

Supplementing a GED Preparation Program with Social and Emotional Learning:

A Delphi Study

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Abstract

Dropping out of high school is a nationally recognized problem which has significant implications for both the individual and society as a whole. Increasing the high school graduation rate will reduce the risk for multiple problem behaviors and poor mental and physical health among at-risk adolescents. GED preparation programs are continually regarded as a second chance mechanism for high school dropouts. Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) has a foundational basis in the rigorous research that has been conducted, which clearly indicates that our emotions and relationships affect how and what we learn. SEL attempts to enhance the development of what are perceived to be fundamental social and emotional skills and competencies. This study explores the incorporation of SEL in a GED preparation program for adolescent high school dropouts between the ages of 16 and 18. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, the Delphi Method was used to gather consensus through a panel of experts.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

In 2003, it was estimated that 3.5 million 16-19 year olds in the United States were out of school without a high school diploma or an equivalent degree (Barton, 2005). During the 2003-2004 school year, the national graduation rate was only 70.5% (Laird, DeBell, & Chapman, 2006); Thus, it is estimated that approximately one-third of high school students do not graduate after four years (Barton, 2005). According to the 2005 Educational Testing Service Policy Information Center Report, the rate of high school completion fell in forty-three states between the years 1990 – 2000; ten of these states reported a decrease in high school completion rates by eight percent or more (Barton, 2005).

Due to these depressing rates of high school dropouts and the current state of educational affairs, Colin and Alma Powell announced in the *Washington Times* on April 9, 2008 that the dropout rate is “an issue of national security” (Powell & Powell, 2008). Dropping out of school has significant implications for both the individual and society as a whole (Rumberger, 1987). According to Lehr (1999), for the individual, negative outcomes for students who drop out of school traditionally fall into four categories, including low income and lifetime earnings, high unemployment rates, involvement in the criminal system, and limited cognitive growth. Additionally, Kortering et al. (1997) found that dropouts were less satisfied with their lives and reported more psychological distress and social despair than high school graduates, and research has proved that these individuals struggle with mental health issues and high-risk behaviors. These damaging effects are closely tied to the repercussions felt by society at large (Lehr, 1999). Catterall (1988) stated that these effects are imposed on society in two ways; these include lower public tax collections and higher dependence on public support services, both of which are

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problematic on a society committed to providing social services. The estimated service costs attributed to dropouts in terms of lost revenues, welfare, unemployment, crime prevention, and prosecution have been estimated to be in the billions of dollars (Lehr, 1999).

As a result of these consequences on both the individual and society, it is first important to understand at-risk students and the reasons associated with adolescents dropping out of high school. At-risk students are those who are not able to progress successfully in school due to failing courses or standardized tests, and include those students who have failed, dropped out, kicked out, or have the potential of dropping out (Kvapil, 2007). In a 2002 study, the United States General Accounting Office (GAO) examined the body of research related to factors associated with non-completion of high school. GAO affirmed that “dropping out of school is a long-term process of disengagement that occurs over time and begins in the earliest grades” (p. 3). Additionally, in this study, the GAO identified two general factors contributing to dropping out – family issues and school experiences. Students from low-income households, single parent family homes, and less educated families demonstrated a lower high school completion rate. School related factors that negatively impacted graduation rates included low grades, discipline problems, absenteeism, grade retention, and changes in the schools (GAO, 2002).

Significance

As a society, we want students to succeed in school and in adult life. Dropping out is a signal that a young person has not succeeded in school and may not succeed in adult life. Therefore, many local school districts have long operated dropout-prevention programs. The United States Department of Education has conducted large evaluations of the effectiveness of these programs and found that most did not reduce dropping out. Although some programs have improved outcomes for some students, none of these programs were able to improve all key

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educational outcomes, including dropping out, attendance, test scores, and grades. Successful programs may be uncommon because it is difficult to match program designs with students whom those designs can help (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002).

General Educational Development (GED)

The General Educational Development (GED) is the “most widely recognized form of alternative secondary certification in the United States” (Boesel, Alsalam, & Smith, 1998, p. 7). The GED is a substitute for the high school diploma and is accepted as the equivalency to a high school diploma (Tarantino, 2004). GED preparation programs are continually regarded as a second chance mechanism for adults who did not finish high school. Although estimates vary, most research indicates that substantial numbers of high school dropouts return to school or an equivalency program (Bickerstaff, 2010). Kolstad and Kaufman (1989) reported that 44% of school leavers attained their high school diplomas or their GED certificate within two years of their expected graduation date. In addition, research indicates that the number of sixteen to twenty year olds in GED classes is growing (Welch & DiTommaso, 2004), and the population of the youngest GED certificate seekers, ages sixteen and seventeen, has increased (Tarantino, 2004).

GED preparation programs are an important step toward addressing the huge dropout problem alongside the social and economic problems within the United States (Styles, 2011). Significant differences have been found between dropouts and GED recipients in the potential of income, life satisfaction, future optimism, depression, and substance use (Ou, 2008). Second-chance opportunities for dropouts have been declining in the past decade and there are less training and educational opportunities for students who left school without a diploma (Barton, 2005). There is a need to expand opportunities for dropouts who later come to regret their

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decision, and at present, the GED is the main option for most dropouts (Ou, 2008). It is important to recognize the key role of alternative approaches to high school diplomas for dropouts, especially for disadvantaged adolescents (Entwisle et al., 2004).

Mental Health

Increasingly, leaders in human service agencies are recognizing that youth are in need of mental health services and encounter problems in accessing services in traditional sites, such as community mental health centers. Additionally, there are mounting questions about the effectiveness of weekly outpatient sessions in a setting that is typically removed from children's natural environments (Weisz, Weiss & Donenberg, 1992). Less than a third of youth with serious mental health issues are receiving care and the percent of youth who are receiving effective care is likely to be less than 10% (U.S. Public Health Service, 2000). In the former Surgeon General's report on Children's Mental Health (U.S. Public Health Service, 2000), and more recently, in the report released by the President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health (2003), schools are recognized as the major setting for providing mental health care to youth and are critical in enhancing service utilization (Adelman & Taylor, 1999).

Growing recognition of these gaps has served to fuel a national movement that involves the development of comprehensive mental health services for youth in schools. These "expanded" school mental health (ESMH) services go beyond services traditionally offered to youth in schools to include assessment and treatment services for students. Commonly, ESMH programs provide focused evaluation, individual, group, and family therapies, referral of youth into collaborating community organizations for more intensive services, a range of preventive services, such as support groups for well-functioning youth, and mental health education (Weist, 1997). However, across all systems, child mental health efforts are plagued by extremely limited

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resources, evaluation, training, and technical assistance, leading to questionable quality and effectiveness of services that are being delivered (U.S. Public Health Service, 2000).

Combining General Educational Development (GED) & Mental Health

Dropouts and students at-risk for dropping out need the same things all students need – opportunities to learn and develop, guidance in making constructive choices, and help with specific problems or situations. Thus, alternative programs need a holistic approach that includes social, academic, psychological, and career-related needs (Sandra, 2003). There is little or no consistency across the states in defining an alternative program or the nature of its curriculum. The range of options for alternative programs is extremely wide: home-schooling, charter schools, programs for the gifted and talented and for special needs, disciplinary programs for students who are suspended or expelled, and remediation programs for students to re-take failed courses (Ah Bae, 2008). A new vision of education that incorporates educational, social, and emotional support is needed in order to continue the work currently being done and change the educational system for those who have fallen through the cracks (Kvapil, 2007). The current study will explore just such an option through gaining consensus on supplementing a GED preparation program which offers academics, with the addition of mental health services in the form of social and emotional support to its students.

Theoretical Framework

Social & Emotional Intelligence

With the increasing challenges of educating today's high school student, it has become necessary to look beyond mere cognitive abilities and knowledge acquisition and find other ways to reach the teenage heart and mind (Kvapil, 2007). Maslow's (1968) hierarchy of needs, which has become a cornerstone in educational theory places physiological and emotional needs as

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foundational prerequisites that must first be fulfilled in order for students to be able to focus on academic needs and optimize academic outcomes. At-risk students come to us with what Maslow calls ‘deficiency needs’ that must be addressed before any academic program can be effective as he claims that when emotional needs are not being met, they tend to interfere with task achievement. Maslow makes it clear that it is necessary to better understand more than just academic needs; this is especially true when looking at the emotional and sometimes physical condition of at-risk students.

Howard Gardner (1983) was one of the first modern researchers to consider the idea that there might be more than one modality for teaching and learning. His theory that there are at least nine different intelligences helped educators begin to see that defining student success by only one measure (i.e., IQ) might not be beneficial to all students and may actually conflict with this nation’s goals of providing equal opportunity for success as it is defined in both the No Child Left Behind Act and the *Nation at Risk* report. Gardner (1983) introduced the concept of both interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence, which are considered key factors of emotional intelligence (EI). Interpersonal intelligence is the measure of one’s ability to have satisfying interpersonal relationships and to understand and appreciate the emotions of others. Intrapersonal intelligence is the measure of one’s ability to understand his or her emotions and his or her ability to communicate those emotions to others (Khudaverdyan, 2009).

In considering what works best for at-risk students, emotional intelligence may be a better predictor of success than cognitive intelligence according to Goleman’s (1995) framework. This model expanded a portion of Gardner’s work and focuses specifically on how sensitivity to emotional intelligence might be the key to reaching those otherwise hard to reach students. Goleman’s framework comprised basic social and emotional skills that enable individuals to

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function successfully in life. Goleman identified five domains of social-emotional intelligence, including, self-awareness – knowing one’s emotions, self-regulation – effectively managing one’s emotions, motivation – ability to self motivate, empathy – ability to recognize and understand the emotions of others, and social skills – the ability to deal effectively with relationships and manage the emotions of others. Goleman’s model comprises two general areas of personal and social competence – personal competence relates to how we manage ourselves and social competence denotes how we manage our relationships.

Additionally, Reuven Bar-On (2006) revised the concept of emotional intelligence and developed his theoretical model by renaming it “emotional-social intelligence” (ESI). This modification of the term highlights the interrelatedness of the social and emotional components of the construct. The revised definition of the Bar-On model describes emotional-social intelligence as:

... a multi-factorial array of interrelated emotional and social competencies, skills and facilitators that influence one’s ability to recognize, understand and manage emotions, to relate with others, to adapt to change and solve problems of a personal and interpersonal nature, and to efficiently cope with daily demands, challenges and pressures (p. 20).

Bar-On states “ultimately, being emotionally and socially intelligent means to effectively manage personal, social, and environmental change by realistically and flexibly coping with the immediate situation, solving problems and making decisions.”

Social & Emotional Learning

Concerns over the vulnerability of youth to various social and psychological problems and the potential role of schools in ameliorating such risks have helped fuel the growing popularity of efforts to help youth become more socially and emotionally competent. While educators may not be able to address the factors that cause students to enter schools as at-risk,

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they can use their knowledge of student needs to provide a supportive environment that will help mediate the effects caused by these factors (Kvapil, 2007). Since the early 1990s, formed on the basis of the above discussed theories, social and emotional learning (SEL) has emerged as a major thematic and programmatic emphasis in American education. Social and emotional learning attempts to enhance emotional intelligence, emotional literacy, and/or the development of what are perceived to be fundamental social and emotional skills and competencies. These competencies include such things as having emotional awareness, expressing and managing emotions appropriately, making responsible decisions or choices, establishing positive social relationships, and handling difficult interpersonal situations effectively (Hoffman, 2009). Cherniss et al. (2006) defined SEL as “the process of acquiring a set of social and emotional skills – self awareness, self management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making within the context of a safe, supportive environment” (p. 243).

Although many SEL programs are ‘add-ons’ to the current school curriculum, there are other, more comprehensive, approaches to SEL where the emphasis is on infusing social and emotional competencies into the entire school experience. One of the advantages of more generalized programs is that they promote a school-wide systemic approach that encourages fundamental social and emotional skills that improve the entire emotional, social, and academic climate of a school for all students (Hoffman, 2009). The central idea underlying SEL is that explicit teaching of EI skills is both possible and necessary: “Social-emotional and life skills must be taught explicitly at the elementary and secondary levels. Like reading or math, if social-emotional skills are not taught systematically, they will not be internalized” (Elias, 2006, p. 7). Although SEL programs may differ in their delivery (e.g., curricular add-ons vs. whole classroom/whole school change) and in their thematic focus (e.g., fostering community or

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reducing conflict), most programs emphasize the development of EI, defined as “skill clusters” related to self and social awareness, identifying and labeling feelings of self and others, self-management (monitoring and regulating feelings), decision-making skills, and relationship skills (CASEL, 2003).

The emphasis on emotional skills reveals that emotion per se is not the focus; rather, it is the cognitive processing of emotion that is important – the “reasoning about” emotion and the behaviors one associates with such reasoning. SEL advocates that skills can be taught and the learner’s competence in their performance can be measured. SEL programs see cause for optimism in the measurability and teachability of emotional skills and competencies as this means that individual performances can be measured, deficiencies can be assessed and remediated, and in the end all children can be taught the appropriate skills and behaviors (Goleman, 1995). In order to be able to create a teaching and learning environment that will provide opportunity for success, despite the academic deficits of at-risk students, other non-cognitive aspects of student development must be considered (Kvapil, 2007).

Rationale / Purpose

Through a variety of school reforms beginning in preschool and running through high school, educators are working to prevent young people from getting off track. For the foreseeable future, the nation will need “second-chance” systems and programs to re-engage and re-direct young people who leave the public school system. The challenge is that the knowledge base on the effectiveness of second-chance programs is still thin. Relatively few programs have been rigorously tested, and even fewer have produced unambiguously positive results (Bloom, 2010).

The purpose of this study is to explore the incorporation of mental health and social support, in the form of social and emotional learning (SEL), to GED preparation programs for

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adolescent high school dropouts between the ages of 16 and 18. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, the Delphi Method will be employed to gather consensus through a panel of experts on how best to integrate such a component.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The current study sets to explore experts' views on developing a GED preparation program with a focus not only on academic achievement, but also on providing social and emotional support and learning. The literature review first seeks to evaluate current research on the phenomenon of dropping out high school, which includes dropout statistics, a history of dropouts, consequences of dropping out / rationale for decreasing the dropout rate, reasons and predictors for dropping out, and an overview on dropouts who return to school or an equivalency program. Moreover, the literature review provides research on the General Education Development (GED) to help further the understanding on such types of programs. This section includes a brief history of the GED, the GED credential, the population and types of GED students, the benefits of the GED, while comparing GED students to high school graduates and dropouts, and lastly a summary on the factors which have made some GED preparation programs successful. In addition, the importance of offering mental health and social support in schools is discussed. Finally, a review of the positive offerings of social and emotional learning (SEL) is provided as this mode of learning is conceptualized to be incorporated in the GED preparation program understudy.

Dropping Out Of High School

Dropout Statistics

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2006) provided dropout rates after examining the 2003-2004 academic year. The NCES reported that the national graduation rate that year was 70.5%; thus, almost one-third of students entering high school leave before graduation (Barton, 2005). The report further examined high school dropouts and described two categories of dropout rates – event and status. The event dropout rate represents the proportion of

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students who quit school each year. The NCES reported that roughly five out of every one-hundred students, approximately 4.7%, enrolled in high school in October 2003 left school before October 2004 without completing high school. On the other hand, the status dropout rate reflects the proportion of the population that has not completed high school and is not enrolled in any school. In October 2004, it was estimated that 3.8 million 16 to 24 year olds in the United States were not enrolled in high school and were without a high school diploma or an equivalent degree (Laird, DeBell & Chapman, 2006). These status dropouts accounted for 10.3% of the 36.5 million 16 to 24 year olds in the United States in 2004 (NCES, 2006).

History of Dropouts

The United States has not always expected all students to graduate from high school. Only in the twentieth century did universal access to secondary education become a general right. In fact, it was not until much later that graduation from high school became a plausible standard for all young people (Finn, 1987). Steady progress has been made towards universal high school graduation in the United States over the last fifty years. In 1900, only 11% of the students graduated from high school (Sherraden, 1986). While a slow increase in high school graduates occurred from 1900 (11%) to 1940 (25%), it was not until 1950 that 50% of students enrolled in high school actually graduated (Schreiber, et al., 1965). That figure increased steadily over the next twenty years to 75%, which has remained the estimated national high school graduation rate for the past decade (Sherraden, 1986).

As graduation from high school became the norm, the national dropout rate of 25% became a critical issue for educators (Schreiber et al., 1965). In his book, *Creating the Dropout*, Herman Dorn (1996) accounts for the rise in the concern about dropout in the 1960s largely as a result of the changing role of high schools. In brief, he suggests that because high schools were

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extremely successful in attracting students in the 1950s, an expectation that everyone should graduate was created. This expectation of graduation was accompanied by a fear of the phenomenon of dropout. The term “dropout” emerged as a dominant term in the 1960s and was used to describe those who leave school before receiving a diploma. Fears centered on the apprehension of what a dropout may become as an adult and the dangers posed to society (Dorn, 1996). The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 stressed high school completion as a requisite for all citizens (Howard & Anderson, 1978). In 1963 and 1965, federal funding was allocated for the purpose of reducing the dropout rate (Schreiber et al., 1965). During this time, many federally funded studies attempted to determine the actual number of dropouts, their characteristics and reasons for leaving school (Coombs & Cooley, 1968). The primary focus of these studies was on who dropped out rather than how to prevent students from leaving school (Natriello et al., 1985).

