovery high school?
- 2) Why do you think it is important to be here?
- 3) What is your family structure or story?
- 4) What did growing up in your family feel like?
- 5) Tell me about your financial standing
- 6) Are your parents involved in your school work?

The demographic information of the participants chosen is given in Table 2.0 below. The researcher randomly selected the students to serve as a true representation of the overall population of the school. Out of the 10 students selected, one particular student (participant 5) was not available for the interview session so the researcher automatically selected participant 11 to fill in the spot of participant 5. The interview sessions were based on students’ availability in the school at the time the sessions were conducted.

Table 2.0

*Student Interview Participants' Demographics*

Participant	Age	Sex	Race
Participant 1	16	Female	Caucasian
Participant 2	18	Female	Black
Participant 3	18	Male	Caucasian
Participant 4	19	Female	Hispanic
Participant 6	18	Male	Black
Participant 7	18	Female	Black
Participant 8	18	Female	Hispanic
Participant 9	17	Male	Hispanic
Participant 10	19	Male	Hispanic
Participant 11	19	Male	Hispanic

Out of the 3-9 minutes interview session with each student, the following themes emerged after thematic analysis.

- 1) Students are in a credit recovery high school because they are lagging behind on their credits due to attendance or similar problems in their high schools

- 2) A larger percentage of students in the credit recovery high school grew up in a single parent household (mother/female guardian households)
- 3) Majority of the students grew up in a lower class or lower middle class family
- 4) Students are back in school because they want to get an education in order to secure good jobs in the future

Theme 1: Students are in a credit recovery high school because they are lagging behind on their credits due to attendance problems in their high schools

The credit recovery high school is basically set up for students who are behind in attaining all their credits due to not attending school properly, health issues, pregnancy, and behavioral problems. All the students interviewed stated one or more of these reasons as why they are currently enrolled in the credit recovery high school.

*Participant 1: "Uh, because I was behind in school, I stopped going to school for two years so they told me to come here. Well, uh I don't know how to explain it, uh I don't know what it's called, I uh am a juvenile. I have been in a lot of trouble (delinquent acts)."*

*Participant 6: "I don't know really, I am here because of attendance. Uh I had a surgery and I didn't bring back all my report."*

*Participant 9: "My credits are bad, for the past few years I have been doing a couple of skipping around and it caught up to me."*

*Participant 8: "I came cos I am behind on my credits uh, like way behind. I got behind because when I was at challenge I wasn't doing my work I was busy getting my rep up. I wasn't worried about school back then but now I am ready to get back on track."*

Theme 2: A larger percentage of students in the credit recovery high school grew up in a single parent household (mother/female guardian households).

Out of the 10 participants selected for the interview sessions, 8 grew up with their mothers/female guardian while the remaining two grew up with both parents. This theme

depicts that a high percentage of the students enrolled in the credit recovery high school grew up in a single parent household.

*Participant 2: "I live with just my mom."*

*Participant 7: "I stay with my mother."*

*Participant 1: "We don't have like too much of a family I guess. I live with my mom, my dad is in prison"*

*Participant 11: "I stay with my mom, uh I have never really sat down to talk to my dad."*

*Participant 9: "My parents got separated whenever I was 7 years old, uh we moved down here, left my dad and started staying with mom."*

Theme 3: Majority of the students grew up in a lower class or lower middle class family

This theme explains the financial standing of the students. Some of the students stated that they have to work to support their parents financially.

*Participant 10: "Right now I work and I pay the water bill, electricity and phone bills, uh, it's just to help my mom out."*

*Participant 11: "Right now, I work at Fazolis, just to help out my momma and have money in my pocket for whatever I need instead of asking my momma."*

*Participant 4: "I work because uh my parents, I mean right now my dad doesn't work much so I need to take care of myself and help my momma out too."*

*Participant 6: "I uh work because I need extra money."*

Theme 4: Students are back in school because they want to get an education in order to secure good jobs in future

All the students stated that they are enrolled in the school because they realized that education is important in order to get a good job in the future. One participant stated that she does not want to end up like her parents, and that is why she is back in school.

