Interactions within the social environment of schools: Perspectives on dropouts Voices of administrators, teachers, stay-ins, and dropouts

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INTERACTIONS WITHIN THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT OF SCHOOLS -- PERSPECTIVES ON DROPOUTS: VOICES OF ADMINISTRATORS, TEACHERS, STAY-INS, AND DROPOUTS

by

Andre Brent Denson

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in Educational Administration and Higher Education

Department of Educational Administration and Higher Education
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December 1995

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ABSTRACT

This study explored perceptions of administrators, teachers, stay-ins, and dropouts about personal interactions and the influence of a school's social environment on interactions as they pertained to students dropping out of high school. Symbolic Interactionism and Moos' Social Environment Theories served as the theoretical basis for framing the investigation of interactions within a school's social environment.

This study was conducted at two comprehensive high schools in the Clark County School District (Las Vegas, NV). Participants consisted of six school administrators, six teachers, six stay-ins [students who remained in school], and six dropouts who were evenly divided between the two selected schools. Data were collected and analyzed using naturalistic research methods. Data collection consisted of conducting individual, semi-formal interviews; completing questionnaires; and gathering pertinent documents while analysis consisted of using the computer software, "The Ethnograph," to code interview data and assist in creating core categories that related to and interacted with the research questions.
Data analysis pointed to the perceptions of the participants who felt that student involvement in school activities and programs was important; conflict and fear on campus affected the social environment; peer group interactions were influential; blame for dropping out of school rested on the dropout and his or her family; and communication at school, through feelings, perceptions, and beliefs were very important in interpreting the meanings of different interactions.

The perceptions of conflict/fear, involvement in school, and activities/programs indicated the important role the schools' social environments have on interactions with regard to dropping out. The perceptions of how feelings and directions were communicated, the blame and responsibilities for dropping out placed on the dropout, and how individuals interacted within their peer groups pointed to the importance of personal interactions on the two high school campuses.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

High school dropouts continue to concern American society. In spite of massive amounts of research, prevention strategies, and special programs that are designed to assist potential dropouts to stay in school, the dropout rate remains constant or even increases each year. Although various definitions of the term "dropout" appears in the literature (Barber, 1987), the national average hovers around 25% of the students not completing high school prior to graduation.

The dropout problem is not new. In 1900, the dropout rate was approximately 85%; by 1950, it had decreased to 40%. These rates suggest that the dropout problem is not unique, but the concern for dropouts has "proliferated continuous investigations" into the antecedents and causes for dropping out (Wehlage & Rutter, 1987, p. 71).

Concerns about dropouts are economically, socially, and educationally relevant. The lack of a formal education hampers the acquisition of new skills and makes it difficult to adapt to a changing work environment. The dropout suffers economically in the job market (Orr, 1987). Wehlage and Rutter (1987) report, "Those who lack basic skills . . . and
social presence to be successful in the workplace will encounter unemployment and welfare with the frustration and indignity this status confers on them" (p. 71). America's change from an agrarian to a service and technological society has forced people to achieve higher skill levels in the fundamentals of reading, writing, and speaking. Previously, labor markets were able to absorb individuals who lacked those skills and dropped out of school, but increasingly the lack of a high school diploma denies the dropout access to many employment and academic opportunities (Wehlage & Rutter, 1987).

Various studies have been conducted and theories suggested to find causes for students dropping out. Many studies suggest that pregnancy, marriage, chronic truancy, poor academic performance, and problems at home are reasons for dropping out. Clearly, students drop out of school due to both "in-school and out-of-school experiences" (Barber, 1987, p. 26).

The in-school experiences are ones in which the school personnel, other students, and environment influence students to drop out. As a case in point, the 1983 High School and Beyond Study groups assigned students to three broad categories of reasons for dropping out: Academic Performance, Early Transition into Adulthood, and Social Adjustment (Barber, 1987, p. 26). Two of the three categories, Academic Performance and Social Adjustment, can be attributed to the school and its environment. As another example, Strother
(1986) noted that some in-school reasons relate to incidents in the classroom. She reported that students spoke about being unhappy and embarrassed at school and dissatisfied with their interactions with teachers (Strother, 1986, p. 326). This contributed to pre-graduation departure by some students.

The impact of dropping out of school on students is also well-researched and documented (Fine, 1991; Mann, 1987; Neill, 1979; Orr, 1987; Stevenson & Ellsworth, 1993; Wehlage & Rutter, 1987). Dropouts not only have a more difficult time finding and holding work, but they also earn less money annually than graduates. In addition, their self-esteem and self-worth are fractured by a nation which emphasizes educational attainment (Orr, 1987). Moreover, society benefits when students remain in school in the form of a more educated citizenry who can become contributing members of society and are less likely to drain resources from the community (Levin, 1986; Sewell, et al., 1981).

Since the dropout phenomenon has many characteristics and attributes which are related to the student, educational institutions and the interactions within the environment of the school are sometimes overlooked (Fine, 1991; Ponciano, 1989; Wehlage & Rutter, 1987). Although many studies on dropouts focus on the student and his or her background and home situation, Bloch (1991) indicates that "school[s] must [also] examine the[ir] roles in the estrangement and alienation that some students feel" (p. 40). Therefore, the
approach by the school personnel in dealing with the dropout phenomenon may result in pushing some students out of school.

Student "pushout" is somewhat more descriptive of what occurs when students are "systematically ignored and devalued until they become alienated and leave school" (Ponciano, 1989, p. i). Ponciano (1989) argues the term "dropout" places all the blame on the student when, in fact, the educational system can and may contribute to many students leaving school prior to graduation (p. 1). This philosophy is shared by others who believe that schools often practice a "pushout" stance by pressuring students to leave school when they could and would otherwise remain (Conant, 1992, p. 4). According to Fine (1991), for example, students stated they wanted to remain in school, but they were "pushed out and didn't want to leave" (p. 71).

School administrators, teachers, and students are additional important factors in examining the dropout phenomenon. Administrators are individuals in a "position to make decisions about the selection and implementation of strategies designed to keep children in school" (Hyle, 1991, p. 3). Although many causes for dropping out exist that are beyond the control of the school administrator, an administrator's influence on the school's interactions, environment, and climate may be deciding factors for many stay-ins, dropouts, and pushouts (Stockard & Mayberry, 1992).

In School Dropouts, Hyle (1991) found that administrators believed the focus of the dropout problem
strategies should be centered on the children and their home environments rather than on the school (p. 14). In her study, administrators, in general, shifted the cause for student dropouts away from the school even though administrators have the ability to make a difference in their schools, "yet their focus is not there" (Hyle, 1991, p. 14).

Studies have further suggested that some interactions between teachers and students cause many students to leave school (Fine, 1991; Strother, 1986). Strother (1986) indicated that students said they would do anything to avoid classes in which teachers embarrassed them (p. 327). Interactions with teachers were again addressed by Wehlage and Rutter (1987) in their examination of the data from the 1983 High School and Beyond Study. They indicated that students were more likely to drop out if "teachers are not particularly interested in all students and the discipline system is perceived as neither effective nor fair" (Wehlage & Rutter, 1987, p. 79). Furthermore, in recommending ways to reduce the number of dropouts, they emphasized that schools must provide "caring and personalized teaching" (p. 85). As a result, the importance of teacher contact and interactions in determining students' feelings about school and the decision to stay in or leave school can not be dismissed.

The school's social environment, which influences the interactions between student and teacher, student and administrator, or student and student, may be a cause for student departure. As a result, many dropouts cite numerous
negative school experiences as a cause for leaving school (Mahan & Johnson, 1983). School administrators, teachers, and other students can help bring about an environment that fosters a student's persistence in school or encourages him or her to leave school prior to graduation (Stockard & Mayberry, 1992).

The concept of social environment is illustrated by the climate on a secondary school campus which may influence many student decisions. The school social environment can be described within the context of Social Environment Theory (Moos, 1979). According to Moos, the social environment can be divided into three distinct domains: Relationship, Personal Growth/Goal Orientation, and System Maintenance. The Relationship Domain incorporates interactions among people, while the Personal Growth/Goal Orientation Domain encompasses the setting of goals and the aspects of self-enhancement. The System Maintenance Domain incorporates the order and control within an environment. All of these domains interact in creating the social environment on a secondary school campus (Moos, 1979). Therefore, the influence of interactions, the meanings prescribed to them, and the way in which the overarching social environment affects them may provide insight into the reasons students drop out of high school.

Statement of the Problem

Previous research on dropouts has indicated that
students leave school prior to graduation for psychological, personal, and/or emotional reasons. Overriding contributions may be narrowed to specific home problems, financial situations that cause students to go to work, and educational factors such as difficulty understanding school work, lack of participation in activities, problems interacting with fellow students, and conflicts within a school's environment. In addition, the school's role, as suggested by Fine (1991), in creating an environment that either limits or fosters dropouts needs to be examined to understand the different factors and interactions that contribute to the early departure of students.

The literature suggests the two foundations of this study: the social environment of the school and the interactions among people within the school. As a result, the purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of administrators, teachers, stay-ins, and dropouts of the influence of a school's social environment on their interactions as it pertains to dropping out of school as well as their conceptions of their interactions in relation to the issue of dropping out of school.

**Research Questions**

In order to study the perceptions regarding the influence of the school's social environment and interactions among individuals in terms of dropping out, the following research questions were posed:
1. What interactions with the school's social environment influence students to drop out?

2. How does the social environment influence the different interactions among administrators, teachers, stay-ins, and dropouts?

3. What perceptions do administrators, teachers, stay-ins, and dropouts have about dropping out of school?

4. What interactions between administrators, teachers, stay-ins, and dropouts influence students to drop out of school?

Theoretical Framework

This study concerns the effects of school and interpersonal interactions on a student's decision to drop out of school. For this reason, Symbolic Interactionism Theory and how it relates to a school's social environment was selected as the appropriate theoretical basis for framing this study. Symbolic interactionism originated with philosopher George H. Mead, whose many writings generated it (Charon, 1985, p. 26). In the 1950's, Herbert Blumer interpreted and synthesized the writings of Mead and others to develop the symbolic interactionist perspective. This micro-level theory is concerned with aspects of interaction and the meanings attached to the outcome of personal encounters. Symbolic interactionism, in this study, focused upon the perceptions of interactions among the students and
faculty rather than personality or social structure (Charon, 1985, p. 30).

In psychological terms, the "self" is differentiated from the "other." "Interaction," then, is defined as the self encountering others and/or society. Plummer (1991) further indicates that the most basic concept of self "... implies the idea of 'the other' is always present in a life" (p. xi). Because the presence of the other is always understood, a person's actions must be joint acts since an individual is never truly alone. The self and the other are in constant interaction.