Beginning in the 1980s, a metamorphosis occurred in the American educational system. In 1981, T. H. Bell, the Secretary of Education, created the National Commission on Excellence in Education to study the effectiveness of American schools. In 1983, this commission released a report that gave a rather bleak view of the American educational system and focused attention on deficits in the academic achievement of American high school students. This publication, entitled *A Nation at Risk*, was a catalyst to bring to light many questions about the quality of an American education and the need to address the academic performance and future of America’s youth (Kvapil, 2007). The stated mission of the 18 month study was to, “generate reform of our educational system in fundamental ways and to renew the Nation’s commitment to schools and colleges of high quality throughout the length and breadth of the land” (Kvapil, 2007, p. 3). The report discovered many deficiencies in the educational process and made nearly forty

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recommendations for needed improvements in the areas of content, standards and expectations, time, teaching, leadership, and fiscal support (Kvopil, 2007).

Since the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, many of the recommendations for change have been accomplished. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 was instated with the intention to improve educational outcomes for disadvantaged students. High school courses, graduation requirements, and college entrance requirements have become more rigorous. Expectations and standards of content have increased and standardized testing has been added to provide for student accountability. The changes in academic rigor for students and certification rigor for teachers have all been made in an effort to provide quantifiable ways to assure ourselves that our educational system is being effective (Kvopil, 2007).

However, one the biggest changes in American schools that was not addressed or perhaps even anticipated by the *A Nation at Risk* report was how the student population itself would change (Kvopil, 2007). The reality of *A Nation at Risk* was that because the system was flawed, every child was considered at-risk; the system, not the student population, was the issue of concern. The educational system today has and continues to be improved through new teaching strategies, new policies and regulations for curriculum, more rigorous teaching certification requirements, and new tests of accountability for students and teachers alike. Nevertheless, “the change to a more rigorous system has also been accompanied by a change of exponential proportion in the number of students who are more challenging, needy, and in danger of failure or dropping out of school” (Kvopil, 2007, p. 4).

Concern about the estimates of the graduation rate for the general population continued into the 1990s and resulted in the establishment of a national goal to increase the graduation rate (Lehr, 1999). The second goal of Goals 2000, which was established in March of 1991 by

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Congress and President Clinton, states that the graduation rate should be increased to 90% (National Education Goals Report, 1991). Increasing the graduation rate as well as raising the standards may be a difficult task for those students who are already at risk of school failure. Nevertheless, high schools are expected to see nearly all students through to graduation (Lehr, 1999).

Consequences of Dropping out / Rationale for Decreasing the Rate of Dropout

Many sociologists suggest that although the rate of dropout has improved from the 1950s, the current ramifications of not graduating high school have a greater negative impact on the individual and society as a whole (Coley, 1995). Options for youth who do not graduate are much more limited than they were thirty years ago. It has been argued that the increasing advances in technology and the changing needs of the labor force require the skills of a high school graduate and even these are not sufficient to meet the demands of the business world in many cases (Dorn, 1996; Rumberger, 1987). Economic indicators predict a continuation of trends toward jobs that require critical thinking skills and specific areas of expertise, and a decrease in employment opportunities for unskilled laborers and those without a high school diploma (Wehlage et al., 1989).

The majority of research findings point to incredible costs and negative consequences of dropping out. Failure to graduate has implications on both individual students and society at large. For the individual, most research suggests consequences affecting income / employment status, crime, cognitive growth, and health / mental health.

Income / Employment Status

Catterall's (1988) review of the implications of dropping out of school reveals striking differences between outcomes for students who dropped out of school and for those who

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graduated. Catterall stated that dropouts earn on average \$200,000 less during their lifetime than students who finish high school. Incomes of dropouts were found to be nearly 30% less than school completers who did not go on to college.

Additionally, several recent studies document that high school dropouts are more likely than high school graduates to be unemployed (Edwards et al., 2006; Barton, 2005). Youth who drop out of high school are likely to lack minimum skills necessary to function in today's increasingly complex society and technological workplace (Edwards et al., 2006). Dropouts have been reported to have unemployment rates 40% higher than school completers (Catterall, 1988). By contrast, possessing a high school diploma typically leads to higher income and occupational status (Barton 2005; Levin et al., 2007; Edwards et al., 2006). High percentages of youth without high school diplomas are sporadically employed, unemployed, or even worse, totally absent from the labor force (Khudaverdyan, 2009).

The positive relationship between education and earnings is particularly important because earnings have been used as a mediator to explain the relationships between education and other non-economic benefits, such as crime and health (Ou, 2008).

Crime

Recent studies have found that high school graduates are much less likely to engage in property, drug, and violent crimes than high school dropouts (Lochner, 2004, Lochner & Moretti, 2004). Education is negatively correlated with violent and property crimes (Lochner, 2004), and higher education is significantly associated with lower probability of incarceration and arrest (Lochner & Moretti, 2004). Moreover, some studies have examined the relationship between education and juvenile delinquency, with time spent in school used as an explanatory variable for juvenile delinquency (Jacob & Lefgren, 2003; Farrington et al., 1986). Jacob and Lefgre (2003)

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found that property crime committed by juveniles decreased by 14% on days when school is in session, but violent crimes increase by 28% on days school is not in session. Additionally, in an analysis of data from High School and Beyond, a national longitudinal study of American high school students, it was found that one out of eight youths who dropped out reported serious trouble with the law, compared to a ratio of one of thirty-three youth who had graduated (Catterall, 1988). Also, according to the National Longitudinal Transition Study, the arrest rates of youth with disabilities who dropped out were significantly higher than those who graduated high school. The arrest rates for dropouts three to five years after leaving high school climbed to 62% for students with learning disabilities and 73% for students with emotional and behavioral disorders (Wagner et al., 1991).

Several hypotheses have been developed to explain the relationship between education and crime. First, higher education may lower crime by raising wage rates or increasing the cost of punishment, thereby increasing the cost of crime (Lochner, 2004). Furthermore, the stigma of a criminal conviction is larger for more educated people, which suggests that the negative effects go beyond the time spent in prison (Kling, 2002). Therefore, the cost of punishment is not only limited to lost wages, but also includes social pressures that come with the stigma attaching criminals. In addition, education may affect individuals' time preference and risk aversion. Higher education may increase individuals' patience and make people more risk-averse, such that more educated people might place greater weight on the possibility of future punishments (Becker & Mulligan, 1997). Finally, education might affect biological development, maturity, norms, and social networks, subsequently affecting decisions to engage in crime (Lochner, 2004).

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Health / Mental Health

Higher education is associated with a better quality of life and health through paid work, economic resources, social-psychological resources, and healthy lifestyle (Adams, 2002; Ross & Willigen, 1997; Ross & Wu, 1995). The health advantage of higher educational attainment increases with age; therefore, the education-based gap in health is greater in older age than in younger ages (Ross & Wu, 1995). High school dropouts have a life expectancy that is 9.2 years shorter than high school graduates (Muennig, 2005).

Furthermore, education is also found to be negatively correlated with the prevalence of severe mental illness and depression (Ou, 2008). Kaplan et al. (1994) found that not graduating increased the likelihood of depression, anxiety, and self-derogation. Similarly, Kortering et al. (1997) found that high school dropouts were less satisfied with their lives and reported more psychological distress and social despair than high school graduates. Moreover, life satisfaction is one of the most well established indicators of general wellness and positive functioning (Suldo et al., 2006). Chan et al. (2003) found significant differences in life satisfaction, measured primarily in terms of work satisfaction, between dropouts who completed their high school education and those who did not. Similarly, Ou (2008) found significant differences in symptoms of serious depression, future optimism, and life satisfaction between high school graduates, dropouts that later received their GED, and dropouts without a GED.

Cognitive Growth

High school graduation is often required to access post-secondary education and is a minimum requirement for most jobs (Edwards et al., 2006). Students who drop out are more likely to show limited cognitive growth primarily because early school leavers have less chance of pursuing further education (Pallas, 1987). In a regional study of students who left the

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Washington D.C. public schools, Tuck (1989) found that students who dropout once have a 40% chance of returning to school; however, those who drop out twice will probably not return. Also, it was illustrated that those who did not return to school were found to have left school at a significantly lower grade level than those who had re-enrolled.

Family

Several researchers have pointed to the striking correlation between earnings and marriage trends. For instance, in 1970, 68% of male dropouts between age 22-32 were married. However, in 2007, after earnings for dropouts dropped precipitously, the marriage rate for this group fell to 26%. Similarly, although trends in out of wedlock births are affected by many factors, having children outside of marriage is strongly correlated with education. In 2006, a startling 67% of births to female high school dropouts under age thirty were out of wedlock. By contrast, the out of wedlock birth rate was 10% for women under thirty with a master's degree (Bloom, 2010).

In general, leaving high school without graduating is a developmental transition associated with a more problematic life-course, including poorer employment outcomes, lower wages, higher levels of risky behaviors, and poorer mental health outcomes (Liem, Lustig, & Dillon, 2009). The capability of these adolescents to establish families and raise children to function successfully in society is severely challenged as employment opportunities and income potential are greatly diminished (Khudaverdyan, 2009). Barton (2005) refers to these dropouts as "lost youth" and states:

These lost youth will wander without a map on the edges of the economy and could be at risk of falling prey to alternatives to earning a living in the regular economy. Without interventions that will change their course, they are likely to father and mother children ill-equipped to do better, thus perpetuating a downward cycle of economic or social failure (p.40).

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Several researchers have viewed the dropout crisis from a societal perspective, examining the tremendous long-term costs to society associated with youth dropping out of school and the benefits that society stands to gain from addressing the issues and assisting students to finish school (Catterall, 1987; Levin et al., 2007; Orfield, 2004). Orfield (2004) examined the fiscal cost to society from the perspective of lost earning potential and estimated potential unrealized revenue tax gains of approximately \$71,000 per dropout. Further, potential societal gains from dropout prevention were stressed by Levin et al. (2007), who stated that high school graduation not only benefits students in terms of increased lifetime earnings and society in terms of increased tax revenues, but also decreased dependence on public services and reduced criminal behaviors. From these researchers' perspectives, the societal benefits of staying in school are great, and the costs of dropping out of school are striking, as high school dropouts are more likely to live in poverty, receive government assistance, persist on government assistance, and commit crimes (Barton, 2005; Edwards et al., 2006).

Reasons and Predictors for Dropout

The societal concern regarding dropouts has been translated into several thousand studies attempting to determine which students are more likely to leave school early (Howard & Anderson, 1978). Failure to complete high school is a nationally recognized problem and increasing the high school graduation rate will reduce the risk for multiple problem behaviors and poor mental and physical health (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000). Identifying the predictors of high school failure is a crucial task for researchers; understanding the causes and processes of dropping out can help guide the creation of effective approaches to not only prevent this problem, but also to create interventions for those who have already fallen

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out of the system. Currently, the research points to five theories influencing high school students to drop out (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000).

Academic Mediation Theory

The school environment is becoming increasingly influential on adolescents' development, relationships, adjustments, and problems due to the changes in family and social structures over recent times (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2000). Numerous studies have found school influences to be strong predictors of dropping out (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000).

Poor academic achievement, typically assessed with standardized achievement tests or grade point average, has consistently been one of the strongest predictors of dropping out of high school (Rumberger, 1983). According to Finn (1989), many children respond to discomfiting academic feedback by disengaging from school. For instance, report cards signal competence judgments explicitly, and educational track placements do so more subtly. Also, repeating a grade, receiving Special Education services, taking low level courses, and pursuing a non-college program all imply a low standing in the school's academic hierarchy; all of which are potentially stigmatizing. According to Finn's (1989) frustration-self-esteem model, a record of poor performance causes children to question their competence and weakens their attachment to school. Dropout under such circumstances is a means of escape from an environment that is psychologically punishing.

Moreover, adolescents are becoming more reliant on the school context to provide a sense of belonging (Beck & Malley, 1998). The common finding within the literature is that students who do not feel a sense of belonging within their school, experience feelings of alienation and loneliness, which motivates them to leave school early. Adolescents deprived of a sense of belonging often experience a variety of negative outcomes, including emotional distress,

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increased stress, and health problems (Beck & Malley, 1998). Children who develop a commitment to succeed in school and who feel a sense of attachment to school are more successful academically (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000). Ultimately, when a sense of belonging is not nurtured in students, they are more likely to leave school early (Finn, 1989).

Additionally, many researchers have found that dropouts had difficulty seeing a connection between school and the realities of their lives. These studies speak not only to the failure of schools to successfully engage large groups of students, but also to the complex issues schools face given the many, various challenges low-income and minority adolescents face in their lives outside of school (Bickerstaff, 2010). Fine (1991) stated that structural and institutional systems “enable, obscure, and legitimate” high school dropout. LeCompte and Dworkin (1991) argue in their analysis of student dropout and teacher burnout that the structure of contemporary schooling is in conflict with the current economic and social systems. They provide a compelling theory of alienation centered on a gap between expectations and experiences that leads to a sense of “powerlessness, meaninglessness, and normlessness” (p. 155).

General Deviance Theory

General Deviance Theory consistently describes a relationship between deviant behavior and dropout rates in the literature (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000), as research has identified problem behaviors such as aggression, defiance, disruption, and antisocial behaviors as key factors that often interfere with school success (Arnold et al., 1999). The negative influence of problem behaviors is especially important among disadvantaged youth, who are at terrible risk for both academic failure and behavior problems (McLoyd, 1998). Youth who are struggling in school are far more likely to exhibit aggressive behavior, and vice versa. Students with both academic and behavior problems are at greatly increased risk for continuing achievement

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deficits. Research suggests that academic difficulties cause disengagement, increased frustration and lower self-esteem, which then causes a student to act out. At the same time, behavior problems typically are associated with noncompliance, elevated activity levels, and poor attention, which limit academic development. Thus, a cycle is created in which once a child has one problem, it is likely that the other will develop, and that the two problems will exacerbate each other (Arnold et al., 1991).

Additionally, problem behaviors can lead teachers, parents, and peers to inadvertently contribute to the cycle and make the problems worse. For instance, studies show that children with severe behavior problems misbehave most frequently during difficult activities. During these times, teachers withdraw demands in the presence of these misbehaviors by removing the student from these activities, either as a disciplinary action or as the student is too difficult to manage. This, in turn, will make it more likely that the student will exhibit negative behaviors in the future to escape such difficult activities (Arnold et al., 1999). Therefore, students with behavior problems may receive less teaching, which further contributes to their development of academic problems. Moreover, dropouts have a strong tendency to experience problems with attendance due to truancy from school, which results in missed coursework leading to lower grades and the lack of credits required to graduate (Natriello et al., 1985).

Deviant Affiliation Theory

During adolescence, student's identification with and conformity to peers increases dramatically (Berndt, 1979). As a consequence, the quality of peer relationships at this age may have a particularly strong impact on adjustment and subsequent performance at school. Accordingly, Deviant Affiliation Theory explains that peers influence their friends' behavior and development, and they have considerable influence over their academic achievements. It is well

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understood that social factors are central aspects of a teenager's life, and therefore, bonding to antisocial peers has been found to uniquely and directly contribute to dropping out (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000). Early school leavers are likely to hang out with peers who have similar family backgrounds, educational expectations, or individual behaviors; these peer influences are more likely to develop into delinquency, violence, or substance abuse (Brook & Cohen, 1992). Also, when students are faced with feelings of alienation and loneliness, as is often found among at-risk students, they often attempt to alleviate these feelings through membership in groups such as gangs and cults. Although social in nature, gangs and cults are usually considered to be undesirable, dangerous, rebellious, and antisocial (Beck & Malley, 1998). When students experience a supportive environment in school, such as having friends who support their academic goals, they are more likely to experience positive outcomes (Newman et al., 2000).

The literature suggests that having friends to serve as academic as well as social resources can have a direct and positive influence on achievement outcomes at school (Wentzel, 1991). The quality of children's relationships with peers also appears to have a strong influence on their emotional and motivational response to school (Epperson, 1963). Several research studies have linked the acceptance by peers to social responsibility in the form of cooperative, pro-social, and nonaggressive behavior. Thus, it is possible that positive relations between the quality of peer relationships and academic outcomes reflect more direct links between social responsibility and achievement. Conversely, socially responsible behavior may contribute to academic accomplishments by promoting positive interpersonal relationships within the classroom (Wentzel, 1991).

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Poor Family Socialization Theory

Poor Family Socialization Theory subscribes that families are the earliest and most fundamental socialization institutions for a developing child. Thus, families provide many of the pivotal foundations and experiences for later life, including academic achievement and success in school. Early family socialization influences on dropping out are many and varied, including parent divorce, family stress, parental behavioral control and acceptance, and most prominently and consistently the parents' own education levels and their expectations for their children's academic success (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000). For instance, Brown (2004) noted that low parent expectations and low parent education as influencing high school dropout compared to low academic achievement. Brown (2004) reported that family support predicts student retention, and that students are more likely to remain in schooling if the social or family environment values education. In addition, life course estimates suggest that most American youth will spend some time living outside a traditional nuclear family due to changes in living arrangements among American families in the last century (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008). This has the ability to cause instability and turbulence in adolescents' lives which is linked to a variety of behavioral, social, and academic problems (Cavanaugh & Huston, 2006). For example, young people who experience changes in family structure in childhood are less likely to complete high school compared to those who remain in two-parent families (Strohschein et al., 2009).

Structural Strains Theory

Finally, Structural Strains Theory places emphasis on demographic factors as predicting dropout. Research indicates that gender (boys are more likely than girls to dropout), socioeconomic status (dropouts are more likely to be from families of low SES), and race/ethnicity (African American and Hispanic American students are more likely than European

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American students to dropout) are all dropout predictors (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000). Dropouts come disproportionately from low-income and minority families. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the share of 16-24 year olds who are out of school and lack a diploma or GED is only 4% in the highest income quartile and 17% in the lowest income quartile. Similarly, the dropout rate is 6% for white adolescents, whereas 12% for African American and 20% for Hispanics (Bloom, 2010).

Not everyone who drops out of high school does so for the same reasons. It is important to recognize that students who leave school have a variety of experiences which lead to their decision to drop out. These findings suggest that a comprehensive model of social development that considers influence from multiple sources such as the family, school, community, and peers would better explain the process of high school dropout. Building on evidence-based theories predicting high school dropout, it is clear that intervention efforts should focus on increasing the academic success through the consideration of these factors (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000).

