

CONNECTING CIVIC EDUCATION TO CIVIL RIGHT AND RESPONSIBILITY:  
A STRATEGY FOR REDUCING HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUT AMONG AFRICAN  
AMERICAN STUDENTS

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THESIS

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AMERICAN STUDENTS

A Thesis

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Abstract

of

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The early inclusion of a civic responsibility-based curriculum is critical as African American students' values and attitudes are forming about educational, civic, and behavioral competencies. Educators must grapple with shifting social value toward high school matriculation by incorporating a civic-based pedagogy to reduce education apathy. The undervalued civic education component in the 2001 reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Act, also known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act remains necessary for whole child education toward the knowledge and understanding of basic civic competencies.

This thesis examines civic education as a means to lowering the African American student dropout rate while presenting it as a civic responsibility and right. The review of literature includes literary works, published research that investigate the American perspective on civil rights, civil rights in education, civic education, and a conceptual framework linking civic education to the dropout crisis.

*Conclusions Reached*

Students value a commitment to their communities and know their responsibility to attain a high school diploma. Further, if civic education pedagogy began in early elementary education and if it includes the civic responsibility of high school matriculation, then high school dropout rates will diminish.

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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM

This study explored the educational right of African American students at risk of dropping out of school to receive meaningful civic education and if whether to consider it a right and responsibility. The body of research surrounding civic education is vast and significant, but the amount of research on civil rights and responsibilities associated with the school dropout rate remains limited. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) presented educators with the responsibility of teaching academics, character, and civic education, but they must accept this threefold task (Benninga, Berkowitz, Kuehn, & Smith, 2006; 2001 NCLB Act). The nation's education system is seeing the value of a high school diploma shift in society that has shifted in schools as well, and the education system has to change. If, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is not a civil right to be educated wholly, then there is a breach of the education contract in America. That is, educators must provide a need not met- equal education in academics and civic formation.

The inclusion of the civic responsibility to earn a high school diploma and the right to receive such instruction is crucial for reforming civic education in America. Therefore, the African American student dropout rate warrants a refreshed look at the convergence of ideals and a depolarization of right versus responsibility in earning a high school diploma. Teaching civic responsibility extends not only to parental guardians and educators, but also to policymakers as stakeholders in a shared accountability.

Each stakeholder has the responsibility to educate students as the next generation of community leaders and policymakers.

Several states include in their education codes language that affirmed the need for civic education to nurture student civic and behavioral competencies. For example, the *California Education Code-Senate Bill 1919 Section 44790 Chapter 3.8: Ethic and Civic Values in the School* ([www.leginfo.ca.gov](http://www.leginfo.ca.gov)) states,

The legislature finds and declares that there is compelling need to promote the development and implementation of effective educational programs in ethic and civic values in California schools in kindergarten and grades 1 to 12.... Basic and shared ethical and civic values which lead to strengthened character include, but not limited to human individuality, dignity, worth, fairness, equity, honesty, courage, freedom, autonomy, personal and social responsibility, and community, and the common good.

In 2001, President George Bush signed into law the No Child left Behind Act, requiring educators to teach academic and character education (*NCLB Subpart: Civic Education Section 2342. Purpose*). The *NCLB Act* and *California Senate Bill 1919* asserted the need for effective programs to develop civic values among the K-12 student population. Yet, many schools responded in part by easing attention to character and civil education as they increased their primary efforts in academics (Benninga, et al., 2006).

### *Statement of the Problem*

The student dropout rate is an important issue facing the nation's education system. Students who drop out of school are more likely to live in poverty, risk incarceration, and become welfare dependent (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Burke-Morison, 2006). "President Theodore Roosevelt once stated, 'to educate someone in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society'" (Ellenwood, 2007, p.21). Civic education

involves forming the characters of young people through experiences that affect their school perceptions, emotional literacy and civil behavior (Benninga, et al., 2006). It should be as much part of classroom instruction as reading, writing, and mathematics.

#### *Delimitation of Study*

The sample of students used in this study, as described in Chapter three, might not represent the population of any other given population in America on many variables that could jeopardize our ability to generalize these findings reliably beyond this study. Surely, it would be presumptuous to expect civic education to be the only variable that relates to whether and why students drop out of school before high school graduation. For example, the age requirements to stay in school or to leave school before high school graduation are different from state to state. Therefore, the analysis, findings, and conclusions of this research may not apply to all African American high school students.

#### *Definition of Terms*

A number of terms for concepts and operational definitions used throughout the remainder of this thesis are briefly described below.

##### *2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)*

Re-issue of the 1965 *Elementary and Secondary Act* in order to close the academic achievement gap between student ethnic groups through school accountability and school choice

##### *African American or Black*

Descriptive terms to describe people of African descent living in the United States

*Civic Education*

The study of rights and duties of citizenship

*Civic Intelligence*

The potential capacity for individuals to respond intelligently and effectively toward challenges they face.

*Critical Race Theory*

Socially constructed nature of race- racism, subordination and discrimination

*Dropout Factories*

A high school where more than 60 percent of the students who started as freshmen fail to make it their senior year

*Grounded Theory*

The practice of developing theories that emerges from observing a group

*In Loco Parentis*

A Latin term meaning “in place of the parents,” that is, a teacher or school administrator assumes the duties and responsibilities of the parents during the hours the child is in school

*Pro-social Behavior*

Acts which demonstrate a sense of empathy, caring, and ethics including sharing, cooperating, complying, and helping others.

*Resegregation*

The renewal of segregation in a school after a period of desegregation

*School Dropout*

One who quits school; one who has withdrawn from a given social group or environment

*Social Justice*

The equal and fair distribution of social values such as freedom, income, and wealth, and the opportunity to take part in society

*Dominant Culture/Structure*

A system of attitudes, values, dispositions, and norms that the speaker either presupposes or asserts as supported by social structures vested with power to impose its goals.