Dropouts may come into contact with others who either influence their decisions to leave or who do not encourage them to stay in school. For example, peer influence and the development of cultures within certain groups were examined by Eckert (1989). She pointed out the importance of interactions with peers and their involvement in creating a culture, "While it's true that adolescents adopt attitudes and behaviors to fit in with their close friends, peer influence also functions on a more abstract, cultural level" (p. 12).

Another facet of symbolic interactionism is the concept that humans are active participants in the world. This implies that people place meanings on events and situations which occur in their lives, that is, actively defining and interpreting the world, not just passively responding (Charon, 1985, p. 30). By applying meaning to reality, human
beings derive symbolic events from social interactions between and among one another. From their interactions with others, individuals are able to create and produce symbols (Denzin, 1994, p. 124). As noted by Woods (1992),

[a] teacher must consider many things [in interactions]. He or she needs to interpret the behavior of the pupil; the consequences for the pupil, the teacher, and for others; the implications for the achievement of aims; and how this action might be received. (p. 342)

In addition, symbolic meaning can be understood by ". . . learning the language of the participants with all its nuances and perhaps special vocabulary. Other means of communication - gestures, looks, actions, appearances, and the whole area of 'body language' are important" (Woods, 1992, p. 355).

The meanings created by interactions go through an interpretive process of modification and selection (Denzin, 1994, p. 124). In this process, an individual may select, check, suspend, regroup, and transform meanings into symbolic events with actions. Plummer (1991) sees this process as a "very active view of the social world in which human beings are constantly going about their business, piecing together joint lines of activity, and constituting society through these interactions" (p. xi).

Meanings of the interactions which take place within a high school are interpreted by potential dropouts in deciding to leave school. Fine (1991) addressed the meanings which were created by dropouts, how they interpreted their world,
and how their interpretations influenced their decisions to leave school.

This study also drew upon the framework of the Social Environment Theory (Moos, 1979) in dealing with the interactions of individuals within a school. In examining social environments of educational settings, Moos (1979) further indicated that personality accounted for partial variance in behavior; therefore, the environment in which behavior takes place and the interactions that occur must be considered. In other words, the dropout phenomenon is not only limited to the behavior of the dropout; rather, the environment and the interactions encountered by the dropout are also important.

Social Environment Theory was inductively developed and refined based upon 15 years of research on the environments of colleges, psychiatric wards, correctional institutions, and high schools. These different settings were conceptualized by a common set of domains that were seen in each situation (Moos, 1979, p. 16). These theoretical domains consist of the following:

1. Relationship Domain - extent of individuals' involvement, extent to which they support and help one another, and express themselves freely.

2. Personal Growth/Goal Orientation Domain - extent of measuring the basic goals of the setting, the areas in which personal development and self-enhancement tend to occur.
3. System Maintenance Domain - extent to which the environment is orderly and clear in its expectations, maintains control, and responds to change.

Individual meanings can be constructed through various social interactions. Administrator-student, teacher-student and student-student interactions may create a social environment that is seen as contributing to the dropout dilemma. Administrators, teachers, and students belong to different groups on a secondary school campus. These groups are formed, sustained, weakened, and transformed by their interactions with one another (Plummer, 1991, p. x) creating a range of meanings to their interactions. As Blumer suggested, "... one must see the activities of the collectivity as being formed through a process of designation and interpretation" (Plummer, 1991, p. x).

Previous research on dropouts (Boshier, 1973; Darkenwald & Gavin, 1987; Fine, 1991; McDill, 1987; Wehlage & Rutter, 1987) indicated that interactions and the social environment contribute to the dropout phenomenon. The interactions of administrators, teachers, and students within a school's social environment which lead to students dropping out of school are applicable within the Symbolic Interactionism theoretical framework. McDill (1987), in fact, suggested that one of the most crucial aspects of the school is the responsiveness of the school staff to the needs and concerns of the students. The responsiveness, or lack thereof,
through interactions and the environmental factors within a school may create a condition in which dropping out may occur (Hernandez & Ochoa, 1994).

**Synopsis of Methodology**

**Rationale**

In trying to gain an understanding of the perceptions of administrators, teachers, students, and dropouts one could agree with Zeigler et al. (1985). When justifying their choice of an interview strategy, they stated, "There are only two ways to find out: watch them or ask them" (p. 91). In using an interview strategy, the interviewer and participants clarify unique situations and gain a greater understanding of meanings, feelings, and expressions discussed. Therefore, in order to obtain a clearer understanding of the different voices about dropping out, a naturalistic study is appropriate.

**Site Selection**

The sites selected were two comprehensive high schools in the Clark County School District (NV). Criteria used in selecting the comprehensive high schools included characteristics such as student body population, school programs, student diversity, and school dropout rate. School administrators within these schools were selected based on their assignment to the schools chosen for this study. Teachers and students within these schools were then selected according to their availability, participation in
school groups, and interactions with students who had dropped out.

Participants

Participants in this study were school administrators, teachers, students who remained and participated in school (stay-ins), and dropouts from two comprehensive high schools. Each cohort consisted of three individuals.

Administrators consisted of a dean of students, an assistant principal, and a principal. Stay-ins were students who participated at school in various activities such as leadership, Varsity Quiz, athletic teams, or student ambassadors. Teachers who came into contact with different students by teaching various level classes - advanced, average, and below average - were selected. Finally, dropouts who participated in this study were students who had been referred to an alternative program by the home school but failed to attend any such program or students who had withdrawn from school due to general disinterest. With this diverse group and the number of individuals selected for each cohort, a substantial amount of information was generated to create different voices about dropouts and their interactions within the social environment.

Data Collection

Interviews

Individual interviews were conducted with administrators, teachers, stay-ins, and dropouts. The
interviews gave the participants an opportunity to speak freely about themselves, other individuals with whom they interacted, and about dropping out of school.

**Questionnaires**

Two questionnaires were distributed: one to the professional staff (administrators and teachers) and the other to students (stay-ins and dropouts) for demographic information. The professional staff were asked about number of years in education they have worked, number of years in their current positions, participation with dropouts or potential dropouts, knowledge about the school's social environment, and dropouts in general. The student questionnaire elicited information about family structure, age, participation in school events, and knowledge about the school's social environment and dropouts. The questionnaires created a baseline of information that "facilitate[d] backgrounding and [the] development of common understandings between the researcher and those being studied" (LeCompte & Preissle, 1994, p. 162). These data were also used to cross-check perceptions and comments from interviews with information stated on the questionnaire. This triangulation of information contributed to the trustworthiness of the study.

**Documents**

Documentation and records on student dropouts from the Clark County School District and other sources were compiled
and examined. This "secondary analysis" was essential in revealing "characteristics of the group under investigation that provide a framework for baseline data" (LeCompte & Preissle, 1994, p. 217). The dropout records and statistics of the district, the alternative programs, and the selected schools were used in establishing the "background prior to . . . interviewing" (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p. 95).

Analysis of the Data

Analysis of each interview was coded by open, axial, and selective coding techniques with the aid of the ethnographic software, "The Ethnograph" (Seidel, 1988). Data were then continuously explored and compared to identify a series of categories, patterns, themes, and labels. Survey information from questionnaires was cross-referenced with interviews for accuracy and served as a demographic resource. The ultimate goal of the methodology used in this naturalistic study was to provide a carefully documented, well-corroborated report that used rich and engaging information. Therefore, this study emphasized the dynamics and affinity between the interactions of participants, the school's social environment and the decisions of students to drop out. Consistent with naturalistic studies, analysis was conducted throughout the study to verify categories, themes, patterns, and labels.

Limitations

Naturalistic research posed the following limitations on this study:
1. The use of observation as a research technique to gain information, as prescribed by symbolic interactionism, was not employed. Precursor knowledge of who will drop out of school would be needed to determine whom to observe with any degree of accuracy. Although certain characteristics may indicate dropout risk, a dropout can be defined only after the event has occurred.

2. Due to the nature of naturalistic studies, data collection and analysis techniques were not fully disclosed prior to contact with participants. Through the interviewing process, a theme, pattern, or category could also have developed that was not foreseeable. This information might have required a different analytical procedure or a revisit to a particular question. To address this, Marshall and Rossman (1989) suggests, "A balance must be struck between efficiency, consideration, and design flexibility. The researcher is guided by initial concepts . . . , but shifts or discards them as the data are collected and analyzed" (p. 113).

**Contributions of the Study**

This study, *Interactions Within the Social Environment of Schools—Perspectives On Dropouts*, contributes to the
knowledge on dropouts in several ways:

1. This study assists in determining administrators', teachers', stay-ins', and dropouts' perceptions of the influence of the social environment on dropping out. In doing so, the interactions with the social environment and their impact on a student's decision to leave school prior to graduation, as noted by Darkenwald and Gavin (1987) and Boshier (1973), were examined.

2. This study expands on the limited number of studies that examined individuals' interactions within the social environment of the school. McDill (1987) clearly points out, with support from Wehlage and Rutter (1987) and Fine (1991), the importance of understanding the impact of school processes on students if the causes of dropping out are to be truly understood (p. 171).

3. This study contributes to the literature in determining why students leave school without creating another characteristic of a dropout. Interactions between teachers and students clearly delineated the impact of those interactions on students making decisions (Delamont, 1983; Fine, 1991; Olsen and Moore, 1982).

In viewing the dropout phenomenon, the consequences of dropping out on students and society have an adverse effect for all. The school that students attend may influence, in a
subtle way, the decisions to drop out, while the interactions within a school created by and within the social environment may affect students' decisions. This study explored those interactions within the social environment and their influence on dropping out.

**Definition of Terms**

1. **Dropout** - a student who was enrolled in a comprehensive high school but has been referred to, but is not attending, a site-based alternative education program for lack of attendance at the comprehensive high school or a student withdrawn from school due to general disinterest. The student(s) in the site-based alternative program, not officially recorded as dropouts, missed at least nine (9) consecutive days not due to illness, enrolling into another educational institution or school approved absences. (Clark County School District, 1993).

2. **Meaning** - how we define ourselves, our bodies, impulses feelings, emotions, behaviors and acts (Plummer, 1991).


4. **Pushout** - any student who is forced to leave school due to various reasons (i.e., attendance policy or suspension). If given a choice, the student would remain in school (Conant, 1992).

5. **Social Environment** - social climate of an environment
that consists of physical and personal aspects (Moos, 1979).

6. **School Administrator** - school personnel assigned as an administrator at a high school (i.e., dean of students, assistant principal, and principal).

7. **Stay-in** - student who accepts school and its institutional expectations as an all-encompassing social context and have an unflagging enthusiasm and energy for working within that institution (Eckert, 1989).