Dropouts Returning to School or an Equivalent Program

Dropouts follow different trajectories after leaving school. However, although estimates vary, most research indicates that a substantial number of high school dropouts attempt to continue their education and return back to school or to an equivalency program. Using the High School and Beyond dataset, Kolstad and Kaufman (1989) reported that 44% of school leavers attained their high school diplomas or their GED certificate within two years of their expected graduation date. Drawing on data from the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) of 1988, Berkold et al. (1998) similarly found that 42% of students who dropped out of school earned a diploma or equivalent credential two years after their expected graduation date. Six years later, Hurst et al. (2004) extended that study and found that eight years after the examined

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cohort's expected graduation date, 63% of the dropouts had earned a high school diploma or equivalent. Thus, it appears that dropout is rarely permanent.

Although data on the total percentage of students who ever re-enroll in school are sparse, research indicates that the number of 16-20 year olds in alternative schools, GED classes, and other adult education settings is growing (Welch & DiTommaso, 2004). Adult education programs frequently struggle to meet the needs of the growing numbers of young students, and the literature suggests that adolescent and young adult learners present particular challenges that many adult education programs feel unequipped to handle (Hayes, 1999). In response, a greater range of alternative school programs have emerged in recent years; many designed specifically for adolescents and young adults. The numbers of young school leavers returning to alternative programs is indicative of both greater interests on the part of the young adults who return and enhanced efforts on the part of the educational institutions to provide alternative pathways for individuals to earn a high school diploma or equivalent (Bickerstaff, 2010).

Moreover, in Metzger's (1997) qualitative study of dropouts returning to school, he reports that most of the dropouts returned to school after "some kind of pivotal event or realization" (p. 6). Metzger writes that while many respondents reported feeling more mature, wanting a better life, or feeling more motivated, critical incidents in the respondents' lives (i.e. the loss of a job, the birth of a baby, or the graduation of friends) were essential in precipitating the respondents' return to school. This data analysis draws on a classic redemption narrative in which former high school dropouts experience an epiphany and then begin a new section of their life (Bickerstaff, 2010). In addition, in Rymes (2001) work with returning students, she analyzes that common feature of the 'turning point' in which the student distances himself from the former self who was responsible for leaving school. The 'turning point' allows the student to create two

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characters within their life story; the first self was lured into gangs or other negative behaviors, and the second self rejects those influences and is on the path to success. According to Rymes, these returning students reject their dropout identity and accept a new identity as a successful student.

Moreover, Conrady (1997) stated that some students who return to school to acquire their GED believed that having a GED was simply a step that he or she had to fulfill and that it had no direct bearing on whether or not he or she obtained a job or what kind of job it was. However, for many high school leavers, the GED opens the door for post-secondary education. This was reflected in the 1980's when over half of the students receiving the GED diploma received some education or training after high school in colleges, trade schools, or job training programs (Tarantino, 2004). In addition, for many returners, having a GED increases a dropout's chance of getting a full time job as GED diploma holders are paid 8% higher than other dropouts (Tarantino, 2004).

General Educational Development (Ged)

The GED is the “most widely recognized form of alternative secondary certification in the United States” (Boesel et al., 1998, p. vii). The GED is a test-determined certificate of graduation for adults who did not complete a regular high school program for instruction. The primary impetus for earning a GED credential is to use it as a stepping stone for access to higher education, to obtain a job, or to facilitate mobility within a job (Boesel et al., 1998).

Many dropouts seek to continue their education by enrolling in classes to prepare for the GED. GED preparation programs are continually regarded as a “second chance” mechanism for individuals who did not finish high school for various reasons. GED preparation programs are an important step toward addressing the huge dropout problem alongside the social and economic

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problems in the United States. These classes may be offered at community-based organizations, schools, libraries, or community colleges (Styles, 2011). Each year 400,000 to 500,000 people pass the GED nationwide and more than 60% of them are under the age of twenty-five (Bloom, 2010).

Brief History of the GED

The original GED test was first introduced in 1942 during the years of World War II for veterans who returned from the war without a high school diploma but had the abilities to be able to use the postsecondary education benefits provided in the GI Bill. Through collaboration between the U.S. military personnel and the American Council on Education (ACE) provided an opportunity for veterans to demonstrate that they had achieved learning outcomes usually associated with a high school diploma. As a result of this program, many veterans were able to qualify for civilian jobs and pursue postsecondary education upon discharge from military service (Tyler, 2005). In 1947, ACE granted New York state permission to administer the tests to civilians who had not completed high school. By the early 1960s, the majority of GED test-takers were civilians. In 1974, GED credentials were issued in all fifty states in the U.S. (Tyler, 2005). Due to the changes in society since the GED was first introduced, the test is now being administered in its fourth version (GED Testing Service, 2004).

GED Credential

To earn a GED credential, a candidate must pass a set of five tests, covering language arts (writing), social studies, science, language arts (reading), and mathematics. The score of each test ranges from 200 – 800. To receive a GED credential, a candidate has to earn an average score across the five tests of at least 450, with no individual test score below 410. Students may take the test as many times as is necessary to pass and have the option to take all five sections at

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one time or in segments (GED Testing Service, 2004). This assists students with learning disabilities and/or a lack of academic experience as they can concentrate on only one subject area at a time before moving on to learn the content of another section (Ah Bae, 2008). The minimum age requirement for taking the test varies state to state. Most states set the minimum age at eighteen; however, many states allow sixteen and seventeen year olds to take the exam on a case by case basis (Ah Bae, 2008).

Population & Types of GED Students

The population of the youngest GED certificate seeker, ages sixteen and seventeen year old adolescents, has increased over the past decade. In 2000, there were more GED test takers in the 16-19 age groups than any other age group. Individuals aged twenty to twenty-four accounted for the next largest percentage, and as age increased, the percentage decreased (Tarantino, 2004).

In general there are two types of GED students. The first type of GED student is the student who leaves high school and immediately attends a GED program in order to remain with his class and enter into higher education. The second type of GED student appears to be adults who return to school after some hiatus to fulfill the requirements necessary to enter into a two or four year higher education program (Tarantino, 2004).

Benefits of GED / GED Compared to High School Graduates & Dropouts

According to GED test passers, roughly 64% took the exam for educational reasons and 46% tested for employment reasons. Education benefits individuals in various domains, as a level of schooling, a GED credential benefits individuals beyond improving chances of employment and future earnings (Ou, 2008). Boesel et al. (1998) recognized several functions of the GED:

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(a) as a stimulus to human capital investment, (b) as a test for measuring and assessing cognitive skills, (c) as a sorting procedure for stronger cognitive skills, (d) as certification to signal educational institutions, employers, and others that they have demonstrated the ability to read, write, think, and compute at the high school level, and (e) as a self-confidence builder (p 8-11).

Other than the intended purposes, the GED credential also has implications for the contours of educational stratification in the United States as the GED credential adds a new dimension to the system of educational stratification that has traditionally been classified in terms of high school completion alone. Although a GED credential is equivalent to complete high school, it has introduced substantial heterogeneity within the high school level of schooling (Ou, 2008). Ou (2008) reported that dropouts, GED recipients, and high school graduates are three stratified levels of education with dropouts on the bottom, GED recipients in the middle, and high school graduates on the top.

The well-established relationship between education and earnings is an important concept from the perspective of human capital. Some findings have indicated that a GED credential does not bring the same economic benefits as a high school diploma; however, researchers have reported that it does improve economic benefits when compared to permanent dropouts. A GED credential is associated with a higher probability that one will pass the threshold of making average or above average income (Ou, 2008). Additionally, although some studies suggest that a GED credential functions as a high school diploma for recipients who continue onto postsecondary education, GED recipients have a lower rate of participation in postsecondary education than high school graduates (Murnane et al., 1997).

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Furthermore, GED recipients have higher scores for life satisfaction and optimism than dropouts, and high school graduates have higher scores on these two outcomes than GED recipients (Ou, 2008). Personal development through learning is one of the several hypotheses (Hammond, 2003) that have been proposed to explain the positive relationship between education and health. This hypothesis suggests that education aids the development of psychological resilience and helps foster some personal characteristics, such as self-esteem and a positive outlook on the world, which then influence health behaviors (Ou, 2008). This hypothesis corresponds with one of the functions of the GED credential: build self-confidence (Boesel et al., 1998).

Finally, GED recipients are associated with a lower rate of substance use than dropouts. Substance abuse is associated with negative consequences on both a personal and a societal level (Hawkins et al., 1992). Therefore, there is public interest in reducing substance use. The rates of substance use decrease significantly as the levels of education move up from dropout to the GED credential, and from the GED credential to high school graduation (Ou, 2008).

The GED may not necessarily be the equivalent to the high school diploma but it is an improved option over no high school education at all. The right education for many dropouts may not have necessarily been high school education. Instead of assuming that all students need a high school education, educators should perhaps also consider alternative forms of education involving high school and vocational training (Tarantino, 2004).

Success Factors in GED Preparation Programs

In their evaluation of current prevention and high school equivalency programs, Dynarski and Gleason (2002) found that all five of the high school prevention programs studied did not significantly reduce dropout rates; in contrast, participants in the three GED programs evaluated

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were more likely to earn their GED certificates. They found that the total effect was that GED programs improved the overall high school completion rate from 24% to 39%, a relative increase of over 60%. Dynarski and Gleason (2002) attributed the GED preparation program's success to providing a shorter road to success as opposed to the four years needed to complete and earn a high school diploma. Additionally, the success of these programs was based on a characterization of "personalization." The programs were smaller than regular school, and students had more access to adults who could help them with their issues and problems. These adults were noted to not only have wanted to help their students, but also went out of their way in doing so. The programs recognized that students often had family or personal problems that hindered their ability to attend or succeed in school; therefore, the programs offered counseling or other means to help their students deal with their problems. The programs also recognized that even students with undistinguished academic records need a measure of academic challenge. The teachers in these programs pushed their students to learn by connecting their learning experience to their personal experiences (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002). Accordingly, based on research findings, it can be concluded that dropout students have a need not only for academic focus, but also for a focus on personal problems and issues.

Importance of Offering Mental Health & Social Support Interventions to Adolescents in School

In 2002, President Bush established the President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health to analyze the state of the country's mental health system. After a year of study and input from more than two-thousand stakeholders, the commission concluded that "the mental health delivery system is fragmented and in disarray... leading to unnecessary and costly disability, homelessness, school failure, and incarceration" (New Freedom Commission on

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Mental Health, 2003). The final report of the commission highlighted unmet needs and barriers to care, including fragmentation and gaps in care for children and lack of a national priority for mental health. Additionally, the mental health system for children and adolescents is acknowledged to be broken (New Freedom Commission on Mental Health, 2003) with less than a third of youth with serious mental health issues receiving any care and the percent of youth who receive effective care likely less than 10% (U.S. Public Health Service, 2000).

Traditional responsibilities of schools and educators have primarily centered on promoting achievement and academic success within youth. Attending to the social-emotional needs of students is often a secondary aim within the school setting, despite evidence showing the critical linkage between social-emotional health and students' development and academic success (Adelman & Taylor, 2009). Provision of effective mental health care is crucial, as psychological problems during childhood and adolescence significantly impair academic achievement and learning (Masten et. al, 2005).

Mental health has traditionally been marked by the absence of disorder or negative outcomes, such as behavioral or academic problems (Diener, 2000). However, research within the past decade has indicated that the absence of pathology in youth does not equate to optimal mental health or wellness. The construct of mental health appears comprised of two components – subjective well-being (i.e. happiness) and psychopathology. Wellness entails the absence of negative indicators of mental health (i.e. psychopathology) as well as the presence of positive indicators of mental health (i.e. subjective well-being). These studies with adolescents supported the superior physical, social, and academic functioning of youth with both high perceptions of subjective well-being and low levels of psychopathology, and underscore the importance of

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conceptualizing mental health in a more holistic manner, rather than simply using indications of impairment (Suldo & Shaffer, 2008).

Such an approach aligns well with the foundational principles of positive psychology, which recognizes the importance of identifying strengths and helping adolescents to thrive and form positive connections with others, through supportive social relationships, in conjunction with reducing and/or eliminating problematic behaviors and risk factors (Seligman, 2002). Life satisfaction is one of the most well established indicators of general wellness and positive functioning (Suldo et al., 2009). Studies have evidenced positive associations between adolescent life satisfaction and academic achievement (Suldo, Shaffer, & Riley, 2008).

Positive psychology has been “informed by decades of research examining positive emotions, characteristics, values, and institutions that support and enhance individuals” (Beaver, 2008, p. 129). Social support is an expansive construct that describes the physical and emotional comfort given to individuals by their family, friends, and other significant people in their lives (Israel & Schurman, 1990). It can generally be defined as “the degree to which a person’s basic needs are gratified through interaction with others” (Thoits, 1982, p. 145) and refers to one’s social relationships as buffering life’s stressors and thereby promoting one’s general health and well-being (Demaray et al., 2005). Adolescence is the time in life when youth attain the skills and attributes necessary to become productive, self-sufficient adults. Social support is one mechanism that aids successful adolescent development and promotes positive outcomes during this time (Malecki & Demaray, 2006). Higher perceptions of social support are generally associated with beneficial psychological and school-related outcomes for adolescents (Stewart & Suldo, 2011).

Social and Emotional Learning Programs – The Collaborative For Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)

As a nation we believe every child deserves the opportunity to learn to his or her potential and capacity. To succeed in school, students must be engaged and interested; they must also need to know how to focus their attention on work, be persistent in their efforts even in the face of discouragement or setbacks, work effectively with others, and have good communication and problem-solving skills. These qualities are what form the foundation for youth to experience success not only in school, but also in their adult lives. Research has indicated that these skills can be taught in a classroom setting by existing teachers in all schools today. Evidence has also shown that these skills can be learned by all students of every background. Programs that teach these skills are referred to Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs (CASEL, 2007).

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), is a not-for-profit organization based at the University of Illinois at Chicago. CASEL has studied numerous programs offering social and emotional learning (SEL) programming. These studies have reported that those students who participate in such programs consistently outperform their peers by receiving better grades and graduating at higher rates, compared to those who do not receive SEL. Effective SEL programming drives academic learning, social outcomes, such as positive peer relationships, caring, empathy, and social engagement. Evidence has also shown decreases in deviant behaviors, such as drug use, violence, and delinquency (CASEL, 2007).

According to CASEL (2007), what sets SEL apart from other national youth development and prevention initiatives, is that it

“systematically addresses the numerous social and emotional variables that place youth at risk for school failure, such as a lack of attachment to a

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significant adult or the inability to manage emotions. SEL provides educators with a common language and framework to organize their activities. Many programs related to children's social and emotional development focus on a single problem or issue such as preventing substance use. SEL however is an inclusive approach that covers the entire spectrum of social and emotional competencies that help children to be resilient and successful learners" (p. 2).

Furthermore, SEL has a foundational basis in the rigorous research that has been conducted, which clearly indicates that our emotions and relationships affect how and what we learn. Educators have long debated the most appropriate ways to promote academic and student success. In doing such, they have often distinguished between the emotional and academic aspects of children's learning. However, implications from the growing body of research confirms that these two types of learning are intimately connected and that academic achievement has a better success rate when student's social and emotional competence is addressed (CASEL, 2007).

Thus, this study seeks to gain experts' views on how GED preparation programs could incorporate a SEL component as most research currently pertains to SEL being offered in schools as opposed to high school equivalency programs.

Chapter Three: Methods

The Delphi Method

Currently, there is limited understanding and research on effective second-chance programs for high school dropouts. Although many dropout prevention programs and alternative programs for dropouts are being employed, most programs have never been formally evaluated for effectiveness and the small amount of research that has been conducted has proved that they are lacking and inefficient in many forms. The paucity of conclusive evidence makes it hard to know how to direct resources and magnifies the importance of ensuring that all new initiatives provide for rigorous evaluation of their impacts (Bloom, 2010). This study makes use of the Delphi Method to help gather expert views on how GED preparation programs would integrate a social and emotional learning (SEL) component.

The Delphi Method allows the researcher to facilitate communication and gather a consensus of opinion among a panel of knowledgeable persons on a particular topic (Fish & Busby, 1996). Linstone and Turoff (1975) state that the Delphi technique is a “method for structuring group communication processes so that the process is effective in allowing a group of individuals, as a whole, to deal with a complex problem” (p. 3). This methodology offers an effective way to arrive at a consensus of opinion among a panel or group of knowledgeable experts, in a specific field of study (Sackman, 1975). It is an effective means of obtaining preliminary data in a field where none existed previously (Preble, 1983). The method also provides one of the best ways to facilitate communication between the members of a large pool of people, and to group their ideas together. In this way, effective discussion about a topic can occur without the group of people having to be together in one location (Fish & Busby, 1996). Fish and Busby (1996) report “the Delphi method attempts to negotiate a reality that can be

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useful in moving a particular field forward, planning for the future, or even changing the future by forecasting its events” (p.470).

The Delphi method traditionally collects data by sending out a series of questionnaires to a group of experts. These experts are referred to as panelists. The questionnaires are repeatedly sent out to the panelists until there is a consensus of opinion about the particular topic. An acceptable degree of consensus may only occur after the questionnaires have been mailed to participants on several occasions (Fish & Busby, 1996). Three-rounds are most commonly used to achieve stability in responses. Further rounds tend to show little change (Linstone & Turoff, 1975).

The Delphi approach is a flexible methodology, and there are many different ways that the phases of data collection can be implemented. It is essentially up to the research team to decide upon the procedures best suited to carry out the data collection for the specific study. Most important in the research is the opportunity for panelists to express their opinions about the subject matter, and for the research team not to prematurely close off disagreements among members (Fish & Busby, 1996; Linstone & Turoff, 1975).