*Participant 4: "Because really, without education you really can't get anywhere I mean unless you're rich, education will help me get the job that I want."*

*Participant 1: “Uh, I want to finish, I want to get a high school diploma so I can be a counselor. I just don’t want to end up like them (parents).”*

*Participant 9: “I am here so I can graduate and go to college”*

*Participant 3: “Being here helps you graduate faster, and once I graduate I want to further my education so I can get a good job.”*

### *Summary*

Information retrieved from the survey and interview sessions gave insight on the students enrolled in a credit recovery high school and the reasons they are there. This form of education gives students a second opportunity at making all their credits and then eventually graduating from high school which in turn reduces students’ dropout rate.

The students’ demographic information revealed Hispanic and African American as the most largely represented race in the school and the average age of the students is over 18. Over half of the students (52.5%) grew up in a single parent family and majority of the students stated that their family income was either lower middle class or lower class.

After the analysis was cross checked for consistency using the data retrieved from the surveys, students’ interview, and staff interview, it was concluded that all participants in this study shared similar viewpoints as to the reasons why students end up in a credit recovery high school. Also, students’ family structure and family income are important factors that may contribute to students’ at risk status or students ending up in a credit recovery high school.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Discussion

In recent years, the increase in high school dropout rate has been a major concern for the state and local boards of education. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) that was passed into action in 2001, aimed at mandating all U.S. states to set precise goals for improving test scores and boosting high school graduation rates. Schools are therefore focusing on instructional programs, structures and methods that will increase the chances that students will succeed academically and graduate. One such structure is the "credit recovery" school program (Sharp, 2013). Credit recovery schools and programs emerged primarily to help increase graduation rates by giving students who are lagging behind the opportunity to recover credit through various methods. There is still a high rate of students dropping out of high school irrespective of the standard of the student data information systems used to compute graduation rates (McCabe & St. Andrie, 2012).

The data retrieved from the survey questions and interview sessions in the present study provided insight into who the students in a credit recovery high school are and the reasons why they are there. All participants stated the same reasons as to why students are enrolled in the school, while analyzing responses retrieved from all the participants, several themes emerged. Information retrieved in this study will serve as a foundation for future research on the credit recovery high school.

*Research Question 1: What is the Demographic Profile of a Student in an Urban Credit Recovery High School Program?*

The students were between 16-21 years of age; the mean age was 18.25 (SD=3.48). They were currently in their junior or senior year in the high school. There were 23 males and 17 females. Out of the 40 participants, 55% identified as Hispanic which is the most largely represented race in the school, 37.5% identified as African American while 7.5% identified as Caucasian. Refer to table 1 for students' demographics.

*Research Question 2: What is the Typical Family Structure of these Students?*

Data retrieved from the survey and students' interview revealed that majority of the students grew up in single parent homes. Of the 40 participants selected for this study, 52.5% reported that they grew up with only their mothers/female guardian, 45% stated that they grew up with both parents, while 2.5% stated that they did not grow up with either father/male guardian nor mother/female guardian. The data reported is similar to opinions stipulated in the literature. For example, several previous studies have agreed that growing up in various alternative family structures has negative educational outcomes. Compared with peers raised in two biological parent families, children growing up in single-parent families typically showed lower levels of academic achievement, exhibited lower educational expectations and had lower chances of graduating from high school, attending and graduating from college (Sun & Li, 2011).

*Research Question 3: How do these Students Describe their Reasons for being in a Credit Recovery Program?*

The staff and students' opinion were exactly the same in terms of the reasons why the students are currently enrolled in the high school. Data retrieved from all the interview sessions revealed attendance problem as the major reason why the students lag behind in their credits.

Additionally, some students stated that they have to work before coming to school to help support their family and parents. This depicts that low socioeconomic status of the family can also serve as one of the reasons why students end up in a credit recovery school.

*Research Question 4: How is the Urban Credit Recovery Program Implemented?*

From the results of the interview session with the staff members, the school combines computer based programs and face-to-face interaction. The curriculum is flexible; the school administrator puts into the computer whatever subjects the students need to work on. The students are responsible for their own learning since the school incorporates a self-paced educational system. Upon completion of all graduation requirements which includes passing 22 credits and STAAR tests, the students are awarded a high school diploma. The students have to be able to look at the computer and work at their own pace, and there are teachers in each classroom to help answer questions.