8. **Teacher** - individual contracted with the school district on the teachers' salary schedule and charged with the responsibility of providing instruction at, in this case, a secondary school.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Dropouts continue to be a mystery to many educators and researchers. This chapter, divided into four sections, will set the stage for examining the dropout situation from the perspective of the voices of dropouts and individuals who interact with them. The first section of the Review of the Literature examines components related to the dropout phenomenon. Who drops out of school is explored and discussed. Why students leave school before graduation and questions about the importance of knowing who and why dropouts exist are reviewed. The school's responsibility through its teachers, staff, and policies in connection with the dropout phenomenon are also reviewed. Finally the pushout stance is considered in light of the dropout rate that exists in American schools.

Section Two reports on the interactions between different individuals on a school campus; specifically the interactions between teachers and students, administrators and students, and students and students. These interactions may influence decisions students ultimately make about dropping out of school.
The tenets of Symbolic Interactionism Theory are reviewed in the third section of the chapter. The interactions between administrators, teachers, students, and dropouts are placed in this framework because it provides insight into examining the meaningfulness of interactions between different individuals. The interactive process, meanings prescribed, and symbols as they apply to the theory are discussed in relationship to dropouts.

Described in the fourth section of this chapter is the social environment within a school. This will be incorporated in analyzing the interactions using the Moos Model of Social Environment. The interactions of different groups occur within a social environment that may have an impact on the interpretations of those interactions. Dimensions of Moos' Model and how it influences the school environment are prescribed in dealing with the interactions of dropouts.

Dropouts

Who Drops Out Of School?

It is difficult to pinpoint the type of student who drops out of school. Researchers have tried to determine with consistency which specific individuals leave school prior to graduation in order to predict and prevent future dropouts. The lack of a clear definition of a dropout hinders determining who consistently drops out of school. Strother (1986) notes, for example, "... there has been
little agreement on the definition of who drops out" (p. 326). Further, since many school districts calculate their dropout rates differently, no consistent nationwide data exist on who drops out of school. Strother (1986) indicates that many districts match their definitions of a dropout for their own purposes (p. 326). Clearly, then, identifying the potential dropout will vary and research on who drops out of school will remain inconsistent.

Even with inconsistencies in determining who drops out of school, characteristics of students who drop out recur in the literature. Stephens' (1990) research used predictors in determining dropouts. His proactive stance in determining who would leave school was thought to be a good indicator for predicting student behavior. Consistent predictors such as misbehaving in school, achieving at a lower academic level than peers, no parental monitoring, having friends who dropped out, and school's not having any relevance to the student have been reported (Stephens, 1990, p. 16).

Strother (1986) noted, for example, that the 1983 High School and Beyond Study pointed to similar indicators, but also includes a wider range of characteristics. In that study, students who left school prior to graduation "were disproportionately male, older than the average age student, racial/ethnic minorities, low income, [in] single [parent] famil[ies], had few study aids, lower grades, low test scores, read less and were more of a disciplinary problem in school" (Strother, 1986, p. 326). Table 1 indicates the

Table 1

Percentage of High School Dropouts Among the 16- to 24-Year-Old Population in the United States by Sex and Race/Ethnicity

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>All persons</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>m</td>
<td>f</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Previously noted characteristics touched upon almost every facet a student deals with externally (e.g., home and finances) and internally (e.g., low test scores and grades) as they relate to school. Low test scores and grades may not be overriding causes of students departing school prior to graduation, but may be symptoms of a larger home or school problem which leads to dropping out.

Research on the academically gifted who drop out has indicated that they have the ability to do the work, but are mentally withdrawn or act defensively (Belts & Neihart, 1988). They further reported that gifted dropouts "are angry. They are angry with adults and with themselves because the system does not [and did not] meet their needs for many years and they feel rejected" (p. 52). The feeling of rejection, or not fitting in, was also noted by Strother (1986). Her examination pointed out that dropouts were
usually unpopular with other students and were alienated from school life (p. 326). Dropouts displaying little interest in school pervade the literature. While it may be easier to understand the academically untalented student who leaves school, gifted students who dropped out "have interests (i.e., work) that lie outside the realm of the regular school curriculum" (Belts & Neihart, 1988, p. 52).

A student who drops out of school may, in fact, have a positive attitude toward school, but the problem may be external. For example, in her research on policy development for dropout prevention, Bloch (1991) used the work of Ekstrom, et al. (1987) to examine students' attitudes. Ekstrom and colleagues had determined that dropouts had a "more externalized locus of control and lower self-esteem than did students who stayed in school" (Bloch, 1991, p. 40). Similarly, Sewell's (1981) earlier work on dropouts' attitudes is consistent with Ekstrom's. He found that dropouts were lower than the general population in positive self-concept (Bloch, 1991, p. 40). With regard to their self-concepts and attitudes, Belts and Neihart (1988) suggested that potential dropouts may require close working relationships with individuals they trust to prevent them from leaving school before graduating.

Fine's (1991) work provides the insight that "demographics alone do not distinguish graduates from dropouts" (p. 132). Wehlage and Rutter (1987) further suggest that many students do not see themselves dropping
out, and most envision themselves continuing with their education (p. 80). Studies by Fine (1991) and Natriello (1987) also indicated that something happens to discourage adolescents from obtaining their expectations of graduating. In this case, the demographics are overshadowed by the reasons for dropping out.

In studying the different perspectives about dropouts, examining who drops out of school provides insight into the phenomenon. Research is consistent in that minorities drop out more often than non-minorities, low academic achievers drop out more often than high academic achievers, and lower social economic students drop out more often than higher socio-economic students (Fine, 1991; Orr, 1987). Unless society is ready to make all ethnicities the same, ensure that all students are high academic achievers, or provide everyone with the same social economic status, who drops out of school may be a precursor to why.

Why Students Drop Out of School

Some studies suggest that who drops out of school is related to reasons for dropping out (Ekstrom, 1987; Fine, 1986 and 1991). A higher proportion of pregnant students, for example, have been documented as leaving school prior to graduation than non-pregnant students (Ekstrom, 1987; Neill, 1979). Therefore, pregnancy may be the reason these students leave school because they could experience strained finances, embarrassment or they may be physically unable to attend.
Bloch (1991) stated that the use of characteristics such as pregnancy, poor grades, and poor attendance as causes for student departure maybe "equal to blaming the spots for chicken pox" (p. 41). The causes listed by many researchers on why students drop out may really be symptoms of the dropout phenomenon. Bloch (1991) argues that the reasons given for students dropping out may be better indicators of the "intention to drop out" (p. 41).

The reasons students leave school are important in determining strategies and plans which would assist students in succeeding in school. When Fine (1991) asked students why they dropped out, most responses were criticisms of the school (p. 71). Students mentioned boredom, frustration with the system, and not being able to understand what was happening as reasons for dropping out (Fine, 1991, p. 71). Fine (1991) further found that almost one quarter (23%) of the dropouts interviewed stated they wanted to be in school but were forced to leave (p. 71).

This consistent voice of why students depart school was noted also by Olsen and Moore (1982) who interviewed students about interactions with classroom teachers. Students indicated they "viewed their teachers as unhappy with their jobs, bored, and boring" (p. 20) which would be consistent in contributing to truancy, acting out, and dropping out. Their research further emphasized the importance of these interactions between the student and the teacher. When teachers were viewed as unhappy with their jobs and transmit
those feelings in the classroom, students became discouraged and disenfranchised (Strother, 1986, p. 327), generating yet another reason for students to depart school before graduating.

A study of the Portland Public Schools in 1980 revealed student "dissatisfaction with teachers" (Strother, 1986, p. 326) as the most frequent response to the question "Why did you drop out?" In Table 2, taken from Ekstrom (1987), the reasons students dropped out of school are descriptively summarized (p. 59).

Table 2
Reasons for Dropping Out of School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did not like school</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor grades</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offered job and chose to work</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting married</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could not get along with teachers</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had to help support family</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pregnancy</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expelled or suspended</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Knowledge about who drops out and why they drop out are important in gaining an understanding of the different reasons for dropping out. Knowledge about dropouts must move beyond finding different characteristics of a dropout and focus on solving the dropout phenomenon. Bloch (1991) reiterated that "finding more characteristics of who and why
aren't useful. Linking dropping out to student characteristics [is] unlikely to move us closer to solving the problem" (p. 41). In examining comprehensive high schools, Fine (1986) further stated, "Looking for individual explanations is clearly inadequate and blames the victim. Looking for structural and social explanations of high dropout rates is obviously more fruitful" (p. 103).

Even with ample knowledge of different reasons students drop out of school, the limited focus placed on the school as a variable in many studies on dropouts reduces full understanding of the dropout phenomenon. Stevenson and Ellsworth (1993) articulate that research on dropouts based solely on "personal deficiencies and/or family or cultural deprivation . . . implies that schools bear little responsibility for students dropping out" (p. 259). Wehlage and Rutter (1987) lament, "Schools must examine their roles in the estrangement and alienation that some students feel" (p. 85).

One must be willing to assess the school and its responsibility in dealing with the dropout phenomenon because the interactions among the individuals in a school are important determinants of dropping out (Bloch, 1991, p. 40). Inconsistent with mainstream research on dropouts which focuses on the individual, the work of some investigators has "identified an interdependent relationship between school processes and the personal characteristics of dropouts" (Stevenson & Ellsworth, 1993, p. 259).
School's Responsibility for Students' Dropping Out

Researchers have examined and synthesized many facets of a dropout's identity and what external and internal causes contributed to the decision to leave school. Characteristics such as pregnant, above-average age, low income, having friends that dropped out, and misbehavior in school (Stephen, 1990; Strother, 1986) do not indicate the influence a school has on a dropout. Until recently, consideration of the school as a variable in students' dropping out has been a limited focus of research (Bloch, 1991, p. 40).

Wehlage and Rutter (1987) studied the literature on patterns and policies that may lead to students dropping out. They indicated that most literature is directed mainly at the "deficiencies found in the marginal student" (Wehlage & Rutter, 1987, p. 85). Students are constantly examined about the causes that force them to drop out while the school has very little blame placed on it. They go on to note, "We see those same characteristics [deficiencies] as a reflection on the institution [school]" (Wehlage & Rutter, 1987, p. 85). Although Fine (1986; 1991) addressed it, studies on the whole have not dealt with the interaction of the school and the student as a cause for dropping out (Bloch, 1991; Stevenson & Ellsworth, 1993). Yet, many in-school experiences serve as a catalyst for students who fit the profile of a potential dropout. Experiences such as boredom, alienation, and the hostility of a school's environment are frequently identified
as reasons for student departure (Dropping Out of School in New York State, 1986, p. 9).

The interactions of individuals within the school create a school environment that could lead potential dropouts to their ultimate decision to either stay or go. In one study, Dropping Out of School in New York State (1986), a strong agreement existed among potential dropouts and students who dropped out regarding dissatisfaction with school (p. 9). The most frequent complaints from students in most studies were about teachers and staff members (Dropping Out of School in New York State, 1986; Fine, 1991).