In the first phase of a Delphi study (named Delphi I), participants brainstorm about the subject and give as much input as desired. The research team provides open-ended questions in a survey format and asks the participants to offer open-ended creative responses. In the second phase (Delphi II), the research team reviews the information provided in Delphi I. The researcher edits the information, eliminates redundancy in the responses, and categorizes the responses. Then, the research team designs a questionnaire with a ranking scale (usually a 7-point Likert-scale), by which participants are asked to evaluate each item. The third phase (Delphi III) typically deals with the disagreements encountered by the differing views found in Delphi II.

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Respondents are asked to re-evaluate their own responses in light of the median group response. This phase is useful to explore deeper meanings behind the respondents' ideas, or to clarify anomalies in responses. Several studies eliminate this third phase due to the high dropout rate of panelists at this stage in the research process (Fish & Busby, 1996). Thus, the current study completed data collection in two phases.

Philosophical Assumptions of the Delphi Method

The Delphi method assumes that the opinions of several experts are superior to the opinions of just one or two, and is based on the philosophical assumption that “*n* heads are better than one” (Dalkey, 1972). Underlying the Delphi technique is the philosophical idea that the truth is relative, and thus attempts to study a subject “from as many diverse points of view as possible” (Mitroff & Turoff, 1975, p. 36). Furthermore, the Delphi method approaches research from the philosophical standpoint that a consensus of opinion on a certain subject, achieved through a collective human intelligence process, can produce innovative and important ideas (Fish & Busby, 1996; Linstone & Turoff, 1975).

Brief History of the Delphi Method

Named after the Greek town of Delphi, the Delphi method as it is currently practiced was first used to attempt to predict the future (Fish & Busby, 1996). Most Delphi specialists agree that this method originated with the Rand Corporation in 1948 (Sackman, 1975), for military and defense studies (Dalkey & Helmer, 1963). The research method was primarily developed in order to avoid the problems of complex group processes involving large groups of people (Fish & Busby, 1996).

Advantages of the Delphi Method

One of the important advantages of the Delphi method is anonymity, which reduces the coercive effects of dominant individuals, and allows people, who may be reserved in larger groups, to step forward. The research team controls feedback from participants which reduces irrelevant communication among participants. Group members do not meet with each other face-to-face, nor do they know the identity of other participants, reducing group pressure for members to conform (Fish & Busby, 1996).

Moreover, the Delphi methodology also reduces group hierarchy. Data are presented in a non-hierarchical format, in that no one knows the identity of any other panelist, allowing for the sharing of ideas among participants without the fear of disapproval. For instance, panelists' views and responses may easily be shifted if a well known name in the field were linked to a particular view-point or response.

Furthermore, the Delphi technique allows for information to be gathered from individuals who may not be able to be gathered in one location to discuss the subject matter (Dalkey, 1972; Preble, 1983). Most experts who would be asked to participate have busy schedules and may live all over the world. Thus, the Delphi method allows for the participation of a greater number of panelists because they can complete the questionnaire when it is convenient, which saves both time and money (Fish & Busby, 1996).

Lastly, the Delphi technique is a flexible methodology. The number of participants, the characteristics of the participants, the number and selection of questions, and the number of rounds may all be changed depending on the needs of the research team (Linstone, 1978).

Limitations of the Delphi Method

One of the disadvantages of the Delphi technique is that it is time consuming for both the participants and the researchers (Preble, 1983). Even a few open-ended questions can generate a vast number of responses, which takes time for the research team to analyze and categorize. The investigator must generate the subsequent questionnaire promptly so that panelists stay interested and invested in participation. The method is time consuming for the participants involved in that it may take several rounds of questionnaires, some of which may have hundreds of items (Fish & Busby, 1996).

In addition, Linstone and Turoff (1975) criticize the Delphi technique for its focus on consensus. They see consensus as dangerous when it eliminates opposing viewpoints and differences of opinion, because these differences of opinion may provide valuable information. Fish and Busby (1996) suggest that the diversity of panelists and their responses may be minimized in the Delphi method. Linstone and Turoff (1975) further suggest that truth is not a viable goal to strive for, especially because truth can be subjective. In exploratory studies, exact truth is not the goal. Rather, as Fish and Busby (1996) conclude, “the philosophical underpinnings of the Delphi, then, are concerned more with the application of useful knowledge than with the attempt to define truth” (p. 470).

Another criticism of the Delphi methodology is that it may produce data that is of little practical value to a field. Data may be produced that is too narrow or too broad. At times, the significance of the data may be sacrificed for consensus (Fish & Busby, 1996).

Finally, the Delphi method relies on opinion and thus has a propensity toward subjectivity (Sackman, 1975). However, it should be remembered that the Delphi methodology is exploratory in nature with an emphasis upon discovery making the subjectivity acceptable. Also, the number

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and diversity of a group of panelists, may lead to consensus objectivity through inter-subjective agreement (Fish & Busby, 1996).

Delphi Panel Selection

Panel selection is a critical element of the Delphi Method. The panelists' knowledge of the subject matter at hand is the most significant assurance of a quality outcome. For this reason, participants in a Delphi study are chosen because of their expertise related to the subject rather than through a random process (Fish & Busby, 1996). The aim is to select a panel of experts who are diverse in nature, and well qualified regarding the research topic (Linstone & Turoff, 1975).

In choosing panelists for this particular study, certain criteria were considered in order to ensure the panelists were knowledgeable in education, specifically GED preparation programs, at-risk and dropout populations, and Social and Emotional Learning. Potential panelists need to meet two of the following four criteria, one of which must be either number 3 or 4: (1).

Published journal articles or books on the topic of educating at-risk students or dropouts by providing social and emotional learning; (2). Have a minimum of three years clinical or teaching experience in working with the at-risk or dropout population; (3). Have a minimum of three years' experience working directly with the at-risk or dropout population in a GED preparation program; (4). Have a minimum of three years' experience in providing education with a focus on social and emotional learning to the at-risk or dropout population.

For recruitment, flyers (see Appendix B) were sent via email to school administration and faculty of high schools in districts around the nation which implemented Social and Emotional Learning practices. The flyer included the panelist criteria for the study and invited all those interested and qualified to participate in the study. Ten potential panelists responded to the flyer via email expressing interest in participation and were then asked to complete the Participant

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Screening Form (see Appendix D) to ensure they met the qualifications for the study through email. Of these ten potential panelists, only seven responded and completed the Participant Screening Form. All seven potential panelists met the study criteria. These seven qualified panelists were sent a formal invitation/welcome packet (see Appendix E) via email to participate in the study. Of these seven, two stated they could not participate due to time constraints, one never responded, and four panelists agreed to participate.

All four panelists met the necessary requirements for qualifying as an expert in this field as they all met two of the four criteria. None of the panelists had a minimum of three years' experience in a GED preparation program. However, they all met the criteria for having a minimum of three years' experience providing SEL in an educational setting. The following chart shows how this panel of experts met criteria for the current study.

Table 1				
<i>Panelist Screening & Qualifications</i>				
	Expert1	Expert2	Expert3	Expert4
Published articles, book chapters, or books?	None	2	None	None
Min. 3 years clinical experience with at-risk or dropouts?	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Min. 3 years' experience with at-risk or dropouts in school?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Min. 3 years teaching at-risk or dropouts?	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Min 3 yrs exp teaching with SEL focus?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Min 3 yrs exp in GED prep program?	No	No	No	No
Criteria Met?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	2 & 4	1 & 4	2 & 4	2 & 4

Upon qualifying for the study, the panelists were sent a welcome packet inviting their expert participation in the study. In this packet was included a Demographics Form (see Appendix H), which the panelists were asked to fill out and submit online along with the Delphi

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I Questionnaire. The Demographics Form was used to further ensure that panelists met criteria for the study and to gather more information on their expertise and qualifications. The panel of experts comprised of three females and one male, between the ages of 35-50. One of the experts has a Bachelor’s degree, one has a masters, one is currently enrolled in a master’s program, and the final panelist has a Ph.D. The panelists specialized their educational focus in Child and Adolescent Development, Psychology, Secondary Education, and Developmental Psychology. The following chart outlines the panelists’ expertise:

Table 2				
<i>Expert Panel Demographics</i>				
	Expert1	Expert2	Expert3	Expert4
Age	50	-	43	37
# of yrs clinical experience with study population?	5	-	-	3
# of yrs researching study population?	2	15	-	-
# of yrs teaching study population?	16	-	8	6
# of yrs providing SEL instruction in clinical setting?	8	3	-	3
# of yrs researching SEL for study population?	2	15	-	-
# of yrs teaching SEL to study population?	2	-	4	4
“-“ = N/A (no answer)				

The panelists each exceeded the three-year minimum criterion for working with the at-risk and dropout populations in a SEL setting, as each reported at least six years’ experience. The experts also exceeded the three-year minimum criterion for working with the current population providing SEL instruction, as each reported at least four years’ experience. Moreover, all four panelists completed both phases I and II of the Delphi study, representing 100% participation in both questionnaires, with no attrition of experts.

Delphi Procedures

In the Delphi Method, data is collected by sending out a series of questionnaires to a carefully chosen panel of experts. It is standard practice to send questionnaires out repeatedly until a consensus of opinion is reached regarding the particular topic under investigation. This typically involves three rounds of questionnaires in order to obtain stable responses (Fish & Busby, 1996) as additional rounds would produce a point of diminishing returns (Linstone & Turoff, 1975). However, an advantage of the Delphi Method is its flexibility in data collection, allowing the researcher ability to modify the traditional three round Delphi method to two rounds of questionnaires (Sori & Sprenkle, 2004). This study utilized a modified Delphi model as two rounds of questionnaires were sent out to panelists via email with instructions to be completed and submitted online. This was done in an effort to limit attrition from the survey and to increase the likelihood of participation.

For the current study, a welcome packet was emailed to the four qualified panelists. The email attached a Cover Letter (see Appendix F) and Consent Form (see Appendix G), listed website URL's for completion of the Demographics Form (see Appendix H) and the Delphi I Questionnaire (Q1) (see Appendix I), stated the deadline for participation in Delphi Phase I, and included their participant identification number to be used on the questionnaires throughout the study to insure anonymity. Additionally, panelists were first directed to read the Cover Letter and Consent Form prior to filling out and submitting responses to the Demographics Form and Q1. Panelists were explained that submission of Q1 would imply their consent to participate as an expert in the study.

The Cover Letter included the purpose of the study, background information, and the unique contribution their perspective would make in the field of combining academics and

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SEL. The Consent Form outlined procedures, confidentiality, risks, and benefits of their participation.

Q1 proposed open-ended questions and was designed to explore and gather expert opinions on how best to add SEL in a GED preparation program accentuating academic, social and emotional success. As this study takes the first step toward researching and developing an SEL GED preparation program, Q1 sought to gather expertise on how to appropriately structure the current study program, what important components to include and what outcomes to maintain as goals of the current study program. Specifically, experts were asked to provide opinions on the most important SEL competencies necessitated in the current study program. The panel of experts was also asked to include any other components not listed in Q1 they felt were necessary to incorporate. Experts were asked to recommend what they believed the top three goals should be set for the current study program. Panelists were asked to provide their expertise on what they foresaw to be the most important outcomes of offering the current study program. Expert panelists were asked to provide feedback on possible obstacles which may be encountered in running the current study program. Experts were asked how they would structure the current study program, including total program length, session length, time of day, and distribution of SEL and academic teachings. Finally, panelists were asked to provide their opinion on what population they felt would benefit most from the current study program.

Upon submission of the Demographics Form and Q1 an email was sent to the panelists thanking them for their participation and stating that another email would be sent with instructions for completing the Delphi II Questionnaire (Q2) (see Appendix K). Once responses from Q1 were analyzed and coded for themes, Q2 was developed. Another email was sent out to the expert panelists supplying a website URL for completion and submission of Q2.

Delphi Data Analysis

Due to the different phases of data collection involved in a Delphi study, various methods of data collection were utilized. During the first Delphi stage, qualitative methods were used to analyze participants' responses to open ended questions. Specifically, thematic analysis was employed to analyze the qualitative data. Through thematic analysis, the researcher coded the experts' responses by searching for patterns and themes in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Survey responses were actively read through several times for familiarization and comprehension of the data set. An initial list of codes was created, which in turn, with further re-reading of the responses, allowed patterns and themes to emerge. The themes and patterns which emerged in the data set were then categorized and redundant responses were eliminated. Effort was placed on retaining the experts' language wherever possible and omitting redundancies (Godfrey et al., 2006).

Following analysis of Q1, a second questionnaire (Q2) was developed for Delphi Phase II with more detailed and pointed questions aiming to gain thorough consensus among panelists on how best to incorporate SEL in a GED preparation program. Q2 consisted predominantly of questions on a 7 point Likert-scale and a few rank-order questions. This second data set was analyzed through calculating medians and interquartile ranges to identify the rates of group agreement and consensus among the panelists' responses. The median provides information on the responses' central tendency, thus highlighting consensus or agreement. The interquartile range provides information regarding the variability within the responses without being affected by extreme responses (Fish & Busby, 2005). To measure variability, interquartile ranges (IQR) were measured, computing the difference between the 75th and 25th percentiles. This allows for extreme scores to be noted, and if there is strong consensus on an item, a lower interquartile

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range was evident (Godfrey et al., 2006). This analysis was conducted in an effort to reach expert consensus on the incorporation of mental health and social support, in the form of SEL, to GED preparation programs for adolescent high school dropouts.

Chapter Four: Results

This study sought to gather expert consensus on incorporating mental health and social support, in the form of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), to GED preparation programs, for adolescent high school dropouts between the ages of 16 and 18. To obtain expert consensus the Delphi Method was employed and four panelists completed two-rounds of questionnaires, Q1 (see Appendix I) and Q2 (see Appendix K).

Data Analysis

Delphi I Questionnaire

Qualitative methods, specifically thematic analysis, were used to analyze the expert panel's responses to the questions in Q1 (Braun & Clark, 2006). There were several themes which emerged through the analysis of the first questionnaire, including the importance of SEL competencies, methods of teaching the SEL competencies, goals of the program and specific components necessary to achieve goals, structuring program in terms of length of session and total duration of program, structuring program in terms of achievement in both SEL and academics, and finally the importance and methods of providing proper culture, emotional safety and teachers within the current study program. Following is a review of these themes.

First, one theme that was prevalent in the responses surrounded the importance of the SEL competencies. Supportive comments were made on the interconnectedness of the five competencies by the experts. Experts emphasized the inclusion of all five competencies in the curriculum for best results in academic and SEL achievement. Equal inclusion of the five competencies was recognized as a strength, allowing the ability of a student to be educated as a whole person who has social, emotional and academic skills and tools to succeed.

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Furthermore, themes surrounding the methods of teaching the SEL competencies emerged. Panelists commented on specific components to include within each of the five SEL competencies. Panelists made supportive comments in regards to teaching these competencies in a sequential modality, where students are first taught to achieve self-awareness and self-management and then proceed to be taught social awareness, relationship and decision making skills. Panelists suggested that it is hard to succeed at social-awareness, relationships and decision making without stability in self-awareness and self-management.

Additionally, several themes pertaining to goals of the program and specific components necessary to achieve goals emerged within the analysis. First, experts made comments supporting the importance of building and increasing social and emotional competence as a necessary goal for the program. In order to do this, panelists commented on the importance of allowing collaboration and interaction between students and between students and teachers. Panelists made supportive comments regarding the importance of providing a safe space for the exploration and practice of all five competencies. Also, experts made comments supporting a goal to build and increase academic skills and success. Panelists suggested specific components to include for greater success for this goal of building and increasing academic skills and success. For instance, panelists suggested the program should allow for instruction and space for fostering motivation in helping students understand why they are participating in the program. Also, panelists suggested the program should allow for instruction on building specific academic success skills to foster specific skills students need to be successful such as note taking and study methods. Panelists suggested the program should allow for instruction and space for fostering a sense of belonging within the students as many have dropped out of their base schools due to a lack of a sense of belonging within the school. Furthermore, experts supported a goal of

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decreasing problem behaviors. In order to do this, panelists suggested offering an additional counseling component within the program to recognize destructive patterns in thoughts and behaviors and to learn specific tools to change the problem patterns in thoughts and behaviors. Finally, experts supported building and increasing life skills as an important goal for the program. Specifically, panelists suggested the program should allow instruction for second-step planning (i.e. employment, trade/skills school, junior college). Panelists also suggested including specific counseling and skills groups to address struggles with various issues such as, but not limited to, anger management, conflict resolution, communication skills, and thought disorders.

Moreover, themes surrounding the structure of the program in terms of length of session and total duration of program emerged within the analysis. Experts made comments supporting a need to accommodate for the variance in students' schedules as many at-risk students have various life stressors such as, but not limited to, employment, childcare and transportation. Experts suggested students would have greater success in a long-term program, however, may be unable to commit due to various life stressors. As such, experts supported offering the program at multiple times throughout the day.

In addition, a theme pertaining to the structure of the program in terms of the distribution of time focused on the achievement of SEL versus academic achievement emerged within the analysis. Experts commented on the percentage of time the program should focus on SEL competence and the percentage of time the program should focus on academic achievement. Experts also provided comments on whether to offer SEL courses simultaneous to academic courses or to provide SEL courses prior to academic courses.

Finally, the importance and methods of providing proper culture, emotional safety and teachers within the current study program emerged as themes within the analysis. Experts made

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supportive comments stressing the importance of creating a climate and culture within the program that is safe, open, inclusive, and culturally proficient. Panelists commented that since many at-risk students typically drop out of high school due not only to academic struggles, but also due to social and emotional struggles and feelings of disenfranchisement, it is important to create an environment where students feel comfortable and have a sense of belonging. Experts made several comments suggesting the qualifications which are important for the program teacher to possess. Panelists suggested that teachers create a collaborative environment encouraging students to participate in discussions and activities. Panelists suggested teachers should allow students to practice skills while learning skills. Panelists suggested teachers possess effective classroom management skills in order to create emotional safety.