*Future Research*

Research on credit recovery high schools should continue as there have been very few studies done in the past years. Future studies should include schools in other

geographical location to increase external validity. Although, the sample for this study was a representation of the actual student population, it was discovered that the male population was more dominant in comparison to female population. This study should therefore be replicated using a larger sample size. Research is often biased but future studies should ensure triangulation of all data retrieved just as done in this study to avoid this. Additionally, it will be beneficial to use a more racially diverse population of students to provide more generalization.

### *General Conclusion*

The findings from this study add to the scarce literature of credit recovery high school. The study has provided good insight into a credit recovery high school, its curriculum and the demographics of students enrolled in the school. Even though there are many credit recovery high schools in the state of Texas, the school chosen for this study provides basic information about credit recovery high schools. As stated in the literature review, different credit recovery high schools may use different instructional curricula based on the state and/or school district. Few studies in the past have focused on credit recovery in general. Unfortunately, no studies have been done about the students enrolled in these schools and their personal stories. The collected data provide a means by which current students share unique stories about themselves and how they ended up in a credit recovery high school.

The literature cited in this study stated several factors that cause students to end up in credit schools such as family income, family SES, and family structure which corroborates with the data derived from this study. Although students with behavioral problems might be found in a credit recovery school, credit recovery school is, however,

not a school where students are placed due to behavior problems. The major weakness of a credit recovery high school as stated by all participants in this study is students' poor attendance.

This type of education is vital in reducing high school dropout rate in our society. It provides students with another chance of completing all required credits and then eventually to graduate from high school. Therefore, obtaining current student viewpoint and unique stories is essential in order to succeed in credit recovery and to bring focus to the program's strengths.

## APPENDIX

APPENDIX

Survey Instrument

1. Age \_\_\_\_\_

2. Male  Female

3. Grade level \_\_\_\_\_

4. What is your ethnicity/race?

Black or African American

Asian or Asian American

Caucasian or White

Hispanic

Other

5. Who made the greatest number of major decisions in your household when you were under the age of 18?

Father

Mother

Grandmother

Grandfather

Aunt

Uncle

Spouse

Children

Boyfriend/ girlfriend

Other

If you chose "Other" please specify \_\_\_\_\_

6. What is the highest level of education your father/male guardian has completed?

No formal schooling

Less than elementary school

Elementary school

- Junior high school
- High school/GED
- Associate's Degree
- Bachelor's Degree
- Master's Degree
- Ph. D or equivalent
- Other

If you chose "Other" please specify \_\_\_\_\_

7. What is the highest level of education your mother/female guardian has completed?

- No formal schooling
- Less than elementary school
- Elementary school
- Junior high school
- High school/GED
- Associate's Degree
- Bachelor's Degree
- Master's Degree
- Ph. D or equivalent
- Other

If you chose "Other" please specify \_\_\_\_\_

8. Did you live in a nuclear family (father, mother, siblings) household?

- Yes
- No

9. Did you grow up with both parents?

- Yes
- No, just my mother/female guardian
- No, just my father/male guardian
- Neither father/male guardian nor mother/female guardian

10. Who helps you with your homework?

- Father
- Mother

Siblings (sisters or brothers)

Uncle(s)

Aunt(s)

Grandfather

Grandmother

Tutor(s)

Other

If you chose "Other" please specify \_\_\_\_\_

11. Is/was education an important family value?

Very important

Slightly important

Important

Not important

Slightly unimportant

Not important at all

12. What is your father/male guardian's occupation? \_\_\_\_\_

13. What is your mother/female guardian's occupation? \_\_\_\_\_

14. What kind of area did you grow up in for the majority of your childhood?

Rural (nonfarm)

Rural (farm)

Suburban (residential community)

Urban (towns and cities)

15. What was the income of your household when you were under 18?

Upper class (\$72, 5000 - \$200, 000)

Upper middle class (\$32, 000 - \$50, 000)

Lower middle class (\$15, 000 - \$25, 000)

Lower class (\$7, 000 - \$12, 000)

16. Do you have a job?

Yes

No

If you chose yes, how many hours do you work in a week? \_\_\_\_\_

And why do you work? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

17. Do you have to pass STAAR testing to graduate from school?

Yes

No

18. Have you ever attended alternative school because of behavior problems?

Yes

No

If you chose yes, please explain \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

19. What is your marital status?

Married

Single

20. Do you have children?

Yes

No

If you chose yes, how many children do you have? \_\_\_\_\_

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