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Relationships and dropping out: The voice of at-risk youth

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RELATIONSHIPS AND DROPPING OUT:
THE VOICE OF AT-RISK YOUTH

by

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ABSTRACT

Relationships and Dropping Out
The Voice of At Risk Youth

by

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The practice of retaining students in grade has been studied, researched, discussed, criticized and yet it continues. Dropping out of school prior to graduation has been studied, researched, discussed, written about and continues to be practiced by our youth. Policymakers are often provided quantitative data to consider as they explore, evaluate, and deliberate issues such as the practice of retention-in-grade to assure adherence to standards, or in response to the social, political, and educational problems created by youth who have dropped out from school.

Current studies and research into retention and dropping out fail to include the issues from the perspective of the individual; from the standpoint of the dropout. That failure is not a methodological one; the voices of the dropout have not yet been heard. This qualitative study gives voice to the population of at-risk youth. It allows youth who have been struggled and subsequently dropped out of school to tell their story. Their voice becomes a powerful force in the process of educational reform. By considering the
needs of the individual, education moves toward doing things with them rather than to them.

This mixed methods multiple case study involved collection and analysis of questionnaire data, analysis of demographic information, conducting and analyzing interviews. Participants were youth ages eighteen to twenty-eight years old who chose to return to complete high school graduation requirements through an adult education program.

The findings indicate that the most significant issue in their decision to drop out involved the lack of a meaningful relationship with one or more of their teachers. Retained in grade was an explored characteristic but was not a characteristic that all study participants experienced in their school careers. The issue of retention is not as significant as their desire to have a relationship with a significant adult in school who demonstrates care and concern.

Their story compels policy-makers, decision-makers, and educators to consider more than standards, curriculum, and regulations. They must consider the individual.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ................................................................................................................................. iii

LIST OF TABLES ..................................................................................................................... vi

LIST OF FIGURES .................................................................................................................. vii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .......................................................................................................... ix

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION .......................................................................................... 1
  Problem Statement ............................................................................................................. 9
  Purposes of the Study ....................................................................................................... 11
  Research Questions ......................................................................................................... 11
  Research Design .............................................................................................................. 12
  Participants ....................................................................................................................... 12
  Data Collection .............................................................................................................. 13
  Definition of Terms ....................................................................................................... 16
  Limitations ..................................................................................................................... 17
  Summary ....................................................................................................................... 18

CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE ..................................................... 20
  Characteristics of a Dropout .......................................................................................... 21
  Families .......................................................................................................................... 23
    Family Education ........................................................................................................ 25
    Family Economics ....................................................................................................... 25
  Ethnicity .......................................................................................................................... 26
  Student Behavior .......................................................................................................... 27
  Dropout Prediction ........................................................................................................ 29
  Prevention ....................................................................................................................... 31
  Retention ......................................................................................................................... 32
  Critical Theory ............................................................................................................... 40
  Summary ....................................................................................................................... 44

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY ....................................................................................... 46
  Research Design: A Qualitative Study ......................................................................... 48
  Conceptual and Methodological Framework .............................................................. 53
  Participants ..................................................................................................................... 54
  Data Collection ............................................................................................................. 56
    Sources ....................................................................................................................... 56
    Questionnaires ........................................................................................................... 56
    Demographics .......................................................................................................... 57
# Table of Contents

- Interviews ........................................................................................................... 58
- Role of Researcher ....................................................................................................... 61
- Data Analysis ............................................................................................................... 62
- Coding ..................................................................................................................... 65
- Trustworthiness ............................................................................................................ 66
- Limitations ................................................................................................................... 67

## CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS .............................................................................................. 68

- Questionnaire Results .................................................................................................. 69
  - Ethnicity .................................................................................................................. 70
  - School District ....................................................................................................... 71
  - Number of Schools ................................................................................................. 74
  - Personal Influences ............................................................................................... 74
  - Reasons for Leaving ............................................................................................... 76
  - Dropout Intervention ............................................................................................. 78
  - Dropout Theme ....................................................................................................... 79

- Interview Results ......................................................................................................... 81
  - Tyler ........................................................................................................................ 81
  - Jose .......................................................................................................................... 85
  - Shawnita .................................................................................................................. 87
  - Lynette ..................................................................................................................... 89
  - Stephanie ............................................................................................................... 90
  - Channelle ............................................................................................................... 91
  - Merari ...................................................................................................................... 92
  - Brenda ..................................................................................................................... 94
  - Cynthia .................................................................................................................... 96
  - Juan ......................................................................................................................... 97
  - Ditching ................................................................................................................... 99

- Integration of Interview Data ..................................................................................... 101
  - Teachers ................................................................................................................ 102
  - Students .................................................................................................................. 104

## CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSIONS: PERSPECTIVES ON DROPPING OUT ................. 108

- Relationships Theme ................................................................................................. 113
- New Understandings ................................................................................................. 117
- Future Research ........................................................................................................ 118
- Conclusions ............................................................................................................... 119

## APPENDIX A INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD INFORMED CONSENT .......... 124

## APPENDIX B STUDENT INFORMATION SHEET ............................................... 127

## APPENDIX C INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS ......................................................... 130

## REFERENCES ............................................................................................................... 145

## VITA ............................................................................................................................... 150
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1  Ethnicity - Questionnaire Completers ............................................................. 70
Table 2  Ethnicity - Alternative HS Registrations ......................................................... 71
Table 3  Ethnicity - School District ............................................................................... 72
Table 4  Ethnicity – Community.................................................................................... 72
Table 5  Questionnaire Ethnicity Correlation Coefficients............................................ 73
Table 6  Personal Influences While in School – Questionnaire Completers ................. 75
Table 7  Reasons for Dropping Out – Questionnaire Completers ................................. 77
Table 8  What could have been done to prevent dropping out – Questionnaire.......... 79
Table 9  Frequency of Issues Raised by Participants in Interviews.............................. 103
Table 10 “Un” Table.................................................................................................... 112
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After four years as an undergraduate, two master’s degrees, an educational specialist degree, and an administrative certificate program, I thought I had had my limit. I was wrong. Dr. Michael S. Robison recognized potential I did not know I had. He encouraged me to embark on this, my most recent educational journey. I am grateful for his encouragement. Mike’s support throughout this experience, all the way to the dissertation defense, was very much appreciated.

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As a dissertation chairperson, Dr. James Crawford provided the help, guidance, support and encouragement necessary to keep me focused and heading toward successful completion. As a faculty member, his instructional style was meaningful and challenged my individual limits. As a friend, James shared my excitement during the research phase, spent countless hours reviewing data, assisting in the analysis, and helping to identify meaning. His telephone calls with new ideas or alternative meanings helped me to further my learning.
James, you have my deepest appreciation. You helped me to achieve something I never thought possible.
Jill wakes to the sound of her toddler’s cries and taps on her pregnant stomach. She gets out of bed, stretches, and rubs her eyes. As she bends down, she grabs her baby, picking her up and throwing her on her hip and heads off to the kitchen. After sticking the baby in a chair she opens the refrigerator, takes out a cold waffle and tosses it on the table in front of Lisa. Jill heads off to get ready to start another day. But today will be different. It is a day she has anticipated for quite some time. After looking through a pile of clothes, she finds a pair of jeans she can still fit into without too much difficulty and climbs into them. She finds a shirt; puts on her sneakers and then heads to the kitchen to get Lisa ready.

Lisa has made a mess with her breakfast. She has waffle on the floor, the chair, the table, in her hair, even in her ear. Jill brushes waffle off the toddler with a dry cloth. She lays Lisa on the floor and changes her diaper and puts a shirt, pants and sneakers on her.

Jill pushes the stroller down the street as Lisa walks beside her mom. The walk is long, but Jill is hoping it will be worth it. Arriving at her destination, she enters the building and heads to one of the offices.

“Can I help you?” some one asks.

“Yeah, I’m here to register for school” says Jill.
“Have you been here before?” the counselor asks.

Jill replies, “No, but I have to go to school.”

“How old are you?” asks the counselor.

“Sixteen.”

The counselor asks, “Do you have a student number?”

“Yeah, I think it was 345324. It’s been a bunch of years since I’ve been in school” says Jill.

After checking the district’s student records system, the counselor explains, “Jill, you haven’t passed the eighth grade. You can’t enroll here. You have to go back to the middle school.”

“But I’m sixteen. I’m supposed to be a junior. I can’t go back to middle school” replies Jill. “I have a baby and another on the way.”

“I’m sorry, but we can’t help you until you have passed the eighth grade. It’s the law here in Nevada. You’ll have to go back to the middle school.”

Dejected, Jill leaves the high school. Lisa, still with pieces of waffle in her hair, and her mom head down the street toward the middle school. Approaching the building, she remembers middle school. She heads inside, pushing Lisa in the stroller. After finding the guidance office, she announces that she wants to re-enroll in eighth grade so she can go to high school. The counselor asks if she brought her mother, and if someone was with her to watch her baby sister.

Jill replies, “She’s my kid and no my mother isn’t here. She can’t take anymore time off work to help me out. She told me I have to do this myself.”

“Jill, how old are you?” asks the counselor.
“I’m sixteen. I’ll be seventeen next December” explains Jill.

“Jill, you can’t enroll here in middle school being sixteen, especially with a child. It looks like you are pregnant as well. Is that correct?” asks the counselor.

“Yeah, isn’t it neat?” replies Jill.

“Well Jill, we can’t help you here. We can’t have a sixteen year old eighth grader in our middle school, especially an eighth grader who is pregnant AND has a child” explains the counselor who by this time has involved the building principal.

The principal reinforces the rejection.

Jill was a real-life sixteen year old in an urban setting trying to reengage in public school education. She was unlike the thousands of children across the nation who daily discontinues attending school. They have given up on the educational system for a host of reasons. Some children give up for a day and hang out at the park or go to the mall; some give up for a week and wander the neighborhood, go to a friend’s house after parents go to work, or simply stay at home; still others give up for a year, try to find a job; some give birth to a baby; many permanently remove themselves from their opportunity for education. What is it that brings them to that point? Why do they place themselves in jeopardy for the balance of their lives by limiting their education? Where does this problem originate? Who owns this problem? Is there a solution? What are some alternatives?

In 1981, the then United States Secretary of Education in the Reagan administration, Terrance Bell, created the National Commission on Excellence in Education. Bell’s direction to the commission was “to present a report on the quality of education in America” to Bell and to the American people by April 1983 (Gardner,
The commission’s findings written in the “A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform” report indicated that education was not preparing our young people for the world of work; students were not being prepared to successfully enter post-secondary education, and were not adequately prepared to work cooperatively with others (Gardner, 1983).

In the late 1980s and early 1990s the national attention on education focused on the need for excellence reforms (Margonis, 1992). The goals of excellence in education became the standard; students who could not achieve the goals were identified as “at-risk.”

In response to the media attention directed to these educational shortcomings, in the mid- to late-1980s discussions centered on excellence in education. To understand and know excellence required standards. National teacher organizations developed and published educational standards for their subject areas. States and individual school systems began to emphasize standards-based education with increased measures of accountability. While the term “at-risk” had been in use for many years, critics of the standards movement identified those students unable to meet standards as being “at-risk.” Students at-risk were defined in terms of their relationship to excellence (Margonis, 1992).

Jill’s scenario is a reality in Nevada schools as a direct result of legislation addressing accountability. In 1997, the 69th Nevada legislature considered and approved a number of bills addressing educational issues. The Nevada Education Reform Act (SB 482) set standards and assessments, improved accountability, addressed technology, and provided for legislative review (Assemblyman Wendell P. Williams et al., 2000). The
legislature also approved Assembly Bill 376 (AB 376) in that same biannual session. AB 376, subsequently written into Nevada Administrative Code 389.445, 2, states that students must earn at least one and one-half units of credit in language arts, and one and one-half units of credit in mathematics in grades seven and eight for promotion to high school (NAC). Jill was statutorily unable to attend high school.

Nevada school districts implemented NAC 389.445,2 by mid-1998. By the 2000-01 school year, school personnel and students began to recognize the impact the legislation was having as some students were unable to meet promotion requirements to high school. Nevada junior high and middle schools saw increases in the number of older eighth graders in their schools. Social promotions to high school were no longer an option available to middle school principals. Junior high and middle school principals began listening to concerns expressed by parents of sixth grade students that their eleven year-old child is in school with older children who are, in some cases, sixteen and even seventeen years old.

The 1997 Nevada legislature intended to improve the preparation of students for high school by requiring that entering ninth grade students meet minimum requirements. The legislation and its implementation had various unintended consequences. Focusing on student academic preparation for high school has for the most part been beneficial to the majority of students; it has served to address student performance. It has however, created a class of students who are unable to meet those academic expectations. The legislation is silent on its focus on the more global issues that places students at greater risk for academic failure and their subsequent avoidance of those stimuli that remind them of their inadequacies. What impact does the legislation have on the Nevada
students who are unable to meet the increased grade eight to nine promotion requirements? What will be the impact on the rate at which students disengage in school? Will additional legislation constrain students from disengaging?

Students unable to proceed to ninth grade being unable to meet promotion requirements are at high risk for disengaging from school. It is important for those students to be educated. That class of students feeling disenchanted with school will cost society significantly. The Alliance for Excellent Education (2007) projects that of the students who dropped out of the class of 2007, if they actually graduated, the nation would benefit from an additional $329 billion in income over their lifetimes and another $135 billion in taxes and social security payments (Rouse, 2005). School systems must find ways to keep youth engaged or find ways to reengage those who have exited. Beginning to understand the individual is a key; understanding their needs, desires, and goals is critical to their success.

Considerable research has been completed that attempts to understand the characteristics of at-risk youth (R. Rumberger, Ghatak, Poulos, Ritter, & Dornbusch, 1990). Research has also been done to address behavior issues often associated with at-risk youth (Betts & Shkolnik, 1999), establishing or evaluating programs for at-risk youth (Lever et al., 2004; Wehlage, 1987), studying school completion rates of at-risk students (Gerald W Bracey, 1996; R. W. Rumberger & Thomas, 2000), the impact of transience on school completion (Alspaugh, 1998; R. W. Rumberger & Larson, 1998), and the impact of class size and student achievement (J. D. Finn, 1989; Hoxby, 2000; Odden, 1990; Reichardt, 2001).
Schools have various groups or classes of youth. There exist the academics, the geeks, the skaters, druggies, motor-heads, jocks, and others. However, no one identifies the group of at-risk youth as a formal class. Students who belong to this group often originate from these other groups. Some youth recognize what they see as their futility in remaining in school, see that they can never change the system, see that the system will not change for them, accept their oppression, and choose to leave.

Freire (1970) discusses the problem of humanization. He identifies an exploited group of people and characterizes them as being oppressed. The oppressed have been dehumanized. To be released from their oppression Freire suggests “learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions.” The exploited are to identify those issues that have strong emotional impact on them if they are to begin to break from their oppression (Freire, 1970). Freire further explains that oppressors view the oppressed simply as objects to be controlled, manipulated and maintained. The oppressed are mutants in a “theme of silence” (p. 106). The at-risk youth who have chosen to leave school, have been pushed from school, or are continuing to attend school but do not know why and contemplate a non-return have not yet broken the theme of silence and are mutants in the process of education. The images they have of themselves are as failures.

The engagement of all learners into the teaching-learning process requires a rethinking of the current praxis. The development of schools being responsive to the needs of all students will necessitate a critique, a critical review of the condition of education. Starratt (1991) identifies the bureaucracy of school systems as “an enduring problem, not simply a contemporary phenomenon” (p. 189) suggesting that the focus of attention may be on entities other than the student. To accomplish the business of
education the pedagogy may necessitate becoming more ethical. The ethic of critique “draws its force from ‘critical theory,’ that body of thought deriving from the Frankfurt School of Philosophers” (Starrat, 1991)(p. 189). Critical theory explores social life as problematic resulting from the struggle between competing interests and desires among people and the different groups in society (Starrat, 1991). Through this exploration, the critical analysts encourage others to address the injustice. “The theme of critique forces administrators to confront the moral issues involved when schools disproportionately benefit some groups in society and fail others” (Starrat, 1991)(p. 190).

The ethic of justice requires that the system serve both the good of the people and the rights of the individuals in the school (Starrat, 1991). To promote a just social order in the school and the school community must review their praxis. This review often will suggest new alternatives enhancing justice for all.

Starratt (1991) proposes that for schools to be just, they must be complemented with an ethic of caring. Caring is evidenced in the climate of the school community. The community is there for the individual and the individual for the community. There must be continuous positive regard in all relationships for the school to demonstrate a true ethic of caring. Often our at-risk youth are individuals who need the attention the most and receive the least.

The importance of giving voice to oppressed students, allowing their issues to be brought to the forefront in the dialogue on school reform, becomes a necessary component. The attention of the education community must be focused on the issues of these oppressed students; the attention of policy makers must also be to remove all oppressive influences. Not all students are alike. Not all adolescents can be treated alike,
expecting similar results from all. There are youth without familial support, without appropriate role models, some lacking reasonable living accommodations, some see their peer group as more influential than any adult, some have tried without their efforts recognized, and many have reached the point where they know that they know all they need to know.

Problem Statement

The implementation of AB 376, approved by the Nevada Legislature in 1997, created a population of students who are over-age in the eighth grade that is, fifteen years of age or older. These students, unable by statute to be promoted to the ninth grade, went unnoticed for years until their numbers created social problems in middle schools requiring administrative attention. The attention paid was on the issue of promotion to high school without regard to the underlying needs of students. No meaningful dialog was conducted that would enable student concerns and needs to be identified. There exists a lack of understanding of the many life struggles students face. Those struggles are virtually unknown to most educators that contribute to their academic difficulties. The knowledge of those struggles is not to be used to excuse any student’s poor school performance, but is intended to suggest the need for alternate programming for some students. The implementation of AB 376 from the 1997 legislative session has had unintended consequences for Nevada schools. Preventing students from progressing to ninth grade created a mind-set with students and a different mind-set for faculty.

The seventy-fourth Nevada legislative session (2007) recognizing that a social and academic issue now exists in schools with these over-age, non-promotable eighth
grade students considered and approved SB 312. SB 312 gave local educational agencies the opportunity to develop policies and regulations for the placement of an at-risk, over-age eighth grade student who would otherwise not be promoted, to be placed in a high school setting on academic probation, yet another pejorative term with consequences yet to be identified. The legislature, in an attempt to show concern for the children of Nevada, also approved SB 184 and AB 485 that revised accountability reports making it a requirement that school systems collect and report the annual rate of students dropping out of school in grade eight as a separate report from those dropping out in grades nine to twelve. However, the collection of this data and reporting the data ignores the underlying needs and problems faced by the effected students. Bringing the problem to focus through data collection will not ameliorate the challenges faced each day by these oppressed students. The state legislature has attempted to quantify a problem ignoring its etiology with a disregard for solutions. This study brings those issues into focus allowing for discussion, followed by action thereby enhancing educational outcomes for all students. The issue is not mandating of requirements but the recognition of students as individuals.

The newest regulatory change by the Nevada legislature allows for the social promotion of students to the next grade thereby transferring the real problem to high school environments. High schools are now confronted with a group of students who have not met promotion requirements and cannot actively participate in the high school curriculum until they have demonstrated competence with the middle school curriculum. The question of whether high schools are ready to address the needs of this population of already at-risk students in a meaningful manner.
Purposes of the Study

The purposes of this study were: (1) to identify characteristics of the increasing population of adolescent students retained in the grade; (2) to examine the impingement of the legislative mandate of retention in grade has had on an over-age adolescent with regard to dropping out before completion; (3) to investigate the longer-term status of those students; and (4) to give voice to this at-risk population allowing them to share the effect of Nevada’s promotion legislation on their individual lives with the idea that legislative change can be considered.

Research Questions

In view of the outcomes of the legislation and through the voices of students, this study intended to address the following research questions:

1. What is the profile of a student overage in grade?
2. What attributes and/or people influence the over-age student to remain in school or to consider leaving?
3. What issues are identified by over-age students while they attended classes on their assigned middle school campus?
4. Why do over-age students drop out of school prior to completion?
5. What student identified interventions are necessary to prevent over-age students from dropping out of school?
Research Design

This is primarily a qualitative methods study designed to give voice to those oppressed youth who have chosen to drop out of school prior to graduation (Clandinin, Davies, Hogan, & Kennard, 1993; Creswell, 2003). The voice they are given must be heard by decision-makers if education is ever to truly leave no child behind. Their collective message will demonstrate the unintended consequences of Nevada’s promotion legislation.

This mixed methods, multiple case study (Creswell, 2003) utilizing questionnaires, demographics, and interviews will enable a select group of at-risk youth to tell their story of the challenges they faced while in school, their needs that went unmet, their priorities that were inconsistent with those of school personnel and often times parents.

A narrative format (Clandinin et al., 2006; Creswell, 2003) was used to inform all who attempt to engage youth educationally without a real understanding of their life experiences. Having a clearer understanding of where a child has been will increase the likelihood that we can positively influence where they are going. Narrative research allows those youth to tell the stories that are significant to their education; those stories that many educators have never heard, or maybe never thought to ask. This study allows youth to tell their story; the research organizes those stories in a meaningful sequence.

Participants

Nearly seven thousand youth drop out from school each day across the nation (Center, 2008). Some dropouts find employment and work for the balance of their lives;
some have difficulty maintaining gainful employment and skip from job to minimum wage job; after a period of time, some learn that their earlier decision was not the best one and choose to return to complete their high school education; still others complete their high school education and continue to post-secondary programs. The amount of time a student is out of school will determine how they can reengage in the educational system. Individuals who have been out of school for a year or more will find returning to earn their high school diploma can only be accomplished through adult education program. Individuals who have chosen to return to school accessing an adult education program provide basic registration information that includes the last grade they attended in school, their best recollection of course grades they earned, credits earned toward their high school diploma, their current employment status, and goals. One adult high school principal noted in a personal interview that many of the returning students want so much to share their story with someone when they come to register.