These studies, then, pointed to the realization that schools, via their teachers and staff members, have an influence on students and their decision to remain in school. An environment created by the interactions with these individuals could have a profound effect on students. Wehlage and Rutter (1987) remind us that it "is essential for educators to become knowledgeable about the ways school can be perceived differently and affect different students" (p. 76).

The behavior exhibited within a school may lead a student to drop out even though his or her goal was to stay. Wehlage and Rutter (1987) argued that schools must continue to communicate with their students about expectations and what is meant by certain behavior to limit dropouts. The school is responsible to "enhance and reinforce the expectations of all youth regarding their attainment of
schooling" (Wehlage & Rutter, 1987, p. 77). Stockard and Mayberry (1992) further indicated, "The relationship between high academic expectations among students and staff and high achievement has been supported with both elementary and secondary students" (p. 25). Their study emphasized the proactive stance a school must take in assuring its role in limiting the number of students who drop out.

Hernandez and Ochoa (1994) also reported that schools contribute to the dropout problem. They found that students were more likely to leave school prematurely if some of the following conditions were prevalent: lack of a positive school climate or support, low teacher expectations, and perceptions associated with being distanced from school. Strother (1986) noted some of these same characteristics in teacher-student interactions. Students viewed their interactions with teachers and the school procedures as possible causes for dropping out. The interactions with teachers are most noteworthy since students come into contact with them more than any other professional staff member on a secondary school campus.

The overall student perception of how teachers treat them may influence feelings students have about school. In her interviews with various dropouts, Fine (1991) found many students saying, "They [teachers] don't understand our lives" and "They [the deans] never look into why is it that you're not showing interest. They don't actually ask you" (p. 72). Stevenson and Ellsworth (1993) reported similar responses by
students who dropped out of school. Fine (1991) and Stevenson and Ellsworth (1993) did note that those most likely to leave school prior to graduation carried the most critical commentary which may indicate the lack of responsiveness by school personnel to the dropout or potential dropout.

The role of the administrator in being able to create and implement strategies to keep students in school makes them key figures in deterring dropouts. Hyle (1991), for example, studied 650 secondary principals and 650 superintendents with regard to their perceptions about the causes and interventions which are necessary to reduce the dropout rate. Hyle (1991) found that administrators tend to believe the focus of dropout strategies should be on the children themselves and their home environments (p. 14). This view was also reported by Fine (1991) when Mr. Stein, a principal of 25 years, stated, "Family problems and money. That's why they [students] leave school. Nothing we can do about that," when asked about his school's high exit rate (p. 183).

The principals and superintendents, according to Hyle (1991), have the "ability to make real progress in helping students... yet their focus is not there" (p. 14). This brings about the notion that school administrators may be "distancing themselves from causes of dropping out or whether they individually or collectively believe that they can deal with the school related causes" (Hyle, 1991, p. 15). As a
case in point, Fine (1991) questioned a principal's belief that his school was doing well since he proudly proclaimed that "80 percent of their graduates go on to college" (p. 13). The principal was not acknowledging the fact that only 20% of the ninth graders who entered six years earlier ever graduated from high school at all, which significantly underrepresented the truth regarding the number of students who go on to college (Fine, 1991, p. 14). Administrators' viewpoints about not being able to do anything about dropouts were exemplified by a Boston school board member who commented, "If a student is bringing a lot of baggage to school, he is not going to learn" (Stevenson & Ellsworth, 1993, p. 262).

The interactions between administrators, teachers, and students can create an environment that influences different behaviors among students. For positive effects, the school environment has to be one that nurtures the students and reassures them of their worth. School administrators are important factors in establishing an effective school environment as noted by Stevenson and Ellsworth (1993). The effective principal is seen as one "who creates an environment that emphasizes achievement and intellectualism and nurtures cooperative relationships" (Stevenson & Ellsworth, 1993, p. 28).

A school has a major impact on students and their decisions to remain or leave before graduation. Fine's (1991) research questions ranged from "Why would an
individual student drop out?" to "How could an educational institution produce a majority of failures" (p. 139)? Her analysis of a high school suggests that the educational institution had a major influence on students' leaving school. The school must accept its responsibility not to increase the dropout rate by providing positive interactions for students, teachers, and administrators; an environment that is encouraging; or assistance beyond the school. Fine (1991) reiterated this belief by stating, "The perception that a school's responsibility stops at the building door is a profound and deeply held belief that allows unequal outcomes to fester as if immutable and inevitable" (p. 183).

The Pushout Factor

The school's responsibility to keep students in school is distorted by its often subtle practice of pushout. Strother (1986) noted Fine's, 1984, work in which she "discovered that many dropouts were really pushed out, without knowing their legal rights to a high school education" (p. 327).

The term "dropout" is all-encompassing in its use to describe every student who departs school prior to graduation whether or not by choice. Ponciano (1989), for example, indicated that the word "dropout is a misnomer that places all the blame on the student" (p. 4). The implications of a student being considered a dropout are that the student left by choice, parents are to blame, it is the student's fault,
and the school is blameless (Ponciano, 1989, p. 4). In reality, however, school attendance policies, disciplinary procedures, and consequences sometimes force students to "drop out" even if they want to remain in school. Fine (1991) called this procedure of removing students "Pushout/Coercive Discharge," when she noticed a heavy rate of suspensions and expulsions that ultimately led to students being forced out of an educational institution (p. 79). Data gathered by the Office of Civil Rights further indicated that dropping out and suspensions had the strongest link out of all the categories researched; indicating membership in special education, educably mentally retarded, and vocational education classes, in relationship to dropping out (Neill, 1979, p. 34). The discharging of students at a certain age also made one question the pushing out of students from school and the connections between school-wide policies and students' dropping out (Fine, 1991, p. 81).

Pushouts, as described by Conant (1992), are those students who are pushed out of school and, if given a choice, would remain in school and graduate (p. 4). He emphasized Orr's (1987) work in which schools were found to:

send signals to poorly achieving students and those who are discipline problems, in a sense urging them to leave. This lack of encouragement may compound a student's personal and family problems, further reducing any desire or ability to remain in school. (p. 4)

These signals could lead to the phasing out or pushing out of students who otherwise may not become dropouts. Wehlage and
Rutter (1987) pointed out, for example, that it is "crucial to view the dropout problem as growing out of the conflict with the estrangement from institutional norms and rules" (p. 77). If dropping out may be due to the rules that are prescribed and implemented by the school, then its use in place of pushing out provides an argument for schools. "This argument suggests that schools need not attempt to provide . . . effective education" (Wehlage & Rutter, 1987, p. 85) for every student. An analysis of the discharge process of schools, their legal prescriptions and daily practices additionally revealed the extent to which they engage in a "rationalized exiling of students" (Fine, 1991, p. 80).

Research on dropouts continues to mount and produce more information, yet students continue to drop out of school. Both unique and consistent in their characteristics, dropouts leave school for reasons ranging from financial and family concerns to school problems. The school's responsibility in terms of policies, procedures, and personal interactions influence students to drop out or be pushed out. Regardless of whether a student is a pushout or a dropout, the departure of the student reflects on the interactions that occur within the school. The terms "dropout" and "pushout" indicate who may be responsible, when, in fact, all parties may be responsible for students who do not succeed at graduating from high school.

The literature suggests there is no clear way of evaluating the dropout phenomenon. Examining characteristics
of dropouts and the many reasons they leave school does not bring one closer to solving the problem. Schools are responsible for monitoring their interactions and environment which combine to influence students. The pushout factor is only one example of how the school may encourage students to leave school.

**Interactions Within the School**

Dropouts and potential dropouts come into contact with many people while on a secondary school campus which may bring about feelings, experiences, expectations, or actions which lead to certain decisions. Stockard and Mayberry (1992) noted work from the contemporary social theorist Jeffrey Alexander which indicates that any social-scientific theory concerns the nature of action and order. Action involves "individual acts and interactions, the day-to-day activities in which [people] engage, the ways in which we communicate," while order entails "all the elements and characteristics of social groups and interactions" (Stockard & Mayberry, 1992, p. 89). One key predictor of dropping out is to see if the student associated with others who dropped out (Stephens, 1990, p. 16). This connection speaks to the importance of the different group interactions and peer pressure within the school.

Students learn through social interaction (Stanford and Roark, 1974). Even though subject matter is important, how that information is translated and given will dictate how
students learn. Stanford and Roark (1974) contend that the "medium is the message; we must examine their social interactions - not the subject matter - to determine what messages they are receiving" (p. 3). The messages translated in social interaction must have some significant bearing on the learning process because learning takes place in many ways for students. Learning has meaning and importance in the life of the learner (Stanford & Roark, 1974).

Teachers interact with students mainly to refine knowledge and critical thinking skills, but to have importance for the learner, the interaction must somehow affect that person's life or the potential to live (Stanford & Roark, 1974). Because this is so important, teachers with poor mastery of "interpersonal skills actually retard student learning and create an unpleasant environment," which many students avoid through absences (Neill, 1979, p. 26). In this way, the humanistic aspect of learning, through interactions, is brought to the forefront because meanings are derived from inter-relationships among humans (Stanford & Roark, 1974). Therefore, it is essential to study the interactions between students and teachers (Delamont, 1983). Human interaction does not consist of a person telling another the meaning of something, but consists of the reactions of individuals involved. This reaction creates meanings which brings about significant learning and decision making (Stanford and Roark, 1974).
Student-Peer Interactions

Peer pressure is used to describe the powerful influence students have on other students in regard to their behavior. Peer social interaction in school can "displace the academic function of schools, especially at the high school level" (Hamilton, 1983, p. 69). Peer pressure has the potential, for example, to cause a student to participate in extra-curricular activities, study for exams, or leave school before graduating. The status of students within the classroom can be seen in two different aspects — that with peers and with teachers — in which "each interaction influences their decisions" (Delamont, 1983, p. 81). Further, students who interact with one another create student cultures that are specific and have their own definitions (Delamont, 1983).

Eckert (1989) examined the attitudes students exhibited and the cultures they created in a secondary school. She pointed out that the connection between the individual and the school go far beyond the student and the adult, but it is "mediated by an emerging peer culture that develops, both in and out of school" (Eckert, 1989, p. 11). The prominence of peer interaction is not solely determined by student characteristics; it can also be a response to the "structure and climate of the school" (Hamilton, 1983, p. 69).

Teacher/Administrator —

Student Interaction

The interaction between a teacher and a student is
essential in education. Research indicates that the average teacher engages in as many as "100 interpersonal interactions each day" (Stanford and Roark, 1974, p. 38). From this alone, the sheer quantity of interactions makes it an important aspect of education. Classroom interaction is the most pervasive with teachers and students. The settings of classroom interactions can be dynamically viewed as "physically, temporally, organizationally, and educationally" (Delamont, 1983, p. 29). In addition, any individual classroom encounter between a teacher and a class may be perceived as an intersection of the pupils' "personal status[es] and identit[ies] and the teacher's personal status and identity" (Delamont, 1983, p. 30).