*Organization of the Study*

This phenomenological study explored the inclusion of the civic responsibility of earning a high school diploma as a component of civic education as an “intellectual, civil right” for African American students at risk of dropping out of school. The author described student high school matriculation through historical and contemporary issues and former high school students’ knowledge, concerns, and views about the role of civic competency in social and personal development. Data collection consisted of responses to a questionnaire from a purposive sample of 17- 30-year old students working on a General Education Development (GED) certificate in Sacramento, California. Coding data will reveal descriptive themes and nominal counts. Chapter two reviews literature on an American perspective by delving into civil rights in America; civil rights in education; and civic education. Then, it conceptualizes a link between civic education and the dropout crisis by reviewing the Critical Race Theory; identity development; school dropout. Next, Chapter three describes the method of study. Chapter four describes the

results and analyzes and discusses the findings. Finally, Chapter five summarizes the study and states recommendations for future research.

## Chapter 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Civic knowledge and participation are vital for sustaining an ordered society, (e.g., voting, employment, supporting local economy, and going to school with the intent to graduate from high school). The high school dropout rate has become a major crisis in the American education system, and it is even more alarming and persistent among African American students. As educators and policymakers wrestle with shifting societal values, the silent epidemic of school dropout has become what education advocates believe is a civil rights issue. In 2001, Congress enacted the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) to address the lack of academic achievement and civic education for disadvantaged youths in public education. Educators have sought to raise standardized test scores but remain reluctant to teach civic values, leaving thousands of African American youths to wonder why earning a high school diploma is important and relevant to their lives.

Knowledge and understanding underlie civic competencies and performance. People acquire civic knowledge and develop civic competencies through both formal and informal training. If society provides schooling, and schooling provides knowledge about the symbiosis between personal and societal responsibilities and benefits, then students can more clearly understand how and why graduating from high school serves their interests as well as society's interests. This chapter describes an American

perspective on civil rights and presents a conceptual framework for the role of civic education as a factor in the dropout crisis.

An American Perspective on Civil Rights, Civil Rights Education,  
and Civic Education

The following sections present a summary of our views on civil rights, civil rights education, and civic education in America to contextualize them as a collective variable in the dropout crisis.

*Civil Rights in America*

Civic knowledge and competencies among African Americans and the experiences to which one can apply an understanding of the responsibility to participate in a community stretch back to early colonial times in America. Patterson-Dilworth (2006) concluded the starting point in American history from which civic participation derived rests in the decisions of the nation's earliest citizens. She positioned civic competencies in a historical framework, suggesting that early American civic and moral education existed only for white males. Her point was to underscore the contradiction between rights afforded by the American Constitution and American schooling.

After the American Civil War, black scholars began to challenge the dominant white culture in America and its impudent ideals of civic participation in the American democracy. In the late 19th century, they began to resist the idea of exclusive civic participation in America with a mission towards educating blacks morally and civically (Patterson-Dilworth, 2006; Cannon, 1988). African Americans living outside of slavery in the latter part of the 19th century began to develop a different value set based on lived

experiences socially, economically, and politically. For example, black educators such as Anna Julia Cooper, W.E.B. Du Bois, Nannie Burroughs, and others began to speak out in opposition to the long-held belief that moral and civic education excluded blacks from civic participation (Patterson-Dilworth, 2006).

The climate of educating African Americans in the 1900s was unsafe at best, but a committed community of education activists forged ahead. They understood that in order for the blacks to lift themselves from under two hundred years of slavery, education was a necessary, civil responsibility to challenge the moral fabric of American democratic practices.

Early 20th century black scholars knew African Americans needed literacy skills to combat moral and civic struggles for racial justice in the United States in that “they understood the potential of literacy to be a powerful weapon in their quest for civil rights” (Patterson-Dilworth, 2006, p. 104). In 1988, Christian ethicist Katie Cannon questioned whether the complexities of civil rights and social circumstances had an effect on civic and moral learning in the African American community. Such questioning issued a call from social scientists to education policymakers to become more attentive to a critical race perspective on civic learning (Dilworth, 2006; Cannon, 1988).

### *Civil Rights in Education*

*The Journal of Negro Education* editor, Walter J. Daniel (1965), began his 1965 summer publication editorial comment with the assertion that “education and civil rights are inextricably bound together” (Daniel, 1965, p.197). This historical document recorded the pulse of a nation embroiled in the tumultuous 1960s civil rights movement.

Daniel (1965) provided challenges, questions, and solutions toward educating black children in America. For example, blacks living in America during the 60s wanted to join the national community without barriers and alienation from mainstream America. Education as a right began to evolve with challenges and questions about the state of education and the rights of black children.

In 1975, Cook-Freeman argued that when someone talked about student rights, the subject of lock searches, freedom to express opinions were the topics most covered. Thus, student rights did not include the topic of curriculum and instruction. The relevance of Cook-Freeman's argument is important because it addressed public issues and controlling socio-political forces. Specifically, social concerns, such as students at risk of dropping from school, would not become public agenda items until such concerns warranted discernment from the dominant culture's resources and its power to make changes (Cook-Freeman, 1975).

Student rights were a two-pronged war raging between students and their parents and educators. Parents from lower socioeconomic status exhibited more concern for academic achievement and school finance as "a right" than did the more affluent parents. Parents argued for "*in loco parentis*" in regards to education, asserting that the school had the duty to act on behalf of parents and to provide their children with an education equal to that of other children (Cook-Freeman, 1975; Howarth, 1972). Cook-Freeman (1975) correctly added caution at this point to resist asking educational establishments to solve social problems and conflicts. Indeed, the social issues that have infiltrated the education

system warranted an involved effort among social, economic, and political structures.