Utilizing a structured process, reengaged adult education students were given the opportunity to tell their story. After consent and documentation, the student began the story and was allowed to tell it the way they chose; a way that made sense for them, allowing them to include any points they felt important. During this student monolog, the researcher asked clarifying questions assuring a clear understanding of the message of the participant. Clarifying questions were open-ended or a closed format dependent upon the information shared (Ivey, 1994). With specific written permission by the participant, an audio recording of the interview was taken and transcribed for later analysis.
Data Collection

Data collection was conducted in two stages. In the first stage participants were asked to complete a questionnaire designed to collect meaningful research information that was later analyzed. Demographic information together with personal information including grades repeated, number of schools attended, ethnicity, special education status, last grade attended prior to their return to adult education, and English Language Learner status was collected from one hundred thirty-two completed, usable questionnaires. Inquiries were made to better understand their family dynamics and the impact on their education. The questionnaire also helped to stimulate recollections of school by asking questions such as a significant event (positive or unfavorable) in school that had particular meaning to the participant; a school employee who made an impression; the best experience they had in school; an experience they wished they didn’t have; if given the opportunity, the message they would like to deliver to youth of today planning to drop out of school; and if given the opportunity, the message they would like to deliver to the school leaders.

The second stage of the data collection was individual interviews with ten reengaged students. The interview afforded the participant the opportunity to explain significant life events that contributed to their earlier decision to leave school – to tell their story. The interviews also offered participants a forum to tell the researcher those things they wanted to tell school personnel but were never given the chance, or no one would listen. Participants were given latitude in the story telling. The language of the street was as acceptable as the language of academician (Ivey, 1994; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Spradley, 1980). Interviews were conducted at a location comfortable to
the participant. Each participant will be given the opportunity to identify a location favorable to them (home, school, library, restaurant, community center, or favorite fast-food establishment) that allowed for their comfort, safety, and enhance the free-flow of ideas and recollections. All interview participants chose to meet with the researcher at an office located in the school.

The triangulation of information obtained from interviews and questionnaires from each participant contributed to trustworthiness of this study (Creswell, 2003). School records were reviewed to assure consistency between reported questionnaire data and school information. Recognizing the transient nature of the population of participants, where possible, participants were provided a written summary of their interview which gave them the opportunity to view, modify, or clarify any of their previous comments (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Spradley, 1980). This step further strengthened and enhanced the trustworthiness of the data.

Data Analysis

Descriptive, demographic data was collected for a population of students who previously left high school and have now reengaged in pursuit of their high school diploma. That data included such elements as the number of schools a student attended since kindergarten; the number of times and grades a student repeated; ethnicity; special education status; current English Language Learner coding (indicating their level of competence with English); and the date school records indicated they were withdrawn from school attendance. These data elements were used to answer research question number one.
Research questions two, three, four, and five were answered through the analysis of the participant story, follow-up and clarifying questions, and the analysis of the completed participant questionnaire. That detailed analysis involved the organizing of the data; immersion in the data; category generation and themes; coding of the data; development of interpretations; identification of alternative understandings; and, the actual written report (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). It was anticipated that various themes would emerge through this analysis. It was anticipated that those themes would capture the essence of the experiences of children created by Nevada’s legislative action.

Definition of Terms

When used within this study, the following terms listed below are ascribed the following meaning:

“At-Risk” is a status term assigned to an adolescent who by virtue of various factors is at an increased likelihood of not completing high school. Those factors could include such elements as socioeconomic status, familial support, poor school attendance, and being older than the peer group. Any one or a combination of factors has increased the likelihood that a student may not complete high school.

“Dropout,” used as a noun, refers to a person who has discontinued attendance at school prior to its natural and accepted conclusion as in graduation or completion of an assigned program.

“Over-age adolescent” is a term used to describe those individuals who adolescents in school and are older than the majority of their classmates. Adolescents may be older that some classmates because they started school later due to birth date
eligibility requirements. The cause of the “over-age” in this study is due to having to repeat a grade in school.

“Retention” refers to the act of preventing a child from progressing to the next higher grade in school at a time when other students are making that progression. “Retention” is also colloquially referred to as “holding (or left) back,” “non-promotion,” or “failing a grade.”

“Reengaged” is the term used to describe the process that the dropout follows to return to school to pursue the completion of their high school diploma requirements.

“Social Promotion” is the process utilized by schools to place a student in the next higher grade even when the student has not met minimum requirements or standards in the current grade.

Limitations

The narrative format of this qualitative research gains its meaning from the recollections of the participants. The strength of the results is from the richness of the recollections. Those recollections are from previous school experiences; some may be recent, others from a number of years ago. As a person ages, reflections on previous events can temper the intensity of feelings one had at the time. Reflections of events are also impacted by an individual’s memory. Events are filtered through one’s experiences, perceptions, and degree of importance they assign.

This study is limited by the ability of the participants to recall thoughts, events, behaviors and feelings from their past. In reflecting on their past, a participant may overlook or discount a particular series of events that had relative importance. While
participants were afforded the opportunity to review the data that was collected and offered additional clarifying information, this was only beneficial if the participant was able to be contacted and was willing to review that initial data. The transient nature of the population limited follow-up review.

The skills of the interviewer were also a limiting factor. The use of open-ended, follow-up questions is important to uncovering those thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that were significant in the participant’s adolescent experiences. The interviewer, being a licensed counselor with an understanding of interviewing still must attend to all the participant’s expressions, both verbal as well as non-verbal. Any follow-up questions that needed to be explored after review of the initial data collection event were asked when the participant was afforded the opportunity for review. If that participant was not available for the review, the use of that data is limited.

Summary

Dropping out of school continues to be an issue of concern within society. Nationally much has been explored, discussed, and written on the importance of education for all. Societal concerns associated with dropouts that appear in print include a less well-educated populace; decreased economic contributions by the dropout; increased social welfare costs associated with dropouts; increasing numbers of dropouts being sent to prison (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 2003). Initiatives at the state and local level in some areas have been on reengaging the dropout. Efforts have been reactive. This is the problem. We should investigate it and identify a permanent solution. However, a proactive strategy designed to be preventative has not yet been discussed.
This study engages the very individuals who are the source of the concern. This study attempts to uncover the etiology of the decision to drop out from those who have actually dropped out.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This study was designed to bring to light the challenges faced by the population of over-age adolescent students who were retained in grade and ultimately left school. Examining the educational impact of issues faced by an over-age adolescent student suggests a number of salient issues. Being over-age in grade in school increases the challenges for students. Having a clear understanding of these challenges associated with their status is important if educators are to effectively engage youth in the teaching-learning process, and keep them engaged in school. Issues associated with youth identified as being “at-risk” include characteristics of that status; the impact of retention in school grade on the individual as well as the system; the ethics of leadership in the education of youth in general and at-risk in specific; and the importance of hearing and understanding the messages being delivered by these retained youth. This chapter begins with a review of characteristics commonly ascribed to youth identified as being “at-risk” for leaving school prior to completion of graduation requirements. A contributing factor to a student’s being at-risk includes retention. A discussion of retention and its corollary of social promotion is presented. It is hoped that schools, school districts, and state legislatures attempt to balance the needs of the individual; the expectations of institutions of higher learning; employers; and, the expectations and regulations of the state.
Balancing needs and expectations, of often-divergent issues, should include ethical considerations. A review of the ethics of leadership is also presented.

The issue of early leaving from school continues to be a significant point of discussion between and among educators, communities, legislatures, businesses, and governmental agencies. With the volume of information written on the dropout problem, little has been done that furthers the understanding of the life of a child before, during and after dropping out of school. This begs for a forum allowing the voices of youth to be heard by all those who are charged with and involved with decision-making, allegedly, on their behalf.

Characteristics of a Dropout

The discontinuance of attendance in high school prior to graduation, its natural conclusion, as in earning a completion credential (diploma, adjusted diploma, certificate of completion, or certificate of attendance), is commonly referred to as “dropping out.” Researchers have used terms such as “early school leaving,” “dropouts,” and “non-graduates” to describe the phenomenon of not completing high school as evidenced in discontinuing attendance. Youth who leave school prior to its natural conclusion are ascribed the status of an “early school leaver” or a “dropout.” Dropping out of school continues to be a major issue for educational systems. Editorial Projects Education Research Center reported in Education Week’s Diplomas Count (2008) that the graduating class of 2004-05 had a graduation rate in Nevada of 45.4 percent where the national average was reported as 70.6 percent (Diplomas Count 2008: School to College. Can State P-16 Councils Ease the Transition?, 2008). The National Center for Education
Statistics reported for the 2005-06 school year that Nevada had the lowest average freshman graduation rate in the United States at 55.8 percent where the national average was 73.4 percent. That Nevada rate has shown a steady decline from 72.3 percent in the 2002-03 school year to 57.4 percent in the 2003-04 school year; data for the 2004-05 and 2005-06 school year both showed 55.8 percent.

Dropout and school completion data collected is categorized into one of four types of information. The “event dropout rate” provides the number of students who have left school during the year, i.e. they began a school year and left during the school year without earning a diploma and without enrolling the next year. The event dropout rate data is collected from students in grades nine through twelve. A second category of dropout information is the “status dropout rate.” Status dropout rate data is collected for individuals within a specified age range who have not earned a high school diploma or equivalent. The “status completion rate” identifies the population of individuals within a given age range who have completed high school with a diploma or an equivalency credential. The “averaged freshman graduation rate” represents the population of students who earned a high school diploma four years after entering the ninth grade (NCES, 2007).

The event dropout rate reports the percent of students dropping out during a given school year. The event dropout rate was 7.7 percent for Nevada where the national average was reported as 4.0. The event dropout rate for Nevada students in 2002-03 was 6.1 percent; the 2003-04 school year was 6.0 percent; 2004-05 school year data showed a continued small decline to 5.8 percent before increasing to 1.9 percentage points to 7.7 percent in the 2005-06 school year.
The concern with dropping out of school is not a recent phenomenon. National statistics show that during the 1980s, between 25 and 30 percent of high school students dropped out before graduating (Roderick, 1993). Cassel (2003) characterized the process of students dropping out from high school and college as a major social problem in the United States.

Students who often opt for an alternative education setting, a setting other than their comprehensive school, are at risk for dropping out of high school before completion (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004). Understanding the characteristics of youth leaving school prior to completion should be instructive to those who have responsibility in addressing this problem. Such an understanding will be created through a review of literature identifying characteristics and ending with a delineation of the process of dropping out that will be used within the purposes of this study.

Families

Families contribute significantly to a child’s development from infancy through childhood and then on to adolescence. Familial characteristics have been identified as contributing factors to early school leaving. Beekhoven and Dekkers (2005) identified that family characteristics such as the educational level of parents and family structure will influence the propensity toward dropping out. Students from single-parent homes, receiving public assistance, and those who are from a large family where a family member has dropped out are more likely to drop out of school (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002; Sommers & Pillawsky, 2004; Wehlage, 1987). Other researchers point to non-school-related factors as having greater influence, especially parenting styles and family
background. Rumberger (1983) concluded in his study on school dropouts that family background is a powerful predictor of dropout behavior. If parents did not have high school diplomas or did not stress the importance of education to their children, the children were at greater risk of leaving school early. To the contrary, Steele (1992) indicated that the socioeconomic level and marital status of the dropout student's parents, either together or separately, are not adequate predictors of potential dropouts.

Rumberger, Ghatak, Poulos, and Philip (1990), while conducting research in a high school in California, discovered that parents of dropouts were more likely to have permissive parenting styles, to use negative emotions regarding their children's academic abilities, and to tend to be less involved in their children's school activities.

Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollenck, and Rock (1986) presented their analysis of the salient characteristics of school dropouts in the national “High School and Beyond” study using the 1980 high school sophomore data set. They concluded that dropouts tend to come from homes with weaker educational support systems. Compared with non-dropouts, early school leavers had fewer study aids present in their homes; had less opportunity for non-school-related learning; were less likely to have both natural parents living at home; had mothers with lower levels of formal education; had mothers with lower educational expectations for their offspring; had mothers who were more likely to be working, and; had parents who were less likely to be interested in or to monitor both in-school and out-of-school activities.

Gleason and Dynarski, (2002) categorize risk factors into four clusters: family background, previous school experiences, personal/psychological characteristics, and adult responsibilities. They identify family background characteristics as: single-parent
family; family receiving public assistance; primary language one other than English; having a sibling who has dropped out; and, mother who did not graduate from high school.

**Family Education**

Although there are multiple factors that relate to school dropout, the education level of the parents seems to be important. Early research by Shaw (1982) found that the educational level of the parent (considered the head of the household) was the variable that most influenced learning by children, using standardized test data as the measure to make this determination. Learning then being related to success in school.

National Center for Educational Statistics indicates that the lower the level of the education of the parents, the more likely the child will become a school dropout (Roderick, 1993). This finding also being supported by the research of Steele (1992).

**Family Economics**

Researchers examining family background have found that family income, socioeconomic status, and parent's educational attainment are related to dropping out (Barro & Kolstad, 1987; Mare, 1980; National Center for Education Statistics, 1990, 1992). Relying upon dropping out as a crude indicator of education inequity, historic data confirm consistent patterns of relatively high dropout rates for low-income children and adolescents during the past century (Fine, 1991)

Hodgkinson (1986) reported that many students are at risk even before they enter school because of poverty, lack of English-speaking ability, and parents with a low level of education. Other researchers support at-risk programming as early as pre-school for
students exhibiting an at-risk profile based on family and environmental characteristics (Heckman & Krueger, 2003; Schargel & Smink, 2001).

Families often move from apartment to apartment, house to house, neighborhood to neighborhood seeking more affordable housing. Often those moves force students to enroll in new schools in new neighborhoods. High transience effect students’ feeling of belonging which will impact the likelihood of dropping out (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004). Each change of school that a child experienced increased that child's odds of dropping out by thirty percent. Students with a strong internal locus of control and good self-concept were less likely to drop out (Gerald W Bracey, 1996).

Rumberger (1995) found that an eighth-grader whose socioeconomic status (SES) was one standard deviation above the mean was one-third less likely to drop out than a student with a mean SES, while a student one standard deviation below the mean for SES was three times as likely to drop out as a student at the mean.

Dropouts consistently come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, have little support for school from home, perform poorly on academic tasks, have poor self-esteem, a history of poor attendance and trouble with school (Grissom & Shepard, 1989).

Ethnicity

Ethnicity may also be an important consideration in identifying characteristics of a student likely to drop out as dropouts are twice as likely to be children of color, primarily Black and Hispanic (McCall, 2003). Scanning for gender patterns, the main effects are what one might expect - males drop out more frequently than females (14.7 percent vs. 12.6 percent). However, when race, ethnicity, and geography are considered,
the patterns shift considerably. In Urban areas, Latinas drop out with far greater
frequency than any other group (26.2 percent vs. 20.2 percent Latinos); 15.7 percent,
white males vs. 15.3 percent white females; 24.4 percent African-American males, vs.
16.5 percent African American females. Young women overall drop out of high school
substantially more often than young men for reasons that have been classified as "family
concerns" (37 percent females vs. 5 percent males) (Fine, 1991).

From the period of 1978 to 1993, the event dropout rate for Hispanic males
exceeded the rates for black males as well as white males (Gerald W. Bracey, 1997).
Bracey (1997) also reports that the event dropout rate for Hispanic females for the period
1982 to 1993 was greater than the rate for black and white females. Black students who
reported that they had high-quality teachers were less likely to drop out, but this finding
did not hold for members of other groups (Gerald W Bracey, 1996).

**Student Behavior**

Students who do not feel a part of or are not engaged in school often consider
truancy as an alternative. Student absence/truancy from school (twenty or more absences
in a school year) increases the probability that a student will consider dropping out
(Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). Still, evidence suggests a clear relationship between today's
truant and tomorrow's dropout. One Illinois school district tracked two hundred-forty
chronically truant youth and found that just seven of them ever graduated from high
school and none of the others had obtained an equivalency certificate by the age of
twenty (C. E. Finn, 1987).
Other school performance measures related to dropping out have included being overage for grade level, having disciplinary problems in school, truancy, and spending little time on homework (Alexander & Pallas, 1984; Barro & Kolstad, 1987).

Previous school experiences include being absent twenty or more times during the school year; over-age for grade level by at least one year; earning low grades (Cs and Ds or below); experiencing disciplinary problems during the school year; having attended five or more schools during their lifetime; spends less than one hour per week doing homework; and, spends no time each week engaged in pleasure reading (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002).

Personal/psychological characteristics include an external locus of control; low self-esteem; parents who do not talk about school related issues; and, the expressed ideation that he/she is not sure about graduating from high school. Within the adult responsibilities category, having a child is identified (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002).

In a qualitative study at a high school, Fine (1991) found differing personal characteristics of dropouts compared to those who stay in school. Students who dropped out were significantly less depressed and more likely to challenge something perceived as an injustice, and less likely to provide conforming responses on a social desirability questionnaire. Students who remained in school were significantly more depressed, demonstrated a lower self-concept, and were more conforming.

Parents and school officials projecting a single reason for dropping out identified feelings by students that teachers did not care about them; students identified their number one reason for leaving school is to earn money (McCall, 2003).
The factors associated with the highest dropout rates were high absenteeism (students with that factor had a dropout rate of fifteen percent), and overage by two or more years (students with that factor had a dropout rate of sixteen percent). High absenteeism and being overage by two or more years were more efficient than other single risk factors, but they were not efficient as absolutes identifiers (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002).

Christenson and Thurlow (2004) identify dropping out of school as a process that must be viewed in context with alterable variables influencing the engagement of students. Beekhoven and Dekkers (2005) identify early school leaving as the result of a long and complex process. The processes that have influence on a youth’s decision to dropout are cumulative, which individually makes them difficult to identify and remediate.

Before dropping out of school, at-risk students often demonstrate low self-esteem and a sense of having lost control of their futures. They perceive that teachers do not show much interest in them. A majority of dropouts and potential dropouts also believe that the school's disciplinary system is neither effective nor fair (Wehlage, 1987).

Dropout Prediction

Gleason and Dynarski (2002) looked at the identification of when a student could be predicted to be a dropout. They indicated that characteristics measured when students are beginning the 7th grade do not predict accurately whether they will drop out. They also report that risk factors measured in the 10th grade do not reliably predict
dropping out, suggesting that the problem is not simply the point when risk factors are measured (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002).

Lloyd (1978) could predict dropping out with 75% accuracy using IQ, reading scores, retention, grade point average, and family background. The surprising feature of Lloyd's study was that all these variables were measured in the third grade. Being overage in third grade or having been retained by that time correlated .31 and .27 respectively, with dropping out of high school (Grissom & Shepard, 1989). A student retained in grade was eleven times more likely to drop out than one promoted regularly (Gerald W Bracey, 1996).

Some researchers have determined that school-related factors such as poor attendance, disciplinary problems, and low academic achievement affect student dropout behavior (Ekstrom, Goertz, Polleck, & Rock, 1986; Rumberger, Ghatak, Poulos & Phillips, 1990). Dropouts have also demonstrated lower mathematics, reading and language arts scores (McCall, 2003; Wehlage, 1987).

There was a positive relationship between the number of risk factors children were identified for an individual child and the probability that they were experiencing academic and/or behavioral problems (Luster & McAdoo, 1994).

Research supports the positive effects of engagement of students in the teaching-learning process. Finn (1989) identified two models in theorizing about the process that leads to dropout. First is the participation-identification model, which states that dropping out of school can be seen as an outcome of the process of participation and identification. Lack of participation leads to unsuccessful school outcomes contributing to the non-identification with school, culminating in the ultimate of non-participation.
being the actual physical withdrawal from school. The second model is the classic frustration-self-esteem model; low achievement destroys self-confidence and leads to problematic behavior. In both models, Finn particularly points to the processes within school as significant factors that impact the likelihood of an at-risk student becoming disengaged to the point of leaving school (J. D. Finn, 1989).

Prevention

Prevention strategies must begin early. Some assistance to children may come from teachers, but parental involvement seems to make the most difference, particularly at the preschool age (Schargel & Smink, 2001; Seaman & Yoo, 2001). Heckman and Krueger (2003) identify a major determinant of successful schools to be successful families. Schools can accomplish more with children if their efforts are reinforced by parents. Investments in education will be realized over a longer period of time and hence, have a greater cost-benefit ratio if they are implemented earlier (Heckman & Krueger, 2003).

Dynarski and Glason (2002) suggest that dropping out is as hard to prevent as it is easy to do. They suggest that some programs have improved outcomes for some students, but no program they studied was able to improve all key educational outcomes (e.g. dropping out, attendance, test scores, and grades) (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002). It then becomes important for decision makers to prioritize their expectations and make decisions based on that hierarchy.

A characteristic not of the student but of the school or school system is worthy of some consideration. It has been documented that high school dropout rates fall somewhat
as teacher-student ratios increase (Barro, 1984). The dropout rate rises as the number of
teacher moves, and transfer requests rise (Combs and Cooley, 1968) suggesting student
engagement is related to relationships with teachers.

Student achievement drops with increases in teacher turnover (Ascher and
Flaxman, 1987). In addition, schools in which students report a lack of faculty interest,
unfair discipline procedures, and widespread truancy (Wehlage and Rutter, 1986), as well
as those with rigid retention policies, tracking procedures, and competency examinations
report relatively high dropout rates (Barro, 1984; Oakes, 1985).