The interactions within the classroom for teachers are not limited to that setting. Teachers have been documented to be the most influential people on a secondary school campus due to their control over knowledge (Delamont, 1993, p. 50). When coming into contact with students, the teacher must feel comfortable and be effective in the kinds of interpersonal relationships required in interacting (Stanford & Roark, 1974). Because of the intensity of their interactions, students become aware of positive and negative feelings given out by teachers. As a case in point, Fine (1987) heard those same sentiments from a pregnant student who stated, "I got to leave cause even if they don't say it, them teachers got hate in their eyes when they look at my belly" (p. 100). Strother (1986) pointed to Olsen and
Moore's (1982) study which indicated that students viewed their teachers as unhappy with their jobs and consequently:

- erode students' confidence,
- erode students' confidence, their fragile sense of acceptability to their peers,
- and can contribute to truancy, dropping out and acting out.

Students go to great lengths to avoid teachers they feel put them in uncomfortable or humiliating positions (p. 327). These negative interactions with the teacher could create an environment that leads to students' departing school prior to graduation.

Administrative interactions with students, on the other hand, are not as prominent as those with teachers and students. Differences in student behavior can be attributed to the beliefs and practices of administrators and the ways in which they interact to "form a social system within a school" (Hamilton, 1983, p. 69). Ultimately however, an administrator's goal is to make the school successful by helping students learn through the efforts of teachers at the delivery point (Albrecht, 1988). As a result, administrators are important because they can assist in improving the interactions between students and teachers because, "the patterns of principal and teacher behavior work together to ensure commitment; leadership patterns of the principal must complement the interaction patterns of teachers" to create an environment for learning (Stockard & Mayberry, 1992, p. 101).

The interactions between students and staff could influence the perceptions and beliefs of and about students on campuses. Teacher interaction with students may also
bring about a feeling of rejection or disappointment. If the interaction is negative, then dropping out of school may be an alternative for many students.

In reviewing the interactions that take place on a secondary school campus, they have an influence on many decisions made. In examining the dropout phenomenon, the interactions between administrators, teachers, and students have influenced the decisions of students to remain in school (Darkenwald & Gavin, 1987). Therefore, interactions and how they are interpreted within the social environment may present another way of exploring the dropout phenomenon.

**Symbolic Interactionism**

Various interactions and the importance given to them may lead to students' dropping out. The study of these interactions among administrators, teachers, stay-ins, and dropouts require a theoretical framework such as Symbolic Interactionism Theory. This theory provides a means to examine the "face-to-face interactions of individuals" (Delamont, 1983, p. 15). The paradigm of symbolic interactionist provides a lens through which to view the interactions, the symbols, and the different meanings created by administrators, teachers, stay-ins, and dropouts.

**Development of Symbolic Interactionism Theory**

In order to understand fully the meanings, feelings, and behaviors behind interactions, it is critical to interpret
their relationships. Scientifically, interpretivists argue for the uniqueness of human inquiry in that they hold that mental sciences or cultural sciences are different from natural sciences (Schwandt, 1994). The goals of each type of study are both theoretically and philosophically distinct. Schwandt (1994) indicated that the goal of the mental sciences is to understand and grasp the meaning of a social phenomenon while natural sciences try to have a scientific explanation (p. 119).

Various types of interpretivist philosophies exist to explain the interactions of humans. For instance, Clifford Geertz's interpretive anthropology is used to interpret the theory of culture (Schwandt, 1994, p. 122) by combining the phenomenological and hermeneutical perspectives when interpreting human interactions. Another example is the social psychological theory of symbolic interactionism. According to Schwandt (1994), however, symbolic interactionism is "difficult to summarize briefly because of the many theoretical and methodological variants of the position" (p. 123).

Mead postulated two types of interaction --symbolic and non-symbolic (Delamont, 1983, p. 27). Non-symbolic interactions include biological reflex actions such as the involuntary response of pulling a hand away from a fire. Most human interactions are symbolic, however, and therefore require interpretation (Delamont, 1983, p. 27). In the 1950s, Herbert Blumer drew upon the work of his professor,
George Mead, and developed the notion of symbolic interactionism (Schwandt, 1994, p. 124). The theory derived by Blumer concentrates on three notions: the importance of interactions between individuals, meanings derived from social interactions, and establishment of meanings through an interpretive process (Delamont, 1993; Plummer, 1991; Schwandt, 1994).

Symbolic interactionism frames an active, dynamic view of the world in which meanings are never fixed and immutable, but rather are always "shifting, emergent, and ambiguous" (Plummer, 1991, p. x). Individuals place different meanings on a variety of situations which create an inconsistent pattern of an environment. Consequently, dropouts or potential dropouts may view their environment of school differently from stay-ins or educators. Whenever dealing with humans and their interactions, the social world changes because individuals have different perspectives. These changes are "integral parts of the human being" (Charon, 1985, p. 23).

**Process**

Symbolic interactionism was used as a framework for examining the dropout phenomenon because of the focus on face-to-face interactions of individuals on campus rather than producing theories about a whole science on dropouts (Delamont, 1983). Interaction is a process which is "ongoing, dynamic, and changing" (Delamont, 1983, p. 15).
Changes occur due to the different participants and situations that are encountered. With constant change and evolution, symbolic interactionists must focus upon strategies of "acquiring a sense of self and adjusting to others" (Plummer, 1991, p. xi). It is in this active world that humans are going about their business, piecing together joint lines of activities, and constituting society through different interactions (Plummer, 1991, p. xi). As a case in point, Fine (1991) experienced this interactive process while studying high school dropouts. Interactions with students, administrators, teachers, secretaries, counselors, parents, and support staff provided insight into how the school operated and created an environment conducive to dropping out (Fine, 1991).

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, humans are regarded as "purposive agents" (Schwartz, 1994, p. 124). Schwartz (1994) indicated that, through the interaction process, humans engage in minded, self-reflective behavior that allows interpretation of the world in order "to act, rather than a set of stimuli in which they are forced to respond" (p. 124). In this active image of human beings, individuals go through a process of constantly re-defining the world in which they act (Charon, 1985, p. 22).

Studies (Bloch, 1991; Fine, 1991; Strother, 1986) indicate that dropouts define school for themselves as a negative and sometimes unproductive place. McDill (1987) further points out that a process including student
characteristics and school procedures leads to the ability of students to define their own situations as dropouts (p. 167). In Stevenson and Ellworth's (1993) study, dropouts also defined their situations and reclaimed for themselves the blame for dropping out, even though they voiced criticism about their school (p. 266).

In viewing the process of interaction, the inquirer must begin with sensitizing images of the interaction process. These are built around concepts of self, language, social setting, social objects, and joint acts as well as movement to the immediate world of social experiences which permits the images to shape and modify a conceptual framework (Charon, 1985, p. 124). Fine (1986) experienced this change as she observed, interviewed, and interacted with individuals at a secondary high school in New York. In September, her research question was, "Why do urban students drop out of high school?"; by December, her conceptual framework was modified to ask, "Why do they stay" (Fine, 1986, p. 86)?

Symbolic interactionism seeks an explanation of the world. Charon (1985) envisions the process as taking the following steps: interaction, in which people communicate; role, how what we do is defined; reference groups, the group with which one identifies within a situation; perspectives, how one feels and views situations; definition of situation, how the situation is defined based on the individual's view of the world; action, what course is taken; and interpretation of judgement, how we intermingle all concepts.
and interpret the world [italics added] (p. 25). In interpreting the world through the process of symbolic interactionism, the inquirer must take "thick description as a point of departure for formulating an interpretation of what students and faculty are up to" (Charon, 1985, p. 124).

**Interaction**

Interaction that individuals engage in is a major premise of symbolic interactionism. The focus is neither with the individual nor the society per se; rather, it is concerned with the joint acts through which lives are organized and societies assembled (Plummer, 1991, p. xi). Interaction is concerned with behavior that is not independent, but collective. Interactions through joint acts eventually lead to decisions for students. Ekstrom's (1987) path model of student dropouts, displayed in Figure 1, incorporates the collective interactions of society such as demographics, family, and school factors that are critical to the decisions students make regarding staying in or dropping out of school (p. 61).
During interaction, the use of 'self' implies that the idea of 'the other' is present and societies are constituted through their interactions (Plummer, 1991). Situations require personal interactions rather than "producing theories about a whole science" (Delamont, 1983, p. 15). Interaction implies that human beings act in relationship to each other by taking each other into account. They then act, perceive, interpret, and act again (Charon, 1985). In this way, when two people both interact, they are constantly interpreting and reacting to their own acts as well as to each others. As a case on point, in evaluating their acts, Ekstrom (1987) noted that dropouts appear to have chosen friends who are also alienated from school. These interactions assist adolescents who are "comparing oneself with peers and seeking an identity that is not deviant from collective adolescent norms" (Stevenson & Ellsworth, 1993, p. 268). These
interactions have an influence on how dropouts interpret the act and perceive the outcome of dropping out. Dropouts are also less likely than stay-ins to interact and discuss their experiences with their parents (Ekstrom, 1987). When a symbolic interactionist approach is applied to a classroom or school setting, the interactions between the teacher and pupils are seen as joint acts (Delamont, 1983, p. 28).

In symbolic interactionism, it is necessary in social interactions that careful attention be focused on "overt behavior and behavior settings of actors and their interactions" (Charon, 1985, p. 124). From the interactions of individuals, perspectives are learned, altered, transformed, and replaced when the self comes into contact with the other. Ekstrom (1987) further noted that the behaviors of dropouts were different from stay-ins. The dropouts' interactions with teachers were consistently not positive which exacerbated low academic achievement, discipline, and attendance problems.

Through these interactions, the dynamic world of the classroom is fraught with new interpretations because students and teachers are constantly acting in relation to one another. Through the steady interactions with one another, they are constantly communicating while "symbolically creating meanings" (Charon, 1985, p. 133).

**Symbols/Meanings**

Through the interactions of individuals, meanings are
created. Meanings depend on the definition of the significant others whose interaction constitutes its meanings (Plummer, 1991, p. x). In witnessing interactions between a teacher and her students, for example, Fine (1986) noticed that students interpreted the meanings of certain situations differently from the teacher. This creation of meaning through significant others caused Fine (1986) to remark about the "discrepancies in the lives and experiences of students and teachers" (p. 98). Human beings act toward things based on the meanings they derive from the social interaction between and among individuals (Schwandt, 1994).

Through interaction, meanings are assembled, but they are changing, never fixed. Even though meanings are created, routined, and shared, they are always open to reappraisal and reevaluation. Meanings created by dropouts, for instance, may indicate an evaluation of the school. Fine (1986) noted, "whether dropping out is a personal act of rejection, assertion, joining one's peers, or giving up, it presumes a structural context that is being rejected, critiqued, and/or experienced as defeating by the actor" (p. 93).