Freeman's research and assertions remain relevant to current socio-cultural environment.

Recently, Orfield and Chungmei (2007) documented important research in The Civil Rights Project, which addressed current segregation trends in American schools. The authors systematically examined implications of the United States Supreme Court's reversal of previous desegregation rulings such as in the *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1* and the *Meredith v. Jefferson* cases. The rulings in both cases decided in favor of declaring the use of race as a means to end school segregation as unconstitutional (Orfield & Chungmei, 2007). The authors connected data on race, school demographics, and geographical locations indicating school segregation as contributing factors to high school dropout among African American teens.

Additionally, Orfield and Chungmei (2007) proposed changes to collecting data on the racial makeup in schools to track data regarding segregation practices. They cited the necessity of a congressional call to action to examine desegregation and integration in schools, even as the United States Supreme Court previously "refused to rule that children have a constitutional right to quality education" (Bell, 2001, p.117)

### *Civic Education*

Scholars have argued an urgent need for including civic education in the classroom curriculum. Ravitch (2008) proposed civic education programs as effective and productive measures to change the way students think and act in society. Ravitch argued, "We have to teach civic education along with patriotism as a respectful,

understanding, appreciative of the principles and practices of democracy and woven into the daily fabric of education” (Ravitch, 2008, p. 110).

Educators must work to close not only the academic achievement gap that exists between minority students, but the civic achievement gap as well (Levinson, 2007). Knowledge, attitude, skills, and behavior are four areas of civic engagement imperative to helping low-socioeconomic students, immigrant students, and non-white students to gain the civic knowledge and skills necessary for full participation in their communities. The issue, as Levinson argued, was to not see students -- in this case high school dropouts -- as the defect, but rather to look at the democratic institutions, such as school sites, to teach civic education (2007). Levinson argued, “Poor and minority people are less likely to develop civic skills via education, the work place, and voluntary associations... because they are likely to leave school sooner and be less educated” (Levinson, 2007, p. 5).

In 1988, Pratte suggested three goals in teaching civic education. Educators should teach a historical perspective of civic competency, direct students to develop social action skills, and reduce ethnocentrism (Pratte, 1988). These goals are still relevant to the challenge educators confront when teaching civic competencies. Dr. Martin Luther King stated years ago, “The function of education is to teach one to think intensely and to think critically. Intelligence plus character is the true goal of education” (King, 1947).

Classroom democracy coupled with service learning increases civic understanding and responsibility. Students engaged in community service during high school often engage civically after matriculation (Kahne & Sporte, 2007). Taylor and Trepanier-

Street led a study of college students assigned to tutor at-risk children in AmeriCorps' Jumpstart Program, in Dearborn, Michigan. After finishing the program, students cited a higher interest in doing more for their communities (Taylor & Trepanier-Street, 2007). Seventy-eight percent of the 1317 students who participated in the program wanted to work for the Jumpstart Program (Taylor & Trepanier-Street, 2007). Additionally, students enrolled in the Cesar E. Chavez Public Charter School for Public Policy in Washington, DC learn civic behavior through immersion in an intergraded public policy curriculum with a year-ending project of designing a public policy proposal for local government officials. School administrators cited a higher graduation rate, with 100percent of graduating students accepted to at least one college or university (Welch & Chavez-Rodriguez, 2005).

Although civic understanding and participation are important in school, social science curriculums narrowly address civic education. Haynes and Pickeral (2008) argued all schools have a civic mission to prepare students for civic life sated with engaging, pro-social, and ethical behavior and aspirations. It should be the aim of all schools to educate children to become "intellectually, prepared, civically engaged and compassionate members of the community" (Haynes & Pickeral, 2008, p. 10). The foundation of positive, civic ways of life should begin in early childhood teachings. Haynes and Pickeral argued that the welfare of the nation rests upon what kind of citizens are learning in schools (2008). When the lack of civic studies is missing from schools, it threatens the democracy of America. Students, regardless of socioeconomic, ethnic, and cultural background, must believe their voices matter and will matter in a democratic

society. The construct of a civic education program should include guiding students' civic identity.

#### A Conceptual Framework Linking Civic Education to the Dropout Crisis

This section characterizes Critical Race Theory (CRT), identity development, and dropout research findings. These ideas help us organize an understanding about the importance of civic education in schools and the relation to students' identity formation, academic relevance, and graduation from high school. However, they constitute only a fraction of what we need to know to understand the complexity of the dropout crisis.

#### *Critical Race Theory*

After the *Brown v. Board of Education*, decision and the passage of *1964 Civil Rights Act*, judicial interpretations, backlogs, or lackadaisical political prominence constricted social inequalities (science.jrank.org). In the 1970s, Bell hypothesized a social, economic, and political interest convergence to provide an explanation for the progression and withdraw from mainstream social equalities, including education, in the African American community (Bell, 1978). His analyses of legal action, white dominant power system and the spiraling turn of black gains of the 1960s, led to a Critical Race Theory (CRT). This theory, which is an amalgamation of humanities, social sciences, and legal scholarship converging to identify the forces at work in opposition to justice and equity in education, is an attempt to explain the dominant power construct in America (Stovall, 2006; science.jrank.org).

Student voice is important when addressing education among African American students. Applying the practice asserted in CRT promotes a place of discussion and

discovery of social constructs which remain dominant in society and work in opposition to social justice in education (Stovall, 2006). Therefore, CRT is not necessarily a “grounded theory,” but a “contribution to knowledge to value the everyday living experiences of racism as necessary qualitative data” (Stovall, 2006, p.244).