Delphi II Questionnaire

The themes generated in the first questionnaire guided and led to the development of the Delphi II Questionnaire (Q2). The themes in Q1 were used mainly as section headings for Q2 and the questions under each heading were extracted through the analysis of each of the Q1 themes. Q2 contained a total of eighty-one items. Of these eighty-one, fifty-six statements were on a 7-point Likert scale where panelists were asked to respond to their level of agreement and disagreement. Experts had the option to respond over the range where “1” represented “strongly disagree” and “7” represented “strongly agree.” Additionally, five of the eighty-one items asked panelists to respond by short-answer. Although short-answer questions are not typical for a traditional Delphi study, the research team agreed there was a need for more clarity and consensus by the experts over which additional teaching skills they felt were needed under each of the five competencies. Moreover, of the eighty-one items, the questionnaire included twenty rank-order items where panelists were given various scenarios to rank in order of importance.

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For example, in a section with five rank-order statements, panelists were asked to rank the items in order of importance where “1” represented most important and “5” represented “least important”.

Using a Likert scale allowed for a quantitative analysis of the second questionnaire. The data gathered in the second questionnaire was analyzed by calculating medians and interquartile ranges (IQR) to determine expert consensus on each of the fifty-six Likert scale items. A median score of 6.00 or higher indicates that most of the panelists ranked the statement as important or very important and an interquartile range of 1.50 or less suggests a high degree of consensus among the panelists. These criteria were used to identify these statements as representing expert panel consensus (Fish & Busby, 2005). Following is a discussion of the Q2 analysis. Forty-nine of the fifty-six statements (87.5%) are discussed below as they met criteria for consensus. These statements are also included in the final profile.

Social and Emotional Learning Competencies

A major finding of this study was that expert panelists highly conceded that receiving quality SEL instruction in an academic program allows students to grow in all necessary areas socially, emotionally, and academically. Additionally, the panelists agreed that inclusion of all five competencies would lead to positive outcomes in all three previously stated areas as all five competencies are interconnected. The first statement in Q2 was gleaned from experts’ responses in Q1. For instance, expert 2 stated “All of these areas are important to emphasize because all of the skills have been found to be related to positive outcomes in youth academically, socially, and emotionally.” Expert 3 illustrated “Since [the five competencies] overlap and are interdependent, covering all of them, to avoid a deficiency in one [competency] derailing the student, is critical.” Another panelist, expert 4 indicated, “I feel that all five create a healthy, confident individual.

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Working on all five areas empowers one to succeed and withstand.” Additionally, expert 1 specified “All five areas should be emphasized! Each of the five areas builds on the others and all are interconnected.” This expert panelist went on to say that “you will end up with a student who has been educated as a whole person who has both the social/emotional and academic tools to navigate an increasingly complex and competitive world and find a measure of success (perhaps for the first time in their academic lives) that they can build upon.”

Six out of the eight statements in this section of Q2 met criteria for expert consensus. Five of these statements had small interquartile ranges of >0.25 and a median of 7.00, yielding very high consensus in positive outcomes of SEL competencies. The following table (Table 3) illustrates the statements in this section which met consensus.

Table 3			
<i>SEL Competencies – using SEL comps as part of curriculum</i>			
Statement	Median	IQR	
Receiving quality SEL instruction in an academic program allows students to be educated as a ‘whole’ person who has both social/emotional and academic tools.	7.00	0.00	
Receiving quality SEL instruction emphasizing all 5 areas of competency leads to positive outcomes academically?	7.00	0.25	
Receiving quality SEL instruction emphasizing all 5 areas of competency leads to positive outcomes socially?	7.00	0.25	
Receiving quality SEL instruction emphasizing all 5 areas of competency leads to positive outcomes emotionally?	7.00	0.25	
The 5 competencies work as an umbrella to cover most at-risk adolescent issues.	6.00	0.50	
The 5 competencies are interconnected and build upon one another.	7.00	0.50	

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Methods of Teaching Social and Emotional Learning

Q2 presented the five identified groups of social and emotional competencies recommended by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2005) to gather expert consensus on which specific instructions they felt should be implemented in the current study program. The panelists all conceded to the teaching goals the Q2 statements presented for each competency, along with the reasons for which these methods should be employed. These statements in Q2 were derived from panelists' comments in Q1. For example, expert panelist 3 stated "[The five competencies] should be taught from the internal person outward, meaning you should start with self-awareness and self-management then progress outward to social awareness and relationship skills, finally responsible decision making needs all four previous skills to be most effective."

This section of Q2 also included five opportunities for each expert panelist to add additional skills they felt necessary to include in teaching each competency. Due to the variance among experts' responses, these results are not included in the final profile.

The following statements, shown in Table 4 below, explicate the statements which met criteria for consensus. Fourteen of the fifteen statements presented in Q2 received a median <6.5 and all responses fell >1.5 on the IQR. The panelists yielded high consensus that in teaching the five SEL competencies, the presented items should be included. The experts also conceded that the five competencies are most effective when students are first taught to master self-competencies, then social competencies, and finally the decision making competency.

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Table 4			
<i>Methods of Teaching SEL</i>			
Statement	Median	IQR	
During self-awareness competency, it is important to teach students to recognize their emotions, strengths, interests, and values and build a grounded sense of self-confidence.	6.5	1.25	
During self-management competency, students are taught to regulate and express their emotions, control their impulses, manage stress, and monitor progress toward personal and academic goals.	7.00	0.50	
During social awareness competency, students are taught to empathize with others and recognize and appreciate their similarities and differences.	7.00	0.50	
During relationships skills competency, students are taught to establish and maintain healthy relationships, resist inappropriate social pressure, prevent and resolve interpersonal conflict, and seek and provide help when needed.	7.00	0.50	
During responsible decision making competency, students are taught to make decisions by considering consequences of actions, ethical standards, safety concerns, societal norms, and respect for self and others.	7.00	0.50	
The 5 competencies are most effective when taught from the internal person outward.	6.50	1.50	
The 5 competencies should be taught in the order of (1) self-awareness, (2) self-management, (3) social awareness, (4) relationship skills, (5) responsible decision making skills.	5.50	1.50	
The 5 competencies are most effective when students are able to first learn self-awareness and self-management.	6.50	1.50	
Individuals can't manage their emotions and behaviors if they are not aware of the emotions they are experiencing.	6.50	1.25	
Without self-awareness and self-management it is hard to succeed at relationships, social awareness, and responsible decision making.	6.50	1.25	
The 5 competencies are most effective when students are able to build social and relationship skills upon self-competencies.	6.50	1.25	
Students struggle to empathize with others when they lack the ability to understand their own emotions and behaviors.	6.50	1.50	
Students can't successfully communicate with others in a relationship if they are not self-aware and able to self-manage.	6.50	1.50	
The 5 competencies are most effective when learning responsible decision making skills are built upon a foundation in self and social competencies.	6.50	1.50	
Students struggle to make responsible decisions if they are unaware of their motives, unable to manage those motives objectively, take others' perspectives, and communicate effectively.	6.50	1.50	

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Program Goals and Objectives

Four statements explicating goals for the current study program were presented to the expert panelists in this section. Statements were presented under each of these four goals containing specific methods and objectives necessary to include in order to attain each of the presented goals. These statements of goals and objectives were extracted from Q1 since Q1 posed an open-ended question asking panelists to recommend their top three goals for the current study program. For instance, all four panelists in Q1 unanimously believed that increasing social and emotional competency would be an important goal to include in the current study program. Furthermore, the expert panelists in Q1 also unanimously posed that increasing academic skills and success would be another important goal to include. Two of the four panelists stated in Q1 that another important goal to include would be to build skills for success in post GED planning, including college and career success. Finally, two of the four panelists in Q1 believed decreasing problem behavior was an important goal to include to meet the needs of the current study population.

In this section of Q2, each of the four goal statements attained high consensus among panelists as they each received a median score of 6.50 and an IQR of 1.00. Additionally, of the thirteen objective statements presented, ten met expert panel consensus. The three statements which did not meet consensus in this section all pertained to incorporating an additional counseling component within the current study program. The goals and objectives which met consensus are included in the final profile and are indicated below in Table 5.

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Table 5			
<i>Program Goals & Objectives</i>			
Statement	Median	IQR	
To build and increase social and emotional competency is an important goal in a SEL GED prep program.	6.50	1.00	
The program should allow instruction and space for exploration and practice of all 5 competencies.	7.00	0.75	
The program should allow instruction and space for collaboration and interaction between students.	7.00	0.25	
The program should allow instruction and space for collaboration and interaction between students and teachers.	7.00	0.25	
The program should allow instruction and space for practicing skills while learning skills.	7.00	0.25	
The program should allow instruction and space for fostering a strong safe environment.	7.00	0.25	
To build and increase academic skills and success is an important goal in a SEL GED prep program.	6.50	1.00	
The program should allow instruction to build and practice academic skills such as note taking and study methods.	6.00	0.25	
The program should allow instruction and space for fostering motivation (why I am doing this) and academic success skills (what do I need to do to be successful).	7.00	0.25	
The program should allow instruction and space for fostering a sense of belonging within the students.	7.00	0.25	
A sense of belonging within the program is important in ensuring students' academic success.	6.50	1.00	
To decrease problem behavior is an important goal in a SEL GED prep program.	6.50	1.00	
To build and increase life skills is an important goal in a SEL GED prep program.	6.50	1.00	
The program should allow instruction for second-step (post GED) planning (i.e. employment, trade/skill school, junior college).	7.00	0.25	

This section of Q2 also included 2 subsections under each of the first two goal statements asking expert panelists to rank-order the objective statements which were listed under each goal.

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The following Tables 6 and 7 indicate panelists' responses. Due to the variance in these responses, these results are not included in the final profile.

Table 6				
<i>Rank-Order Objectives for Goal to Build & Increase SEL Competency</i>				
Statement	Expert1	Expert2	Expert3	Expert4
The program should allow instruction and space for exploration and practice of all 5 competencies.	5	3	1	2
The program should allow instruction and space for collaboration and interaction between students.	4	5	3	5
The program should allow instruction and space for collaboration and interaction between students and teachers.	3	1	5	4
The program should allow instruction and space for practicing skills while learning skills.	2	2	4	3
The program should allow instruction and space for fostering a strong safe environment.	1	4	2	1

Table 7				
<i>Rank-Order Objectives for Goal to Build & Increase Academic Skills & Success</i>				
Statement	Expert1	Expert2	Expert3	Expert4
The program should allow instruction to build and practice academic skills such as note taking and study methods.	3	2	1	2
The program should allow instruction and space for fostering motivation (why I am doing this) and academic success skills (what do I need to do to be successful).	2	1	2	1
The program should allow instruction and space for fostering a sense of belonging within the students.	1	3	3	3

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Program Structure – Length and Duration

This section offered three Likert-scale statements and two sections asking panelists to rank order their preferences in terms of the total length and the timings the current study program should be offered. The statements posed in this section were derived from expert panel responses in Q1. For example, expert 4 stated “offering two different options to obtain goals would be successful seeing as [students] may have jobs or other obstacles to work around.” Also, this expert panelist said “I would look at having an evening course” and “expect a commitment of at least six months.” Additionally, expert 1 recommended “the program be offered three times a day to accommodate students’ work schedules and child care issues. I would recommend that the program be four hours in length daily.”

A major finding in this section of Q2 was that expert panelists conceded that it is important to accommodate for life stressors and variance in schedules of the current study population. However, only one of the three Likert-scale statements met consensus. Panelists did not concede that a full day program would be preferred to a half day program. As a result, panelists agreed the program should be offered twice daily as illustrated in Table 10 below. Moreover, although there was some variance in responses to the total program time offered rank-order statements, panelists generally agreed the program should be offered a minimum of six months as indicated in Table 9 below.

Table 8			
<i>Session Length & Program Duration</i>			
Statement	Median	IQR	
It is important to accommodate for variance in students’ schedules as many at-risk students have various life stressors such as, but not limited to employment, childcare, transportation.	6.50	1.25	

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Table 9				
<i>Rank-Order Program Length & Duration</i>				
Statement	Expert1	Expert2	Expert3	Expert4
A half day program running for a period of 3 months allows sufficient time for successful completion of the program by allowing students to progress through the SEL competencies and to achieve academic skills and success.	3	4	2	4
A half day program running for a period of 6 months allows sufficient time for successful completion of the program by allowing students to progress through the SEL competencies and to achieve academic skills and success.	1	3	1	2
A half day program running for a period of 9 months allows sufficient time for successful completion of the program by allowing students to progress through the SEL competencies and to achieve academic skills and success.	2	2	3	1
A half day program running for a period of 12 months allows sufficient time for successful completion of the program by allowing students to progress through the SEL competencies and to achieve academic skills and success.	4	1	4	3

Table 10				
<i>Rank-Order Program Timing</i>				
Statement	Expert1	Expert2	Expert3	Expert4
The program should be offered once a day in the mornings.	3	3	3	3
The program should be offered once a day in the evenings.	2	2	2	2
The program should be offered twice a day - mornings and evenings.	1	1	1	1

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Program Structure – SEL Achievement versus Academic Achievement

In this section of Q2, panelists were only asked to respond to two sets of rank-order statements to determine distribution of time spent on SEL achievement and academic achievement within the current study program. The statements posed in this section were derived from expert responses in Q1. For example, expert 4 stated “I would spend 20% of the time on academic achievement and 80% on SEL. Yet, expert 1 said “I would spend 75% of the time on academic goals [and] 25% of the time on SEL goals. On the other hand, expert 3 stated “I would spend 30% on academic success skills and goals [and] 70% on SEL skills and knowledge.” Due to the variance in the short answer responses in Q1 among panelists, a rank-order setting was employed in this section of Q2 to retain experts’ words and ideas and attempt to gain consensus.

In response to the rank-order statements, the panelists drew toward consensus. As indicated in Table 11, three out of the four experts believed that SEL achievement and academic achievement should be allocated equal time and attention in the program. Furthermore, there was unanimous consensus among the panel of experts, as indicated in Table 12, that the program should offer courses in SEL competencies and courses in academics simultaneously.

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Table 11				
<i>Rank-Order Time Focused on SEL Achievement vs. Academic Achievement</i>				
Statement	Expert1	Expert2	Expert3	Expert4
SEL achievement requires more attention for the at-risk population and therefore should be allocated 75% of the time; whereas academic achievement should be allotted 25% of the time.	3	2	1	2
Academic achievement requires more attention for the at-risk population and therefore should be allocated 75% of the time; whereas SEL achievement should be allotted 25% of the time.	2	3	3	3
SEL achievement and academic achievement should be allocated equal time and attention in the program.	1	1	2	1

Table 12				
<i>Rank-Order Placement of SEL Courses</i>				
Statement	Expert1	Expert2	Expert3	Expert4
The program should offer courses in SEL competencies and courses in academics simultaneously to provide students with a supportive environment throughout the program and to enable the students to progress slowly through the skills being learned.	1	1	1	1
The program should require completion and achievement of SEL competencies before starting courses in academic achievement as students will be more effective academically with SEL skills already in hand.	2	2	2	2

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Climate, Culture and Emotional Safety of the Program

This section of Q2 posed statements in reference to the culture and emotional safety of the current study program. This section also included statements regarding specific requirements teachers and administration should possess to create a successful climate and culture within the classroom and program. All items in this section of Q2 met criteria and yielded high consensus. The statements put forth in this section were derived from Q1. A major theme of Q1 was the emphasis placed on finding “a quality and passionate teacher” as stated by expert 3. Expert 1 said “it is important to that you select an instructional resource that will enable teachers to teach the skills in the five competency areas directly and explicitly.” In addition, expert panelist 1 also included the importance of “the climate and culture of the facility and the classroom – an open, inclusive, culturally proficient, safe environment – are paramount to the success of the students.”

Eleven of the thirteen statements in this section of Q2 received a median score of 7.00. Four of these eleven statements also received an IQR of 0.00; as such, these four statements received the highest possible consensus. Experts concede that it is important to create a safe and open environment for students to feel comfortable and acquire a sense of belonging. Panelists agreed that a quality curriculum should be employed in the program and that teachers must possess effective skills. Consensus for these statements is illustrated in Table 13 below.

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Table 13			
<i>Program Culture & Emotional Safety Requirements for Administration & Teachers</i>			
Statement	Median	IQR	
It is important to create a climate and culture within the program’s environment that is safe, open, inclusive, and culturally proficient.	7.00	0.00	
Teachers and administrators must model the behaviors, attitudes, and communication skills being taught in the program.	7.00	0.00	
At-risk students typically drop out of high school due not only to academic struggles, but also to social and emotional struggles and feelings of disenfranchisement. Therefore, it is important to create an environment where students feel comfortable and have a sense of belonging.	7.00	0.00	
It is important to employ teachers that are dedicated and passionate about the teaching material and working with the at-risk population.	7.00	0.00	
The program must employ a quality curriculum with highly qualified and trained teachers.	7.00	0.25	
Teachers must attend a training program.	7.00	0.25	
Teachers must create a collaborative classroom environment with many student discussions and activities.	6.50	1.00	
Teachers must interact with the students throughout teaching the material as these topics cannot be taught through lecture only effectively.	7.00	0.25	
Teachers must allow students to practice skills while learning skills.	7.00	0.25	
Teachers must have highly effective classroom management skills in order to create a safe environment for students.	7.00	0.25	
Teachers must possess effective engagement strategies such as movement and open-ended questioning.	7.00	0.25	
The program should employ an instructional resource that will enable teachers to teach the skills in the 5 competency areas directly and explicitly.	7.00	0.50	
The program should employ an evaluated, evidence-based SEL curriculum.	6.50	1.00	

Summary

The final profile includes the statements from Q2 which yielded the highest agreement and met criteria for expert panel consensus. Forty-nine of the fifty-six (87.5%) Likert scale statements met consensus and are included in the final profile below (see Table 14). These forty-nine statements met criteria for expert consensus as they received a median score of 6.00 or higher and an IQR of 1.5 or less (Fish & Busby, 2005). The final profile is delineated from both Q1 and Q2 and includes the themes which arose from panelist responses in Q1 and also the statements which met consensus from Q2. The themes found in Q1 serve as section headings in the final profile and the statements which met expert consensus are included as items within the section.