Plummer (1991) implied that a concern of the interactionist is the task that is undertaken in assembling meaning:

how we define ourselves, our bodies and impulses, our feelings and emotions, our behaviors and acts; how we define the situations we are in, develop perspectives on the wider social order, . . . and how these meanings are handled, modified, transformed and hence evolve through encounters. (p. x)
The meanings that are created come from verbal and non-verbal communication pattern which occurs through interaction. Communication is also symbolic because "we communicate via languages and other symbols; further, in communicating we create or produce significant symbols" (Schwandt, 1994, pp. 124). Symbols created for different students, as reported by Eckert (1989), typify students through "the symbolic manifestation of category affiliation - dress and hangout" (p. 49). The symbols are developed and utilized to clarify the interdependence of meanings.

Charon (1985) establishes that symbols in symbolic interactionism are of one class of social objects used to "represent", "stand in for," or "take the place of" (p. 34). Eckert (1989) notes this when "burnouts displayed their counter-school values . . . adopted distinct public behavior with clear symbolic values - smoking, drinking, and occupying a certain area" (p. 69). These symbols were social in nature because they were defined in interaction and meaningful to the user who was aware of what these symbols represented. Language also creates certain symbols and meanings for different groups in the high school (Eckert, 1989). For example, certain words were used to determine what social group a student represented.

Symbols used to create meanings can change during interaction due to the different perceptions held by individuals (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, p. 128). Communication via language or gesture is a kind of symbol...
that is recognized in interactions. Communication can involve a physical object, a human act, or words during an exchange between two actors. Through this process, symbols are seen as significant not only to the receiver, but also to the user (Charon, 1985, p. 34). For a dropout, this interaction could be disruptive behavior, lack of attendance at school, or low academic achievement which communicates a dislike for school (Belts & Neihart, 1988; Ekstrom, 1987; Kronick & Hargis, 1990; McDill, 1987; Wehlage & Rutter, 1987). Charon (1985) quoted S. Morris Eames who summarized the importance given to symbols in symbolic interactionism:

Pragmatic naturalists conceive of humans as a part of nature. Although they share many organic processes with other animals in their lives, in nature, humans emerge above the animals in certain forms and functions. For instance, humans can construct symbols and languages, they can speak and write, and by those means they can preserve their past experiences, construct new meanings and entertain goals and ideals. (p. 62)

The three concepts --process, interaction, and meaning/symbols-- come together to form Symbolic Interactionism Theory. Meaning itself is an interactive process emanating from interactions (Plummer, 1991, p. xi). Therefore, meaning is derived through social interaction: individuals act based on how the interaction is perceived. The process in evaluating interactions, symbols, and meanings assists in articulating the influence the social environment, peers, and professional staff in a school have on dropouts.
Social Environment

Introduction

A social environment theory was derived from the early works of Lewin on field theory and of Murray on needs-press in which the behavior of an individual is a joint product of individuals and their environment (Darkenwald & Gavin, 1987; Stockard & Mayberry, 1992). With this, individuals and their social environments reciprocally influence one another.

Along with symbolic interactionism, which views the individual and society as inseparable units, reciprocal influence is emphasized in micro-social environments (Jacob, 1987). The environment, a passive agent which permits strong personalities to alter its quality, has an influence on individual behavior in events (Moos, 1976, pp. 21-22). In dealing with dropouts, Boshier (1973) further concluded that "researchers must recognize that . . . dropout[s] stem from an interaction of internal psychological and external environmental variables" (p. 256). As another example, in their study, Darkenwald and Gavin (1987) used the social environment in determining the nearness of dropout behavior to the social ecology of the classroom for adult education participants. In doing so, they indicated that the social environment of a classroom determined, in large part, "the attitudes and behaviors of individual students" (Darkenwald & Gavin, 1987, p. 155). This notion was also emphasized by Stockard and Mayberry (1992) who concluded that the connection between individual and environmental
characteristics could apply to analysis of the fit between students and their schools and classrooms (Stockard & Mayberry, 1992, p. 102).

**Moos Model of Social Environment**

Psychologist Rudolf H. Moos inductively developed and refined his Model of Social Environment based on years of research on various institutions such as colleges, psychiatric wards, correctional institutions, and high schools (Moos, 1979). These various settings were conceptualized by a common set of domains that were seen in each situation (Moos, 1979). The consistent theoretical domains he observed were:

1. **Relationship Domain** - extent of peoples' involvement, extent to which they support and help one another and express themselves freely.

2. **Personal Growth/Goal Orientation Domain** - extent of measuring the basic goals of the setting (areas in which personal development and self-enhancement tend to occur).

3. **System Maintenance Domain** - extent to which the environment is orderly and clear in its expectations, maintains control, and responds to change.

Within each domain, dimensions exist that are "similar in most settings, although some environments impose unique variations" (Moos, 1979, p. 14). Within the Relationship
Domain are the dimensions of involvement, which reflects the degree of social interaction, attentiveness of students to class activities, and friendship; affiliation, which examines how students work with and come to know one another; and support, how students assist one another. The Personal Growth Domain incorporates the aspects of task orientation, which characterizes the emphasis placed on accomplishing specific academic objectives; and competition, the stress on students as they compete with one another for recognition and success. Finally, order and organization, which denote order in expectations; rule clarity, which consists of clearly stated expectations; control, which characterizes the maintenance of control and constraint; and innovation, which examines how students initiate behavior, are dimensions used to measure the System Maintenance Domain.

Various studies have applied the Moos Model of Social Environment to explain the social environment of an educational setting. In studying the relativity of dropout behavior to the social environment, for example, Darkenwald and Gavin (1987) found that discrepancies between student expectations of the classroom environment and the actual environment promoted "dissatisfaction for the student" (p. 152). These discrepancies consisted of various aspects of the Moos Model such as rule clarity, affiliation, and involvement. Boshier (1973) also terms this dissatisfaction "incongruent" when an individual did not have "inner harmony with self and the environment" (p. 259), Moos found a clear
correlation between average class absentee rate and the classroom environment (Neill, 1979, p. 25).

The Moos Model of Social Environment was used by Darkenwald and Gavin (1987) to conceive the classroom environment as a "dynamic social system that includes not only teacher behavior and teacher-student interaction, but student-student interaction" (p. 153). As noted by Stevenson and Mayberry (1992),

the work of Moos and others on . . . climates provides insights into individuals' perceptions of social groups and how these influence the ways in which they make decisions about actions and their interactions with others within the group. (p. 102)

With the use of this paradigm, the classroom environment is defined in terms of the perceptions people have that are shared within the environment. Social environment, through the use of the Moos Model, implies that students and teachers construct their own social reality and the social climate of their classroom and school. In turn, this reality can be understood and thus validly measured only through their perceptions (Darkenwald & Gavin, 1987). The dropout symptoms, according to Natriello (1987), signify the "mismatch between certain individuals and the typical high school environment" (p. 84). Knowing this, concerned educators could attempt to provide an environment in which interactions involving students bring about an effective learning atmosphere.

The literature reviewed in this chapter provided ample
grounding for this study. The type of student who drops out of school along with the various reasons for dropping out continues to be diverse. Yet with these differences, one of the common bonds among all dropouts is that they attended school. The consistent voice of students blaming the different interactions within the school (Fine, 1986 and 1991) provides insight into the school's responsibility in curtailing dropouts. Further, interactions between different individuals may influence a student to remain in or leave school, and the social environment in which the students interact may cause their departure. These factors indicate a need to examine the effect of interactions within a school's social environment on the student's decision to drop out.
CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction
Within this chapter the research methods used to examine the interactions of dropouts within a school's social environment are described. In the first section, the use of naturalistic research is addressed, while in the second section, the research environment, context, and participants in the study are described. Data collection and analysis are described in section three and in the final section, strategies used to address the trustworthiness of the study are identified.

Research Methodology
Guba and Lincoln (1982) emphasized that "qualitative methods are preferred by humans using themselves as prime data collection instruments" (p. 244). In this study, the different perceptions of administrators, teachers, stay-ins, and dropouts about the interactions within the social environment involves human context. With that, this study utilizes a naturalistic research paradigm using Symbolic Interactionism and Moos' Model of Social Environment, as described in Chapter 2, as the underlying conceptual framework. It addresses the following research questions:
1. What interactions with the school's social environment influence students to drop out?

2. How does the social environment influence the different interactions among administrators, teachers, stay-ins, and dropouts?

3. What perceptions do administrators, teachers, stay-ins, and dropouts have about dropping out of school?

4. What interactions between administrators, teachers, stay-ins, and dropouts influence students to drop out of school?

**Research Context**

**Research Setting**

The settings under investigation were two comprehensive high schools in the Clark County School District (NV). Two sites were selected in order to provide a multiple case study in which the results were "more compelling, and the overall study is therefore regarded as being more robust" (Yin, 1989, p. 52). Multiple sites also allowed for cross-experiment of the phenomena under investigation to verify any literal replications. The number of sites selected was a reflection of the number of case replications that were in this study.

Comprehensive high schools facilitated this study because they encompassed various athletic and activity programs, a diverse ethnic and socio-economic student body, and a number of students who dropped out of school in the...
past year. According to Marshall and Rossman (1989), these are ideal selection criteria because "there is a high probability that a rich mix of many of the processes, people, programs, interactions, and/or structures that may be a part of the research question will be present" (p. 54).

The comprehensive high schools selected had the following characteristics:

1. Population of 1,800 or more students
2. Diverse ethnic composition—either consistent with or more diverse than the Clark County School District (1994) average as shown in Table 3
3. Athletics and activity programs
4. Students who have dropped out of school in the past year
5. Wide range of subjects offered such as social studies, mathematics, child development, and occupational education classes at different levels like honors, average, and basic
6. Administrative team consisting of three or more individuals
7. Ninth through twelfth grades housed within the school.
Table 3:
Student Ethnic Distribution by Grade and Ethnic Group of the Clark County School District

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Native Am.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>11,471</td>
<td>63.9%</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>10,802</td>
<td>63.5%</td>
<td>13.6%</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>9,591</td>
<td>64.2%</td>
<td>13.6%</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>8,384</td>
<td>65.6%</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
<td>13.6%</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These characteristics constituted boundaries to help distinguish between the schools studied and those excluded from consideration as discussed by LeCompte and Preissle (1989). The two sites selected aligned with the questions under study. In order to investigate the different perceptions about interactions, dropping out, and a school's social environment, the use of comprehensive high schools as described addressed the needs of this study.

Research Participants

Dobbert (1982) emphasized that proper selection of participants is based upon the widest possible range of variation in the phenomenon, setting, or people relative to the central pattern of the study. In selecting individuals who come into contact with dropouts on a high school campus, the different interactions and the environment of the school must be considered (Delamont, 1982; Stockard & Mayberry,
Persons selected to participate in this study were school administrators, teachers, stay-ins, and dropouts. Approval to interview and solicit responses from these participants was obtained through the University of Nevada, Las Vegas' Office of Research Administration and the Clark County School District's Cooperative Research Committee in September, 1994.