Retention

In the mid-nineteenth century, schools were essentially ungraded. Students
moved through the education system demonstrating competence with subject matter
(Balow & Schwager, 1990). This changed as a result of influence by American scholars
studying the German educational system during their study in Europe near the end of the
nineteenth century. The change established the differentiation of the curriculum by
grades. For students who did not meet curricular expectations for that grade a decision
had to be made regarding that child; retention in grade was introduced creating an option
for consideration (Balow & Schwager, 1990). By 1900 the retention of public school
students in grade became a significant problem with the grade failure rate reaching as
high as fifty percent and in some cases adolescents being retained in primary grades
(Balow & Schwager, 1990).

Children not meeting the expectations of their teachers present a dilemma when
summative evaluations are necessary. At the close of a school year when students must
be considered for promotion to the next consecutive grade, those children who have not met the expectations in their current grade create a decision point for educators. What should be done for a student who has not been successful in the current grade? Should the student be retained in their current grade? Should the student be promoted recognizing that he/she has not mastered the course content? If a student is retained in grade, what benefits can be expected? If a student is promoted without having demonstrated competence with the subject matter, what are the consequences? Answers to these questions need to be considered.

Holmes and Matthews (1984) in a meta-analysis of effects of retention on children identified four areas of consideration: academic achievement, personal adjustment, self-concept, and attitude toward school. Their statistical analysis included discussion of the effect size for the identified variables. The effect size values for academic achievement (-.37) indicated that non-promotion had a reasonably strong negative effect on students. Retained students scored an average of .27 standard deviation units below that of promoted students on measures of personal adjustment (including social adjustment, emotional adjustment, and behavior). Promoted students outscored retained students by .19 standard deviation units on self-concept measures. And retained students held school in less favor than promoted students although the effect size here does not indicate a large difference (Holmes & Matthews, 1984).

Respondents of a survey conducted by Byrnes and Yamoto (1986) were asked to identify their three principle characteristics of retained children given a list that included low self-esteem, learning disabled, low motivation, low intelligence, developmentally immature, emotionally unstable, disciplinary problems, shy and nonassertive, and lack of
English proficiency. Survey results indicated low self-esteem, low motivation and developmentally immature were characteristics consistently identified by teachers, principals, and parents (Byrnes & Yamamoto, 1986).

Grissom and Shepard (1989) found that failing a grade is strongly associated with dropping out of school in later years. House (1989) indicates that the effect is as strong as the effects of achievement itself in determining whether a student drops out. Being retained has as much to do with children dropping out as does their academic achievement (House, 1989). Research demonstrated that by ninth grade, between 30 and 50 percent of all students were retained at least once in their educational career (Shepard & Smith, 1989).

Most states do not publish retention data if they even collect it; however, Shepard and Smith (1990) through analysis of ages in grade data reported that forty-one percent of first graders had been retained. They also cite that in Arizona, nearly half of all students had been retained at least once during their academic career with academic achievement and self-concept of the retained students being negatively affected. Retained students were more likely to drop out of school than students who were never retained (Shepard & Smith, 1989).

Evidence exists to support the practice of social promotion as a better alternative to retention in grade (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2007). Allington and McGill-Franzen (2007) define social promotion as the practice of allowing the child to move with his/her peers; to continue with their kindergarten cohort. When children were socially promoted, they fared better than retained children, but they usually remained among the
lowest-achieving members of the group with only the retained children performing at lower levels (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2007).

Throughout their school experiences, children belong with their peers identified as their original kindergarten cohort (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2007). Retention carries a stigma identifying the assignment of the learning difficulties to the child – the child has failed rather than the system has failed the child. Social promotion assigns the responsibility to assist that child to his/her teacher. If and how the teacher assumes that responsibility is critical to that child’s future success.

School districts have considered alternatives to retention for children where evidence exists that states the child is not ready to move to the next grade. Considerations have included transition programs such as a pre-first or a middle school transition program. Allington and McGill-Franzen (2007) state that transitional-grade programs do not benefit children. Those programs provide another manner in which children are retained and do not permit children to continue with their kindergarten cohort. Allington and McGill-Franzen (2007) have also argued that retention and transitional-grade programs have no benefit to children or the community as they increase the cost of educating children by extending a child’s school career by at least one year.

Grissom and Shepard (1989) cite a study done by Schulz et al. (1986) that concluded that a year of remedial study could not positively impact achievement enough to negate the negative effect of being overage.

Retention of children in grade increases the costs of educating that child. Additional teachers, school facilities, instructional materials all become a necessity. Balow (1990) states that the increase in school system expenditures necessary to educate
retained students is consistent with the rate of retention. Using an example to illustrate, a system with a seven percent rate of retention will realize a budget increase of approximately seven percent.

A Mesa, Arizona study on retention provided the conclusion that retention with remediation had better results than retention alone, but suggested that the effects of promotion (social promotion) with remediation as a better alternative required further study (Balow & Schwager, 1990).

The thought exists that students who are in danger of failing a course or grade will be motivated to improve thereby avoiding that failure. Jackson (1975) studied non-promotion of children and found that in most cases, retention was not beneficial and the threat of grade failure did not serve as a motivating factor for students to improve academic performance.

Doyle (1989) identified four categories of research that failed to support the benefits of retention in grade. The categories identified are empirical evidence, intelligence, progress because of retention, and high standards. In considering empirical evidence, they cite Ayres and Thorndike data dating back to the early 1900s on retention. They reported that no appreciable progress resulted from retention. Gains by the majority of non-promoted students subsequent to retention were smaller than that of their matched age mates who were promoted. Similarly the threat of failure had no appreciable positive effect on the educational gain of students in danger of failing. Regarding high standards, Doyle (1989) indicates that they may not be the cure for low achievement citing their effects on motivation of hope for success and fear of failure; there is also high anxiety associated with the need to complete a complex task tends to produce avoidance.
behavior. This is particularly true when the task must be performed in a social setting where the fear of failure is compounded by the fear of social rejection.

Fine (1991) uses colloquial expression for retention as also “being left back.” On the basis of self-report and quantitative analysis, “being left back,” retained, or held over in grade seemed to disrupt educational and psychological well-being of students. Of thirty dropouts interviewed, eighty percent (twenty-four) had been retained at least once throughout their school career, and of these, twenty-nine percent indicated that the experience substantially contributed to their decision to drop out. They expressed frustration and disappointment. For some, being left back confirmed their own sense of inadequacy (Fine, 1991).

"There is no reliable body of evidence that indicates that grade retention is more beneficial than grade promotion for students with serious academic and adjustment difficulties" (Jackson, 1975, p. 627). Jackson’s 1975 study was important, cited many times as significant and the practice of retention continues.

The relationship between grade retention and dropping out has been observed, its potential importance for educational policy has been dismissed because of the obvious explanation that poor achievement very likely accounts for both retention and school leaving.

In a longitudinal study of dropouts in Dade County, Florida, Stephenson (1985) found that the dropout rate was fifty-five percent for over-age students compared to only twenty-seven percent for normal-age students. Stephenson (1985) cautions that from these results one cannot conclude that retention in and of itself cause higher dropout rates. It is likely that the occurrence of low achievement causes both being retained, and
dropping out. It is more likely that the occurrence of low interest in school, together with little extra-school support for school accomplishment, and perhaps other factors cause low achievement, which ultimately will result in dropping out (Stephenson, 1985).

Grissom and Shepard (1989) concluded that repeating a grade might directly increase the dropping out of school for a student. However, they go on to identify a competing hypothesis that poor achievement gives reason for both retention and dropping out. They focused on a series of studies done by Hess and Lauber (1985); Rice, Toles, Schulz, Harvey, and Foster (1987); Schulz, Toles, Rice, Brauer and Harvey (1986) that were conducted in the Chicago public schools. Those studies in various ways adjusted for student achievement before they examined the effect of retention on dropping out (Grissom & Shepard, 1989).

The Hess and Lauber (1985) report was based on 30,000 students using the 1978 entering cohort. Schulz, Toles, Rice, Brauer and Harvey (1986) combined these data with the 1979 and 1980 cohorts resulting in a sample of 77,000 students. They predicted dropout status using both log-linear and multiple regression analyses. When eighth grade reading scores and entry age were considered first, eighty percent of the modeled variance or thirty-eight percent of the total variance was accounted for. Grissom and Shepard (1989) concluded that on the average, the dropout rate of overage students is thirteen percent higher than the dropout rate of normal-age students with equivalent reading achievement scores. Looking at that from another perspective means that overage students must have reading scores approximately 2.25 grade levels higher than normal-age students to have the same chance of graduating. Schulz et al. (1986)
concluded that a year of remedial study could not possibly boost achievement enough to offset the negative effect of being overage (Grissom & Shepard, 1989).

A study by Rice, Toles, Schulz, Harvey and Foster (1987) provided a direct measure of the consequences of deciding to retain more children. In the spring 1980, a more stringent eighth grade promotion policy was imposed. Therefore, Rice et al. (1987) were able to examine directly what happened to dropout rates when the retentions were increased. The freshman class entering in 1979 was the last class unaffected by stricter eighth grade promotion standards. The 1980 class had uniquenesses because it was the only class to complete high school with a substantial number of low achievers removed. Low-scoring students from the class of 1980 subsequently joined the 1981 cohort after repeating the eighth grade. Rice et al. (1987) call attention to the significant decline in the total number of 1980 students. They indicate that because students were retained in eighth grade, the attrition was greatest in the normal-age and lowest achievement stratum. With so many at-risk students removed, the 1980 cohort had a substantially reduced dropout rate, thirty-six percent overall compared to forty-two percent the two preceding years (Hess and Lauber, 1985). The significance of the consequence of the more stringent eighth grade promotion policy cannot be overlooked. The intervention effect of the retention policy is seen in the 1981 data. These data show that the overall dropout rate climbed to an all-time high of forty-five percent. Additionally, the rate of dropping out for the average students actually increased, especially for the middle and above-average achievement students. Rice et al. (1987) concluded that being overage was more of a detriment to staying in school than poor achievement.
Changing schools had much more impact on blacks and whites than on Hispanics, while being retained was more important to whites and Hispanics than to blacks. Black students who reported that they had high-quality teachers were less likely to drop out, but this finding did not hold for members of other groups. High SES was important in keeping whites and Hispanics in school but not blacks (Gerald W Bracey, 1996).

Doyle (1989) poses a question asking if more emphasis should be placed on qualitative research in hopes that the findings of such research will preserve more of the sentiment and emotional tone that is lost through experimental science.

Critical Theory

A critical approach to understanding the process of youth dropping out of school prior to completion of graduation requirements involves a number of crucial components. There are the social influences that cause a student to leave school before completion. Youth leave school for personal reasons and others feel that they system has pushed them out. Understanding the thinking and reasoning of youth is one piece of a complex, integrated puzzle of educational systems that must fit into any comprehensive strategy designed to reduce the frequency of and ultimately eliminate dropping out of school.

Theory is a term used to explain a set of understandings that exist that assist in understanding some aspect of the world (Brookfield, 2005). Gramsci (1971) has ascribed a status of theorist to each person because he or she “participates in a particular conception of the world, has a conscious line of moral conduct, and therefore contributes to sustain a conception of the world or to modify it, that is to bring into being new modes of thought” (p. 9). Theories may be formal with prescribed, deliberate steps and
intentional procedures or can be informal but in either case, the intent is to make sense of the world and allow for the sharing of that understanding. Theory is where practice, action, judgment, and decision come together (Brookfield, 2005). We theorize to assist to understand that which is happening around us and to make informed choices in planning action.

“When we read an explanation that interprets a paradoxical experience in a new or more revealing way, the experience often becomes more comprehensible” (Brookfield, 2005, p. 24). Dropping out has been researched, studied, and discussed by examining trend and cost analyses, characteristics of the dropout, the sociology of the dropout, but there exists a paucity of research from the perspective of the dropout. Lincoln (1993) suggests giving voice to the silent. The silent are those non-mainstream classes studied from an etic point of view. Dropouts themselves are marginalized individuals who have been silent or silenced.

The perplexing dilemma of ameliorating the drop out problem with the intricacies of its components increases the consternation of educational leaders. Critical theory helps to understand that the dilemma may not be the problem of the individual but more of the system within which the dilemma exists. Brookfield (2005) in writing about critical theory and education identifies “oppressive behavior” in discussing pedagogy and practice of education, specifically adult education.

Critical theory has as an underpinning the intent to initiate change. Fay (1987) states, “A critical theory wants to explain a social order in such a way that it becomes itself the catalyst which leads to the transformation of this social order” (p. 27). So if a theory is to be useful it should assist in initiating change and provide some guidance as
the transformation is happening. The theory should suggest ways that the transformation will build a society founded on the democratic principles of fairness, justice, and compassion (Brookfield, 2005). Marcuse (1968) identifies critical theory’s claim as that of the explanation of the “totality of man in his world in terms of his social being” (p. 135).

The primary analysis of critical theory is the conflict between social classes within an environment where there is an exchange of commodities (Horkheimer, 1995). Education is a commodity and that commodity is marketable. The more education a person has, the more marketable he or she is (Moore, 2000). Conversely, the less education, the less marketable the person will be increasing his/her marginalization. This education commodity exchange is one of the bases of our capitalist society whose roots go back to our colonial period. The founding fathers of the United States identified the importance of education for the new nation by describing that an educated populace will make better decisions in the social order of self-governing.

In commenting further on critical theory, Horkheimer (1995) states, “Every part of the theory presupposes the critique of the existing order and the struggle against it along the lines determined by the theory itself” (p. 229). Critiquing the existing social structure where youth are exiting schools prior to graduation should include the individual youth, but more importantly an examination of the system within which that youth exists or existed. That critique should begin to create a map for addressing the struggle.

Brookfield (2005) identifies a second purpose of critical theory to provide people with knowledge and understanding that will free them from oppression. The theory takes
the process beyond understanding and interpretation to that of being transformative (Horkheimer, 1995).

Critical theory criticizes current society as well as outlines plans for a fairer, less alienated, more democratic society (Brookfield, 2005). Critical theory goes beyond simply reporting on the current state of affairs in society, it creates a vision of how things can be and provides a road map. Traditional theories are grounded in the collection of empirical evidence that refines the interpretation of the way things exist; critical theory generates a vision of the way things can be (Brookfield, 2005).

The grounding of critical theory in a vision of the way things can be opens the theory to criticism. Horkheimer (1995) comments that, “although critical theory at no point proceeds arbitrarily and in chance fashion, it appears, to prevailing modes of thought, to be speculative, one-sided and useless” (Horkheimer, 1995, p. 218). He further identifies the criticism as being “biased and unjust” (p. 218). Fay (1987) summarizes criticisms made of critical theory identifying its unresponsiveness to empirical evidence and it starts with the notion that it has the answer and does not deviate from that notion. The goal of the transformation of society is inconsistent with the objectivity required of scientific methods.

Another distinctive element of critical theory is the verification of the theory. Verification of the theory cannot take place until the social vision is realized (Brookfield, 2005). “In regard to the essential kind of change at which the critical theory aims, there can be no corresponding concrete perception of it until it actually comes about” (Horkheimer, 1995, p. 220).
Summary

The act of dropping out of school is not a single event that occurs when an adolescent wakes up one morning and decides that he/she has a better way that does not include school. Dropping out is a process that occurs over time that could a number of years and is the direct interaction of variables that include the child’s family; parent and siblings education level; some related to the community; and some directly related to the child. One variable that emerges in many studies as having significant influence on dropping out is the retention of a student in a grade in school.

A dropout is not necessarily a youth of low socio-economic status, from a single-parent family where the live-in parent dropped out of school, but research shows that youth with these characteristics do drop out. Minority youth drop out at higher rates than White youth but being minority does not assure that a student will leave school early. A student who does not conform to school rules is at higher risk for dropping out, but students with behavior problems still graduate from high school. Children are retained and many eventually graduate from high school without ever dropping out. The act of retaining a student in grade often has long-term consequences for the child, the family, the community and the school system within that community. Retention has been demonstrated to have negative consequences, but yet it continues to be practiced nationally. So what is it that gives cause to a student to leave high school before its natural conclusion?

Research continues to be reactive to the issue of dropping out of school. The examination of those factors associated with dropping out will not necessarily assist the practice of educational leadership in preventing dropping out as leaders cannot mitigate
many of those factors ascribed to those who have dropped out. The solution is more than one of identification.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

A part of the experience of adolescence should include education. Youth should have the opportunity to attend school, learn, experience the social milieu of a school setting, and prepare for life after high school. Some youth never have that complete experience. They leave school or feel they have been pushed out before its natural conclusion. They have been alienated, or have alienated themselves from that educational experience. Some youth who feel as though they have been pushed out, forced to leave as a result of the system, recognize the system as oppressive. Others may have been oppressed by the system through its regulations, requirements, standards, and/or expectations. A critical review of leaving school without graduation through the lens of youth will be instructive for policy-makers, as well as decision-makers.

This study explored and documented the lived experiences of selected young adults that influenced their decision to leave public school education prior to graduating from high school with a diploma. It is important that the collective voice of this group of young adults be heard by all who work with children, especially those who influence and directly work with students at-risk for not completing their education. The perspective of youth, especially at-risk youth, is important as many decision-makers may not consider the long-term impact of policies being considered or the unintended consequences of those policies that have been implemented.
“Now we must begin. How, and by what means? It doesn't much matter: a corpse is open to all comers. The essential thing is to set out with a problem” (Sartre, 1981, p. x). So let us begin.

Taking the family on vacation to the Wally World Resort and Campground where they project that the days of riding the amusements, seeing the exhibitions, swimming in the pool, camping out, sleeping under the stars will be such great fun. Mom and Dad’s research included the development of a hypothesis that the family will have fun. Dad is intent on getting the family to their destination allowing them to begin their enjoyment. Mom begins her data collection. She checks off all the completed activities on their to-do list. They went on some rides multiple times; put the extra tick marks next to that category. Once the vacation is over, the family will analyze the fun they had. The data will support or refute the hypothesis that everyone enjoyed the experience. But, did anyone include the kids in the planning for this event? Were they asked how they felt about Wally World? Who was the intended benefactor for this family vacation? It may very well be that the kids had fun but maybe they would have rather gone to the beach. Mom and Dad, with their good intentions, may have missed their intended target.

This critical research provided an opportunity to allow the “kids,” members of this underrepresented, oppressed group, many at-risk youth, to share their experiences, their thoughts about this fun, family vacation they were forced into. Let us give them the opportunity to critique their individual journey; allow them to tell us where they got lost on our way to Wally World. As with any journey, part of the fun, part of the enjoyment, sometimes the best part happens along the way. In structuring this inquiry, research
questions were developed serving as a heuristic for this exploration, not a trail to a
campsite. The following were the questions to be answered:

What is the profile of a student over-age in grade?

What attributes and/or people influence the over-age student to remain in school or to
consider leaving?

What issues are identified by over-age students while they attended classes on their
assigned middle school campus?

Why do over-age students drop out of school prior to completion?

What student identified interventions are necessary to prevent over-age students from
dropping out of school?

Research Design: A Qualitative Study

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) identify a research design as “a flexible set of
guidelines that connects theoretical paradigms to strategies of inquiry and methods for
collecting empirical material” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p.14). Others identify
qualitative methods as the exploration of social issues in a natural setting where the
researcher is the prime instrument of data collection, and interprets individual lived
experiences through structured procedures (Creswell, 2003; Marshall & Rossman, 2006;
Spradley, 1980). This study is a qualitative study. Qualitative methods involves
researchers and those studied describing routine or unique moments in their lives (Denzin
& Lincoln, 1994). The process of dropping out of school may be a routine process for
some at-risk youth; others may describe that process as a unique event. The destination,
that end point of not returning to school, whether it is seen as a unique moment in the life
of an at-risk child or the culmination of a process, has become a social problem worthy of understanding (Gerald W Bracey, 1996; Cassel, 2003). To remediate this problem, we first need to understand it. To understand it we need to engage those who have lived it.

Friedrich Engels (1845) expressed in the dedication to his work his respect and appreciation for the working class in England.

To the Working Classes of Great Britain
Working Men! To you I dedicate a work, in which I have tried to lay before my German countrymen a faithful picture of your condition, of your sufferings and struggles, of your hopes and prospects. I have lived long enough amidst you to know something about your circumstances; I have devoted to their knowledge my most serious attention, I have studied the various official and non-official documents as far as I was able to get hold of them. I have not been satisfied with this, I wanted more than a mere abstract knowledge of my subject, I wanted to see you in your own homes, to observe you in your every-day life, to chat with you on your condition and grievances, to witness your struggles against the social and political power of your oppressors. I have done so: I forsook the company and the dinner-parties, the port-wine and champagne of the middle-classes, and devoted my leisure-hours almost exclusively to the intercourse with plain Working Men; I am both glad and proud of having done so. Glad, because thus I was induced to spend many a happy hour in obtaining a knowledge of the realities of life - many an hour, which else would have been wasted in fashionable talk and tiresome etiquette; proud, because thus I got an opportunity of doing justice to an oppressed and calumniated class of men who with all their faults and under all the disadvantages of their situation, yet command the respect of every one but an English money-monger; proud, too, because thus I was placed in a position to save the English people from the growing contempt which on the Continent has been the necessary consequence of the brutally selfish policy and general behaviour of your ruling middle-class. (Rhenan Prussia), March 15th, 1845.(Engels, 1958) pp. 7-8

Engel's work fell within a naturalistic, interpretive, and field study framework (Hamilton, 1994). Much like Engel, this study is intended to identify a picture of the condition of our at-risk youth, to identify their sufferings and struggles, and identify their
hopes and prospects. They are a class of oppressed; their oppressors are decision-makers, policy-makers, superintendents, principals, teachers, and even their parents.