Racial disparity in schools continues to be a motivating factor in educational inequalities. Rumberger and Palardy (2005) examined whether socioeconomics and racial segregation still contribute to achievement in America. Utilizing data collected from the 1988 National Education Longitudinal Survey (NELS), Rumberger and Palardy examined a representative sample of 14,217 students from 913 high schools across the nation. The authors confirmed that the socioeconomic status of schools with increased attention to more rigorous academic courses, high teacher expectations, and consistent disciplinary process would decrease the achievement gap between black and white students. For example, based on data collected from the NELS, students from more affluent neighborhood schools learned ten times as much math as students from lower socioeconomic neighborhood schools. In their final analysis, Rumberger and Palardy (2005) contended that the lack of education and community resources, such as current textbooks and tutoring available to families, posed more inequalities than the socioeconomic status of the students attending schools.

### *Identity Development*

Children develop emotional experiences in early childhood (Bronfenbrenner, 2000). Therefore, educators must look at positive or negative developmental experiences that shape a student’s thoughts and actions (Bronfenbrenner, 2000). Parental guardians,

educators, and other positive adult mentors must engage actively in a child's life during intellectual, moral, emotional, and social development. Thus, schools serve as viable institutions for such human development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner and Evans (2000) further argued that without a third party adult, such as a teacher, in a child's life, the risk becomes greater for counter-social behavior such as school dropout.

Students need to feel a sense of belonging to their school and community. In the 1900s, John Dewey theorized the link between a sense of belonging and growing up to live in that same community with a commitment to that community and a civil, democratic way of life (Dewey, 1916). Dewey (1916) argued that the power to learn depended upon forming habits. His progressive philosophy of education included that the value of education should foster a desire to grow, and the future for which students will prepare remains in constant development. His philosophy is not without criticism. Social and education critics in the 20th century noted that Dewey's education failed to mention the issues of racism and the power structure in education and other arenas (Margonis, 2009).

Providing opportunities for civic engagement in schools can spur a child's civic identity. Youniss and Yates (2007) suggested that there are three areas of development in a child's civic identity. Agency and industry refers to the ability of someone to understand social problems. Educators and others can persist in developing agency and industry by involving students in such projects as collecting and bagging canned goods for the local food closet or serving meals at a kitchen for homeless individuals and

families. Second, educators can offer opportunities to increase a child's social relatedness in which students learn how to respond to societal needs. Students can participate in a neighborhood park clean up or clean up creek areas in support of wildlife environments. Thirdly, students need to develop their political-moral understanding. It has become vitally important for students to understand, reflect, and discuss the existing environments in which they live and what these environments should be like (Youniss & Yates, 2007).

### *Dropping Out of School*

For decades, researchers documented the higher rate of African American students leaving high school ahead of their senior year. Literature suggested the reasons students drop from school were not short-term answers to specific problems, rather a long period of disengagement from school (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

The pathway to high school dropout has its genesis as early as kindergarten (Hickman, Bartholomew, Mathwig, & Heinrich, 2008). Hickman, et al. examined the school data records of 60 high school graduates and 60 high school dropouts who started kindergarten in 1990 and 1993. The authors compared school records on the students' GPAs, standardized tests scores, grade retentions, juvenile court records, family demographics and other variables (Hickman, et al., 2008). Data revealed evidence that students who eventually dropped out of school were more likely to perform lower on grade level and standardized tests, had lower academic performance in kindergarten, exhibited a higher rate of problematic classroom and community behavior, and were more likely to be non-white students (Hickman, et al., 2008).

Bridgeland, et al. (2006) produced a report entitled, *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*, providing an inside look at the issues associated with school dropout. The report contained data and narration of hundreds of students across America. The authors used student narratives in the survey as a predictor to other students who may be considering an early departure from school.

One of the key elements of this report was a national cross-sectional data collection of inner city, rural, poverty-stricken, and other varied school systems, such as in suburban areas of Nebraska. The study showed that 47 percent of students there stated that classes were not interesting, and 69 percent of students had low motivation or were not inspired. Forty-three percent of the students indicated that they felt under-prepared for the academic rigors of middle school and beyond (Bridgeland, et al., 2006). Additionally, some of the problematic areas included multiple suspensions and expulsions, poor reading skills, minority race and ethnicity, and frequent changes in home location (Biles-Jones, 2006; Bridgeland, et al., 2006). Yet, students were remorseful about their decision to leave school before matriculation. Eighty-one percent indicated high school graduation was important for living successfully in life. As adults, they (76 percent) supported the idea of re-entering school to complete their diplomas (Bridgeland, et al., 2006).

The quantitative and qualitative data illustrated the need for more research and funding to support programs and initiatives to combat school dropout. For example, Bridgeland, et al. (2006) argued for more relevant and engaging teaching methods and curriculum. Students in the survey stated a desire for more real-world relevant learning.

Next, the authors argued for increased support for struggling students in the form of tutoring, summer school and individualized instruction. Other examples include better parent to school personnel communication and better student to teacher relationships.

The report offered a valuable student voice to the problem, but the authors fall short of considering other societal and systemic factors of school dropout. Further research on educator and administrator attitude and biases, as well as budget problems and socioeconomics can provide an additional angle to school dropout.

The student dropout rate has been more prevalent in the African-American and Latino communities. Many of these students attended so called “Dropout Factories.” Dropout factories are schools in which fewer than 60 percent of freshmen students graduate their senior year (Orfield & Chungmei, 2006; MSNBC, 2007). Researchers at Johns Hopkins noted that 13 percent of American schools are under this label and chronically have large populations of under-served low-income and minority students (MSNBC, 2007).