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Table 14		
<i>Final Profile</i>		
	Median	IQR
Benefits of Social and Emotional Learning in a GED Preparation Program		
Receiving quality SEL instruction in an academic program allows students to be educated as a ‘whole’ person who has both social/emotional and academic tools.	7.00	0.00
Receiving quality SEL instruction emphasizing all 5 areas of competency leads to positive outcomes academically?	7.00	0.25
Receiving quality SEL instruction emphasizing all 5 areas of competency leads to positive outcomes socially?	7.00	0.25
Receiving quality SEL instruction emphasizing all 5 areas of competency leads to positive outcomes emotionally?	7.00	0.25
The 5 competencies work as an umbrella to cover most at-risk adolescent issues.	6.00	0.50
The 5 competencies are interconnected and build upon one another.	7.00	0.50
Teaching SEL - What to teach; Specific components to include; Structure of teaching competencies		
During self-awareness competency, it is important to teach students to recognize their emotions, strengths, interests, and values and build a grounded sense of self-confidence.	6.50	1.25
During self-management competency, students are taught to regulate and express their emotions, control their impulses, manage stress, and monitor progress toward personal and academic goals.	7.00	0.50
During social awareness competency, students are taught to empathize with others and recognize and appreciate their similarities and differences.	7.00	0.50
During relationships skills competency, students are taught to establish and maintain healthy relationships, resist inappropriate social pressure, prevent and resolve interpersonal conflict, and seek and provide help when needed.	7.00	0.50
During responsible decision making competency, students are taught to make decisions by considering consequences of actions, ethical standards, safety concerns, societal norms, and respect for self and others.	7.00	0.50
The 5 competencies are most effective when taught from the internal person outward.	6.50	1.50

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The 5 competencies are most effective when students are able to first learn self-awareness and self-management.	6.50	1.50
Individuals can't manage their emotions and behaviors if they are not aware of the emotions they are experiencing.	6.50	1.25
Without self-awareness and self-management it is hard to succeed at relationships, social awareness, and responsible decision making.	6.50	1.25
The 5 competencies are most effective when students are able to build social and relationship skills upon self-competencies.	6.50	1.25
Students struggle to empathize with others when they lack the ability to understand their own emotions and behaviors.	6.50	1.50
Students can't successfully communicate with others in a relationship if they are not self-aware and able to self-manage.	6.50	1.50
The 5 competencies are most effective when learning responsible decision making skills are built upon a foundation in self and social competencies.	6.50	1.50
Students struggle to make responsible decisions if they are unaware of their motives, unable to manage those motives objectively, take others' perspectives, and communicate effectively.	6.50	1.50
Program Goals & Objectives		
To build and increase social and emotional competency is an important goal in a SEL GED prep program.	6.50	1.00
The program should allow instruction and space for exploration and practice of all 5 competencies.	7.00	0.75
The program should allow instruction and space for collaboration and interaction between students.	7.00	0.25
The program should allow instruction and space for collaboration and interaction between students and teachers.	7.00	0.25
The program should allow instruction and space for practicing skills while learning skills.	7.00	0.25
The program should allow instruction and space for fostering a strong safe environment.	7.00	0.25
To build and increase academic skills and success is an important goal in a SEL GED prep program.	6.50	1.00
The program should allow instruction to build and practice academic skills such as note taking and study methods.	6.00	0.25
The program should allow instruction and space for fostering motivation (why I am doing this) and academic success skills (what do I need to do to be successful).	7.00	0.25

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The program should allow instruction and space for fostering a sense of belonging within the students.	7.00	0.25
A sense of belonging within the program is important in ensuring students' academic success.	6.50	1.00
To decrease problem behavior is an important goal in a SEL GED prep program.	6.50	1.00
To build and increase life skills is an important goal in a SEL GED prep program.	6.50	1.00
The program should allow instruction for second-step (post GED) planning (i.e. employment, trade/skill school, junior college).	7.00	0.25
Program Structure - Session Length; Program Duration; Timings Offered		
It is important to accommodate for variance in students' schedules as many at-risk students have various life stressors such as, but not limited to employment, childcare, transportation.	6.50	1.25
Rank-Order Item - A half day program running for a period of 6 months allows sufficient time for successful completion of the program by allowing students to progress through the SEL competencies and to achieve academic skills and success.		
Rank-Order Item - The program should be offered twice a day - mornings and evenings.		
Rank-Order Item - SEL achievement and academic achievement should be allocated equal time and attention in the program.		
Rank-Order Item - The program should offer courses in SEL competencies and courses in academics simultaneously to provide students with a supportive environment throughout the program and to enable the students to progress slowly through the skills being learned.		
Program Climate & Culture; Requirements for Teachers & Administration		
It is important to create a climate and culture within the program's environment that is safe, open, inclusive, and culturally proficient.	7.00	0.00
Teachers and administrators must model the behaviors, attitudes, and communication skills being taught in the program.	7.00	0.00
At-risk students typically drop out of high school due not only to academic struggles, but also to social and emotional struggles and feelings of disenfranchisement. Therefore, it is important to create an environment where students feel comfortable and have a sense of belonging.	7.00	0.00
It is important to employ teachers that are dedicated and passionate about the teaching material and working with the at-risk population.	7.00	0.00
The program must employ a quality curriculum with highly qualified and trained teachers.	7.00	0.25

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Teachers must attend a training program.	7.00	0.25
Teachers must create a collaborative classroom environment with many student discussions and activities.	6.50	1.00
Teachers must interact with the students throughout teaching the material as these topics cannot be taught through lecture only effectively.	7.00	0.25
Teachers must allow students to practice skills while learning skills.	7.00	0.25
Teachers must have highly effective classroom management skills in order to create a safe environment for students.	7.00	0.25
Teachers must possess effective engagement strategies such as movement and open-ended questioning.	7.00	0.25
The program should employ an instructional resource that will enable teachers to teach the skills in the 5 competency areas directly and explicitly.	7.00	0.50
The program should employ an evaluated, evidence-based SEL curriculum.	6.50	1.00

Chapter Five: Discussion

This study aimed to reach consensus through a panel of experts on how best to add Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) to a GED preparation program for at-risk adolescents. Although many studies have been conducted on SEL instruction, limited research is available on offering such curriculum to the at-risk population and in a GED preparation program. Therefore, this study sought to expand upon the current research in this field. This chapter discusses the findings of this study and examines the comparisons found in the existing literature on SEL, GED preparation programs, and the at-risk population. A discussion of limitations to the study, clinical implications and suggestions for future research is also included in this chapter.

Summary of Findings

Many themes emerged through the two rounds of questionnaires offered to the panel of experts of this study. These themes surrounded best practices and methods to employ an SEL GED preparation program. The themes which emerged include positive outcomes, program goals (i.e., build and increase social-emotional competency, build and increase academic skills and success, decrease problem behavior, and increase life skills), including and teaching all five competencies (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making), accommodating and meeting needs of the at-risk population, program structure, methods of teaching, teacher qualifications, and program culture and climate. The following is a review of the current study's findings along with an evaluation of the current literature.

Offering Social and Emotional Learning in a GED Preparation Program

One of the goals of this study was to acquire an expert panel's views on the incorporation of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in a GED Preparation Program. The panelists

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unanimously conveyed that an SEL GED is an appropriate modality for the current study population and would result in positive outcomes providing greater success academically, socially and emotionally for students through proper implementation of the current study program. The panelists' consensus is in accordance to current existing literature. In a recent meta-analysis of over two-hundred school-based SEL programs, Durlak et al. (2011) found significantly improved social and emotional skills, attitudes, behavior, and academic performance among SEL students as compared to controls.

Finally, according to CASEL (2005) SEL has a foundational basis in the rigorous research that has been conducted, which clearly indicates that our emotions and relationships affect how and what we learn. Educators have long debated the most appropriate ways to promote academic and student success and have often distinguished between emotional and academic learning. However, research confirms that these two types of learning are intimately connected and that academic achievement has a better success rate when student's social and emotional competence is addressed (CASEL, 2005).

Program Goals

A major result provided by the panelists of this study was the establishment of goals for a SEL GED preparation program. Four goals were highly recommended by the panel of experts, including to build and increase social and emotional competency, to build and increase academic skills and success, to decrease problem behavior, and to increase life skills. Following is a discussion and evaluation of each of the four goals and the literature which currently exists on each.

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Goal One – Build and Increase Social and Emotional Competency

A strongly identified goal by the panelists was to build and increase social and emotional competency among students. This falls in congruence with current literature as extensive research indicates that effective mastery of social and emotional competencies is associated with greater well-being and better school performance; whereas the failure to achieve these competencies can lead to personal, social, and academic difficulties (Weissberg & Greenberg, 1998). Additionally research indicates that emotions and relationships have a great impact on the learning process, and they affect a student's ability to use what has been learned. For instance, a student's emotions can help generate an active interest in learning and can help sustain a student's engagement in school. However, a student's unmanaged stress and poor impulse regulation interferes with attention and memory which in turn allows occurrence of disruptive behaviors to learning (CASEL, 2005).

Goal Two – Build and Increase Academic Skills and Success

All panelists highly agreed that a goal to build and increase academic success and skills was important to implement within a SEL GED preparation program. Panelists identified building and practicing skills such as note taking and study methods as important components to teach. Experts stated that fostering motivation and building an understanding for why each student is participating in an academic SEL program is important. Moreover, experts agreed that these students need to be supplied with specific academic success skills to foster an understanding of what is required to be successful. Researchers have found that dropouts have had difficulty seeing a connection between school and the realities of their lives. This is an indication of schools failure to engage large groups of students with various backgrounds and challenges as profiled among the current study population (Bickerstaff, 2010). In addition, Elias

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(2006), in response to the connection between academics and SEL, stated that “Children are required to learn many things, but without a sense of connection between to and those things, children are not likely to retain what they learn and use it in their lives.”

Goal Three – Decrease Problem Behavior

Given the many risk factors the current study population faces, panelists agree that a goal to decrease problem behavior among students is an important goal to include in a SEL GED preparation program. A relationship between deviant behavior and dropout rates has been identified in current literature (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000) as these problem behaviors interfere with school success (Arnold et al., 1999). The current literature argues providing quality SEL instruction and school climate is sufficient in producing a decrease in problem behavior. In a recent meta-analysis conducted by Durlak and Weissberg (2005), it was found that SEL programs significantly improved adherence to societal norms and reduced disruptive behavior and school violence. The study found a clear pattern of results indicating that mental health is affected by SEL classroom instruction and school climate as these factors in turn enhance academic performance.

Although the panelists did not meet consensus on offering an extra counseling component within the program to aide in the acquisition of this goal, they suggested offering a range of coping skills and helping students recognize and break patterns in thoughts and behaviors. Elias (2006) suggests that SEL programs need to be attentive to difficult life events that are upon students and provide them with support and coping strategies. Unfortunately, often students are not offered extra support until after they have engaged in disruptive behavior. Providing SEL is a sound prevention strategy that also promotes better academic learning (Elias, 2006).

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Goal Four – Build and Increase Life Skills

The panelists unanimously agreed that it is important to help the current study population build and increase life skills by providing instruction for post GED and second-step planning. Kvapil (2007) argued that although educators may not be able to address the factors that cause students to enter schools as at-risk, educators can use their knowledge of student needs to provide a supportive environment to help mediate these factors' effects. The expert panelists conceded that the program should provide students with the added support to make future plans with observable goals.

Social and Emotional Learning – The Five Competencies

Elias (2006) relates that The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has drawn from extensive research and has identified a set of social and emotional skills that underlie effective performance of a range of social roles and life tasks. A goal of SEL to foster the development of five inter-related sets of cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies, which include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (CASEL, 2005).

Therefore, a goal of this study was to determine, through expert consensus, the most efficacious competencies, of the five identified by CASEL, to include in a SEL GED preparation program for the at-risk population. Additionally, this study sought to explore a clear consensus on what specific components to include in the curriculum for each competency. All expert panelists unanimously supported the inclusion of all five competencies stressing their importance as they are interconnected, build upon one another, and provide appropriate instruction to meet the needs of the at-risk population. Each of the five competencies is defined and evaluated by the panel of experts and current literature below.

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Self-Awareness

According to CASEL (2003), self-awareness is the identification and recognition of one's own emotions, recognition of strengths in one's self and others, a sense of self-efficacy, and a grounded sense of self-confidence. CASEL (2013) states these students are taught to "recognize their emotions, describe their interests and values, and accurately assess their strengths." They are taught to have a "well-grounded sense of self-confidence and hope for the future." Expert panelist 4 suggested that "teaching children to identify their own thinking errors will also work to increase their self-confidence."

Self-Management

According to CASEL (2003), self-management skills include the ability to regulate emotions, manage stress, control impulses, and manage life stressors and obstacles. Students are taught to set and monitor progress toward achievement of personal and academic goals. Students are taught to express their emotions appropriately in a range of situations. Elias (2006) stated in that managing emotions, students are taught to regulate their feelings so that they aid rather than impede in handling situations. Expert panelist 3 suggested that students should also be taught to "create a vision for their lives."

Social Awareness

According to CASEL (2005), social awareness includes the ability to show empathy by identifying and understanding the thoughts and feelings of others. Also students are taught to respect others by instilling a belief that others should be treated with kindness and compassion as part of a shared humanity. Students are taught to see different perspectives of the same issue and appreciate diversity. Finally, students are taught to recognize and make best use of family, school, and community resources.

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Relationship Skills

According to CASEL (2005), relationship skills include the ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships based on cooperation. Students are taught to resist inappropriate social pressure, prevent, manage, and resolve interpersonal conflict, and seek help when needed.

Responsible Decision Making

According to CASEL (2005), in this competency, students are taught to make decisions based on consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, appropriate social norms, respect for others, and likely consequences of various actions. Students are taught to appropriately apply decision-making skills to academic and social situations, contributing to the well-being of one's school and community.

In their review of the positive impact of SEL from three scientific reviews, Payton et al. (2008), argued "Students who appraise themselves and their abilities realistically (self-awareness), regulate their feelings and behaviors appropriately (self-management), interpret social cues accurately (social awareness), resolve interpersonal conflicts effectively (relationship skills), and make good decisions about daily challenges (responsible decision-making) are headed on a pathway toward success in school and later life" (p. 5).

Furthermore, the panel of experts recommended that the five competencies be taught from the "internal person outward" beginning by teaching students to acquire self-awareness and self-management, then moving on to build social awareness and relationship skills, and finally being taught responsible decision-making skills. This corresponds with the current literature as Elias (2006), in his work on connection between academics and SEL, stated "Social-emotional

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and life skills must be taught explicitly [and] like reading or math, if social-emotional skills are not taught systematically, they will not be internalized” (p. 7).

Each of these five competencies helps to remediate the effects of the five theories, discussed in Chapter 2, influencing at-risk students to dropout. For instance, as Academic Mediation Theory states, students typically dropout due to disengagement and negative school grades and feedback. However, the gap between expectations and experiences in school is lessened as students gain a deeper understanding of their interests and strengths and gain self-confidence. Moreover, self-management skills will help reduce problem behaviors as General Deviance Theory discusses a strong relationship between dropouts and deviant behaviors. Furthermore, resisting inappropriate social pressure is an important skill to teach this population as Deviant Affiliation Theory suggests that many at-risk students respond to negative peer pressure and subsequently engage in deviant behaviors. Also, as Poor Family Socialization Theory states, at-risk students often struggle with many family stressors. Thus, social awareness competency will enable students to recognize and utilize family strengths. Finally, teaching students to make decisions based on the well-being of all parties involved, allows students to combat the demographic factors discussed in Structural Strains Theory predicting dropout.

Program Structure

An important goal of this study was to seek opinions through a panel of experts on how best to structure a SEL GED preparation program to accommodate for the at-risk population. The panel of experts agreed that it is important to accommodate for variance in students’ schedules and other life stressors and risk factors. As a result, the panelists unanimously agreed that a SEL GED preparation program would be most effective and meet its students’ needs best if offered

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multiple times a day. Furthermore, the expert panelists concluded the program would be most effective if offered for a minimum period of six months. Nine months was another time duration the panelists agreed would be appropriate for the current study program. Moreover, the panelists agreed that the program should equally direct time and attention on accomplishing both goals to meet competency in the five areas of SEL and to acquire academic success and skills. In addition, the panel of experts directed that the program should offer courses in SEL competencies and courses in academic simultaneously. This provides students with a supportive environment throughout the entire duration of the program and enables students to progress slowly through the skills being learned in an effort to help further internalize them. Finally, panelists agreed the program should employ an evaluated, evidence-based SEL curriculum, and that the program should employ an instructional resource that will enable teachers to teach the skills in the five competency areas directly and explicitly.

Research concludes that when selecting and implementing a SEL the following considerations are important: local needs, goals, interests, preexisting instructional efforts and activities, content and quality of the program, acceptability to community and parents. SEL programs are often implemented as pilot projects, and it typically takes two to three years for staff to have a confident and competent sense of ownership of the approaches being used (Elias, 2006).

Program Climate, Culture, & Teaching Methods

A major theme among the expert of panelists was the emphasis placed on providing a proper social and emotional learning environment. The experts stressed the importance of creating a climate and culture within the program's environment that is safe, open, inclusive, and culturally proficient. Elias et al. (2006), pose that a student's attention and energy that is

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necessary for learning is disrupted when a school is not providing emotional safety and engagement, and when a school is filled with adults and students who are in conflict or beset by expressions of disrespect. The panelists highly conceded that since at-risk students typically drop out of school due to social and emotional struggles and feelings of disenfranchisement, it is imperative to create an environment where students feel comfortable and have a sense of belonging.