So, why consider a qualitative study? Creswell (2003) discusses narrative research and provides a definition that includes a form of inquiry where the researchers studies the lives of individuals and asks one or more of those studied to provide the story of their life. The information gained is then retold by the researcher in another form. In the final analysis narrative study tells the participant’s stories in a meaningful way (Clandinin et al., 2006). Investigation can be an instrumental case study when the case is studied with the intent to provide insight into an issue (Glesne, 2006). When that instrumental case study involves looking toward multiple participants, it becomes a “collective case study” (p. 13) and allows for the investigation of a population or a general condition (Glesne, 2006). This study was a mixed methods, multiple case study utilizing questionnaires and personal interviews to understand how their life experiences affected their decision to leave school prior to completion.

This study was a narrative analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2006) in that it sought to describe meaning of the experiences of youth who have dropped out of school; those who have been socially marginalized as a result of their choice (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The narrative is the story they have constructed that led them to their decision. Their story gives voice to the oppression they felt while in school. This study was a multiple case study in that it was designed to answer some “how” or “why” questions being posed by the researcher to focus on a contemporary phenomenon with the real-life context of school experiences (Yin, 2003). Further, Creswell (2003) identifies a case study as an exploration of a single phenomenon that is bounded by time and activity. The
phenomenon of dropping out has become a major contemporary issue worthy of further exploration from the perspective of those who have lived it.

Criticism associated with quantitative research has taken two forms, one within the research and the other external to the study (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The internal pressures include context stripping; exclusion of meaning and purpose; disjunction of theories with contexts; the inapplicability of general data to individual cases; and, the exclusion of the discovery dimension in inquiry (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Guba and Lincoln (1994) discussed that the controls or randomization of quantitative research while appropriate for the variables under consideration may ignore other variables that also affect results. The exclusion of some variables may improve the theoretical rigor of a study, but may affect its relevance. Qualitative data will provide contextual meaning.

Human behavior still cannot be predicated with certainty. Juxtapose this with attributes of physical objects. A body in motion tends to stay in motion unless acted on by some other force. Understanding human behavior requires an understanding of their meaning and purpose for the behavior. Qualitative data will assist in the identification of meaning and purpose for behavior.

Traffic along a particular stretch of highway can be studied. Speeds can be recorded, the number of vehicles traveling within particular speed classes can be collected, the time of day of observations can be made, as well as a host of other physical observations can be made. The strategy identified by local law enforcement to place a decoy police cruiser that will be visible on that same stretch of highway known to be where drivers exceed the speed limit is intending to limit the excessive speed. However, those who regularly travel the road will know that the cruiser is in fact a decoy. The
theory that drivers will slow seeing that there is a police vehicle ahead is inconsistent with behavior of the locals who “know.” There is a disjunction of theory within the local context. Guba and Lincoln (1994) identify the etic/emic dilemma. The etic theory (that all drivers will slow down seeing the police cruiser) may have little or no meaning within the emic (behavior of “locals”) view of those being studied. Qualitative data collected will not explain why some drivers are not moved to slow down by the sighting of a police cruiser. Qualitative inquiry can be useful in identifying the “emic view” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Also related to the scenario presented above is the inapplicability of general data to individual cases (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) where statistically accurate data on traffic have no applicability to the behavior of some locals who have knowledge of the scenario.

The apriori hypothesis that the visual appearance of law enforcement increases compliance with traffic laws is challenged by our police cruiser scenario. Without the use of qualitative data collected from drivers, the discovery that there are additional dimensions to the inquiry is overlooked. Quantitative methods are done to the exclusion of a discovery dimension in inquiry (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Data can be collected on the number of students leaving high school prior to completion, on their ethnicity, gender, age, family socioeconomic status, parent education level, on the number of times they repeated a grade, and the grade they repeated. However, this data will not necessarily assist in understanding what a child was thinking prior to dropping out; the set of life experiences that impacted his/her decision to leave high school prior to completion; the issues (real or perceived) faced by that child that
influenced his/her actions; the behaviors of others (significant or insignificant) from the perspective of the child that support or negate the veracity of their decision.

Conceptual and Methodological Framework

The nature of this study was the exploration and documentation of the untold story of at-risk youth who dropped out of school prior to graduation. Each member of this subgroup of all adolescents had a set of experiences that influenced, guided, and perhaps controlled thoughts, actions, decisions, and many parts of their lives. The youth as a group have been silent on the systemic reasons for leaving. This silent group joins many other silent groups whose story needs to be told. There has been a paucity of research on voices of silent groups (Lincoln, 1993). “The silenced are silenced precisely because they share few if any mainstream characteristics” (Lincoln, 1993, p.32). These youth have left the mainstream.

A theory is critical if it intends to liberate or emancipate humans from that which oppresses them (Horkheimer, 1982). Many related theories have evolved from the Frankfurt School; one being critical social theory (CST). CST is a multidisciplinary framework with the implied intent to advance the discovery of knowledge about an oppressed group and the understanding of that oppression (Leonardo, 2004). Standpoint theory, another critical theory examines oppression from the point of view of oppressed (Stone-Mediatore, 2007).

Critical theory and its corollary, standpoint theory to the extent they take into account the social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender antecedents (Lincoln, 1993) of the marginalization of at-risk youth, provided the conceptual framework for this
study where the forces of oppression and marginalization have effected the behaviors and decision-making of the population of at-risk youth. The inquiry into these forces acts as the stimulus that erodes the ignorance and misapprehensions that will transform the existing structure (Lincoln, 1993). The intent is the eventual transformation of the structure.

Participants

This study utilized a purposeful, homogeneous, convenience sampling (Creswell, 2003) of eligible students who presented themselves as individuals meeting the following criteria. Creswell (2003) identifies the purpose as being the selection of the site and participants. The site was selected as it is the only location in the urban area where the study took place that offered educational programming for reengaged youth after they have dropped out. The participants were homogenous in that they all had the characteristic that they dropped out and chose to reengage in school. They were also be students who have returned to complete their high school education but through an adult education program, not their comprehensive high school. It was intended that participants were retained in at least the eighth grade. The students selected for participation left school early – dropped out of middle school or high school. The convenience of them all being at the alternative program for adult education resulted from school district policy that precluded their attendance at a comprehensive high school. If they chose to return to school at their comprehensive high school would be directed to an alternative program as they would not be able to complete requirements typically accomplished within a four year high school experience in their remaining time of high school eligibility. Finally,
they must have been willing to share their experiences that affected their decision to drop out of school. Hence, this study utilized convenience together with purposful sampling techniques (Creswell, 2003). Interviewees were self-selected by presenting themselves to their only remaining option for a high school diploma – an adult education program, as a returning student (convenience sampling); their selection for participation was made by their willingness to meet with this researcher for interview (purposeful).

Each participant had an individual story to tell; each set of events and circumstances experienced uncovered and identified the universality of these lived experiences. Sartre (1981) explains, “For a man is never an individual; it would be more fitting to call him a universal singular” (p. ix). He continues on to discuss the universality of events as continuing a person’s individuality. “Universal by the singular universality of human history, singular by the universalizing singularity of his projects, he requires simultaneous examination from both ends” (Sartre, 1981, p. ix). Hence, considering the life experiences of a participant identifies their singularity; viewing the universality of the collective singularity created a purpose for this study. The focus on Sartre’s (1981) “universalizing singularity of his projects” was instructive. Viewing experiences from the lens of the participant created the singularity of the universality. Analysis of the universality of those singular experiences gave purpose to this study.
Data Collection

Sources

For purposes of this study the following data sources were utilized:

Questionnaires

Local, state, and national demographic data

Interviews

The questionnaire data were generated from participants completing a researcher developed questionnaire. That printed two page questionnaire was completed through written response by participants. One hundred thirty-six completed questionnaires were submitted.

School district data included published demographic information as well as a review of student records to verify the demographic data provided by students from the questionnaire. U.S. Census Bureau data together with information available from the American Educational Research Association were utilized to provide local, state and national data.

Questionnaires

Students attending an adult high school in a large metropolitan area of the southwestern United States were provided a class work assignment by one of their assigned adult education high school teachers. Students were asked to complete a questionnaire. The assignment remained within goals and objectives of the course to which it is assigned, i.e. the questionnaire furthered a student’s written language skills, furthered their development of critical thinking skills, and enhanced their expressive language skills. The questionnaire collected some basic demographic and descriptive
information (name, age, number of years in school, grades repeated, ethnicity, last school attended, number of schools attended, and contact information). Additionally, the questionnaire began to collect narrative data through the use of open-ended questions. Students were asked to respond in writing to open-ended questions such as, “If you repeated a grade, what thoughts and feeling do you have about that experience?” and, “Describe your middle school educational experiences.” The last questions, being closed questions, were intended to seek the student’s interest in having the opportunity to meet with the researcher to tell his/her story. Students were to complete the questionnaire during class time and submit their completed questionnaire to their adult high school teacher. The teacher transmitted the completed questionnaire to the building principal who forwarded them to the researcher.

Questionnaires were reviewed and categorized by the researcher. A potential group of students meeting the study selection criteria (dropped out of school, repeated at least grade eight, and willingness to meet to talk about their school experiences) were identified. Those identified students were contacted by the researcher explained the purpose of the research, answered questions students had, and asked for their continued involvement in the research by participating in an interview. Interview appointments were arranged for those who choose to participate.

Demographics

Student specific demographic data were collected from the student-completed questionnaire and recorded on a database. That data was compared to district collected data at the time the student was initially registered into a school district school. The comparison was made assuring consistency with reported ethnicity, number of years in
school, the number of schools attended by the participant, as well as any grades repeated by the student. A data element that most students did not have was their English proficiency level at the time of initial registration into the district as well as their English proficiency level at the last formal proficiency testing.

Interviews

The second stage of the study was to conduct face-to-face interviews with registered and attending students. Ten students participated in individual, recorded, and transcribed interviews with the researcher.

Knowing that the research was to focus on reengaged students who exited high school before graduation, the principal of an alternative high school program visited classrooms at random asking for student volunteers between the age of eighteen and twenty-five who would be willing to meet with a university researcher to talk about their school experiences, explain why they left a comprehensive school, and why they decided to return to school. Those who expressed a willingness to participate were selected based on their availability to the researcher while on the school campus.

Interviews were conducted in an appropriately lit, quiet classroom on the school campus. The interviewer and interviewee sat in comfortable arm chairs adjacent to a round conference table. All interviewees agreed to an audio recording of the interview. The iPod recorder was placed on the conference table and provided minimal distraction during the interview. Each interview began with the similar question to “tell your story.” Follow-up questions were asked to clarify particular points being made by the interviewee and summarization techniques were utilized by the interviewer assuring an understanding of information shared by the interviewee.
Student participants were asked to discuss a hypothetical “regular” high school they would create, staff, and be responsible for that would be good for students. If in their response they did not make specific reference to personnel, a follow up question addressing expectations for staff was asked.

Each interview took between forty-five minutes to one hour and ten minutes depending on the student. Some participants had many thoughts to share and did so very willingly; others seemed to be comfortable responding to a series of open-ended questions. The structure of the interview was dependent on the student’s comfort in an open-ended question interview or their desire to respond to a semi-structured interview. No student was pressed to discuss more than they felt comfortable disclosing. No student declined to respond to any question asked by the researcher.

Interview data were obtained from individual interviews conducted with ten students who have reengaged in an alternative high school for adult students after dropping out of their comprehensive high school. Some participants left a comprehensive high school and within months enrolled in an alternative, adult education setting; others had been out of school for years before returning. All interview participants had been out of a comprehensive high school for at least six months; some were out for up to seven years.

Each participant met with the researcher at a location comfortable to the participant for the purpose of a semi-structured interview. Merriam (1998) identifies a semi-structured interview as one that contains a mix of structured and less structured questions, follows a question guideline, and is a question/answer format combined with conversation. The initial open-ended question, “Tell me how you got here” provided the
structure keeping thoughts and information sharing on the reasons and events that led the student to their present school location.

Offers to meet interview participants in an office at the adult education program, student’s home, a local restaurant, a library, were proposed. The participant was given the latitude to identify a comfortable location for the initial interview as well as any follow-up discussions that may be necessary. The initial interview meeting included a second review of the purpose of the study, responding to any procedural questions, completion of informed consent documentation, discussing confidentiality, as well as seeking permission to create an audio recording of the interview.

The interview audio recording was taken using an electronic device that created a digital record of the entire interview without disruption typically caused by the limitations of some analog recording devices.

Participants were provided a copy of their completed questionnaire with the request to review it for completeness and accuracy. Each participant had the opportunity to make any amendments that they felt necessary. Upon finalization of the questionnaire data, the formal interview began.

Participants were given freedom to tell their story. Some asked, “Where do you want me to start?” They were guided back to the purpose of the study, which is the opportunity to tell the world what caused them to decide to leave school without a diploma. Participants were asked follow-up questions designed to clarify points they introduced to establish a thick and rich explanation of their thoughts, feelings, and actions associated with their school experiences. The follow-up utilized typical interview strategies of rephrasing, summarizing, reflection of feeling, and encouragers to continue
(Ivey, 1994). The follow-up techniques included such interviewer statements as, “Let me see if I understand all you have said. You explained that…” or, “It sounds like that was a challenge when…” and “That is interesting. Tell me more.”

The participant had the opportunity to close the interview at any time. The participant was asked if they have shared all they intended to share. They were given the opportunity for a follow-up interview to add to their story if they felt it necessary. Participants were given the opportunity to review a transcript of the interview to modify, add, or simply review the content of their study input. Recognizing the transient nature of the population of at-risk youth, contact information was reviewed and alternate contact methods will be identified.

At time of the follow-up meeting with the participant, they were to be provided a transcript of their input and asked if any changes, additions or modifications need to be made. They were given the opportunity to receive a copy of the final study.

Role of the Researcher

Lincoln (1993) identifies at least four responsibilities for researchers conducting research on underrepresented and silent groups. The first responsibility is the production of knowledge where that knowledge is generated specifically for the purpose of addressing and ameliorating the conditions of oppression, poverty, or deprivation (p. 33). The second responsibility is the need to uncover and identify the multiple perspectives of the silenced. The third is the responsibility of the researcher to reproduce the story in such a way as to “speak to the interests of the silenced” (p. 35). The fourth is the responsibility to create a narrative that portrays the group with fidelity and rigor.
In addressing the first of the four responsibilities identified by Lincoln, the data is being used to identify the lived experiences of those youth who dropped out. The opportunity to explore the context within which their decision to exit school prior to completion creates new knowledge for educational decision-makers in understanding and addressing those feelings of oppression and marginalization the students felt.

The second responsibility is to uncover and identify the multiple perspectives of those youth. The questionnaire provided participants the opportunity to discuss their lived experiences from the standpoint of their family, peer group, school personnel, and community. The written questionnaire responses gave participants the opportunity to examine some factors that may have had an influence and identify the strength of those influences.

The third responsibility as identified by Lincoln is to reproduce the story of the silenced that speaks to their interests. The review of the questionnaire and interview results is that reproduction of their story.

The fourth identified responsibility of a researcher is creation and portrayal with fidelity and rigor of the narrative data. That responsibility of the researcher has been met and described in the following discussions.

Data Analysis

Marshall and Rossman (2006) identify seven phases for the analysis of qualitative data: (a) organizing the data; (b) immersion in the data; (c) generating categories and themes; (d) coding; (e) development of interpretations; (f) identifying alternative explanations; and (g) presentation of the study.
The organization of the questionnaire data as identified by Marshall and Rossman began with the receipt of the completed questionnaires. A database was created where each participant response to an individual question was a field in the database. Written responses were entered exactly as participants wrote them in their questionnaire.

Interview data was organized by the creation of a verbatim transcript of the interview. The digital file was provided to a transcriber who prepared the transcript. Upon receipt of the interview transcript the researcher listened to the interview with the transcript to verify the accuracy of the prepared transcript. Transcript revisions were made when and if necessary to assure an accurate written account of the interview. In multiple cases, replaying sections of the interview audio file was necessary to capture all words spoken by the participant.

The second phase included exploring the questionnaire data through a comparison between the information provided in school records and questionnaire data. For example, a student may have indicated that he/she never repeated a grade. School records may have shown otherwise. Additional database fields were created with researcher identified data obtained from that review of school records. Further immersion into the data included constant review of various database fields. The data was disaggregated by ethnicity and reviewed; examination of adjacent database fields for common responses took place; exploration of the participant response “I did not drop out” was examined further paying attention to other data fields. Participant responses were reviewed multiple times and also explored by other educational professionals who assisted the researcher in deeper exploration of the data.
The transcript of each interview was read multiple times over the course of a number of days. They were read in the sequence of the data collection as well as reorganization of the transcripts by gender and ethnicity. Lincoln and Guba (1985) cited Glaser and Strauss’(1967) constant comparison method identifying four distinct stages: (a) comparison of incidents applicable to each category; (b) the integration of categories and their properties; (c)delimiting the theory; and, (d) writing the theory (p. 339).

Each written response to the questionnaire was reviewed and summarized by a one word or short phrase that described the essence of that response. That summarization created an additional field in the research database. Those summarized incidents established the different categories for the data within each field. For example participants used statements commenting on teachers’ classroom behavior. Some behaviors were intended to be helpful; some were interpreted by the student as not helpful at all. The category of teachers’ positive caring as well as teachers’ behavior that did not demonstrate caring emerged. The theme is identified as the caring demonstrated by teacher behavior. The examination of categories led to the identification of various themes within the data.

The reading and rereading of the transcripts allowed for the identification and categorization of ideas shared by interview participants. The reading and rereading enhanced the identification and credibility of the categories that then led to the development of themes. The transcripts were also reviewed by a team that consisted of a university professor and two school district administrators for the purpose of additional perspectives on the data and verification of identified. Those professionals provided input to the researcher.
Interpretations and explanations that emerged during and through the categorization provided for the coding of the data. The interpretations begin to bring meaning to the data. Alternate explanations were explored testing the veracity of those interpretations (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

The delimiting of the theory as identified by Lincoln and Guba (1985) evolved from the examination of behaviors of individuals significant to the participants. For example, parents would like to believe that they continue to have significant influence over their adolescent children. However, this theory is delimited through the examination of the interview and questionnaire data as it applies to family influences.

Coding

The coding of data began with the researcher reviewing respondent responses to the questionnaire for each question requiring a narrative response. The review was guided by the research questions – to understand why they chose to leave school prior to completion. Specific codes were not identified. It was intended that general domains would be inductively developed through the data (Miles & Huberman, 1984). The first level of analysis was a naming or summarizing of segments of data. A search for “repeatable regularities” was done to identify emergent themes or patterns to “pull a lot of material together into more meaningful and parsimonious units of analysis” (Miles & Huberman, 1984, pp. 67-68). The coding of the allowed the emergence of categories and themes. For example, students identified particular teacher behaviors that were either helpful or detrimental to their perception of their success in school.

The coding was accomplished utilizing a team of educational professionals. Four education leaders met on two separate occasions to review questionnaire data. The
participants were three school district level administrators each with at minimum of fifteen years administrative experience and one university professor with fifteen years of research experience. Each participant read the data independently prior to any discussion.

Coding of interview data utilized three education professionals (one university professor and two district-level school administrators). Each participant independent read the interview data prior to discussion.

Through discussion the data patterns began to emerge. These patterns were identified through marginal notes and memos included within the transcript. Analysis of the notes and memos help in the identification of relationships within the data that were used to identify themes.

Trustworthiness

Validation of research results is critical if the study is to be recognized as being sound, i.e. having validity. Qualitative methods of validation include credibility, dependability, and confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

The construct of credibility has as its goal the demonstration that the inquiry was conducted in such a way as to ensure that participants were appropriately identified and described (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Descriptions coming from the data are rich showing the complexities of interactions.

For a study to be dependable, it must be easily replicable with different participants from different environments. The study must have clearly identified procedures such that the results from those other studies will demonstrate consistent
results. This study is easily replicable assuming one has a population of participants willing to respond to the questionnaire and participate in an interview.

Studies are confirmable if they are objective. Researcher bias may effect the research objectivity. Any researcher bias will be mitigated through the thick and rich detail provided in the study analysis. The inclusion of participant interview transcripts will allow others to freely conduct their own cross-check analysis (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The results obtained from subsequent reviews of this research data will be consistent with the results obtained in this study.

Limitations

One factor limiting the methodology in this study is the selection of participants. The intent of this study was to explore the experiences of former dropouts who have chosen to return to school who were retained in the eighth grade. There exist multiple students who have left school and failed eighth grade who never choose to return to school. This study is limited to only those who have chosen to return and complete requirements for their high school diploma. Study results may be different for the group of students who have not developed a similar understanding of the value of education and have chosen to reengage in school. That group may have been disenfranchised by the educational system differently than the group that chose to return to school. An alternate standpoint may evolve if future research is conducted with participants being drawn from a population of the non-returning dropouts.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This study explored perspectives on school engagement by individuals who made a choice to leave a comprehensive school setting prior to its natural conclusion – graduating with a high school diploma. Some left school by simply stopping regular attendance; some individuals felt that they were pushed out or counseled out; others saw no opportunities in school feeling it was a waste of their time and simply stopped attending.