African American students who leave school without a diploma will experience hardship and drastically reduce their ability to contribute to the nation’s economy. Earning an average of \$9200 less than high school graduates do, school dropouts will more likely live below the poverty line while depending on government support and will contribute \$60,000 less in federal taxes over lifetime. (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007; US Census 1990; Bridgeland et al., 2006). But if they could earn at least a high school diploma, this could have direct bearing on the nation’s economy by saving \$7.9 to

10.8 billion in annual aid to recipients in food stamps, housing, and other short-term living federal assistance programs (Garfinkel, Kelly, & Waldfogel, 2005; Rouse, 2005).

*Summary*

In years past, civic education was a norm for the classroom; the expectation guaranteed to parents and citizens was to graduate students with civic knowledge and understanding sufficient to practice the principles of democracy in their communities.

Research in civic participation suggests that the earlier inclusion of civic education occurs in the classroom, the more students are likely to learn pro-social behavior.

Therefore, if we re-evaluated the right of students to receive civic education which included graduating high school as a civic responsibility, then the number of high school students dropping out of school would decrease.

## Chapter 3

### METHODS

High school dropout has been on the forefront of the education agenda for the American government and school districts. The NCLB contracted school districts to reform their academic and civic education programs to educate the minds and hearts of the children, while bridging the academic gap among high-performing white and African American, Latino, and other socio-cultural groups. Additionally, thousands of children come to school lacking basic understanding of pro-social community participation and civic education. Consequently, the awareness of the importance of a high school diploma is diminishing, and this has left students with the alternative of dropping from school to live on the fringes of society.

One strategy to combat high levels of school dropout is to connect education to civic responsibility. If educators taught *in loco parentis* the civic responsibility of graduating from high school, would this have a significant effect on high school dropout rates? If education veers from teaching civic behavioral in order to focus on academic performance, is it a violation of a basic fundamental rights of children to receive fair instruction on how to be productive citizens in their community?

#### *Population and Sample*

The purposive sample used in the survey was students obtaining their General Education Development (GED) certificate from two adult education centers: Charles A. Jones Skills and Business Center in Sacramento, California, and the Greater Sacramento Urban League in Del Paso Heights, California. The GED class periods were both day and

evening classes taught by a total of four instructors of various cultural backgrounds and levels of teaching experiences. The GED instructors invited the 63 self-selected participants, a group which consisted of 43 females and 20 males and widely ranged in age. Thirty participants were between 17-23 years old, eleven 24-29 years old, and nineteen 30 years or older. The racial composition of the sample consisted of < 1 percent American Indian or Native Indian, 10 percent Asian/Pacific Islander, 16 percent Caucasian, 15 percent, Multi-racial, 22 percent Hispanic/Latino, 43 percent African American, and < 1 percent declined to state. The highest level of education completed among the participants was 10 percent completed school up to 6<sup>th</sup> grade, 13 percent completed 9<sup>th</sup> grade, and 77 percent completed 11<sup>th</sup> grade (See Table 1.).

Table 1.

*Demographic Characteristics of the Sample*

Characteristic	N/63	percent
Gender		
Female	43	68
Male	20	32
Age		
17-23 years	30	48
24-29 years	11	17
30 and above	19	30
Declined to state	3	5
Ethnic background		
American Indian/Native Indian	1	less than 1 percent
Asian/Pacific Islander	6	10
Black/African American	27	43
White/Caucasian	10	16
Hispanic/Latino	14	22
Multiracial	4	6
Declined to state	1	less than 1 percent
Highest-grade level completed		
Below Sixth Grade	6	10
Sixth- Ninth Grades	8	13
Tenth-Eleventh Grades	49	77

*Instrumentation and Data Collection*

Data collection consisted of a demographic questionnaire and measuring participants' thoughts about their academic experience and education as civic participation (appendix C). The paper and pen approach to data collection was advantageous to both the sample population and the researcher (Leedy and Ormrod, 2005). The omission of names as well as the remoteness of the survey allowed participants to complete a questionnaire without fear of retribution for ideals and comments expressed on the survey. The questionnaire was an effort to evaluate the

overall attitudes about the education experiences of the sample population. A five-point scale ranging from strongly-agree to strongly-disagree was necessary to record responses. Three statements rated attitudes about academic and civic education taught in school. Four statements rated attitudes toward high school graduation as civic participation, one statement rated responses about social influences, and the last item was an open-ended question with space provided to record any additional thoughts about educational experiences not presented in the described survey items.

The questionnaire, written in clusters according to school experience, social behavior, and community participation and engagement, began with a nonaligned statement that would ease participants into answering questions about their education experiences. The first statement rated student enjoyment in school, but did not specify which grade level or a favorite subject. Teacher and student enjoyment linked together provide for a more positive classroom experience (Frenzel, Ludtke, Perkrum, and Sutton, 2009). Student behavior, thoughts, and feelings will have an effect on academic engagement (Martin, 2003). Therefore, when student exposure to positive teachers increases, it is more likely to promote positive social development and achievement. Moreover, students exposed to factors that reduce academic motivation exhibit negative behaviors such as anxiety, failure avoidance, and self-sabotage (Martin, 2003; Frenzel, et al., 2009).

The second and third statements on the survey measured civic skills and knowledge for positive social behavior in the community. These skills enhance advocacy and positive school outcome for students, particularly African American and Latino

students (Day-Vines & Terriquez, 2008). Moreover, when taught to navigate through systems of authority, students learn pro-social behavioral skills such as respect for authority, develop leadership and self-management skills, and serve as peer role models. As students develop personal advocacy skills, they also develop pro-social skills and strategies to combat social and academic injustices (Day-Vines & Terriquez; Delpit, 1988).

Based on the Austin Interfaith Initiative (Simon, Gold, & Brown, 2002), statements six through nine rated the importance of a high school diploma as a part of community participation as well as volunteerism in the community.