Panelists stressed that teachers and administration should model the behaviors, attitudes, and communication skills being taught in the program. The panel of experts feel it is important to employ teachers who are dedicated and passionate about the teaching material and working with the at-risk population. Panelists agreed that teachers would have to have highly effective classroom management skills in order to create a safe environment for the students. Teachers will need to create a collaborative classroom environment facilitating student discussions and activities as skills should be practiced while being learned. This is all consistent with current literature as CASEL (2013) states that:

“...learning is an intrinsically social and interactive process: it takes place in collaboration with one’s teachers, in the company of one’s peers, and with the support of one’s family. Hence, the abilities to recognize and manage emotions and establish and maintain positive relationships impact both preparation for learning and the ability to benefit from learning opportunities. Because safe, nurturing, well-managed learning environments are essential to the mastery of SEL skills, they too are essential to children’s school and life success. SEL skills and the supportive learning environments in which they are taught contribute to the resiliency of all

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children—those without identified risks and those at-risk for or already exhibiting emotional or behavioral problems and in need of additional supports.”

Furthermore, Elias et al. (2006) explain that although these skills can be taught in a classroom, the internalization process however is a school wide opportunity and responsibility. SEL programs should provide opportunities for internalization of skills through development, practice and reinforcement in multiple contexts throughout the day and must provide a climate of care, support and high expectations (Devaney et al., 2006). Ultimately, SEL and school climate have a reciprocal relationship in that a positive school environment promotes SEL, and SEL facilitates a supportive climate. “Because social, emotional, and academic growth are interdependent, the result of schoolwide SEL is synergistic progress in all of these areas” (Elias et al., 2006 p. 11).

Study Limitations

One limitation of the Delphi Method is the issue of validity as it is directly related to the selection of the panel of experts (Fish & Busby, 2005). This study was limited in the size of its panel and in the diversity among the panelists. The researcher attempted to secure a minimum of five to ten experts for the study panel, however, was only able to acquire four. Although many attempts were made to reach out to experts in the SEL field, many were unable to participate due to time constraints and criteria restrictions as many SEL programs employed today are still in the early phases. Moreover, although there is diversity among the panelists’ backgrounds, in that one has a PhD in Developmental Psychology, one has a masters in Sport Psychology, one is currently enrolled in a Master’s program for Secondary Education and the last has a Bachelor’s degree in Child and Adolescent Development, this is not representative of the total SEL expert population. Also, although most of the panelists had experience working with the at-risk population, this study did not have the advantage of including any panelists who had experience working in a

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GED preparation program. Since GED preparation programs are typically short-term, and since most SEL programs are currently employed in public schools, panelists with experience in a GED preparation program may have been better able to shed more insight on how to best incorporate SEL practices and competencies in the short duration of the program. As a result, a narrow perspective may have been supplied as this study only represents the opinions of these few experts. Furthermore, Linstone and Turoff (1975) criticized the Delphi Method for its focus on consensus and elimination of opposing and differing viewpoints.

Additionally, another limitation of the study is that it only offered two-rounds of questionnaires as opposed to the recommended three in the Delphi Method (Fish & Busby, 1996). The study was limited to two-rounds to reduce risk of attrition and panelist fatigue. Therefore, the researcher was unable to clarify responses or address discrepancies produced in the second round of data collection (Sori & Sprenkly, 2004). For instance, the researcher would have sought to gain a deeper understanding of the panelists' opinions on a teaching resource and curriculum which could be used in the program. In addition, the researcher would have asked panelists to comment and explore more on how families of students can be involved and provide support in the current study program. Moreover, the researcher would have explored perceived obstacles pertaining to program structure and administration. Furthermore, this study was unable to offer a deeper understanding of various scenarios such as classroom set up and how courses should be taught and differentiated (i.e. are academic classes held separately from SEL competency courses or are academic and SEL courses combined in one).

Clinical Implications

The panelists of the current study suggested that an added counseling component may be beneficial to students, however this item did not meet consensus. An important implication of

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this study, is that it offers an opportunity for further research in exploring benefits and methods of involvement among family therapists in a SEL GED preparation program. Since SEL is still a new concept in the academic field, and many adolescents do not have access to such a curriculum, an important implication of this study is that offers therapists a modality to facilitate in their work with the at-risk population.

Implications for Future Research

This Delphi study provided consensus through a panel of experts on how best to supplement a GED preparation program with social and emotional learning for at-risk adolescents. Due to the exploratory nature of the Delphi method, there are many areas of this study which can be explored further to gain a deeper understanding of meeting the needs of the current study program. In the event of another Delphi study being conducted, a larger expert sample size should be employed. Expanding on the sample size should include panelists who have experience in working in a GED preparation program. It is possible that the responses may have varied had more panelists had various backgrounds of expertise in GED preparation programs, SEL, and the at-risk population.

Furthermore, an area for future research includes the exploration of using family involvement and support as a strength of the program. In addition, as there was some discrepancy among this study's panelists regarding counseling components to be included within the program, future research could be conducted on the use of counseling strategies in the program.

Moreover, future studies should help determine which combinations of social and emotional skills most effectively influence which outcomes for the at-risk population. Also, future research could explore specific interventions school staff can employ and how best to

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provide support as they implement interventions. The literature in support of the benefits and positive outcomes of SEL as the “missing piece” (Elias, 2006 p. 6) in the academic world is growing rapidly. Still, there is little research on the supplementation of SEL in a GED preparation program. The findings from this study conclude through expert consensus that a SEL GED preparation program is an appropriate modality for use among the at-risk population. As a result, an area for future growth includes studying the effects of the current study program once it is employed.

Conclusion

There is broad agreement among educators, policymakers, and the public that educational systems need to produce students proficient not only in core academic subjects, but also students who are able to work well with others from diverse backgrounds in socially and emotionally skilled ways by practicing healthy behaviors and behaving responsibly and respectfully (Greenberg et al., 2003). In other words, schools are being given the responsibility of raising healthy children by fostering not only their cognitive development, but also their social and emotional development (Durlak et al., 2011). It has been posited that universal school-based efforts to promote students’ social and emotional learning is a promising approach to enhance success in school and life (Elias et al., 1997; Zins & Elias, 2006). Education is changing and academics and SEL are becoming the new standard for what are considered the basic teachings children should receive in school. Since SEL is still fairly in its early stages, this study seeks to benefit research by providing a glimpse into the concept of supplementing SEL into a GED preparation program for at-risk adolescents.

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Appendix A

Email Letter 1

My name is Afifa Bawahab, and I am a graduate student at Virginia Tech in the Marriage and Family Therapy Program. I am currently working on a research topic for my thesis which seeks to gather a consensus of opinion through a panel of experts on how best to run a GED preparation program which implements SEL.

I am contacting you as I am looking for individuals who have direct experience with SEL to participate in my research by serving on a panel of experts. I have attached a flyer with more information, including the panel criteria.

If you have any interest in joining my research panel, I would truly appreciate it! I would also appreciate it if you would pass along the flyer to others in the community you know that would be interested and qualify for the study.

Thank you so much for your time,

Afifa Bawahab
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Attachment Included

Appendix B

Recruitment Flyer

SEEKING PANEL PARTICIPANTS FOR RESEARCH IN:

Offering Social and Emotional Learning in a
GED Preparation Program: A Delphi Study

OVERVIEW

This study will explore the initial development of a successful GED preparation program that adds on the implementation of mental health and social support (in the form of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) for adolescent high school dropouts.

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, this study seeks to gather consensus through a panel of experts on how best to run such a program.

PANEL CRITERIA

Potential panelists need to meet 2 of the following 4 criteria, *1 of which must be either number 3 or 4:*

1. Published journal articles or books on the topic of educating at-risk students or dropouts by providing social and emotional learning.
2. Have a minimum of 3 years of clinical or teaching experience in working with the at-risk or dropout population.
3. Have a minimum of 3 years' experience working directly with the at-risk or dropout population in a GED preparation program.
4. Have a minimum of 3 years' experience in providing education with a focus on Social and Emotional Learning to the at-risk or dropout population.

WHAT TO EXPECT / PANELIST EXPECTATIONS

You will be asked to only complete 3 questionnaires and a demographics form throughout your participation. The 1st questionnaire should be allowed approximately 30 minutes of your time. The other 2 questionnaires will take 10-15 minutes each.

CONTACT INFO

Please feel free to forward this flyer to other potential panelists. If you qualify or have any questions, please contact me via the information below.

Afifa Bawahab
Virginia Tech
Graduate Student in Marriage and Family Therapy
abawahab@vt.edu

Appendix C

Email Letter 2

I hope this email finds you well. Thank you for your interest in participating in this exciting and important research!

If you could please take a few quick moments to fill out the following screening form. This will help me determine your eligibility for participation.

The form is available online. Simply click on the link below, complete and submit online.

<https://survey.vt.edu/survey/entry.jsp?id=1380256072102>

Once you've submitted the form and have qualified, I will send out the Delphi 1 packet to you (explained below).

The research process consists of 3 phases. Your information as a participant will remain strictly anonymous and a code will be assigned to you. The first phase requires you to complete a consent form, demographics form and a questionnaire which can take approximately 30 minutes depending on how rich your responses are. The following 2 phases will consist of questionnaires as well but should take no more than 10-15 minutes of your time each. All these forms can either be submitted online or by mail.

Again, thank you for your participation! If you have any questions, comments, or concerns feel free to contact me! Also, if you know of any other schools implementing SEL programs please either let me know or pass along the flyer.

Best regards,

Afifa Bawahab
Virginia Tech
Graduate Student in Marriage and Family Therapy
abawahab@vt.edu

Appendix D
Participant Screening Form

Name

Date of Birth (month and day only):

Please list two journal articles, book chapters, and/or books you have published on the topic of educating at-risk or dropouts by providing social and emotional learning and support.

Do you have a minimum of 3 years of clinical experience in working with the at-risk or dropout populations?

Yes

No

Do you have a minimum of 3 years' experience working directly with the at-risk or dropout population in an educational setting?

Yes

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No

Do you have a minimum of 3 years teaching experience working directly with the at-risk or dropout population?

Yes

No

Do you have a minimum of 3 years' experience in providing education with a focus on social and emotional learning?

Yes

No

Do you have a minimum of 3 years' experience providing a GED preparation program to high school dropouts?

Yes

No

Please indicate an email address and telephone numbers where you can be reached:

Email:

Telephone # (Daytime):

Telephone # (Evening):

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Please list any of your colleagues who have experience or expertise in the field of education, at-risk students, and social-emotional learning (name, address, phone number, email address):

Appendix E

Email Letter 3

Thank you for completing the screening form. Congratulations! I am very excited to let you know that you have qualified as a panelist! I am looking forward to working with you through this process!

This email contains a welcome packet to help get you started. Attached you will find a cover letter and a consent form. The cover letter is your formal invitation to the study. It also provides background information regarding the research involved. Additionally, a consent form is attached which outlines your participation.

Once you have read both attached documents, please follow the links below. The first link will direct you to a required participant demographics form and the second will direct you to the study questionnaire. Both forms are completed and submitted online. Hard copies of the questionnaires are available upon request.

Your participant ID number is ____ (two-digit birth month and two-digit birth date). Please use this ID number when completing the questionnaires. Please have the questionnaires submitted by Monday, December 2.

Demographics Form: <https://survey.vt.edu/survey/entry.jsp?id=1382377834022>

Delphi I Questionnaire: <https://survey.vt.edu/survey/entry.jsp?id=1345685131472>

Once again, thank you so much for your time and participation! If at any time you have any questions, please do not hesitate to email or call me.

Thank you!

Afifa Bawahab
Researcher

abawahab@vt.edu

Appendix F
Cover Letter

DATE

NAME
ADDRESS
CITY, STATE, ZIP

Dear Participant,

Because of your unique contributions to the field of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) I wish to recognize you as a highly qualified and outstanding candidate for our Delphi panel on exploring the incorporation of mental health and social support, in the form of SEL, to GED preparation programs for adolescent high school dropouts between the ages of 16 and 18. I hope you will participate on this panel to help us arrive at the most thorough consensus possible. Please have the Consent Form (implied, if submitting on-line), Delphi I Questionnaire, and Demographics Form completed and submitted by [Insert Date - ~ 3.5 weeks from postage date].

The purpose of this study is to explore the initial development of a successful GED preparation program which adds on the implementation of mental health and social support, in the form of social and emotional learning (SEL), for adolescent high school dropouts between the ages of 16 and 18. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, the Delphi Method will be employed to gather consensus through a panel of experts on how best to run such a program.

Background of the Study

In 2003, it was estimated that 3.5 million 16-19 year olds in the United States were out of school without a high school diploma or an equivalent degree. During the 2003-2004 school year, the national graduation rate was only 70.5%; thus, it is estimated that approximately one-third of high school students do not graduate after four years. According to the 2005 Educational Testing Service Policy Information Center Report, the rate of high school completion fell in forty-three states between the years 1990 – 2000; ten of these states reported a decrease in high school completion rates by eight percent or more.

Due to these depressing rates of high school dropouts and the current state of educational affairs, Colin and Alma Powell announced in the Washington Times on April 9, 2008 that the dropout rate is “an issue of national security.” Dropping out of school has significant implications for both the individual and society as a whole. For the individual, negative outcomes for students who drop out of school traditionally fall into four categories, including low income and lifetime earnings, high unemployment rates, involvement in the criminal system, and limited cognitive growth. Additionally, studies have found that dropouts were less satisfied

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with their lives and reported more psychological distress and social despair than high school graduates, and research has proved that these individuals struggle with mental health issues and high-risk behaviors. These damaging effects are closely tied to the repercussions felt by society at large as studies have stated that these effects are imposed on society in two ways; these include lower public tax collections and higher dependence on public support services, both of which are problematic on a society committed to providing social services. The estimated service costs attributed to dropouts in terms of lost revenues, welfare, unemployment, crime prevention, and prosecution have been estimated to be in the billions of dollars.

Dropouts and students at-risk for dropping out need the same things all students need – opportunities to learn and develop, guidance in making constructive choices, and help with specific problems or situations. Thus, alternative programs need a holistic approach that includes social, academic, psychological, and career-related needs. There is little or no consistency across the states in defining an alternative program or the nature of its curriculum. The range of options for alternative programs is extremely wide: home-schooling, charter schools, programs for the gifted and talented and for special needs, disciplinary programs for students who are suspended or expelled, and remediation programs for students to re-take failed courses. A new vision of education that incorporates educational, social, and emotional support is needed in order to continue the work currently being done and change the educational system for those who have fallen through the cracks.

Through a variety of school reforms beginning in preschool and running through high school, educators are working to prevent young people from getting off track. For the foreseeable future, the nation will need “second-chance” systems and programs to re-engage and re-direct young people who leave the public school system. The challenge is that the knowledge base on the effectiveness of second-chance programs is still thin. Relatively few programs have been rigorously tested, and even fewer have produced unambiguously positive results.

Social and Emotional Learning

As a nation we believe every child deserves the opportunity to learn to his or her potential and capacity. To succeed in school, students must be engaged and interested; they must also need to know how to focus their attention on work, be persistent in their efforts even in the face of discouragement or setbacks, work effectively with others, and have good communication and problem-solving skills. These qualities are what form the foundation for youth to experience success not only in school, but also in their adult lives. Research has indicated that these skills can be taught in a classroom setting by existing teachers in all schools today. Evidence has also shown that all students of every background can learn these skills. Programs that teach these skills are referred to as Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), is a not-for-profit organization based at the University of Illinois at Chicago. CASEL has studied numerous programs offering social and emotional learning (SEL) programming. These studies have reported that those students who participate in such programs consistently outperform their peers by receiving better grades and graduating at higher rates, compared to those who do not receive SEL. Effective SEL programming drives academic learning, social outcomes, such as positive peer relationships, caring, empathy, and social engagement. Evidence has also shown decreases in deviant behaviors, such as drug use, violence, and delinquency.

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According to CASEL (2007), what sets SEL apart from other national youth development and prevention initiatives, is that it

“systematically addresses the numerous social and emotional variables that place youth at risk for school failure, such as a lack of attachment to a significant adult or the inability to manage emotions. SEL provides educators with a common language and framework to organize their activities. Many programs related to children’s social and emotional development focus on a single problem or issue such as preventing substance use. SEL however is an inclusive approach that covers the entire spectrum of social and emotional competencies that help children to be resilient and successful learners” (p. 2).

Furthermore, SEL has a foundational basis in the rigorous research that has been conducted, which indicates that our learning is influenced by our emotions and relationships. As educators have debated the best methods of promoting academic and student success, the growing body of research highlights that emotional and academic achievement are intimately connected as academic achievement has a better success rate when student’s social and emotional competence is addressed.

I appreciate your time and effort during the course of this study. I look forward to working with you over the next few months. As always, please feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns at abawahab@vt.edu.

Sincerely,

Afifa Bawahab
Researcher

Appendix G

Consent Form

VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY

**Informed Consent for Participants
in Research Projects Involving Human Subjects**

Title of Project: Supplementing a GED Preparation Program with Social and Emotional Learning: A Delphi Study

Principle Investigator: Afifa Bawahab and Andrea Wittenborn, Ph.D.

I. Purpose of Research

The purpose of this study is to gain a consensus of opinion in supplementing a GED preparation program, which focuses on academic achievement, with Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). This study employs the Delphi Method, which allows the research team to gather a consensus of opinion through a panel of experienced educators, trainers, writers, theoreticians, and clinicians.