In life, every person has a story to tell about something. Youth and young adults are eager to share their school experiences that led to their decision to stop attending. The use of the phrase “stop attending” is significant in that the majority of youth surveyed did not identify themselves as dropping out. Terms and concepts such as “transferred,” “kicked out,” “ditched too much,” or “had to leave,” have been used by youth and young adults to identify their decision to discontinue their attendance at a “regular” comprehensive high school.

The following sections present the findings from two different but related data sources; the questionnaire administered to one hundred thirty-six participants and the data obtained from ten individually conducted interviews with interested and willing youth and young adults who were former dropouts. The interview gave them the opportunity to
share their school experiences and explain the impact of those experiences on their
decision to exit a comprehensive high school setting.

The two page questionnaire was completed by students enrolled in an alternative
high school in the southwest United States that serves students who have dropped out of a
comprehensive high school. These reengaged students have chosen to return to school.
The alternative high school provides course work for students who have recently left high
school as well as students who left high school years earlier. Enrolled students are
assigned to courses they need to meet graduation requirements for an adult high school
diploma. The majority of students are enrolled in at least an English class, as four units
of English credit are required for graduation.

The principal at the alternative high school visited classrooms and asked students
to consider completing a questionnaire. In her comments, she explained that university
researchers were partnering with school personnel to collect information that will be
beneficial in better understanding the needs of students. Students were told that they
were not required to complete the questionnaire but were encouraged to participate. She
left questionnaires with the teacher who then distributed them to students. Completed
questionnaires were then collected by the teacher and forwarded to the building principal.
Completed questionnaires were subsequently forwarded to the university researchers for
review and analysis.

Questionnaire Results

One hundred thirty-six completed questionnaires were submitted by students.
Two students completed the questionnaire twice as they were enrolled in two English
classes. Their data was combined and included only once in a database. Two completed questionnaires listed fictitious names; those two survey forms were excluded from consideration. Hence, one hundred thirty-two surveys were analyzed.

In addition to standard demographics (name, address, phone number), students completing the questionnaires identified their ethnicity by placing a mark in a box immediately to the right of commonly identified school district ethnic codes (White, African American, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Native American). One additional category, “Other” was added. Open-ended questions were asked about family, school personnel, and friend’s influence on them while in school.

**Ethnicity**

Table 1 provides the frequency distribution for questionnaire respondent’s ethnicity. It is worthwhile to note that no Native American students completed the questionnaire. While the sample completing the questionnaires was diverse, the diversity is reasonably correlated ($r = 0.81$) to the community from which students originate, and to the school district ($r = 0.93$) within which the alternative adult program operates. Studies done by Rumberger(2000), Raywid (2002), Dynarski and Gleason (2002), Bracey (1997),

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>12.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>46.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>49.2</td>
<td>95.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Fine (1998), and Finn (1989) report that minorities drop out of school at rates higher than white students. The data obtained from questionnaire respondents indicate that almost four times as many Hispanic students as White students are enrolled in this alternative program, and more than twice as many African American students as White students participate.

Table 2 provides the ethnic distribution for students attending the alternative high school. The questionnaire completers are highly representative of the population of students attending the alternative high school (r = 0.99).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>459</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>13.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>882</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>38.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>56.4</td>
<td>94.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>99.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>99.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3523</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

School District

The school district, from which a majority of the students originated, published demographics for 2007-08 school year. That data is provided in Table 3. White students attending district schools are not the majority. While Whites represent the majority in the community at fifty-four percent of the population, they are a minority in district schools at thirty-six percent. Less than one percent of the district’s student population is Native
American which is consistent with US Census Bureau data that reports 0.9 percent of the community is Native American.

Table 3
Ethnicity – School District

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>111,484</td>
<td>36.1</td>
<td>36.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>43,047</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>123,236</td>
<td>39.9</td>
<td>88.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>28,595</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>99.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>2,421</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>308,783</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Community demographics for 2006 reported by the American Community Survey (US Census Bureau, 2006) for almost 1.8 million people living in the county are

Table 4
Ethnicity – Community

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>54.1</td>
<td>54.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>64.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>27.2</td>
<td>91.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>99.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
provided in Table 4. Whites represent the majority of the community population with Hispanics showing more than one-quarter of the total population.

Table 5 provides correlation coefficients between questionnaire completers, school demographics, school district demographics and the community. The relationships are strong indicators that the ethnicity of the questionnaire completers is representative of the school, the district, and the community.

Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questionnaire Ethnicity Correlation Coefficients</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>Community</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaire</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ten percent of the students completing the questionnaire were identified as students with special education needs and received special education services at the alternative high school. The percentage of students receiving special education services in the school district from which most of the students originate is eleven percent. Two percent of the questionnaire sample was identified as gifted and talented students. The percentage of students in the district identified as gifted and talented is approximately four percent. No special programming is provided at the alternative adult high school to gifted and talented students.

Summarizing demographic data, students attending the alternative high school show that Hispanic students return to complete their education at rates higher than
African American and White students. They also exit comprehensive high schools at rates higher than African American and White students (Barro & Kolstad, 1987; Fine, 1991; Nowicki, Duke, Sisney, Stricker, & Tyler, 2004; Schargel & Smink, 2001).

**Number of Schools**

The reengaged students with verifiable school records data show the mean number of schools attended is greater than seven with a range of eighteen different schools. Typically, students in the most stable living arrangements would have attended one elementary school, one middle school and one high school during their educational careers. Only twelve percent of the questionnaire population had this level of stability. School records show that approximately one-half of the respondents had attended seven or more schools. One-fourth of the students attended ten or more schools with one person attending twenty different schools in their educational career thus far.

**Personal Influences**

Open-ended questionnaire questions were asked of respondents with the expectation that participants would provide a written response to the question. If a student’s response included more than one idea, the primary idea was recorded first in the database. The primary idea was determined by the coding team. In most instances it was the idea the student presented first. There were questions designed to identify who had the greatest influence on them when they were in middle school and a separate question addressed their high school influence. Blank lines were provided for their narrative responses. Approximately one-third of the respondents left this question blank. Of the eighty responses, twenty-nine percent of the respondents indicated that a family member (parent, grandparent, sibling, or other relative) had the greatest influence on them in
middle school. Family influence in high school was consistent at thirty percent. Respondents indicated school personnel in middle school were their greatest influence in thirteen percent of the cases, dropping to ten percent in high school. Friends were the greatest influence for thirteen percent of the respondents in middle school increasing to eighteen percent in high school. Twelve percent of the respondents indicated that while in middle school they had no one influencing them or they were self-influenced; that figure increased to fourteen percent for high school.

Table 6 shows personal influences in middle school and high school disaggregated by ethnicity as provided by respondents. Less than one-third of white students indicated that their family was their biggest influence in middle school compared to more than one-half of the Hispanic respondents. White students were influenced more by friends in middle school and high school than any of the other students. The Asian

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influence</th>
<th>White MS</th>
<th>White HS</th>
<th>White CF*</th>
<th>African-American MS</th>
<th>African-American HS</th>
<th>African-American CF*</th>
<th>Hispanic MS</th>
<th>Hispanic HS</th>
<th>Hispanic CF*</th>
<th>Asian MS</th>
<th>Asian HS</th>
<th>Asian CF*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self/ No One</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*CF - Consistency Factor
sample size was too small to be meaningful. White students showed the greatest consistency in responses (consistency factor) of all groups. Seventy-seven percent of white students did not change their influences between middle school and high school. That factor decreases for African-American students and decreases again for Hispanic students.

**Reasons for Leaving School**

Ninety-one percent of the respondents answered the question, “What was it that caused you to stop attending school and drop out?” Blank lines were provided after the question for students to write in their responses. Seventeen percent of respondents indicated that they had not dropped out; they explained that they simply stopped attending or they left to transfer to the alternative school. However, seventy-four percent of those indicating that they did not drop out cited interventions that could have been utilized to keep them in school. Twenty-three percent of students left schools for social reasons including friends, pregnancy, or drug involvement. Fourteen percent of the students who left school cited school related reasons that includes “kicked out”, absence with loss of credit, or a negative reaction to teachers’ comments. Fewer than eight percent of the students responding indicated that they left school to go to work. Some respondents listed “drugs and ditching with my friends,” or “family problems and hanging out with my friends when I should have been in school” as reasons for discontinuing their education at their assigned comprehensive school. Almost twenty-three percent of the respondents gave a second reason for leaving school. The most frequently cited second reason was “ditching with friends.” Eleven percent of respondents providing a second reason cited school factors that caused them to stop
attending such as credit, negative reaction to a teacher or a counselor, absence, and relevance of the course content.

Table 7 provides the reasons given for dropping out of a comprehensive school by questionnaire completers disaggregated by ethnicity. The categories were identified from the written questionnaire responses. More than one-third of the White students indicated their reason for dropping out was because they were deficient in credits required for graduation. For the African-American and Hispanic students the stated reason with the greatest frequency showed that they believe that they did not drop out of school yet the answered other questions as though they did drop out. Approximately one student in five dropped out and attributed their action to their friends.

### Table 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>African-American</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Asian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Credit deficient</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not drop out</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Interest/Self</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pregnant</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kicked out</td>
<td></td>
<td>8%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drugs</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Reasons</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School/Attendance</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td></td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Dropout Intervention

The question, “What should your teachers, counselors, principals, and/or parents have done to keep you in school?” provided interesting results. Forty-two percent of the respondents either left the question blank or stated that there is nothing that could have been done at that time to prevent him/her from leaving. They indicated that their friends were more important or they needed to do it themselves. Almost one half of the respondents stated they felt they wanted someone to pay some attention to them; they wanted an improved relationship with someone at school. Reasons given for improving relationships were to take an interest (“talk to me”, “stick with me”, “be there for me”, “cared more”), monitor (“check up on me”, “push me harder”, check attendance), and model (“show us the right way”). Twenty percent of respondents listed school improvements (“improve teaching”, change the schedule, help us to see the value of education) as methods that would keep them in school.

Table 8 provides a summary of comments offered by questionnaire completers to the question, “What could have been done to prevent you from dropping out?” disaggregated by ethnicity. The categories were identified through analysis of the written questionnaire responses. The greatest single factor identified by African-American and Hispanic students that could have prevented them from dropping out was for school personnel to take an interest; less than one in ten white students identified interest as a significant intervention. Almost one-half of the white students stated there was nothing that could have been done to prevent them from dropping out.
Table 8
Dropout Prevention - What could have been done to prevent dropping out – Questionnaire Completers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>African-American</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Asian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Improve Teaching</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nothing</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take an Interest</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitor</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater Parent Influence</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value of Education</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modeling</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Scheduling</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The final questionnaire question was, “What message would you give to one of your family members if you learn that they are planning to drop out of school?” More than three-fourths of the responses focused on the importance or value of education and the need to stay in school to earn a diploma.

**Dropout Theme**

Minorities drop out of school at a higher rate than White students (NCES, 2007).

When given the question “Why did you drop out?” White students provided explanations that included credit-deficiency (29 percent) and friends (21 percent). No White student participating in the questionnaire indicated that he or she “did not drop out.”

Twenty-one percent of the African-American students indicated that they “did not drop out.” Fifteen percent claimed that they left school through the influence of their friends. Additionally, eight percent explained that they “got kicked out” and eight percent wrote that they left school because they had to go to work. For Hispanic students,
twenty-four percent indicated that they “did not drop out,” eighteen percent left as a result of the influence of friends, and both credit issues and needing to work were each indicated by eleven percent of the questionnaire respondents.

Almost one student in five attributed their dropping out of school to the influence of friends. White students reported they were more influenced (twenty-one percent) by friends than their African-American (fifteen percent) or Hispanic counterparts (eighteen percent). Considerations for the Asian subgroup were not considered due to the small sample size (n = 5) although forty percent of this group indicated friends had an influence on their decision to leave.

Forty percent of the questionnaire completers indicated that they chose to leave school because they were “credit deficient.” In interview, no student provided credit-deficiency as an explanation or reason for his or her decision to leave school. The interview provided the opportunity for each student to discuss life influences that may have or did result in becoming credit-deficient. Becoming deficient with the number of credits required for graduation is not a reason but a symptom of the disengagement demonstrated by a student. A student does not become credit deficient in one day or in one week. Credit deficiency is a component piece to the process of dropping out for some youth. Examination of the student’s performance in classes begins to provide some understanding of the social, academic, and familial issues facing that student. Accepting the reason “credit deficient” without further investigation allows a student and any system capturing such data the opportunity to ignore the real, and underlying reason the student is proceeding toward dropping out, or has actually disengaged from educational pursuits.
Interview Results

Each recorded interview was transcribed. The actual transcribed interviews with each student are included in the appendix to this document. The recorded interview was played at least once in its entirety while following the prepared transcript assuring accuracy. The preparation of that transcript required listening to various phrases multiple times to capture the exact wording utilized by the participant.

A description of the student participants was prepared from information provided by the student during the interview and a review of school records. The descriptions begin with demographic data that was made available through the interview as well as information supplied by the student or parent when the parent initially enrolled the student in the public school. School district records were maintained by the district on a student records management system. The parent at initial registration in a school district school provided all demographic information on that system. The remainder of the description provides a summary of interview information utilizing specific words, phrases, or other statements provided by the participant. In some cases information has been organized sequentially making it more understandable. The researcher provided no interpretation of the data, simply an overview of the significant events.

Tyler

Tyler, a nineteen year old single, White, male chose to reengage at an alternative high school allowing him to graduate within a reasonable time frame. He reported that if he was to remain at his comprehensive high school, to achieve graduation he would have to attend the entire current school year, summer school, all of the following school year as a fifth-year senior (assuming the school would grant him that status), summer school
the following summer and still not have met graduation requirements. At that point, he would have had to transfer to complete his education within the adult education program.

Presently Tyler lives with his father. When living with his mother in Utah, the recent decisions she made, together with his commitment to his family caused Tyler’s attention to be diverted from high school and to focus more on family responsibilities and obligations.

At about eight years old Tyler’s mother and father separated. Tyler moved to another state with his mother and younger sister, Tory. He began third grade in a new school in another state. Neither mom nor dad ever told him why they separated, and he chose not to ask. He knew that his mother was a drug abuser and continued her drug use throughout his elementary years while the family lived with his mother’s mother in another state. Mother’s drug use caused her to be in and out of jail for periods of time all between Tyler’s third and seventh grade experiences. In the middle of seventh grade she was released from jail after being there for a period of time to return to the family and care for Tyler and Tory. The following year and a half went reasonably well with his mom apparently not using drugs. She seemed to be comfortable with her life.

Early in Tyler’s ninth grade experience his mother returned to her drug abuse. He, his sister, and his mother were all still living with his mother’s mother. Conflicts between Tyler’s mother and grandmother became evident. The conflict resulted in his mother making the decision to take her two children and move out on her own. Tyler and Tory moved with their mother to their own townhouse. She continued her drug use for a period of time before switching to alcohol. His mother was heavy into alcohol abuse while Tyler was attending high school as a sophomore.
Tyler secured part-time employment allowing him the opportunity to have some spending money. His earned spending money was sometimes shared with Tory as she would need money for lunch or other incidentals. That spending money began to be used to cover small grocery items they needed. He often purchased milk, bread, flour, syrup, or similar foods. Supplementation of the family grocery items quickly evolved into his need to take care of all the family groceries. The support provided by Tyler’s dad went to his mother. She used the support money to pay the rent on the townhouse “and for her needs.” Tyler quickly found it necessary to work more to cover the family’s grocery needs.

Tyler’s maternal aunt also had an alcohol abuse problem. His mother and aunt decided that the aunt’s two elementary age children, Zachary and Bailey, would live with Tyler, his mother and sister. Tyler soon found it necessary to remain at home in the mornings to be certain that Zachary and Bailey got up, ate breakfast and got off to school as his mother had been up most of the night drinking and was unable to get herself up in the morning. He himself arrived late to his sophomore classes at high school. At the end of his school day, he began thinking and planning for the younger children’s return home. He could not rely on his mother for appropriate child care for his cousins as she would still be sleeping. Tyler knew the time Zachary and Bailey got out of school and the route they would walk to get home. He wanted to be sure that they were appropriately cared for and supervised. Rather than focusing on the course discussions as led by his teachers, Tyler’s attention was on the sequencing and timing of his afternoon child care responsibilities. There were times he left school early to be sure his cousins were appropriately supervised. Some days Tyler left school early as he needed to report to
work; the money he earned was necessary to purchase groceries for his family and his extended family. The second and third quarters of his sophomore year were characterized by school failure primarily due to school absence.

The attendance policy at the high school required an absence notice be sent home after missing four classes in any subject within a quarter. A parent notice was sent home after Tyler missed “forty-something” classes. School personnel had no idea what was happening. Tyler chose to keep his family issues and responsibilities hidden from teachers as well as school counselors. At one point his French teacher did attempt a call home. The telephone number in the school records allowed the teacher to contact Tyler’s grandmother. She was unaware that Tyler was missing school as he, his mother, and sister no longer lived with her. Mother and grandmother were no longer communicating; hence any notice home went unattended.

Tyler’s mathematics teacher would often take him aside on days he did show for class to talk with him about her concerns for him and his academic progress. She presented herself as genuinely interested in helping. Tyler chose to provide her with little or no information as he felt uncomfortable and embarrassed by his home life.

The dynamics at home did not improve. Zachary and Bailey moved out; however, mom found a boyfriend who moved in. Their relationship was characterized as rocky with considerable domestic violence. Numerous times the police were called to the home at one or two o’clock in the morning to address fights between mom and her boyfriend. Tyler tired of the turmoil and conflict and chose to move back with his grandmother to finish his sophomore year. While returning to a more normal way of life,
he was unable to pull his grades up to where he was able to earn credit for that school year.

Toward the end of the third year in high school, Tyler and his sister had had enough turmoil and shared with their father all that had been happening in their lives over the past few years. Even though he and his sister had regular communications with dad, they did not disclose any of the home dynamics until that call. Tyler chose to move with his dad in another state; Tory went to live with her grandmother allowing her to continue in the school she had been attending for a few years.

Tyler presented himself at his new high school in a different state as a nineteen year old, “senior” with six and one quarter units of credit toward high school graduation. He found it necessary to take traditional freshman, sophomore and junior year courses to begin to meet requirements. After about two months of school the reality of his credit status caused him to explore options that would allow him to graduate sooner than his traditional high school program was going to provide. In October of that school year, he withdrew from that setting and enrolled in an alternative high school.

Jose

Jose is a nineteen year old Hispanic male who is a senior in an alternative high school. He lives at home with his parents, a younger brother, sisters, his girlfriend and his younger brother’s two children. Jose is bilingual where his native language is Spanish. He uses both Spanish and English to communicate depending on the setting.

Jose reported that his elementary school and grade six school experiences were without a major incident. Elementary school was described as fun. In grade six, he was
“still a little boy” afraid to do anything wrong that would bring negative attention to him by his parents.

As a seventh grader, Jose began recognizing that some of the older students he characterized as his friends were leaving school without permission. His thoughts took him to question why he was remaining in school and his friends were off having fun. Jose began “ditching” school in seventh grade; he left with the crowd; he was “always with the crowd.” Eighth grade was more of the same.

Jose characterized his middle school teachers as “if you don’t have good grades, you’re not accomplishing things; they’re always mad at you.” Rather than go to a class where the teacher portrays the image of being “mad” at Jose, he chose to ditch that class or ditch school for the day. On one such occasion, Jose was caught and placed on a school status that required him to return the following day with his parent for a conference with a representative of the school administration. Fearing his parents, Jose went to school, “hung out” around the school until students went in to start their school day. He wandered about the community, hung out with his friends who chose to ditch school and simply wasted time until the end of school when he continued his day. Jose continued his daily routine until one day as students began entering the building he was approached by a school police officer who investigated further. After a parent meeting at school and interventions at home by his godparents, Jose returned to school only to look for other ways to get removed from school. Passing eighth grade was a miracle; he continues to be amazed that he was able to accomplish promotion. He attributes his success to a teacher who took a special interest in him having him report to her after normal school hours to catch up on missing work.
Ninth grade was another opportunity to have fun in lieu of attending school. The courses that were important to Jose were physical education and electives. Other subjects were a challenge; Jose was easily distracted by classmates and very interested in girls. As teachers tried providing instruction and assistance, their words became “gibberish” to him. He followed the crowd off school grounds and attended various “ditching parties” that were taking place at various locations.

Jose had many experiences while ditching school. Many of those experiences he recognizes could have resulted in being arrested and jailed; however, there was a certain excitement, and “adrenaline rush” felt as a direct result of “running from the cops.” That excitement often brought him back for more.

After spending three and a half years in high school, Jose recognized that he was not going to graduate as expected. Mid-year he stopped attending and waited until he was old enough to enroll in an adult education program. Jose did not drop out of high school; he sees himself as leaving high school to go to another program. It took him a period of time before he engaged in another option.

Shawnita

Shawnita is a twenty year old, single African-American female who lives with her infant daughter and boyfriend in her aunt’s home. School records identify her has a student with a learning disability receiving special education support although she never disclosed it during the interview. Her high school experience was characterized as being like any of her friends until her senior year. While in high school she ditched school having fun with her friends but nothing that would preclude her meeting graduation
requirements. As a junior, she took and passed the high school proficiency examinations. Graduation looked to be achievable at the end of her senior year.

Early in Shawnita’s senior year, her gay mother took a female partner whom she married. Living in the house with Shawnita was her mother and her mother’s wife. Shawnita had difficulty with this arrangement. Prior to her senior year, mother would often wake Shawnita in the morning for school, make sure she was prepared for the day, and otherwise communicate care and concern. After the marriage and the addition of the spouse to the home, mom’s attentions were focused on her wife. Shawnita began to rebel; there were increased conflicts with mom and mom’s wife. She chose to leave her mother’s home and move in with her boyfriend.