Selection of individuals was accomplished on a criterion basis. "A set of criteria or list of attributes that the unit for study must possess" (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993, p. 69) was established by the investigator from the research questions and the empirical and theoretical influences that characterized the groups under investigation. In this way, the researcher was able to "choose the first such person, group, or setting that both matches those criteria and permits the study" (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, p. 63).

School administrators were selected on the basis of their work location; therefore at least three administrators from each school, including the principal, participated in the study. The principal was required because of his leadership position within the school which enabled him to set the climate for the school. In addition, he is most influential in deciding on the type of programs initiated at school (Neill, 1979; Stockard & Mayberry, 1992).

An assistant principal who supervised the school's activity program from each school also participated in the study. The assistant principal was able to provide insight
into the day-to-day interactions of stay-ins.

A dean of students from each school was also involved in this study. This administrator comes into contact regularly with many potential dropouts and dropouts because the nature of their jobs in dealing with discipline and attendance on a daily basis allows them to interact constantly with students. These professional staff members were able to provide insight into the school's social environment as well as into interactions with and among students.

Three licensed teachers from each school were selected to participate based upon their involvement with school activities and interactions with dropouts. The teachers selected had successfully completed a minimum of one year of teaching so that they were considered post-probationary, had the opportunity to interact with different types of students, and had a chance at developing a teaching style that was comfortable for them. The classes taught by each teacher were cross-sections of levels and courses including both honors/average and basic level classes. Although teachers taught honors classes such as Advanced Placement, Distinguished Scholars, and International Baccalaureate, they must also have taught at least one basic level class. This allowed for the widest possible range of interactions with different degrees of academically placed students. The professional staff members selected had also interacted with students who ultimately dropped out of school.

Stay-ins consisted of students who were presently
enrolled in school and who participated in various activities on campus such as a school sponsored club like chess or computer club, an activity like leadership or student council, or athletics. These students participated in school events which, according to several studies, reduces the risk of dropping out of school (Ekstrom, 1987; Kronick & Hargis, 1990; Orr, 1987). Within the Clark County School District, there were over 24,000 incidents of students participating in an activity, club, or athletic event (Clark County School District, 1993). This high percentage facilitated the selection from each school's student body.

Dropouts consisted of former students from the two selected schools who were no longer attending a comprehensive high school or attending an alternative program. Reasons for lack of attendance included the attendance policy, home problems, and academic problems. Students coded as a "dropout" by the Clark County School District or referred to an alternative program but not attending were considered dropouts for the purpose of this study (Clark County School District, 1992). These individuals were selected according to their availability and accessibility (Marshall & Rossman, 1989).

Data Procedures

Data Collection

Consistent with naturalistic inquiry, qualitative methods were used for data collection (Guba & Lincoln, 1982;
Strass & Corbin, 1990). Strategies included collecting data across various dimensions of people and activities that would inform this study (Denzin, 1978). In addition, multiple data collection activities such as interviews, questionnaires, and documents were used for triangulation (Guba & Lincoln, 1982; Marshall & Rossman, 1989).

Interviews

A semi-structured, in-depth (Fontana & Frey, 1994; Marshall & Rossman, 1989) interviewing technique was utilized in this study. Each respondent was asked a series of pre-established questions with latitude for responses. The researcher explored general topics with probes, but respected how the participants framed and structured their responses (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). Some open-ended questions were also used to ascertain feelings and opinions of respondents (Yin, 1989) since these interviews allowed for the modification of questions as the interviewing process progressed.

Individual interviews were scheduled and conducted with each administrator and teacher selected. The questions used evolved from the research questions and focused on the topics of student interactions, school social environment, student-staff interactions, and dropouts (Appendix A).

Individual interviews were also conducted for the stay-ins and dropouts and focused on the research questions with the topics of student interaction, interaction with teachers
and administrators, dropouts, and the school's social environment (Appendix B). Both sets of interview questions were first screened by a panel of judges to verify the content validity of each question.

All interviews were audibly recorded and transcribed. Respondents were told in advance that their interviews were being recorded, and they had an opportunity to listen to the interview on tape afterwards. Respondents also had the opportunity to check their responses with the questions they thought were being asked. This process assisted in facilitating the credibility of the study.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire was distributed to each participant in order to discover background characteristics or certain attributes of the respondents (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). These questionnaires elicited descriptive information about each respondent (Appendices D, E, F, and G). As Dobbert (1982) summarized, the purpose of the questionnaire is to "confirm patterns, rather than to discover them, and to test their distribution" (p. 188).

Documents

School district and individual school documents were collected throughout the study. The use of school district dropout records, alternative program records, public reports, and government documents allowed for objective and direct clarification of data (Marshall and Rossman, 1989). The
method of discovery from records and accounts assisted in establishing a foundation for the study. The most important use of documents was to "corroborate and augment evidence from other sources" (Yin, 1989, p. 86). This information additionally assisted other data collection techniques in establishing the trustworthiness of the study.

**Data Analysis**

Data collection and analysis in a naturalistic inquiry may occur simultaneously (Guba & Lincoln, 1982; Marshall & Rossman, 1989). As data were collected, cues were examined in creating patterns, themes, categories, and labels that emerged (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). Information from initial interviews was also used for further purposive and theoretical sampling in succeeding interviews (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). As concepts from the interviews related to dropouts and interactions surfaced, they were considered until further verification from other collection sources was available (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

**Coding Procedures**

The major types of coding procedures described by Strauss and Corbin (1990) were utilized. The use of open, axial, and selective coding procedures assisted in generating valid categories for this study. To facilitate the coding procedure, the ethnographic computer software "The Ethnograph" (Seidel & Kjolseth, 1988), was used to sort, code, and recode data.
Open coding was initially used to sort data into pieces for comparison of similarities and differences. The comparisons then assisted in broadening the scope of the analysis (Strauss, 1987). Open coding also served as a "spring board" (Strauss, 1987, p. 63) for the researcher to wonder and speculate about the data. Further data were scrutinized in order to produce concepts that aligned with the research questions to achieve an extensive theoretical coverage which was thoroughly grounded (Strauss, 1987, p. 31).

Data were constantly compared by "combining inductive category coding with a simultaneous comparison on all incidents coded" (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, p. 256). This entailed comparing information as it was processed with emergent sub-categories. As new events became evident and constantly compared with previous events, new dimensions and relationships were discovered (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993).

Axial coding procedures were used to analyze sub-categories created by open coding (Strauss, 1987). Analysis was done on one sub-category at a time in terms of conditions and consequences (Strauss, 1987) to formulate core categories in which the consequences, conditions, and events were associated with one another. Further data were scrutinized and analyzed in terms of each core category so that new core categories and sub-categories continued to emerge while existing ones were modified. The linkages between the categories were eventually chosen as "cores" (Strauss, 1987,
Selective coding was used in determining which core categories were central to the units of analysis (Strauss, 1987). This process consisted of finalizing the selection of core categories, relating them to other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in core categories that needed further refinement and development (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). When all core categories were linked to the interaction of dropouts, selective coding occurred. The core categories, or the phenomena around which all the other phrases were associated and integrated, were used for theoretical sampling and further data collection.

Trustworthiness

This study adhered to the criteria outlined by Guba, 1981, and Guba and Lincoln, 1985, for judging the trustworthiness of a naturalistic inquiry (Marshall & Rossman, 1989; Yin, 1989). Criteria used to establish trustworthiness consisted of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Table 4 illustrates the various methods (Guba & Lincoln, 1982; Marshall & Rossman, 1989) that were employed to meet the requirements of each criterion.
Table 4

Trustworthiness Criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criterion</th>
<th>Positivist Analogy</th>
<th>Method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Credibility</td>
<td>Internal validity</td>
<td>• peer debriefing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• triangulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• member check</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transferability</td>
<td>External validity</td>
<td>• cross case analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• thick description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• theoretical/purposive sampling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependability</td>
<td>External reliability</td>
<td>• overlapping material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• chain of events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• case study data base</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confirmability</td>
<td>Internal reliability</td>
<td>• triangulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• reflexivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• confirmability audit trail</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Credibility establishes the "truth value" of the inquiry (Guba & Lincoln, 1982) and is consistent with internal validity which requires that the subjects be accurately identified and described. This is best demonstrated "through an isomorphism between the data of an inquiry and the phenomena those data represent" (Guba & Lincoln, 1982, p. 246). In this way, the crucial question in establishing credibility is whether the data sources find the analysis, formulation, and interpretation to be believable (Guba & Lincoln, 1982).

This study included the use of various techniques to safeguard credibility. Triangulation, consisting of a
variety of data collection sources including interviews, questionnaires, and documents; peer debriefing, obtaining the advice and insight of the dissertation advisor about the study and methodological steps to keep the inquiries honest; and member check, verifying the data and interpretations with members of the different groups in which data originated, were used to ensure the truth value of this study.

Transferability is the demonstration that the applicability of one set of findings to another context is available. This is consistent with external validity in which the experiences under study can be transferred to an outside setting. In naturalistic inquiries, transferability "rests more with the investigator who would make that transfer than the original investigator" (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p. 145). The concern for transferability can be abridged by establishing a theoretical framework which indicates data collection and analysis were guided by concepts and models (Marshall & Rossman, 1989).

To ensure transferability, this study utilized thick description, providing enough information about the context to ensure an experience and facilitate judgement about the extent to which the questions can be transferred; theoretical/purposive sampling, consisting of gathering additional data after initial data gathering to support, disconfirm, or elaborate on findings; and cross-case analysis, comparing the behaviors, responses, and perceptions of two or more respondents.
Dependability is the assurance of stability after discounting conscious and unpredictable changes (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). This attempts to account for changing conditions in the phenomenon under study (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). Dependability also brings about the notion of replication. In naturalistic inquiries, designs are emergent, causing changes to be built in which prevent exact replication. According to Marshall and Rossman (1989), "[an] unchanging social world is in direct contrast to the qualitative/interpretative assumption that the social world is always changing and the concept of replication is itself problematic" (p. 147).

To ensure dependability, the following were utilized: overlapping material, the use of different data collection sources to challenge claims of reliability to the extent that they produce complementary results; chain of events, describing and documenting events and responses as they take place; and the use of a case study data base, in which data were organized and documented for investigation by other researchers. The data base consisted of notes, documents, tabular material, and narratives (Yin, 1989).