II. Procedures

There are three stages, each of which include a short questionnaire, involved in this process. You are being asked to complete three questionnaires (one in each stage) and a demographics form. For the first stage (Delphi I), you will be asked to complete a demographics form and a questionnaire. Delphi I will require the most amount of your time, approximately 30 minutes, to complete. In subsequent stages (Delphi II and Delphi III), you will be asked to complete one questionnaire per stage. Delphi II and Delphi III may take up to 10 to 15 minutes each. Also, the total study completion time may take 3 to 6 months, and you will be sent the relevant questionnaires over the duration of the study and asked to respond in a timely manner. You may either mail back your responses or complete the online survey at www.survey.vt.edu.

III. Risks

There are no physical or mental risks posed to you as a participant in this study. Panelists in Delphi studies consistently report that their participation stimulates their own thinking, and also provides a unique opportunity to share ideas with other colleagues. The only potential risk posed to you is the value of your time. However, you may complete the questionnaires at your own pace within the allotted time prescribed for each phase of the study.

IV. Benefits

The responses you provide will contribute to meaningful research, which in turn can help aid in the development of GED programs offering Social and Emotional Learning.

V. Extent of Anonymity and Confidentiality

Strict confidentiality of information will be preserved. Any personal identifying information you may share in this research study will be kept confidential in a locked filing cabinet. Your identity as a participant will not be revealed to other participants on the Delphi panel, or in any writings or presentation that may arise from this research. You will be assigned an identification number (two-digit birth month and two-digit birth date) that will be kept separate from identifying information, and your questionnaires will contain only this identification number.

VI. Compensation

None

VII. Freedom to Withdraw

You do not have to participate in this research study. If you agree to participate, you can withdraw your participation at any time without penalty.

VIII. Participant's Responsibilities

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I have the following responsibilities:

1. I will complete three separate questionnaires through the duration (3-6 months) of this study.

IX. Participant's Permission

I have read the Consent Form and conditions of this project. I have had all my questions answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent.

Participant's Signature

Date

Participant's Name (please print)

Researcher's Signature

Date

If you have any questions about this research study or its conduct, and research subjects' rights, and whom to contact in the event of a research-related injury to the subject, I may contact:

Afifa Bawahab
Investigator

571-226-7578/abawahab@vt.edu
Telephone/e-mail

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Andrea Wittenborn
Investigator

703-538-3787/andreawittenborn@vt.edu
Telephone/e-mail

David M. Moore
Chair, Virginia Tech Institutional Review
Board for the Protection of Human Subjects
Office of Research Compliance
2000 Kraft Dr., Suite 2000 (0497)
Blacksburg, VA 24060

[540-231-4991](tel:540-231-4991)/moored@vt.edu

Appendix H
Demographics Form

ID Number (your two-digit birth month & two-digit birth date; i.e. a birthdate of Jan 1 = 0101)

What is your sex?

- Male
- Female

What is your ethnicity?

- Caucasian
- African American
- Asian
- Latino
- Other (Please specify):

What is your date of birth?

What is your occupation / job title?

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Who is your employer?

What is the highest degree you have earned?

- Bachelor's Degree
- Master's Degree
- Ph.D.
- Psy.D.
- M.D.
- Ed.D.
- M.D. (Psychiatrist)
- Other:

Please specify the field your degree is in (if applicable)

Please specify the number of years you have experience in working with the at-risk or dropout population in the following areas:

Clinical Experience:

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Teaching Experience:

Research Experience:

Supervisory Experience:

Please specify the number of years you have experience in working with the at-risk or dropout population using SEL:

Teaching Experience:

Clinical Experience:

Research Experience:

Supervisory Experience:

Approximately what percentage of time each week do you spend on the following:

Clinical

0-20% 21-40% 41-60% 61-80% 81-100%

Supervision:

0-20% 21-40% 41-60% 61-80% 81-100%

Teaching:

0-20% 21-40% 41-60% 61-80% 81-100%

Other Training:

0-20% 21-40% 41-60% 61-80% 81-100%

Research:

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0-20% 21-40% 41-60% 61-80% 81-100%

Administrative:

0-20% 21-40% 41-60% 61-80% 81-100%

Appendix I

Delphi I Questionnaire

ID Number (your two-digit birth month & two-digit birth date; i.e. a birthdate of Jan 1 = 0101)

Which of the following five areas of social and emotional competence should be emphasized in a GED preparation program emphasizing both academic achievement and social and emotional learning (SEL) for high school dropouts? Please provide your depth of reasoning for each area chosen.

- α. Self awareness – recognizing one’s emotions and values as well as one’s strengths and limitations
- β. Self management – managing emotions and behaviors to achieve one’s goals
- γ. Relationship skills – forming positive relationships, working in teams, and dealing effectively with conflict
- δ. Social awareness – showing understanding and empathy for others
- ε. Responsible decision making – making ethical, constructive choices about personal and social behavior

What other specific components do you believe should be incorporated?

What would you recommend be the top three goals for such a GED program?

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Research evidence has provided positive results in implementing social and emotional learning among schools; however, research is limited among GED preparation programs. What do you believe will be the most important outcomes from a program that not only emphasizes academic achievement, but also social and emotional learning?

What obstacles would you expect to encounter in running such a program?

How would you structure this program?

- α . What realistic time frame (length of program) should be allotted to accomplish both academic achievement and social and emotional learning goals?
- β . What time of day and how many hours a day would you recommend?
- γ . How many total hours would you recommend for completing the program?
- δ . What percentage of time would you spend on academic goals?
- ϵ . What percentage of time would you spend on SEL goals?

What population(s) do you feel will be most helpful for this type of GED preparation program?

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Please provide any other information you feel may be valuable to consider in taking the first step toward the implementation of a GED preparation program using social and emotional learning.

Appendix J

Email Letter 3

I hope you are doing well. We are coming close to an end on this research project. Thank you again for your participation! Following you will find a link to the last survey of the study. Previously I stated there would be 3 rounds of data collection. However, due to the rich responses we received from the panel in the 1st round, we have been able to narrow the study down to 2 rounds of collection!

Delphi II Questionnaire: <https://survey.vt.edu/survey/entry.jsp?id=1395462495669>

Your participant ID number is _____. Please use this ID number when completing the questionnaire.

I'm asking all participants to have the survey completed and submitted by Tuesday, April 1. If this time-frame does not work for you, please let me know.

Again, I appreciate your time and effort in this research process! I will send the results of the study to you upon completion.

Best regards,

Afifa Bawahab
Researcher

abawahab@vt.edu

Appendix K

Delphi II Questionnaire

ID Number (your two-digit birth month & two-digit birth date; i.e. a birthdate of Jan 1 = 0101)

The following statements pertain to the SEL competencies (self awareness, self management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making) in a SEL GED Preparation Program.

Please rate the following comments on a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 representing 'strongly disagree' to 7 representing 'strongly agree.'

1 - Strongly disagree / 2 - Disagree / 3 - Somewhat disagree / 4 - Neither agree nor disagree / 5 - Somewhat agree / 6 - Agree / 7 - Strongly agree

Receiving quality SEL instruction in an academic program allows students to be educated as a 'whole' person who have both social/emotional and academic tools.

Rate 1-7

Receiving quality SEL instruction emphasizing all 5 areas of competency leads to positive outcomes:

Academically.

Rate 1-7

Socially.

Rate 1-7

Emotionally.

Rate 1-7

The 5 competencies work as an umbrella to cover most at-risk adolescent issues.

Rate 1-7

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The 5 competencies are equally important and should all be emphasized in a balanced manner.

Rate 1-7

The 5 competencies are interconnected and build upon one another.

Rate 1-7

The 5 competencies overlap in ways which demand equal inclusion of all.

Rate 1-7

The following statements refer to SEL competency teaching methods in a SEL GED Prep Program.

Please rate the following comments on a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 representing 'strongly disagree' to 7 representing 'strongly agree.'

1 - Strongly disagree / 2 - Disagree / 3 - Somewhat disagree / 4 - Neither agree nor disagree / 5 - Somewhat agree / 6 - Agree / 7 - Strongly agree

During self awareness competency, it is important to teach students to recognize their emotions, strengths, interests, and values and build a grounded sense of self-confidence.

Rate 1-7

Please list additional skills you feel are important to teach in this competency.

During self management competency, students are taught to regulate and express their emotions, control their impulses, manage stress, and monitor progress toward personal and academic goals.

Rate 1-7

Please list additional skills you feel are important to teach in this competency.

During social awareness competency, students are taught to empathize with others and recognize and appreciate their similarities and differences.

Rate 1-7

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Please list additional skills you feel are important to teach in this competency.

During relationships skills competency, students are taught to establish and maintain healthy relationships, resist inappropriate social pressure, prevent and resolve interpersonal conflict, and seek and provide help when needed.

Rate 1-7

Please list additional skills you feel are important to teach in this competency.

During responsible decision making competency, students are taught to make decisions by considering consequences of actions, ethical standards, safety concerns, societal norms, and respect for self and others.

Rate 1-7

Please list additional skills you feel are important to teach in this competency.

The 5 competencies are most effective when taught from the internal person outward.

Rate 1-7

The 5 competencies should be taught in the order of (1) self-awareness, (2) self-management, (3) social awareness, (4) relationship skills, (5) responsible decision making skills.

Rate 1-7

The 5 competencies are most effective when students are able to first learn self-awareness and self-management.

Rate 1-7

Individuals can't manage their emotions and behaviors if they are not aware of the emotions they are experiencing.

Rate 1-7

Without self-awareness and self-management it is hard to succeed at relationships, social awareness, and responsible decision making.

Rate 1-7

The 5 competencies are most effective when students are able to build social and relationship skills upon self-competencies.

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Rate 1-7

Students struggle to empathize with others when they lack the ability to understand their own emotions and behaviors.

Rate 1-7

Students can't successfully communicate with others in a relationship if they are not self-aware and able to self-manage.

Rate 1-7

The 5 competencies are most effective when learning responsible decision making skills are built upon a foundation in self and social competencies.

Rate 1-7

Students struggle to make responsible decisions if they are unaware of their motives, unable to manage those motives objectively, take others' perspectives, and communicate effectively.

Rate 1-7

The following statements pertain to goals and other specific components to be included in a SEL GED Preparation Program.

Please rate the following comments on a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 representing 'strongly disagree' to 7 representing 'strongly agree.'

1 - Strongly disagree | 2 - Disagree | 3 - Somewhat disagree | 4 - Neither agree nor disagree | 5 - Somewhat agree | 6 - Agree | 7 - Strongly agree

To build and increase social and emotional competency is an important goal in a SEL GED prep program.

Rate 1-7

The program should allow instruction and space for exploration and practice of all 5 competencies.

Rate 1-7

The program should allow instruction and space for collaboration and interaction between students.

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Rate 1-7

The program should allow instruction and space for collaboration and interaction between students and teachers.

Rate 1-7

The program should allow instruction and space for practicing skills while learning skills.

Rate 1-7

The program should allow instruction and space for fostering a strong safe environment.

Rate 1-7

Please rank in order of importance. Formats should be ranked from 1-5 with 1 being the most important to 5 being the least important.

The program should allow instruction and space for exploration and practice of all 5 competencies.

Rank 1-5

The program should allow instruction and space for collaboration and interaction between students.

Rank 1-5

The program should allow instruction and space for collaboration and interaction between students and teachers.

Rank 1-5

The program should allow instruction and space for practicing skills while learning skills.

Rank 1-5

The program should allow instruction and space for fostering a strong safe environment.

Rank 1-5

Please rate the following comments on a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 representing 'strongly disagree' to 7 representing 'strongly agree.'

1 - Strongly disagree | 2 - Disagree | 3 - Somewhat disagree | 4 - Neither agree nor disagree | 5 - Somewhat agree | 6 - Agree | 7 - Strongly agree

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To build and increase academic skills and success is an important goal in a SEL GED prep program.

Rate 1-7

The program should allow instruction to build and practice academic skills such as note taking and study methods.

Rate 1-7

The program should allow instruction and space for fostering motivation (why I am doing this) and academic success skills (what do I need to do to be successful).

Rate 1-7

The program should allow instruction and space for fostering a sense of belonging within the students.

Rate 1-7

A sense of belonging within the program is important in ensuring students' academic success.

Rate 1-7

Please rank in order of importance. Formats should be ranked from 1-3 with 1 being the most important to 3 being the least important.

The program should allow instruction to build and practice academic skills such as note taking and study methods.

Rank 1-3

The program should allow instruction and space for fostering motivation (why I am doing this) and academic success skills (what do I need to do to be successful).

Rank 1-3

The program should allow instruction and space for fostering a sense of belonging within the students.

Rank 1-3

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Please rate the following comments on a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 representing 'strongly disagree' to 7 representing 'strongly agree.'

1 - Strongly disagree / 2 - Disagree / 3 - Somewhat disagree / 4 - Neither agree nor disagree / 5 - Somewhat agree / 6 - Agree / 7 - Strongly agree

To decrease problem behavior is an important goal in a SEL GED prep program.

Rate 1-7

The program should incorporate a counseling component to recognize destructive patterns in thoughts and behaviors.

Rate 1-7

The program should incorporate a counseling component to learn specific tools to change patterns in thoughts and behaviors.

Rate 1-7

To build and increase life skills is an important goal in a SEL GED prep program.

Rate 1-7

The program should allow instruction for second-step (post GED) planning (i.e. employment, trade/skill school, junior college).

Rate 1-7

The program should run specific counseling/skills groups to address struggles with various issues such as anger management, conflict resolution, communication skills, thought disorders, etc.

Rate 1-7

The following statements pertain to the length of program session and duration of the program.

Please rate the following comments on a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 representing 'strongly disagree' to 7 representing 'strongly agree.'

1 - Strongly disagree / 2 - Disagree / 3 - Somewhat disagree / 4 - Neither agree nor disagree / 5 - Somewhat agree / 6 - Agree / 7 - Strongly agree

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It is important to accommodate for variance in students' schedules as many at-risk students have various life stressors such as, but not limited to employment, childcare, transportation.

Rate 1-7

A full day program (7 hours) is preferred over a half day program (4 hours).

Rate 1-7

At-risk students will be unable to commit to a full day program.

Rate 1-7

Please rank in order of importance. Formats should be ranked from 1-4 with 1 being the most recommended to 4 being the least recommended.

A half day program running for a period of 3 months allows sufficient time for successful completion of the program by allowing students to progress through the SEL competencies and to achieve academic skills and success.

Rank 1-4

A half day program running for a period of 6 months allows sufficient time for successful completion of the program by allowing students to progress through the SEL competencies and to achieve academic skills and success.

Rank 1-4

A half day program running for a period of 9 months allows sufficient time for successful completion of the program by allowing students to progress through the SEL competencies and to achieve academic skills and success.

Rank 1-4

A half day program running for a period of 12 months allows sufficient time for successful completion of the program by allowing students to progress through the SEL competencies and to achieve academic skills and success.

Rank 1-4

Please rank in order of importance. Formats should be ranked from 1-3 with 1 being the most recommended to 3 being the least recommended.

The program should be offered once a day in the mornings.

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Rank 1-3

The program should be offered once a day in the evenings.

Rank 1-3

The program should be offered twice a day - mornings and evenings.

Rank 1-3

The following statements pertain to the structure of SEL and academic achievement within a SEL GED Preparation Program.

Please rank in order of importance. Formats should be ranked from 1-3 with 1 being the most recommended to 3 being the least recommended.

SEL achievement requires more attention for the at-risk population and therefore should be allocated 75% of the time; whereas academic achievement should be allotted 25% of the time.

Rank 1-3

Academic achievement requires more attention for the at-risk population and therefore should be allocated 75% of the time; whereas SEL achievement should be allotted 25% of the time.

Rank 1-3

SEL achievement and academic achievement should be allocated equal time and attention in the program.

Rank 1-3

Please rank in order of importance. Formats should be ranked from 1-2 with 1 being the most recommended to 2 being the least recommended.

The program should offer courses in SEL competencies and courses in academics simultaneously to provide students with a supportive environment throughout the program and to enable the students to progress slowly through the skills being learned.

Rank 1-2

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The program should require completion and achievement of SEL competencies before starting courses in academic achievement as students will be more effective academically with SEL skills already in hand.

Rank 1-2

The following statements pertain to the culture, safety and teaching methods of the program.

Please rate the following comments on a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 representing 'strongly disagree' to 7 representing 'strongly agree.'

1 - Strongly disagree / 2 - Disagree / 3 - Somewhat disagree / 4 - Neither agree nor disagree / 5 - Somewhat agree / 6 - Agree / 7 - Strongly agree

It is important to create a climate and culture within the program's environment that is safe, open, inclusive, and culturally proficient.

Rate 1-7

Teachers and administrators must model the behaviors, attitudes, and communication skills being taught in the program.

Rate 1-7

At-risk students typically drop out of high school due not only to academic struggles, but also to social and emotional struggles and feelings of disenfranchisement. Therefore, it is important to create an environment where students feel comfortable and have a sense of belonging.

Rate 1-7

It is important to employ teachers that are dedicated and passionate about the teaching material and working with the at-risk population.

Rate 1-7

The program must employ a quality curriculum with highly qualified and trained teachers.

Rate 1-7

Teachers must attend a training program.

Rate 1-7

Teachers must create a collaborative classroom environment with many student discussions and activities.

SEL GED PREP PROGRAM

Rate 1-7

Teachers must interact with the students throughout teaching the material as these topics cannot be taught through lecture only effectively.

Rate 1-7

Teachers must allow students to practice skills while learning skills.

Rate 1-7

Teachers must have highly effective classroom management skills in order to create a safe environment for students.

Rate 1-7

Teachers must possess effective engagement strategies such as movement and open-ended questioning.

Rate 1-7

The program should employ an instructional resource that will enable teachers to teach the skills in the 5 competency areas directly and explicitly.

Rate 1-7

The program should employ an evaluated, evidence-based SEL curriculum.

Rate 1-7