For most of her senior year she had been ditching, not completing school work, and hanging out with friends. Getting close to the end of the school year Shawnita recognized that she needed to get back on track if she was to graduate. After meeting with her counselor, she learned that she would be unable to earn the necessary credits to graduate on time. She chose to stop attending school completely.

Shawnita and her boyfriend moved to Arizona where they lived with her boyfriend’s grandmother. She learned that she was pregnant. Shawnita and boyfriend returned to school to complete requirements for their high school diploma. Her boyfriend secured employment working at night. This arrangement was short-lived as the boyfriend, trying to do school work during the day and work at night, lost his job. Shawnita had her baby daughter and discontinued attending school. The next setback was boyfriend’s grandmother decided to move in with her daughter. Shawnita and boyfriend returned to where they lived previously taking up residence with Shawnita’s
aunt and her aunt’s children. The aunt encouraged both of them to return to school stating that she would provide child care and assist them with resources necessary to complete the registration for school. Shawnita registered in an adult school seeking to complete requirements for her high school diploma.

**Lynette**

Lynette is an eighteen year old Pacific Island female living with her older sister and her sister’s family. She is attending an alternative high school after being in and out of school multiple times during the previous few years.

Lynette lived with her father in California during her elementary school years. Prior to starting sixth grade, her father became ill and passed away. Lynette moved out of California to take residence with her older sister who was awarded guardianship. Living with mother was not an option as mom was unstable and dealing with bipolar disorder. While Lynette was in middle school there were visits from mom to see both her daughters. Those visits resulted in more emotional experiences that Lynette’s sister was able to handle. Contact with mother was discontinued.

In middle school, Lynette remained quiet, trying keeping up with her school work. She felt like an “outsider” in her sister’s family; she recognized that her sister had obligations to her husband and her children so she tried to remain obscure. She wanted some relationship with someone but was unable to secure something meaningful. She used poor school performance as a way of calling attention to herself. She would often simply not do the required school work and subsequently fail.

Seeking alternatives to attendance at a comprehensive high school, Lynette and her sister considered an independent study program. This program proved to be
beneficial for approximately three quarters of the school year at which time she discontinued attendance. At the beginning of the next school year she transferred to a distance learning program staying in that program for one semester and then not continuing with her class obligation. After being out of school for more than two months, she returned to the independent study program for approximately two months (to the end of that school year). At the beginning of the following school year she re-enrolled in the distance learning program remaining in that program for only two months before dropping out again. Lynette was seeking direct contact with a teacher but chose not to return to a comprehensive high school. After being out of school for a number of months she chose to enroll in an alternative high school where she is presently attending and has discussed her feelings of fulfillment resulting from relationships with teachers.

Stephanie

Stephanie is a seventeen year old independent, White female who has attended fifteen different schools getting her to her ninth grade status at an alternative high school. She started ninth grade at the beginning of three different school years only to drop out after attending seven months the first time, two months the second time, and four months the third time.

Stephanie’s middle school experience was a beginning of many learning challenges. She struggled with the curriculum asking for help from teachers. Teachers were willing to provide the assistance and helped her but not to a point where she felt as though she adequately understood the course material. Stephanie never got to a point where she felt confident with any of the course content. She continued to struggle and continued asking questions never receiving adequate support from teachers.
After transitioning to high school, Stephanie’s perception is that she received less academic support from teachers. After asking for assistance, teachers would either refer her to the book, notes, or previous discussions. She became frustrated and bored choosing to sleep in class. Teachers allowed her to sleep. She quickly lost interest in school, and feelings of being overwhelmed led her to other activities. Often she would stay at home and simply not go to school. On days she did attend school, she began ditching classes and ditching the entire school day spending the time with friends.

Each of the years Stephanie chose to stop attending school, her mother provided little or no encouragement or support to continue her education. Stephanie reported that mother left school as a ninth grade student.

Stephanie became entangled with the legal system and was appointed a law guardian. That law guardian assisted her by identifying an alternative high school she could attend and taking her to complete the enrollment process. Her school program includes a vocational program that she finds rewarding, exciting, as well as educational.

Chanelle

Chanelle is a nineteen year old, recently married, White female living with her husband. She has been independent from her parents for more than two years leaving home to live with her boyfriend. She has been working to support herself since she dropped out of high school and moved away from parents. She dropped out of high school just two months away from graduation. Chanelle was on track to graduate with an honor’s diploma taking Advanced Placement courses in English. She struggled with the mathematics requirements for graduation and failed the high school proficiency examination in mathematics multiple times. The anxiety associated with meeting the
daily AP course assignments and the preparation to meet other graduation requirements increased her stress. Chanelle, her mother, and her step-father were in constant conflict regarding her high school status resulting in her decision to move out of her home to live with her boyfriend.

Chanelle’s mother, being a college graduate, had high expectations for her daughter and she regularly expressed those expectations. Those expectations increased the pressure Chanelle felt at home and in school. In school, the assignments required for her AP courses increased the pressure she felt during school. Chanelle got to a point where she expressed that she could not keep up. She stopped eating, refused to attend school and subsequently dropped out with only two months before graduation. School personnel (teachers, counselors, administrators) did not extend themselves to Chanelle in a manner that helped to keep her engaged or to reengage her once she actually left.

Being out of school for about two years Chanelle recognized that she wants more out of life than menial jobs. At the encouragement of her husband, she has returned to an adult high school diploma program and plans to continue her education by attending college.

**Merari**

Merari is a single, eighteen year old Hispanic female who lives at home with her parents and attends an alternative high school. She grew up in a home with strong religious beliefs. Her parents were regular communicants at church. Merari states that she “grew up in the church.” Her mother would often pray for guidance to assist Merari in school and life.
Elementary and middle school years provided typical school experiences. While attending middle school Merari earned school-wide recognition for accomplishments in English. That recognition got her name posted on the wall of excellence at the school. She expressed pride in that accomplishment stating she would return to see her name listed. She earned that recognition by working hard and completing all assigned work and asking for extra work in her English class. This accomplishment carries special significance for her as she also missed a considerable amount of school time that school year as she had considerable difficulties with migraine headaches. She was hospitalized for part of her eighth grade and required recovery time at home before returning to school. She chose to return to school as she was afraid that if she did not attend, she would not be promoted to the ninth grade.

As a freshman at a comprehensive high school, Merari found the school environment threatening. She was approached by a student at her high school and asked if she wanted to purchase drugs. She perceived that as a threat. Her anxiety toward school increased to where she made herself physically sick. Knowing that a friend attended a private school, her parents withdrew her from public school and enrolled her in a private school.

Merari attended a private school for three years. She described that experience using the metaphor that it was like attending a “boot camp.” She was still afraid to attend school but was afraid for different reasons. Not wanting to disappoint her parents, she continued the routine. After her third year at the private school, she did confide in her mother that she was not happy at the private school and things were not as “fine” as she repeatedly told her mother. Her mother did withdraw her from the private school.
Merari attempted to re-enroll in a comprehensive high school. At her first meeting, she was shuffled from office to office, speaking with a variety of school personnel regarding her credit status. There were questions about her transcript from the private school, and then at one point her transcript was misplaced between one office and the next. Her frustration forced her to give up without registering. After a period of time, Merari chose to pursue her education at an alternative high school where she reports that she has begun making up credit that she lost as a result of the “mistakes” made at the private school with the courses she took and the credits assigned. With her current effort, she is hoping to graduate soon and continue her education in theater at the college level.

Brenda

Brenda is a twenty-four year old, married, Hispanic female with two children who immigrated to the United States early in her life. Her oldest daughter, in elementary school, has indirectly provided the impetus for her to return to school. Brenda wants to show her children that she believes that education is important by completing her high school diploma requirements.

In high school Brenda’s parents were divorced. She continued to live with her mother. Her mother was unable to keep up with the bills so Brenda chose to drop out and got a job to help support the family. Mother was not totally supportive of Brenda’s choice to leave school but recognized that she could help the family. Once her mother felt she was self-sufficient she encouraged Brenda to return to school; however, Brenda had a boyfriend and was enjoying the life she had grown accustomed to. She was not in a frame of mind at that time to return to school.
Reflecting on high school, Brenda recalls that she uses the excuse that she had to go to work to help support her family when the truth is closer to she was frustrated with school and was looking for a reason to drop out. She enjoyed ditching school, and hanging out with her friends. When she and her girlfriend chose to ditch, they would often go to her girlfriend’s house, watch a movie and eat popcorn. On occasion she would go driving around with someone. She found a level of excitement from ditching school; it gave her a sense of independence. When returning to school the following day she would provide the school with an excuse she wrote and signed using her mother’s name. With practice she was able to replicate her mom’s signature to where the school did not question it. At the time, her mother never knew Brenda was not in school.

While in school and looking for opportunities to get out of school, Brenda remembers knowing that her behaviors were certainly not helping her; however, she and her friends felt that they still had the remainder of their lives to make up for the fun they were having in high school. There was nothing really that pressing that could not be changed later in life.

During her first year in middle school Brenda recalled issues with one teacher. She had a personality conflict that resulted in her avoiding school. She would often complain to her mother that she was sick. Mother repeatedly took her to the doctor to be examined; each time the doctor found nothing physically wrong with her. Once she disclosed that her concern was with her teacher her mother approached the school for assistance requesting a class change to another teacher. To this day Brenda does not know why the school refused to make a teacher change that would have reduced the anxiety she felt that entire school year. While her teacher did nothing to cause her to not
like or fear her, she also did nothing to improve communication and reduce Brenda’s anxiety.

Brenda’s six year old daughter came home from school one afternoon and began asking questions about her mother’s education. Her daughter explained that the teacher told her that parents should have a high school diploma. Brenda states that the next day she was at the adult education program forming a line to get registered.

Cynthia

Cynthia is a married, twenty-eight year old African-American female who was born, reared and educated in Ghana, West Africa. She immigrated to the United States ten years ago. Since entering the country she married and now has a daughter. Being educated in Ghana she attended elementary school and then what she referred to as high school. In Ghana students attend elementary school, followed by high school and then to secondary school before studying at the university.

University study has always been in her plans. It was and continues to be Cynthia’s plan to further her education to become a nurse. She recognizes that she needs funding support to accomplish that goal so she has been working at a skilled labor position. Other workers at her place of employment have been terminated and their positions being filled with workers with a GED or a high school diploma. Brenda is unable to produce a transcript verifying that she has a high school diploma. She has been working to secure documentation of her education but the schools she attended only have a copy of the certificate. She has decided to forgo continuing her efforts to secure the transcript and complete requirements for a high school diploma here in the United States. She chose to return to an adult education program to demonstrate that she has the
academic knowledge necessary for a high school diploma. Thus far she has earned eight units of credit toward her adult standard diploma.

In Ghana, female students typically attend elementary school. One of the key measures of academic achievement for a female student has been the ability to write her name. Most educational opportunities in Ghana have some costs for parents, even if it is minimally for school uniforms. Still, many children go uneducated by United States standards.

Even though being educated in Ghana may be a privilege, adolescents still do not realize the full meaning and potential of the opportunities before them. Cynthia reported that many students drop out thinking that since they are old enough, they can make their own decisions and can return to education at some point in their future. She reflects on those opportunities she had and wishes she had chosen to take them.

Cynthia was brought to the United States by her father who had been working here for more than twenty years. Her dad sent money to her while she was living in Ghana paying the costs for her to move. Arriving in the United States, she needed to secure employment to begin to provide for herself. Her plans for college were preempted by her need to provide for herself. Since arriving she has gotten married and now has a child making her return to earn her degree in nursing more of a challenge.

Juan

Juan is a single, twenty year old, Hispanic male enrolled in an adult high school program. He is seeking a high school diploma to demonstrate that he has learned from his earlier mistakes and “getting what I gotta get so I can go where I wanna go.” Where
he wants to go is into military service. He has been to the recruiting office and has been told that he needs to earn his high school diploma before he can enlist.

Juan previously earned his GED. Due to his involvement with the Juvenile Justice System, the military service will not allow him to enlist without a high school diploma and a reasonably high Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery score. He has returned to school to earn that high school diploma. It is his intent to do just enough and no more than necessary to earn that credential allowing him then to move on.

While in a comprehensive high school program, Juan presented himself as an angry student always looking to fight. His anger has caused him to be suspended from school many times, and attend disciplinary school placements for extended periods of time. After fulfilling his disciplinary obligations and earning the right to return to a comprehensive school campus, his desire to be successful, follow the rules, and complete school was always overshadowed by subsequent disciplinary incidents.

Juan identified the etiology of his anger as problems at home that included child abuse and parental drug abuse. The abuse began when he was in junior high school. When he attended school he would get into fights not caring about the consequences. The repeated suspensions from school and the many disciplinary moves from school to school resulted in difficulties keeping up with school work. His academic progress was limited, and he recognized that he was behind where he should be. At that point he lost interest in even trying.

The abuse Juan experienced in middle school caused him to be distracted from completing his work at home. When he attended school his desire was to simply do as he pleased. Juan wanted to be free, free from all controls. He wanted to be free from worry
about things happening around him. When at school, he felt he was in a place where he could “just chill out and have fun.”

In high school skipping classes was commonplace, especially those classes he perceived as boring or hard. He would ditch and “go smoke some weed,” or “hang out with my homeboys.” He recognized that his behavior was not getting him where he wanted to be but he felt powerless to get to where he needed to be so he chose to do something to have fun in the moment.

**Ditching**

“Ditching” is the student practice of avoiding their assigned class by non-attendance. “Ditching” may be missing one class period, multiple classes within a day or the entire day. Seventy percent of study participants identified that ditching was an issue for them while attending a comprehensive school campus. They became bored with a class, lost interest in what was happening at that time and choose to “ditch.” Ditching was that avoidance of the noxious stimuli the class provided for them. In avoiding the boredom, or frustration, students either did not attend the class at all or left the class on any given day after it began. Forty percent reported that they lacked an understanding of the material; sixty percent reported the teacher’s presentation methodology was less than engaging, or they did not see the relevance of the material. In some instances, the students reported that they were simply doing individual seatwork that was not meaningful and they did not feel the need to continue.

One study participant explained that he was absent for approximately forty days of class time before some formal school intervention. That initial school intervention was a letter home to parents indicating that the student had been absent for four days. The
school response was inadequate and missed the real issue with that student. He was unable to attend as he was struggling to keep his family together as a direct result of his mother’s drug and alcohol abuse. Her poor choices increased his responsibilities in caring for his sister and cousins. Attendance in class became a challenge and when he was in class, thoughts about his mother and planning for his sister and cousins’ return from school precluded his attention to the course material.

Another study participant explained class absence similarly. “When I’m there I don’t understand the stuff they are teaching so I go to sleep. They let me sleep. Why should I go to class to sleep? So I ditch.” In explaining further, the student commented that upon return from a class absence, the teacher did not acknowledge that the student had been absent, or even that the student was present that particular day. “They don’t care if you’re there or you’re absent so why not be absent.”

One African-American female participant commented that school “wasn’t doing anything for her friends” so they ditched or did not show up at all. In her interest to be with her friends, she chose to join them causing her to fall behind. She stated that she was not concerned about her mother learning of the absence because the school often didn’t follow-up.

A Hispanic female explained the process of dropping out as starting with not liking the teacher, not having a relationship with the teacher or generally not liking the class. Those factors translate into a lack of interest in that class or subject. The student will then avoid that class for a period. Once the first absence occurs, it becomes easier to ditch in the future. After a few missed classes, students find themselves behind, and choose to avoid the class totally. If a student is doing the same in multiple classes,
regular school attendance is in jeopardy. After a number of missed days, students recognize the futility in returning to school with the expectation of passing so they stop attending. Multiple participants reported similar experiences.

One African female’s participation in this study provides an interesting perspective on education and the practice of dropping out. This student was born and attended school in West Africa until she entered high school when her father was able to bring her to the United States to live. She reflected on ditching and dropping out of school in her native country. According to her, the behaviors of ditching and dropping out of school prior to its natural completion are not phenomenon unique to education in the United States. She states that educational expectations in her native country are significantly different from schools in the United States. Performance standards allowing a student to terminate school experiences could be as limited as having the ability to write their name. Her orientation to school was much more goal directed; her plans were to become a nurse. Moving to the United States caused her to recognize boys in a different way. The goal of becoming a nurse was put on hold. She is not looking to finish her high school diploma requirements and move on to college.

Integration of Family, Friends, and School

Using constant comparison methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Silverman, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) interview participant comments were analyzed and categories began to emerge. Interviewee comments focused on teacher behaviors, student behaviors, family issues, peer influences, and reflections on the thoughts of
Teachers

The teacher behaviors as identified by interviewees were categorized as understanding, caring, and talking with students. Participant statements for understanding and caring were further analyzed for content and subsequently disaggregated into positive and negative comments. Student behaviors were categorized into family, ditching, challenging behaviors, understanding, caring, friends, absence and work. The categories of family, understanding, caring, and friends were further disaggregated into positive and negative comments.

Examples of the types of responses included in each category are as follows:

Teacher Understanding – Positive: The context for sharing positive comments about teacher’s understanding came from descriptions of a teacher participants found helpful and the qualities in a teacher they would want to work with. Participants explained that the teacher will help you to understand how to do the work; they will explain it step-by-step; “they have the patience to deal with kids”; “they are not here for their own benefit.”

Teacher understanding – Negative: The context for describing negative teacher understanding behaviors came from experiences participants had on a comprehensive school campus. Participants explained that the teacher just told us she just explained that; “when asked to do it again the teacher became annoyed;” “I didn’t want to tell the teacher I didn’t understand and look foolish in front of everyone.”

Teacher caring – Positive: The context for the descriptions of positive teacher
Table 9
Frequency of Issues Raised by Participants in Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Understand</th>
<th>Care</th>
<th>Talk</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Ditching</th>
<th>Challenge</th>
<th>Understand</th>
<th>Care</th>
<th>Friends</th>
<th>Absence</th>
<th>Work</th>
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<td>White male (19) left school to care for family; mother drug user/ alcoholic</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
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<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>Black female (19) reaction to mom; got behind couldn't catch up</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific Island female (19) living with sister since father's death; seeking a program that will help her graduate</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
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<td>Hispanic female, (24) left school to work for family</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black female (25) from Ghana; married has child</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic female (18) left because of stress;</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic male (18) left because got behind from ditching; didn't like school</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic male (20) school irrelevant; not meeting needs</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White G/T female (20) left because of stress</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>12</strong></td>
<td><strong>18</strong></td>
<td><strong>33</strong></td>
<td><strong>54</strong></td>
<td><strong>27</strong></td>
<td><strong>11</strong></td>
<td><strong>18</strong></td>
<td><strong>25</strong></td>
<td><strong>9</strong></td>
<td><strong>4</strong></td>
<td><strong>24</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

103
caring came from participants’ recollections of a special teacher who took an interest as well as descriptions of the behaviors they were seeking from a teacher. Explanations included statements such as “pay attention to students”; “at least learn our names”; “I want teachers to care about me”; “take an interest in me”; “helpful teachers makes us want to stay in class because we have a relationship with them.”

Teacher caring – Negative: In some instances participants were explaining teacher behaviors that facilitated their dropping out. Statements included expressions such as “they don’t care about us;” “I could fall asleep in class and they would let me sleep;” “It made me act out cause teachers weren’t involved.”

Teacher talking: Participants described expectations they had for teachers or shared their description of an ideal teacher. Statements from participants included expressions such as “the biggest help would have been if the school brought me in and talked to me;” “I just want every teacher to recognize my work and tell me they noticed it;” “don’t yell and kick us out, talk and find out what’s happening.”

Students

Student – Family – Positive: Some participants during their interview spoke about family issues and their impact on their decisions. Statements indicating the potential for positive impact include “if the family thinks education is important then it will be;” “if nobody at home studies, then it is not going to work;” “kids have to talk to their parents and parents have to check up on their kids.”

Student – Family – Negative: Interview data include family related issues that include domestic violence, child abuse, parent incarceration, parent not caring, divorce,
death of parent, change in parent sexual orientation, and parents not being appropriate models (dropouts themselves, drug abusers, alcohol abusers).

Student – Ditching: Many participants spoke about the practice of ditching, reasons students ditch, what they do when they ditch, and teacher behaviors (lack of acknowledgement of an absence) when a student returns after ditching. Participants discussed the desire to avoid “boring classes” so they were absent from class. In most instances once one class cut took place, students escalated to missing multiple classes, then “ditching” the entire day and multiple days. Statements include “the classes are so boring;” “the teachers want you to be quiet;” “I skipped, went out and smoked some weed somewhere.”

Students – Challenge: Participants spoke about some risky behaviors that took place while “ditching” school. Some viewed attempts by parents and school officials to eliminate the ditching behavior as a challenge as evidenced by, “I would go out and get into trouble and think it was fun,” “you get an adrenaline rush from running from the cops,” and “your parents didn’t know where you were so let’s go and do it.”

Students – Understand – Positive: In describing how school life should be participants made statements similar to, “Don’t do anything now that will hurt you in the future,” and explaining that they should feel comfortable in asking for teacher assistance without fear.

Students – Understand – Negative: One participant stated multiple times feelings of inadequacy and lack of understanding of course material. Another participant explained that “I wasn’t learning math,” and the teacher talk was “gibberish.”
Students – Caring – Positive: This category was included anticipating participants would counter some of their negative caring statements with something that would indicate that they themselves cared.

Students – Caring – Negative: Participants made statements similar to, “I took everything as a joke,” “freshman year I played,” and “goofing off and thinking it was cool.”