#### *Procedure*

The CEO of the Greater Sacramento Urban League and the principal at the Charles A. Jones Skills Center granted permission to conduct research on students obtaining General Education Development (GED) certificates. Letters and follow-up phone calls explained the purpose and procedures for the research (appendix B). After the initial contacts, both received the questionnaires for content approval. The decision to use two different GED preparation programs ensured an adequate sample population to study.

Each school received the 30 questionnaires hand delivered in separate manila envelopes, one for each instructor. A follow-up email to each school ensured questionnaire receipt and an offer to address questions or concerns about the survey. Directions for administering the questionnaire, stapled to the envelope, stated directions to distribute and collect questionnaires with little student interaction in anticipation of

gathering raw data about the education experiences of the sample population (appendix C). After the completion of the questionnaires, instructors placed both used and unused surveys back in original packaging to avoid unnecessary intrusion with the data.

Instructors signed the instruction letter stating how many questionnaires used and unused and the total number of students in the classroom.

Surveys gathered from both skill centers yielded 63 total participants, a response rate of 99 percent. Numbering and lettering the surveys allowed for additional confidentiality of responses and participant identities. For example, each participant from Charles A. Jones received an anonymous identifying number between C1 and C46, and Greater Sacramento Urban League participants received a number between G1 and G20. A count taken of the demographical data for each category matched the total number of returned surveys. A numerical count and percentages demographically described the sample population according to age, gender, racial background and highest-grade level. Next, each statement counted and recorded on a blank questionnaire provided easier interpretation of data. Any fields that did not have a response received a “Did Not Answer” (or “DNA”) on the tally sheet.

## Chapter 4

### ANALYSIS OF DATA AND DISCUSSION

#### *Results and Discussion*

The purpose this research was to explore an optional strategy for lowering the occurrence of school dropout among African American students by examining the possibility of teaching high school graduation as a civic responsibility. Schools across the nation have seen an increase in education apathy to completing high school. Without a high school diploma, dropouts are more likely to become involved in illegal activities and grow to depend on government support (Bridgeland, et al, 2006).

The questionnaire used in this research examined GED students' thoughts about their education experience. The data collected included statements about education enjoyment, pro-social and negative behavioral influences, and high school diploma as community participation. As well, some participants provided written responses to an open-ended question about their K-12 education experiences. Their direct quotations afforded additional understanding of the problem.

#### *Limitations of Study*

Although the return rate was 99 percent, some of the responses may not reveal true behavioral attitudes held by all the participants in the survey. Literacy skills, undisclosed emotional trauma, and misinterpretation of questions often limit the results obtained on the questionnaire (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Additionally, the results of the data collected may not reflect all African American students, and the results of this study

should not be used to generalize findings beyond the local concept. Rather, ideas should be regarded as the principal results from the data.

### *Results and Data Analysis*

Major patterns developed while analyzing the data collection. First, more than half the students indicated that they dropped from school during their tenth or eleventh year of school. Battin-Pearson, Newcomb, Abbott, Hill, Catalano, and Hawkins (2000) identified tenth grade as one of the most crucial years for using positive educational experiences to slow the dropout rate for high school students. Educational experiences during key developmental years point to a significant need to look at early school dropout as an indicator of adult patterns of community behavior (Battin-Pearson, et al., 2000).

Second, African American students indicated an understanding of the importance of receiving a high school diploma. Over half the participants indicated on the survey that having a high school diploma was a part of civic participation. In addition, these participants supported the notion of community participation curriculum in schools.

The number of African American students dropping out remains overwhelming. The participants in this sample indicated a desire to learn, although national statistical surveys indicated African Americans out-weight the number of dropouts among socio-cultural groupings. This group also made up more than half the participants in the two GED programs cited in this thesis.

Third, students have strong feelings about their education experiences and most students actually enjoyed some academic aspects of school. The number of students in

the overall sample (86 percent) were comparable to African American students (85 percent) enjoying at least one subject in school. African American participant C 29 remarked, “I hated going to school, I love English and writing... I wasn’t like the other students.” This data provides reasonable indication that African American students obtaining GEDs enjoyed school, but the environment in which students learned may have influenced decisions to drop from school (See Table 2).

Table 2

*Responses to Education Enjoyment*

Question	TN/63	%	AAN/27	%
In school I had a least one subject I enjoyed				
Agree	54	86	23	85
Disagree	5	7	2	7
Did not answer	4	6	2	7

*TN-total number of participants; AAN-total number of African American participants*

Fourth, caring schools are important to students. Reviewed literature cited students’ decisions to drop from school related to uncaring authority figures in their lives. Although more than half the participants agreed, they felt cared for while in school. However, stronger feelings about school and care resonated from the open-ended responses. Several participants expressed the opposite view of feeling cared by educators and administrators at their school. Participant G14 remarked, “Most don’t care what you do in life... all you are to them is a check.” Several participants wrote about teachers whom they felt placed more value on relationships with those students who did not need

extra academic assistance. The data indicates the need for more outward expressions of care on the part of school personnel (See Table 3.).

Table 3.

*Caring Community*

Question	N/63	%	AAN/27	%
Participant caring adults in school				
Agree	43	68	16	59
Disagree	18	29	10	37
Did not answer	2	3	1	3

*TN-total number of participants; AAN-total number of African American participants*

Next, as civic and behavioral competencies develop, students need positive mentors engaging with them on school campuses. Participants in the overall group as well as African American participants indicated that they learned positive behavior skills and civic education in school. Participant C36 wrote, "...as a young teen, I was just too caught up in my social life. I realize I was wrong." African American participant C15 stated a desire for more positive mentors as she adjusted to the social rigors of attending high school. Data strongly indicates a need for more pro-social skills in school to collaborate with the enjoyment in school. Participants indicated that positive social involvements in school would have had an effect on academic achievement (See Table 4).

Table 4

*Responses to Behavioral Influences*

Question	N/63	%	AAN/27	%
Learned pro-social behavior				
Agree	50	79	20	74
Disagree	11	17	6	22
Did not answer	2	3	1	3
Negative social influences				
Agree	33	53	15	55
Disagree	28	44	11	41
Did not answer	2	3	1	3
Civic education skills				
Agree	46	73	18	67
Disagree	12	19	6	22
Did not answer	5	8	3	11

*TN-total number of participants; AAN-total number of African American participants*

Finally, review of literature suggests community participation and service can be valuable tools to teach students to care for their communities by making positive contributions toward community growth. African American students felt as strongly as the overall sample population about community participation and a high school diploma. Fifty-six percent of the participants agreed that having a diploma would make them feel a part of the community. Participant C5 dropped from school in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. She wrote, “Coming back to school to finish up so I can receive my GED so it can lead me to a better place.” Although 59 percent of the participants volunteered in their community, 85 percent felt it necessary to learn about community participation in school. The responses indicated a significant relation between community responsibility and receiving a high school diploma (See Table 5).

Table 5.

*Education and Community Participation*

Question	TN/63	%	AAN/27	%
High school is a part of community participation				
Agree	46	73	17	63
Disagree	15	24	9	33
Did not answer	2	3	1	3
High school makes me feel a part of my community				
Agree	38	60	15	56
Disagree	21	33	11	41
Did not answer	4	6	1	3
Spent time volunteering				
Agree	32	51	16	59
Disagree	27	43	9	33
Did not answer	4	6	2	3
Community participation curriculum in schools is important				
Agree	57	90	23	85
Disagree	4	6	3	11
Did not answer	2	3	1	3

*TN-total number of participants; AAN-total number of African American participants*

*Discussion*

The findings in this thesis illuminate the idea of a major shift in civic education to include knowledge and understanding of civil competencies for pro-social community participation, such as obtaining a high school diploma. The high school dropout rate among African American students is a major concern in schools. It would seem that students no longer value education and have found themselves learning in an education

system with civic education pedagogy negligent in addressing their growing social and education apathy. The following section provides a discussion of findings.

The problem of educating students toward graduating from high school has been difficult, and the reasons for dropping out of school are numerous. Youniss and Yates (2007) suggested that students who learn civic education at an early age are more likely to develop a sense of community early and continue their sense of community into adult life. As students progress academically through school, it becomes necessary to support civic growth and responsibility to give power to students to become pro-social members of their communities.

The gap in educating students exists in both academic achievement and civic competencies. Lower socioeconomic and minority students are less likely to develop civil skills in schools and other social outlets because they are more likely to drop out of school. Schools must assume the position as democratic places where students receive civic education (Levinson, 2005).

The options afforded by society can be few for those without a high school diploma. African American participants in the study understood the importance of an education and the relevance for it in other areas in life, such as employment and higher education. In order to feel a part of their community, having earned at least a high school diploma is important. Students in the survey indicated a desire to learn pro-social behavior, and they viewed a high school diploma as a positive part of community participation. Further, if such knowledge given prior to the eleventh grade, it might have

a significant impact on the number of students leaving school prior to receiving a high school diploma.

Education attainment is important to students. Findings showed that students enjoyed at least some part of their academic studies. This is clearly an indication that potential high school dropouts must be encouraged to learn and grow in school subjects and areas of personal interest. Bridgeland, et al. (2006) summarized students' feelings toward academic education as a need to shift the focus of teaching from standardized tests to relevant academic knowledge.

Former students in this study and other national studies related education frustration to the lack of caring adults. Participants' anger and frustrations were quite evident when they described instances of lowered expectations and the lack of caring individuals to model morals and development. Students will try harder to meet school and behavioral expectations when they know someone cares for them (Bridgeland, et al., 2006). A number of participants discussed feelings about their current teachers in the GED program as caring individuals who explained content more clearly and made them feel as though they could master the subject. The students who have already gone through the experience of dropping from school can provide meaningful reflections to help lower dropout rates.

Educating the whole child involves the converging of ideals to form civil and behavioral competencies in civic responsibilities. Students need to feel a part of their community and that their voices and feelings matter in the public arena. Although some students may not have the desire to volunteer in their community, educators must look for

opportunities to infuse at least exposure to pro-social benefits associated with community participation. For some students, a canned food drive at school to benefit the local food bank is enough to give them a sense of community ownership and belonging. Participants wanted to feel as if they belonged in the community. Findings revealed that the majority felt that their high school diploma is indeed important and would make them a part of their community. Participants feel more a part of their community with a high school diploma, consequently highlighting an important connection between a diploma and responsible civic participation. Thus, the ability to enter into a critical dialogue about community becomes even more important as civic knowledge and its connectedness to political participation influences economic and social issues (Levinson, 2005).

## Chapter 5

### SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### *Summary*

America continues to combat the high rate of school dropout among teens, especially in the African American community. Across the nation, lawmakers included in their state laws the affirmation of a fundamental right for students to receive civic, moral, or character education along with an academic education. Yet, thousands of African American students leave school ahead of a high school diploma. A review of literature showed that the issue of educating African Americans has been elevated throughout history in both theory and practice.

Historically, African American scholars understood that education in America for black people was necessary for advancing a population of citizens long held under the foot of slavery. Prior to the 19th century, white American men decided the only people worthy of civic participation were white American men. It took decades of civil rights struggle, voting and civil rights acts to take effect during the 1960s in order to move the notion of the right to civic participation into mainstream America.