Students – Friends – Positive: Participants spoke about the influence friends had on them, their behavior and their school performance. Statements included, “pretty much the only reason for going to school was to see my friends;” “I wanted to be part of the crowd;” and “I had lots of friends – lots of girl friends too.”

Students – Friends – Negative: In some instances participants spoke about friends in negative ways. Statements such as, “I went with the crowd – if they were going to ditch, I went with them;” “My best friend didn’t know what was happening – it was embarrassing to talk about;” and “friends were with you for the partying – for the distraction” were shared during interviews.

Students – Absence: Some participants discussed absences. Statements included, “at some schools, if you don’t go, you don’t go – it’s no big deal,” and “I began looking for ways to get kicked out of school for a few days.”

From those categories, the significance of teacher behavior was identified. Participants spoke of teacher behaviors that were helpful as well as detrimental to their well-being. The same significance regarding teacher caring of the individual student became evident. The student perspective of the importance of talking with students was identified by some as an issue.
Table 9 provided a summary of the issues identified through analysis and the frequency of issues raised by interview participants. Of the comments associated with teachers, sixty percent of those statements were associated with the concept of teacher caring and sixty-two percent of the caring statements indicated that teachers did not demonstrate caring in a meaningful way to the participants.

The importance of positive teacher behaviors establishing a positive and meaningful relationship emerged as a recurrent theme in virtually every student interview. Either the message was provided as a description of the ideal teacher or was a comparison between the teachers the students had in high school and the teachers they now have while on the campus of the alternative high school.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS: PERSPECTIVES ON DROPPING OUT

Conversations about issues critical to education leadership should always include discussions of those students who set out to complete their education in a timely manner but for whatever reason, disengage from school. Considerable resources have been committed to educate our youth - not all finish. Some are brought close to graduation and then leave. The lost potential we experience resulting from a student dropping out is phenomenal (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2007; Heckman & Krueger, 2003; Rouse, 2005). The disengagement from school is a significant issue that requires keen and interested leadership to reexamine the commitment of the limited educational resources.

Youth disengage by their own choice (“I lost interest”; “School was not my gig”; “I had better things to do”); others leave citing personal and family reasons (“I had to go to work”; “I took care of my mom when she was sick”; “I was into drugs and didn’t care about anything”); still others assign responsibility for their disengagement to the school itself (“I got kicked out”; “Teachers told me to leave, so I did”; “The stuff they were doing was stupid, plus I wasn’t getting anything from it”). That disengagement has impact on each and every American in some manner or form, either directly or indirectly. The sociological and economic factors created by high school dropouts are enormous. The earning power of a person without a high school diploma is significantly decreased (Heckman, 2001; US Department of Labor, 2005; Alliance for Excellent Education,
Individuals with a high school diploma are poised to earn at least $250,000 more in their lifetime than those earning a General Educational Development credential (Rouse, 2005). Individuals who have not completed a high school diploma program are at increased risk of being incarcerated. More than forty percent of inmates in correctional settings entered without having a high school diploma (Harlow, 2003). Individuals without a high school diploma are at greater risk of requiring social welfare assistance than the general population (Garfinkel, Kelly, & Waldfogel, 2005). Children are not born predestined to drop out of school although through the totality of their childhood and school experiences they may be programmed to identify dropping out as an acceptable alternative and some identify it as the only alternative available to them.

Individuals without formal high school education earn less per year, pay fewer taxes, and have less disposable income to contribute to the nation’s economy. It is estimated that American’s will lose more than $300 billion in the next ten years resulting from the graduates from the Class of 2007 alone (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007).

The issue is not one of economics alone. Within an educated populace, there is greater participation in our democratic form of government. Increased participation implies that voters should be better informed on issues, will be better able to read and understand the issues thereby making choices that will have greater benefit on the entire population. Thomas Jefferson wrote: “I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them but to inform their discretion.” (Jefferson, n.d.)
Much of the study of the issue of dropping out of school prior to graduation has focused on data; analysis of data demonstrating the magnitude of the issue by state, by city, and some research studies are even reporting on schools being labeled as “drop out factories” (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). Much has been written about youth who have dropped out but there is a paucity of writing from the youth or the perspective of youth. Examination of dropping out looks differently when filtered through the lens of those who have chosen to leave or felt they were pushed out.

This study developed an understanding of this critical issue through the perspective of those youth who have experienced the process of dropping out of high school and chose to reengage in school to complete the requirements for their high school diploma through an adult education program. They are reengaging through adult education programs as they are either no longer eligible to participate in a comprehensive high school because of age restrictions or their individual needs make a comprehensive high school program inappropriate or unavailable to them. Childcare needs, family obligations, or work schedules preclude their ability to comply with the structure that exists on a comprehensive school campus. They are unavailable during much of the time the classes they need for graduation are offered.

Schools identify a student as dropped out after that student stopped regular class attendance, has not formally withdrawn, and has not transferred her or his school membership to another educational institution. Interestingly almost one in five of those who stopped attending, were withdrawn by their enrolled school, and counted as a high school dropout do not identify themselves as a dropout. Study results from the questionnaire administered to a convenience sampling of students yield comments such
as, “I didn’t drop out, I just stopped going”; “I am still attending school so I didn’t drop out,”; “I didn’t drop out of school, I just missed school a lot”; “I didn’t drop out, but I wasn’t going to school because I wanted to have fun, party, etc…”; “I didn’t drop out – I got kicked out ‘cause I wasn’t going”; and “I never dropped out, I ditched with my friends.”

The students whose statements fail to acknowledge their drop out status demonstrate the disconnect between school and student with regard to defining and categorizing a student as a “dropout.” Examining this issue differently, many adults establish membership with a church or organization. While they do not attend regularly, they still claim membership with that organization; they have not dropped out nor have they withdrawn either formally or informally. The significant difference is that eligibility for high school is time-limited, whereas membership criteria in other institutions generally have no such obligations or restrictions.

Absences

When examining the number of students who have become credit deficient, school leadership must examine their personnel’s attitudes toward class absences, the monitoring of responses provided to students upon their return from an absence, holding students accountable for the missed work, together with a review of student absence data disaggregated by teacher. Many class absences are unauthorized and are indicators of disengagement.
“Un” Table

The team that reviewed the interview data and assisted in the coding was comprised of a university professor and two experienced school district administrators. After conducting the coding of interview data recognized patterns in the data. Through the examination of that data, three general issues emerge. There exist three “un” categories: unable, unwilling, and unstable. The three categories apply to domains of an individual student. The student domains are self, family, and school. Interview data reveal that within the domain of self, participants identified perceptions of their inability (Unable) to meet expectations; other statements addressed their unwillingness to respond; and still other statements addressed their own personal instability (Unstable). Analysis of student statements provided perceptions of their family as well as the school they left was conducted utilizing the same categories. Table 10 provides the summary themes of the interview responses.

Table 10

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Unable</th>
<th>Unwilling</th>
<th>Unstable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td>Lack of Skill; unable to complete assignments; psychological factors</td>
<td>Lack of motivation; lack of will; lack of interest; &quot;better&quot; things to do; lack of maturity</td>
<td>Emotional trauma; anxiety; frustration; dependence on drugs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Missing or absent; lack of parenting ability; lack of knowledge of student behavior</td>
<td>No contact with parents; no value in education; no support or participation</td>
<td>Substance abuses; absent parents; lifestyle preferences; mental health; physical abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>No program; no supports; lack of relevance</td>
<td>Disciplinary removal; uncaring staff; lack of academic assistance</td>
<td>Lack of consistent application of rules</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Relationships Theme

Jones (2008) identifies a relationship framework continuum that includes seven levels. Those levels in the relation framework include the general headings of isolation, known, receptive, reactive, proactive, sustained, and mutually beneficial. At the extremes are isolation and mutually beneficial. A relationship that is mutually beneficial for one-hundred percent of the time is non-existent (Jones, 2008). The review of this continuum provided the initial concept formation that led to the development of the “Perceived Teacher Behavior” continuum and the “Student Relationship” continuum presented in Student-School Engagement Framework (Figure 1).

Interview participants identified a continuum of teacher behaviors that were either a reality for them in their decision to leave school or their ideals for a teacher who would have kept them engaged in school and possibly prevented them from disengaging. Participants spoke of teachers who were not involved with them or their classmates. The teacher’s behavior communicated to the student that they were there to teach a subject – students just happened to be in the room. At the other end of the continuum are those who communicated by their behavior that they enjoy teaching and look to engage the students in personal and meaningful ways. Participant comments indicated that if a teacher showed interest in the student in a meaningful manner, the student would try harder in that class even if the material was extremely difficult for them. One Hispanic male explained his strong feelings toward a school subject with, “I hated math…but that teacher took an interest in me and I didn’t want to let him down. I tried my hardest to learn math.”
The categories on the vertical axis of Figure 1 provide an analysis of student statements of their perceptions of teacher behaviors. The concept formation of the continuum originates directly from student reports of their observations of teacher behaviors; the balance results from students reflecting on what they feel their school could have done to help them when they were into the process of disengaging. The horizontal axis shows the continuum of possible commitment as demonstrated by the student. Many interview statements and some questionnaire statements provided evidence of individual student’s degree of alienation from teachers. All participants recognized the importance of education and the value that teachers provided in the teaching-learning process. All spoke of their desire to have meaningful relationships with teachers.

The dropout quadrant of Figure 1 demonstrates the low perceptions students had of teachers’ behaviors when previously they were in school and their involvement in a meaningful relationship with a significant person in the school was non-existent. Those who dropped out were seeking relationships and often chose friends who were also seeking relationships. The engagements they found were in out-of-school experiences.

Student reflections provided demonstrate that at the beginning of the school year some study participants returned to school with a stronger commitment to themselves to achieve success. They were hoping that their teachers would recognize their renewed commitment and provide recognition. When that recognition did not happen or did not happen in a meaningful way, the students again left school. Increased student desire for a relationship with a significant adult in school without some positive response from teachers was not sufficiently strong to keep them in school. Hence, the “Students
Desiring Engaging Environment” quadrant that demonstrates stronger positive student relationships is not, in and of itself, sufficiently strong to move students to graduation.
The “Engaging Learning Environment” quadrant places greater responsibility for consistency and effort on the part of the teacher. The reengaged students stated that had teachers recognized their efforts in some positive way, allowed and encouraged them to work collaboratively with others, and demonstrated that they, as teachers, were enjoying teaching the class, those events may have made enough of a difference to students to prevent them from disengaging.

For a student to be part of the “Graduate” quadrant, they themselves need to make some positive commitment to their own education and they require the efforts of a teacher who at a minimum demonstrates a matter-of-fact approach to their job and avoids spending time acknowledging any student negative behavior.

One hundred percent of interview participants identified issues with teachers that either could have helped them remain in school or convinced them that school was not helping them. Nine out of ten explained that teachers demonstrated a lack of caring for them and their individual circumstances. Circumstances included the student’s present inability to understand the course material, struggling with the in-class work and homework, a lack of engaging class activities and a rigidity of classroom expectations that took the excitement out of learning.

Interview participants all indicate that at present they are being successful in the alternative school setting. They identified their success as attending regularly, earning good grades, completing courses necessary for graduation, and feeling better about themselves. In all cases, they attribute their success to the organization of the school (time schedules, flexibility, course offerings, learning modalities), the positive interactions with their teachers, and changes they themselves have made. The
interactions with teachers have identified major differences from their previous educational experiences. Students report that current teachers in the alternative setting have communicated a sense of caring. They take the time to interact with them in a meaningful manner. That includes talking with them, following up after an absence to identify any needed additional supports, “not tripping out when I don’t understand, even if they just explained it.”

Approximately one student in five dropped out and assigned responsibility for their decision to the strong influence of friends. Some identified ditching with friends as the beginning of formal disengagement process. Others cited the schools’ practice of allowing seniors to schedule an abbreviated day (at least half a day of classes). Underclassmen see seniors leaving and choose to leave with them. Still others identified “hanging out” with friends a better alternative than sitting in a class they felt was boring, irrelevant, or a waste of their time. Some chose leaving school with friends a more suitable alternative knowing that, long-term, they were not helping themselves. Multiple participants stated that their thinking was that they had the remainder of their lives to make up the schoolwork. It was more important to have a good time.

New Understandings

The decision made by youth to return to school is a goal directed behavior. Earlier when these students left their high school, life circumstances were such that any goals they had would have been mitigated by those circumstances. The set of behaviors they demonstrated were not necessarily toward any identifiable goal or any meaningful behavior expressing a commitment to achieving a goal. Some interviewee participants
expressed that when in high school their thinking was that they were still young and had the remainder of their life to work toward goals.

Ninety percent of interviewees reengaged with the idea of completing the requirements for their high school diploma with a specific goal in mind. Forty percent were planning to attend college and all but one had a specific college program identified. Interestingly, the one gifted and talented student who left her comprehensive high school because of the pressures she felt in her advanced placement classes in school as well as pressures at home from her parents to continue meeting high expectations is the only one without a specific identified college program choice. However, she spoke of her commitment to herself and her fiancé to go to college. One Hispanic male’s goal is to enlist in the military. His recruiter has told him that because of his juvenile record he would be allowed to enlist only if he earned his high school diploma. Thirty percent of the participants indicated that they were returning to school for personal and/or family reasons such as one participant who wants to be a positive role model for her children, another found a meaningful adult relationship with someone who has provided guidance, and another who remembers something his father told him about physical work that would be required of someone without a high school diploma. One participant is searching and is hoping that high school will provide a meaningful direction.

Future Research

This study has given a voice to youth who dropped out of school during high school and chose to reengage to complete the requirements for their high school diploma. Many high school dropouts still have not chosen to reengage. Are their experiences so
different from the students who reengage to keep them away longer? Will they ever return? What will be the motivation for them to return and complete the requirements for their high school diploma?

All study participants, either questionnaire or interview, left school prior to graduation and chose to return to complete requirements for their high school diploma. None of the study participants dropped out of middle school, yet many middle school students never make it to high school. How are youth who leave school prior to entering high school different from the youth who left during high school and chose to reengage? Will the middle school dropouts return to school to complete their high school education? If so, what will be the stimulus that assists them in reengaging? Will the identified stimuli be different from the stimuli identified through interview by the study participants? Exploring the “Why” of the disengagement before entering high school may reveal valuable understandings that will benefit future students.

These perspectives identified by youth in this study need to be understood by those who lead and work with youth on a daily basis. The next step may be to research other questions. What supports and interventions are necessary to prevent similarly situated youth from choosing to drop out? What external supports and interventions will be effective to prevent dropping out?

Conclusions

The research questions for this study were:

What is the profile of a student overage in grade?
What attributes and/or people influence the over-age student to remain in school or to consider leaving?

What issues are identified by over-age students while they attended classes on their assigned middle school campus?

Why do over-age students drop out of school prior to completion?

What student identified interventions are necessary to prevent over-age students from dropping out of school?

The intent for the study was to examine these research questions from the standpoint of the youth directly impacted. Examining the data to answer the first research question, less than five percent of the questionnaire participants, and none of the interview participants repeated the eighth grade. Meaningful analysis of students repeating the eighth grade will require a sample of greater size for results to show any significance. However, some interesting information is revealed through analysis of the small sample. No White students who repeated the eighth grade were among questionnaire or interview participants. Two African-American students repeated the eighth grade; one attributed his difficulties to “ditching” and the other expressed embarrassment at having to repeat. Three Hispanic students repeated the eighth grade. One student gave no explanation; one stated it was not his fault as his family moved; and the other stated he “just messed up.” The one Asian female student who repeated the eighth grade stated that repeating the grade better prepared her for high school, yet she dropped out.

Relationships with significant people in school are what students are seeking and they feel if they had stronger relationships when they were enrolled those relationships
would have mitigated the influences of friends and family pulling them away from school. The second research question addresses the attributes of those who influence students to remain in school or drop out. The attributes and/or people most impacting students’ decision-making to remain or leave school rest with school personnel. Without exception study participants expressed an engaging, caring, interested teacher as someone who could have made a difference in their high school experience.

The third research question intended to explore middle school issues that either contributed to or may have mitigated high school behaviors. As study participants reflected on their middle school experiences, their recollections were uneventful for significant influences leading toward dropping out except for one Hispanic male. His first experiences with “ditching” school began in eighth grade. While the school and parents intervened, and consequences issued for the behavior, the consequences were not significant enough to prevent him from ditching again that year and continuing the practice into high school.

The research question addressing why a student leaves prior to completion has varied responses. Some attribute their decision to family, self, or school issues that they were unable to resolve. Family influences included turmoil within the household, lack of parental influence, and having to leave school to work thereby helping the family meet its obligations. Reasons of self given for dropping out included a lack of interest, teachers who were less than engaging, and the negative influence of friends. The school and its personnel could have demonstrated more care and concern, enforced their rules but in a caring way, had a more engaging curriculum, and teachers who were interested in teaching to students who may not have been as interested as they should. However, all
participants expressed that had school personnel taken a greater interest in them, that intervention may have mitigated the influences or helped them in their decision-making and may have avoided dropping out.

Exploration of research question five seeking student-identified interventions that would positively impact the decision-making behavior of youth yielded interesting results. The greatest and most significant intervention identified by questionnaire respondents and interviewees is the development and maintenance of a meaningful relationship. Each student wanted a teacher or school professional to care about her or him and express that caring in a manner that was understandable to the student. By comparison, they identified their school experiences at the alternative school as the ideal relationship. Teachers took the time with them to talk, offered thoughts, recognized and celebrated accomplishments, contacted them when they were absent for more than a few days, explained course material multiple times in multiple ways until they understood, and generally helped them to take responsibility for their own education.

The Critical Theory framework guiding this exploration intended to inform educational leaders and decision-makers of the school and life experiences of youth that impact their decisions to leave school prior to completion. As with Critical Theory, one intent is to inform for the purpose of change (Freire, 1970; Horkheimer, 1982, 1995; Marcuse, 1968). With higher expectations placed on schools, and school systems through increased accountability, systems out of necessity are considering change. The degree of readiness and openness of the organization to change will impact the success of the efforts (Hall & Hoard, 2006). Being informed of issues that need to be considered for
possible change should be one of the first considerations of leadership. This study of youth who disengaged from high school and chose to reengage provides one such issue.
APPENDIX A

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD INFORMED CONSENT

Department of Educational Leadership

TITLE OF STUDY: Retention and Dropping Out: The Voice of At-Risk Youth

INVESTIGATOR(S): James R. Crawford, Ph D

CONTACT PHONE NUMBER: 895-4949

Purpose of the Study
As someone who is at least eighteen (18) years of age and who previously left school, you are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to understand the struggles and frustrations experienced by youth that caused them to drop out of school prior to graduating. Youth often have a message they would like to share with school personnel explaining things that went wrong or things that went well while they were attending school. This study provides you with that opportunity.

Participants
You are being asked to participate in the study because you are at least eighteen (18) years old, chose to leave school prior to graduation and have chosen to return to complete the requirements for your high school diploma through an adult education program.

Procedures
This study hopes to learn from you. Previously, you left a comprehensive high school. You also have chosen to return to an adult high school to complete your education. This study will give you the opportunity to explain what caused you to leave your comprehensive high school.

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following:
Complete a questionnaire form that will be provided to you by your teacher.
Some students may be selected to participate in an interview with the researcher where you will have the opportunity to “tell your story.”
Review and make corrections to a typed transcript of the interview you had with the researcher.

Benefits of Participation
There are no direct benefits to you as a participant in this study. However, we hope to learn what schools should be doing differently to assist a student before he/she makes the decision to drop out of school.
Risks of Participation
There are risks involved in all research studies. This study may include only minimal risks. As you are
telling your story you may recall situations that happened a few years ago that were uncomfortable for
you. You will not be forced to share any information you are not very comfortable sharing.

Cost /Compensation
There will not be any financial cost to you to participate in this study. The study will take
approximately one hour of your time for the interview. The follow-up meeting where you can review
the transcript of your interview should take no more than 30 minutes unless you have additional
information you choose to share. You will not be compensated for your time.

Contact Information
If you have any questions or concerns about the study, you may contact James R. Crawford at 895-
4949. For questions regarding the rights of research subjects, any complaints or comments regarding
the manner in which the study is being conducted you may contact the UNLV Office for the
Protection of Research Subjects at 702-895-2794.

Voluntary Participation
Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate in this study or in any part
of this study. You may withdraw at any time without prejudice to your relations with the university, to
Desert Rose High School or any personnel of the Clark County School District. You are encouraged to
ask questions about this study at the beginning or any time during the research study.

Confidentiality
All information gathered in this study will be kept completely confidential. No reference will be made
in written or oral materials that could link you to this study. All records will be stored in a locked
facility at UNLV for three years after completion of the study. After the storage time the information
gathered will be shredded.

Participant Consent:
I am at least 18 years old, have read the above information, have had my questions answered, and
agree to participate in this study. A copy of this form has been given to me.

________________________  ________________________
Signature of Participant     Date

________________________
Participant Name (Please Print)
Consent to Audiotape:
I have been asked for my permission to allow the researcher to make an audio recording of my interview. The researcher has explained to me that a written copy (a transcript) of my interview will be prepared from the audiotape and I will have the opportunity to review that transcript. I agree to allow my interview to be audio-taped and grant my permission to start the recording.