In the 20th century, scholars began to develop theories and conduct studies on social inequalities in America. Bell developed the Critical Race Theory to address the widening gap of economic, political, and educational gaps in America. Bridgeland, et al. (2006) produced a report on high school dropout and the reasons why so many students feel it necessary to leave an education system in which they felt lacked relevance and care.

The crisis level has been mounting against the nation's education system and the federal government to combat the student dropout rates, specifically among African American students. The poorest segment of urban and rural students caught in this epidemic have a civil right to be educated wholly in academics and character. More effort remains essential to integrate character and civic education into the curriculum for thousands of students, especially those trapped in so-called dropout factories. Educators and policymakers have to accept the inevitability of change in a society whose morals and community values continue to shift the familial responsibilities from the parent to the educator.

America can no longer afford to maintain the argument of who is responsible to teach character and civil responsibilities. Haynes and Pickeral (2008) echoed what Dewey (1916) wrote in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century- the aim of all schools should be to prepare students for productive, intellectual, and civically engaged citizenship in their community. Education has a duty to promote civic understanding and responsibility. Reforming civic education curriculum to include the civic knowledge and understanding and the responsibility of earning a high school diploma is necessary for the survival of basic democracy in American communities.

The 2001 NCLB mandated that educators teach academic and civic education to close the achievement gap among racial groups in America. As the students' civic values shift in America, the education system requires a major reform of what it means to educate students civically and when such education is necessary. The roundtable of decision-makers (e.g., legislators, district superintendents, and other policymakers) has

found reason enough to address education apathy, achievement gaps, implementation of civic values curriculum, and equitable education in schools. Therefore, education should be a moral and political practice, and the classroom is an optimal place where students could engage in the knowledge and understanding of civic responsibility.

### *Recommendations*

The school dropout rate is on the minds of educators and policymakers, and it has had rippling effects across the nation. It is beneficial to reform the methodology and timing of teaching the civic responsibility of a high school diploma. Additional research into the most effective grade level at which to teach of civic responsibility of a high school diploma will reveal whether such teaching is critical. The subject of civic responsibility of a high school diploma will best be absorbed if the subject is on a continuum of learning throughout student academic life. Further investigations about student attitudes toward the high school diploma as a civic responsibility will be necessary to reform civic education curriculum in the classroom.

## APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Research Request Letter

Date

Dear XXX,

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Sacramento State University, I am conducting an exploratory descriptive study on the issue of educational rights and African American high school dropout students. This study will examine the relationship between students who receive an early civic education and student attitudes about dropping out of school. The population target would be students between the ages of 17-30 year old students who are obtaining a GED because of leaving school early.

The purpose of the survey is to understand the motivational factors that would contribute to a student's decision to drop out of school. The questionnaire is somewhat probative and some respondents may feel uncomfortable in answering some of the questions. If at any point students feel discomfort, they may opt to discontinue the survey. Additionally, I have attached a copy of the survey for your review.

I will contact your office to set up an appointment so that I may address any concerns, and set up data collection times. I appreciate your time and guarantee the confidentiality of your students.

Thank you very much for your time and assistance.  
Sincerely,

Charlane Starks  
Graduate Student  
Sacramento State University- College of Education

APPENDIX B

Demographic Questionnaire and Survey

### Part 1: Demographic Questionnaire

Dear Participant,

Thank you in advance for answering the following questions regarding your educational experience. Your responses are important to examine social issues effecting academic achievement among our Kindergarten through Twelfth grade school population. Please fill out the questions by placing a check next to the appropriate answer.

**Age Group:**     17-23 years old     24-30 years old     31 and above

**Gender:** Male                       Female

**What is your highest completed level of education?**

Below 6<sup>th</sup> grade

6<sup>th</sup> - 9<sup>th</sup> grade

10<sup>th</sup> - 11<sup>th</sup> grade

**How would you describe your ethnic background?**

American Indian or Native American

Asian/Pacific Islander

Black/African American

White/Caucasian

Hispanic/Latino/Latina

Multiracial  Please which ethnic heritages you most identify with:

\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_

If your ethnic heritage is different from the list above, please write it here:

\_\_\_\_\_

## Part 2: Survey

For each statement, circle the number that most indicates your thoughts using the following range:

**5-strongly agree    4-agree    3-somewhat agree    2-disagree    1-strongly disagree**

1. In school, I had at least one subject I enjoyed learning.

5      4      3      2      1

2. In school, I had an understanding of positive social behavior in my community.

5      4      3      2      1

3. In school, I had both academic and civic education curriculum.

5      4      3      2      1

4. In school, people really cared about me as a person.

5      4      3      2      1

5. The negative behavior of other people influenced me in school and in my community.

5      4      3      2      1

6. I feel having a high school diploma is a form of community participation.

5      4      3      2      1

7. Having a high school diploma makes me feel a part of my community.

5      4      3      2      1

8. As a student, I spent time volunteering in my community.

5      4      3      2      1

9. Learning about community participation in school is important.

5      4      3      2      1

10. Please, use this space to write any other thoughts about your educational experience.

**Thank you for your time.**

APPENDIX C

Data Collection Instructions

Dear Educator,

Thank you for assisting me with the data collection portion of my thesis project. Here are some directions for collection:

1. Give each student a two-sided questionnaire
2. Students should complete questionnaire as best to knowledge, answers are completely confidential
3. Students may complete the questionnaire using either a pen or pencil
4. Questionnaire is confidential, so names are not necessary
5. Once questionnaires have been completed, place them in the envelope and return to front office.

Thank you again for your assistance. If you have any comments or questions regarding this survey, feel free to email me at \_\_\_\_\_.

Sincerely,

Char Starks  
Graduate Student  
Sacramento State University  
College of Education

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