Signature of Participant __________________________ Date __________

Participant Name (Please Print) __________________________

Participant Note: Please do not sign this document if the Approval Stamp is missing or is expired.
APPENDIX B

STUDENT INFORMATION SHEET

Directions: Please respond to the questions below. There are no right or wrong answers. The information you provide will assist us in better understanding you and helping us to better serve you as students of our school. This information will not be shared outside of the school without your specific permission.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Your Name</th>
<th>____________________________</th>
<th>Date of Birth</th>
<th>__________</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Street Name and Number</td>
<td>____________________________</td>
<td>Present Age</td>
<td>__________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone Number</td>
<td>Home: ________________</td>
<td>Ethnicity:</td>
<td>Caucasian:  □ Check</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cell: ________________</td>
<td></td>
<td>African-Am: □ Check</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your native language?</td>
<td>____________________________</td>
<td></td>
<td>Hispanic: □ Check</td>
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<td>Name of last school attended:</td>
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<td>Asian: □ Check</td>
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<td>What was the last grade in school you attended before This school?</td>
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<td>How many schools have you attended in your educational career?</td>
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<td>If you repeated, what grade(s) did you repeat?</td>
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<td>If you repeated, what thoughts do you have about repeating a grade?</td>
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<td>If you never repeated a grade, what thoughts do you have about repeating a grade?</td>
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<td>What other states have you lived in and attended school?</td>
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<tr>
<td>The last time you attended school regularly, how would you describe your grades?</td>
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When you were growing up and living at home:
  
  Did your parents live together? ____________________________
  Did you live with your ____________________________
parents?

Did your family eat dinner together?

Did you take family vacations?

Were both your parents employed?

What is your best recollection of your family?

What was the highest grade in school attended by:

Mother __

Father __

Brother __

Sister __

When you were in middle school as well as high school, who do you think had the greatest influence on you? And why?

MS

HS

What was it that caused you to stop attending school and drop out?

What should your teachers, counselors, principals, and/or parents done to keep you in school?
What message would you give to one of your family members (brother, sister, cousin, niece, nephew) if you learn that they are planning to drop out of school?

Would you like to meet with one of the UNLV researchers to discuss your school experiences that led to your decision to leave school before graduation? Yes _____    No _____

Thank you for completing this questionnaire. Your answers will be very helpful to us. We are trying to understand why students decide to leave school before graduation.
APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS

Ten interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed. Appendix C provides one of those interviews as a sample demonstrating the raw data with which the research team utilized to complete the analysis.

Tyler Interview Transcript

R: What I am looking to do is to learn how a variety of students end up at this school and then what we could have done, when I say we I mean we as educators in a comprehensive high school, what we could have done that would have helped students to prevent them from dropping out. So this is your opportunity to tell your story.

S: Okay

R: Whatever you think is important to help me understand what took place and how you got here.

S: Okay, my freshman year went smooth for the main part. I lived with my mom and she lived with her mom; so we lived with my grandmother. And she had a rocky past with drugs. And so we were living with her and freshman year went fine. Sophomore year we moved out and mom had been doing fine. Once we moved out it was like she lost her little security blanket of being at home still. That’s the way I’ve always thought about it. And she switched to alcohol so she became an alcoholic my whole sophomore year. And as she was doing that, my sister and I, being kids, we kept everything
completely hidden from my dad. He lived in Henderson. For the main part he didn’t
know what was going on. We talked to him almost everyday.

R: So your mom and dad were separated?

S. They’ve been separated since shortly after my sister was born – about 15 years. We
kept everything hid from him. He talked to us almost everyday but we kept it hid. The
social setting we had there, and we had been there 9 – 10 years so that was more home
than here. We kept it hid. When she switched to alcohol, I was working on the
weekends just for extra money for spending money.

R: For yourself?

S: For myself, at first. And when she switched to alcohol she stopped working and
became real reclusive; just stayed to herself, stayed at home, slept all day and then drank
all night. She wasn’t working and any money that my dad would send up, because he
sent child support money. If we asked for money he would sent it. But any money he
would send, she would use for whatever she needed. And so then I started working. It
slowly progressed for me from just working for extra spending money for me, for myself,
and then I was giving my sister, Tory a little bit of extra money if she needed it. And
then it turned to, “well, we’re running low on groceries, so I started buying just little odds
and end; syrup, milk, flour, something small. And that grew and eventually it grew to the
whole thing for me to where I was talking care of everything at home. Really, the only
thing that my mom paid for was rent. She paid rent for the townhouse we lived in. And
included in the rent was utilities and all those types of bills so I was covered. But,
everything around the house I bought and took care of. And then my aunt, my mom’s
sister, went into the same kind of problem and my mom kind of….
R: Was your aunt living with you?

S: No, she lives in Cedar, where we lived. But my mom, I don’t know how she ever came up with the conclusion that we have my aunt’s two kids living with us would be better, but she took them in too. And they were elementary age. So I started staying home in the mornings to get them to school. Then in the afternoons, I would work or would be tired from taking care of two small kids and at night it would just start all over. Instead of just me and Tory, now it is me, Tory and two small kids. So Tory started losing school too; not much, just a little bit here and there; and she was in middle school. It wasn’t as bad but still not good either. And so going from that I started, I started missing full days; then I’d miss a week or close to it. Or just show up for one or two classes. We were on a block schedule; we had four periods a day. And so 83 minutes; I’d go one period or two periods. Then I’d either have to go to work or do something with Zachary and Bailey, my aunt’s two kids. And slowly, I was just failing, failing, failing because I wasn’t there and I wasn’t doing the work either. I didn’t have time to do it, and so I was failing. The guidance counselors didn’t catch on to anything until it was too late. I mean, there’s not much they could have done, but they didn’t try to step in until later. By the time they sent out a notice I had been out of school for the main part, except for the occasional going to class here and there, two quarters. Second quarter and third quarter I was gone most of the time. And so, sophomore year was pretty much a waste. And then junior year, my mom went back on to drugs. She switched back to drugs. She ran out of alcohol and went back to drugs. So then it was just as bad. We didn’t have Zachary and Bailey but the home life wasn’t great. She had a boyfriend. There was a little bit of, not a little bit of...there was some domestic disputes, some
domestic violence between those two – some fighting. Several times the police had to come out at two or three in the morning. So between playing referee and taking care of Tory, there’s nothing that could be done, really. By third quarter I decided I was going to move back with my grandma – my mom’s mom. So I moved back there and the rest of third quarter and fourth quarter I went and got done what I could get done but the last part of a year….yeah, that’s not going to do anything. So that’s it in a nutshell.

R: So, up until 9th grade, typical kind of school experience and home experience…

S: Well, for me it was. I didn’t think of anything different. I wouldn’t say looking at other families – no because we moved to Utah right before third grade from Henderson. I started the third grade in Utah and my mom was heavy into drugs. So third, fourth, all the way up into sixth or seventh grade she was using drugs. And then in and out of jail. Then she got out of jail right in the middle of seventh grade and she was fine through seventh grade and that summer. And eighth and that summer. In ninth grade, it kind of sunk in then she started using again.

R: You’ve had a lot of trauma. The divorce, your mom being away from you for a period of time being incarcerated, a move; being born here in Las Vegas, starting school here in Las Vegas and then uprooted to Utah. You’ve had a really tough go of things.

S: Yeah. Moving back and forth wasn’t fun but when we lived here we lived with my dad and that was fine. Why we ended up moving to Utah, I don’t know. I’ve never asked and I’ve never been told why. It was decided for Tory and I to move up. I think it had something to do with schools being better up there than down here was one of the reasons I think but I don’t know. I was never told, and never asked.
R: So with the family kinds of things happening, you were working to hold things
together and you had said that by the time counselors recognized it, it was basically too
too late.

S: Um hum.

R: As you reflect back on those particular experiences were there some things that the
school could have done or maybe should have done that would have been helpful to you?

S: Yeah, looking at it now, I wouldn’t have been happy about it, but it would have been
better for me, and Tory and Zachary and Bailey…the school, once you miss four classes
in one period, or one quarter, four classes in one quarter they are supposed to send home
a notice.  I went forty something class periods before getting the notice that said I missed
four.  So with that happening they should have done something then.  It’s not their fault
that stuff is going on but if the policy says you are supposed to send it home after four
then…..I’m sorry I lost my train of thought.  The police reports started coming, and the
police had to come out during my junior year.  Then they told the school, the police
department told the school and they called out a social worker twice to talk to me and
Tory.  But nothing more ever got done.  The biggest thing is, the biggest help would have
been being brought in and said this is what we can do to get you back on track to get
credits remediated.  But, but that never happened.

R: So the wheels came off the bus in ninth grade and in tenth grade…

S: Ninth grade is weird.  It started… everything in ninth grade is fine.  Towards the end
there’s little hiccups between my mom and grandma.  There’s just little arguments.  And
by that summer she had decided to move out.  That’s ninth grade.
R: And tenth grade, that’s when mom switched to….you, your mom and sister were living elsewhere and that’s when she switched to alcohol and you began to move more into the parent role taking care of your sister and then your nieces, nephews when they wound up living there. And all of this time school didn’t have a clue as to what happening.

S: No, there was no idea. I had a French teacher, they called home once to find out why I wasn’t in class and that was it.

R: Did the French teacher talk to you or mom?

S: She actually didn’t call our house. She called my grandmother’s house cause that was the phone number that was still down on the school stuff. And my grandma had no idea why. She knew that things weren’t perfect at home but she didn’t know why I wasn’t at school.

R: Freshman year, your mom and her mom were somewhat estranged at that point cause the two of them weren’t talking. That’s why grandma didn’t refer it to your mom so that perhaps something could have been done.

S: Something could have been done there. There were teachers at school that tried to find out as much as they could when I was there. As far as teachers go, they tried to help as much as they could. But as far as guidance counselors and administration, there was nothing that happened on that end, but a couple of the teachers really did; they did as much as they could do. They would say, “here, do this packet of work and then turn it in” but when you are taking care of a six year old and an eight year old and a fourteen year old and a thirty-two year old there is \not much time to do a packet of work and turn it in.
R: So you didn’t earn any credit or very few credits….I think that one other time you said you had like six units of credit when you came here?

S: Yeah, when I came here at the end of my junior year….at the end of my junior year, I spilled the beans to my dad. I told him what had been going on over the last few years. He was a little furious. He wasn’t every happy about it and he wasn’t happy about how we had just kept it quiet from him how….I think he was shocked at how much had gone on without him knowing. So I had decided I was moving there and we had Tory move in with my mom’s mom because she wanted to stay in school there. So there’s not much that goes on that he doesn’t know about. We think anyways. Her grades are checked on over the internet. She’s smooth right now. So that’s how I ended up here. I ended up at Evergreen as a senior with six and a quarter credits.

R: Now, how long were you at Evergreen?

S: I was there from when school started in August until October…somewhere midway through October.

R: What was it that caused you to leave Evergreen and come over to This school?

S: I was looking for a realistic way to graduate. I wasn’t going to drop out; I was going to do everything I could to graduate. At Evergreen I’d be there this year, summer school, fifth-year senior, and that’s if they okayed it. I’d be a fifth-year senior and then I’d still end up in adult ed. So I was looking for a viable way to graduate. So I did a little homework on the internet by looking at what the community college had to offer, which was nothing. Eventually This school popped up on a Google search. So I called the school and that’s how I found out about it. I came and talked to the counselor on a Friday and I was at school Monday here.
R: That senior year at Evergreen, from the August until October where when you were there, what kind of help were you getting from teachers, counselors and administrators?

S: None (laughing). It was just regular school. I was put in classes to make up a couple of freshman, sophomore classes. I was put in World History, and Earth Science just to get the science credits going. And senior classes. That’s it; there was no early bird or late bird classes that were even suggested. That was just a regular school day with underclassmen.

R: You left in October rather than waiting until the end of that semester, probably right after the first quarter grades came out? Well let’s see, first quarter grades typically come out the end of October, beginning of November. So you left before that?

S: Yeah.

R: Any particular reason why you chose that time?

S: No, actually that’s one of the regrets that I have in talking with my dad. We think I should have waited a little bit longer. But for some reason it didn’t come up. But I thought that this school would have been better. I’ve made those three credits I would have had already. That was just a mistake….bad timing.

R: Tyler, knowing what you know now of three different educational systems; you had the experience in Utah, and then you had the experience in Utah, and you’ve been here at This school, if you were given the opportunity to put together a school ….If we said to you, “Tyler, you are in charge of the XYZ School, you design the program that is going to be helpful to students; you are going to hire teachers – the kinds of teachers you think are going to be appropriate – what would that school look like?” What would be the philosophy of that school? What would the teacher do?
S: I think it would be modeled after Canyon View High School which is the school I went to in Utah. I think it had the ideal setup, just with a couple of minor flaws. I’d have a block schedule; four periods a day – and A day and a B day. And quarterly credits – I think that those would be better. Not knowing policy here and not knowing policy there, I think quarterly credits help those who have been okay part of the semester but towards the end of the semester kind of go downhill – at least they would have that quarterly credit. Come up with better ways to remediate. One thing we had a Canyon View was the first, if you were a freshman, there were no D’s. In sophomore year they introduced D’s. If you were within x percent of a passing grade and you went to the teacher within two weeks, you’d get a packet to remediate that grade to a passing grade for free. If you were outside that certain percent range you could for $30 and if you waited x amount of time it was too late. You had to act right then, which was good. If you just messed up, or in my situation where you don’t have time to turn in a packet, which is what Dr. Ransel has brought up before, how am I going to have time to get on the internet or something like go to the community college to do something. Something that could be still done at the end of the year; something that didn’t have to be done within that window, what that would look like, I don’t know. I’m not a teacher so I don’t know that. Something that could be done for students that finally had the time to remediate, cause then I wouldn’t have been able to afford the cost but I had the time. And now that I’m here and have a stable environment, I could afford the cost but not the time.

R: Thinking about teachers, what kind of teachers, you know, not subject area but personality, would teachers have a particular philosophy, a particular bent or interests?
S: There was one teacher at Canyon View. Her name was Annie Draper, and if you ever have time to talk to a newer teacher, that’s someone you should talk to. She transferred to a school in Salt Lake. She was a math teacher. She cared about the students. She’s the one that would get involved and when I would come to school she would talk to me in the halls. A couple times, she tried to get as much information as she could but I didn’t tell her. One, it’s an embarrassing situation so I didn’t tell many people about it. She would try to help every student. Her class was basically an applied mathematics class; onne just to make up your credits. If a student couldn’t do that particular work, it’s too hard for them, she’d switch it, but if it was too easy, she’d come up with something that was a little more challenging. She’d make sure you understood everything. She genuinely cared about each student. I think that that’s something important. They actually have to care about the student know when they are not there, know when they are there. She would call me out a lot cause I’d say I’m going to be in class this day and then I’d show up later on. She’d say, you weren’t there that day. She tended to remember. I don’t know, maybe she had a little notepad she took notes on. That is important, that teacher need to remember to pay attention to the students. It’s hard if they have 35 students but do the best they can. At least memorize their names. There were a couple classes I was in at Evergreen where the teacher didn’t even know everybody’s name by October. That’s the smallest thing they can do – know the names. Care about the students I think is the most important thing.

R: The math teacher, Ms. Draper, cared, communicated that caring and another thing you talked about was she had the flexibility or maybe simply utilized flexibility, she may not have been given the flexibility…it should like she tailored the work.
S: Yeah. I know she didn’t have a lot of time on her hands either because she taught the applied math class, she had an Algebra class, a geometry class, a pre-calculus class, she was one of the softball coaches and she was the student government advisor. She didn’t have a lot of free time on her hands. But she found time. There were a lot of times she would, I don’t know how to word it. If she cared for a student, and they didn’t do their work, she’d tell them, “I was here until 11 o’clock last night doing this for you.” It kind of turns around their attitude.

R: So you, as well as other students saw that she was going the extra distance and you tried to match the effort. Is that what you are saying?

S: Yeah, I probably didn’t do as much as I could have done but I definitely tried when I was there. There was a time when I was actually going to the class steady, but because of stuff at home, you just can’t concentrate. You’ve got other things on your mind besides two times six is or whatever. There is other things on you mind.

R: So during class, your mind begins to think about obligations at home or wondering if everybody is safe; things like that?

S: Well, yeah. In math, that was right after lunch so I’d be sitting there and I’d say, it’s Wednesday. Zachary and Bailey…the elementary schools got out early on Wednesday so there should be somebody at home, but that’s within walking distance. It’s all in the same neighborhood so they’ll be fine walking home. And then the door will be unlocked so they’ll only be home ten minutes before I get home. I just tried puzzling everything together. I’m sure in class it doesn’t may not have looked like that. It may have looked like a lazy student who didn’t do work but really there was a lot going on that you had to think about.
R: Knowing the experiences you’ve had, I have a better sense as to who you are, what you are about, who you are today. You’ve impressed me as a young man who is going to go far.

S: Well….thanks

R: I mean that in all sincerity. You are going to graduate and on to college. You are going to make something of yourself. You have that within your personality.

S: Thanks

R: Not to belabor the point, I appreciate the opportunity to meet with you. You’ve given me a different perspective, a valuable perspective to the research I’m doing, and that is when you are in class you are trying to balance the paying attention to the teacher as well as the things that are happening outside – those life kinds of events. So you are not able to give 100 percent of you attention – or as much as you’d want to. You just can’t do it because you’re concerned about the other parts of your life. It’s that balance. Each and every day you had the child care responsibilities, and even before your niece and nephew was there you had to take care of your sister, so my compliments. There would have been a lot of students who would have said, “to heck with it, this is about me, I’m going to go and do as I please.” You didn’t do that; you stuck with your mom, and more importantly you stuck with your sister. And some of the poor decisions your mom made, you still took care of your niece and nephew.

S: Yeah, and it wasn’t always easy cause when Tory would go and ask mom, “hey, can I do this?” she doesn’t care. Sure and there’s not much I can do, except I look like the big bad guy in the end. Sometimes it just has to be done; I have to be the responsible one.
R: So if I understand what you are saying, it was almost like you were parenting your sister as well as trying to mitigate any negative influence your mom had.

S: (chuckling) That’s pretty close….that’s about it. Yeah.

R: It sounds like Tory was being a typical kind of middle school kid trying to do some things that may not have been in her absolute best interest and would get permission from mom to do that. You were monitoring that and saying “no Tory, this isn’t good for you.”

S: Yeah.

R: You’re not going to do that even though mom said it’s okay.

S: Yeah, and it’s really hard for a thirteen year old to listen to her brother when mom already said “yeah.” That would cause big arguments between me and my mom and me and Tory. Eventually, what should have happened in most cases happened, if mom said, “yeah, she can go out until two in the morning” and Tyler said, “no, you’re going to be home at nine o’clock when all of her other friends have to be home then I might have looked like a crazy person when I went out to get her but she was home at nine o’clock.

R: I am guessing as you are thinking about your future, you probably have different thoughts on children, having children, parenting, parenting styles. Your thoughts may be somewhat different than some of your peers.

S: Yes, much different. One thing I will say is normally I don’t like to bring religion or political things in, but one thing that did keep me to where I said, “ah, just screw it.” I became really active in church. A friend of mine, I was surrounded by LDS people. My best friend, his whole family was LDS. In middle school when everything was pretty much smooth sailing I was over at their house almost every weekend and vice versa. Eventually I started going to church with them; by the time I was in high school I was
real active. I kind of kept going because of the people. The LDS church is real tight knit community so that’s one thing that kept it going.

R: Did the church recognize what was happening?

S: Oh, no. They knew less than the school knew; especially them. I didn’t let anything get out there. I was real active but I kept my personal life personal. I didn’t advertise anything that was going on.

R: I’m curious as to why that is? Wouldn’t they have understood?

S: Oh, yeah. They would have, and would probably have helped out a lot, but an embarrassment. It’s embarrassing. I didn’t let a lot of people know. Adam, he’s my best friend and he didn’t know much. He didn’t know until my…shoot…until my sophomore year and then late in my sophomore year….almost summer. He knew bits and pieces but not hardly anything until then.

R: So you’ve been a private person out of necessity to minimize any embarrassment to you, embarrassment that your sister may feel, and ultimately trying to protect your mom.

S: And it’s still like that. Things have changed and I still don’t like bringing it up but I kind of have taken a new take on it. I’ve gone through some things that other students have gone through and if sharing what I’ve gone through will help them then I’ll do it. I don’t like it but I’ll do it. That’s kind of my look on it now.

R: Again, my compliments to you. You have endured more than I will ever endure in terms of life experiences and you are here today. That is a compliment to you.

S: Thanks

R: I feel it in my heart that you are going to be successful.
S: Thanks. I really recommend that if you are going to talk to any teachers to find ways to make things better, try to find Annie Draper cause she doesn’t know half the things that went on at home but she is a good teacher. She was only a second year teacher but there are a lot of thirty year teachers who could learn from her. She was a teacher at Canyon View but then she went to Salt Lake City; somewhere around there; somewhere around there. Canyon View High School would definitely know how to get a hold of her. She is somebody who is great to talk to.

R: Three of my cohort members are from Utah. All three are administrators from different schools. I don’t know if any of them are in Salt Lake. I think they may be in communities surrounding Salt Lake City.

S: She is also in the suburb. She is somewhere around the Salt Lake area. There are…shoot…so many little cities around there.

R: If I am able to locate her, I’ll let you know.

S: Okay. That’d be exciting. Shoot, somewhere she mentioned what school she went to and it is somewhere in the area. I just can’t think of it right now. But if I can think of it or can find it, I’ll tell you. She is probably one of the best teachers I ever had and she was a rookie.

R: She had the heart in teaching.

S: And it was something…it is obviously something she wanted to do because with a master’s degree in mathematics there are definitely other things she could do making a lot more money.

R: I’ll let you get back to class. I can’t thank you enough. I hope that your trip to Carson City is informative and exciting.
REFERENCES


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