Confirmability is the concern for objectivity of the inquiry. Naturalistic studies require that the objectivity rests on the data, not the researcher (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). This inquiry utilized the criterion of confirmability to justify whether or not the findings could be verified by another researcher (Marshall & Rossman, 1989).
Ensuring confirmability in this study was accomplished by the use of triangulation; reflexivity, consisting of the uncovering of the researcher's beliefs, assumptions, biases, or prejudices about the problem under study; and a confirmability audit trail, which may be verified by an independent auditor that each finding can be traced back through analytical steps to the original data source.
CHAPTER 4

OVERVIEW AND FINDINGS

This study examined how administrators, teachers, stay-ins, and dropouts voiced their perceptions about the influence a school's social environment and interactions had on dropouts and potential dropouts to leave school prior to graduating. One major focus of this study was to hear the voices of the participants by allowing them to verbalize their opinions, feelings, perceptions, and emotions about various aspects as they related to the topic.

One aspect of the dropout phenomenon is the influence a school has on students to drop out because school is the only common experience for every dropout. Therefore, the school must play some role in keeping students in school or accelerating their early departures. Two aspects of the school, the interactions among persons and the social environment, both of which have been documented to be influential, were examined in this study. These were interrelated due to the nature and configuration of a comprehensive high school and the characteristics of people who are coming together in the school, working toward a goal and following similar guidelines. According to earlier studies, interactions were cited as important communication
avenues on school campuses (Ekstrom, 1987; Delamont, 1983). In addition, the social environment has been reported to influence interactions and decisions individuals make on school campuses (Darkenwald & Gavin, 1987).

The problem to explore the perceptions of administrators, teachers, stay-ins, and dropouts of the influence of a school's social environment on their interactions as it pertains to dropping out of school as well as their conceptions of their interactions in relation to the issue of dropping out of school was analyzed with four distinct research questions.

The first two research questions related to the influence a school's social environment had on interactions. The first research question asked about the various programs, rules, and policies that influenced students to drop out. The second research question examined the social environment's influence on various interactions.

The third and fourth research questions related to the second part of the problem statement which dealt with the participants' conceptions of personal interactions and how they influenced students. The third research question examined the various perceptions participants had about dropping out of school and the fourth research question asked about the different interactions between the participants and how they influenced students' decisions to drop out or remain in school. In conclusion, the questions ascertained the influence of the social environment and personal interactions
as they related to dropping out of school.

Symbolic Interactionism Theory was used as the framework for evaluating the various interactions on campus. This theory provided a framework that allowed the responses of this study to be evaluated in terms of what process was stated about the interactions, how the interactions were perceived, and what meanings, through symbols, were created by the interactions.

When examining the interactions, the researcher took into account where they took place and what influence the environment had on them. Moos' Social Environment Theory was then used to delineate the attributes of the school's social environment and assist in analyzing its specific domains. The Relationship, System Maintenance, and Personal Growth/Goal Orientation Domains of the Social Environment Theory were used to align the different aspects of each school's social environment and to explain how they influenced decisions and interactions on the campuses.

Documents relative to dropouts were gathered and 24 individuals completed questionnaires and were individually interviewed to serve as the basis for data collection. The documents were used to establish the school district's and respective school's statistics about, view of, and stance on dropouts. The questionnaires further served as a foundation in documenting, understanding, and becoming familiar with the different characteristics of the participants. Interviews, however, were the primary source of data collection and
analysis for this study.

Responses of the participants' interviews were coded according to Strauss and Corbin's (1990) coding procedures. Initially four primary core categories emerged from the data analysis. Selective coding procedures were used to determine which core categories --School Experience, Personal Experience, Process, and Communication-- were central to the problem statement. The core categories of School Experience, Personal Experience and Communication were refined and developed enough through data collection to validate their link to the research questions. The Process category lacked sufficient data to support its linkage to the unit under study and was therefore not reported.

Interview responses were reported in conjunction with the three core categories of School Experience, Personal Experience and Communication. To ensure accuracy of respondents' direct quotations, the term "[sic]" was used with adult participants' quotations. Stay-ins' and dropouts' direct quotations do not include the term "[sic]" since so many of their quotations had grammatical errors.

Within the core categories and under each research question, major responses were sorted, grouped, and labeled to illustrate the cross-section between the core category and respective research question. Table 5 is a summary of core categories, research questions, and response labels that emerged from the data analysis.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 explored the three core categories
of School Experience, Personal Experience, and Communication, respectively, in more detail.

**Table 5**

**Summary Matrix**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Core Categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interactions with the social environment that influence students</td>
<td>School Experience: • degree of involvement • extent of fear • extent of being pushed out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal Experience: • impact of school programs • extent of student inclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communication: • importance of attracting students by communicating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence of the social environment on interactions</td>
<td>School Experience: • degree of student participation • magnitude of a nurturing environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal Experience: • impact of an ext. environment • pervasiveness of racial identity and grouping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communication: • impact of communication in groups • importance of communication through activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical perceptions about dropping out</td>
<td>School Experience: • extent of a school's responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal Experience: • impact of family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communication: • extent of dropouts communicating that they gave up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactions which influence students to drop out</td>
<td>School Experience: • degree of campus conflicts • amount of encouragement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal Experience: • impact of peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communication: • impact of positive support • degree of listening while communicating • impact of contravening communication</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Core Categories and Response Labels**

This study had various findings that were important and relevant to the problem statement. Core categories of School Experience, Personal Experience, and Communication emerged.
from the interview responses. As discussed in Chapter 5, School Experience represented experiences, feelings, and perceptions individuals had with regard to school. Personal Experiences, as discussed in Chapter 6, dealt with the participants' personal lives, how they felt about themselves, how they perceived their personal interactions and what was important and not important to them. Communication, as discussed in Chapter 7, represented how information was given and received and how that information was interpreted by the participants. Consistent with Symbolic Interactionism Theory, each category was viewed with an emphasis on interactions and by the way they were perceived and symbolized by the participants. The Social Environment Theory was used in analyzing the various domains of the environments of the selected schools as well as in describing the characteristics of where the participants interacted.

Within each core category, there were various labels that aligned with each research question (Table 5). Under School Environment, the degree of involvement which represented how students became active or inactive, the extent of fear which articulated the misgivings many participants had while on campus, and the extent of being pushed out which labeled what the schools did to assist students to drop out were addressed. The degree of student participation emphasized the influence of the environment on student involvement and interaction, while the magnitude of a nurturing environment represented the caring interactions.
experienced by some within the social environment. The measurement of the extent of a school's responsibility dictated how individuals viewed the school and its employees as a cause of dropouts. The degree of conflict and amount of encouragement represented the various interactions at school that influenced students to drop out of or remain in school.

As discussed in Chapter 6, Personal Experience represented the impact of school programs in terms of importance to and influence on students and student inclusion which discussed how being included in certain aspects persuaded the participants. The effect of the external environment and how its influence on interactions as well as the pervasiveness of racial identity and grouping were also seen as vital components within the social environment. Perceptions about dropping out of school from a personal standpoint consistently reverted to the impact of families and their roles in students' dropping out or staying in school. Personal peer groups were further perceived as important influences on the interactions of students and clearly played a role in students' decisions.

The core category of Communication, as discussed in Chapter 7, was supported by the various ways individuals talked, listened, interacted, and symbolized how they perceived the different communication styles. The importance of retaining students through positive communication to attract them to school and programs is most relevant. In addition, the impact of communication in groups clarified how
different messages were communicated and how students interacted within the social environment when they were grouped together for various reasons. This finding stressed the importance of communication via activities and clubs and of their existence in the social environments for preventing students from dropping out.

The one perception in the realm of communication that came across about dropping out was how participants viewed dropouts as communicating that they gave up. The interactions which influenced students either to drop out or to remain in school were communicated in various ways. The impact of positive support was seen as a way to communicate to students and encourage them to stay in school, the degree of listening while communicating was also noted as essential means of communicating that influenced students, and the impact of contravening communication was seen as negative means of communication that students symbolized as not being wanted and influencing their decisions to drop out or stay in school.

The response labels assigned to this study were replies that were mentioned, brought up, commented on, or discussed most frequently by the participants. The findings had to pass a three-prong "litmus test." First, the finding had to be relevant to one of the core categories -- School Experience, Personal Experience, or Communication. Next, it had to align itself with an appropriate research question. Finally, analysis of the findings had to deal with the
consistency and constancy of the response by indicating that more than one participant articulated the finding.
CHAPTER 5

SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

Introduction

In the first section of this chapter, the characteristics of the selected schools are analyzed. Next, each participant is described, and finally, the relationship of identifiers are related to the school experience of the participants.

Context of the Schools

Two of the 14 comprehensive high schools in the Clark County School District, centered in Las Vegas, Nevada, with enrollments exceeding 1,800 students were chosen for this study. The study required the schools to be diverse both in population and in program offerings. These differences allowed for diverse beliefs, perceptions, and philosophies among participants.

X High School

X High School, XHS, is a comprehensive high school which enrolled 1,937 students during the 1994-95 school year (Clark County School District, 1995). The 30- year old facility houses ninth through twelfth grades in a "school-within-a-school" configuration. In addition to a "regular" high
school, XHS is also home to a magnet school which is an academy for math, science, and applied technology.

The administration of XHS consisted of seven persons: one principal, four assistant principals, and two deans of students. Six guidance counselors and 95 certified teachers were also on staff. Secretaries, office aides, and other support staff members made up the remaining 46 adults on staff for a total of 154 adults in the building.

The student population of nearly 2,000 was comprised roughly of 30% freshmen, 29% sophomores, 24% juniors and 17% seniors. The diversity of XHS student body in terms of economic status, ethnicity, and special population is described in Table 6 (Clark County School District, 1985).
Table 6
XHS Student Population in Terms of Economic Status, Ethnicity, and Special Populations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identifier</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Economic Status</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low income</td>
<td>8.0 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>53.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>19.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>18.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Special Populations</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular Education</td>
<td>75.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gifted and Talented (GATE)</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English-as-a-Second Language</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The XHS academic plan consists of pre-vocational, pre-technical, and pre-college programs. Classes for mentally and physically challenged students as well as for academically talented ones through a complete Advanced Placement and Honors program are available.

The staff at XHS pride themselves on their proactive community involvement. For example, they had been recognized for their parent/community communiques along with their
creation of a community school for the surrounding neighborhood which consists of having over 25 partnerships with various sponsors, organizations, and businesses.

XHS also has a full-scale athletic program which encompasses 24 extra-curricular teams. Eleven female and 13 male teams allow for ample student participation. In addition, the school houses 42 different clubs and groups ranging widely in scope and purpose which provide for student participation at all levels.

**Z High School**

Z High School (ZHS) is a school that existed in a 62 year-old building, but was relocated to a newly constructed edifice. All the students, teachers, and administrators who were housed in the older facility were moved to the new building at the beginning of the 1993-94 school year. During this study, then, the building was in its second year of operation; however, most of the teachers, administrators, and students had come from the old school site and had therefore been working and attending school together for numerous years.

The student population of ZHS was 2,643 students during 1994-95 (Clark County School District, 1995). Freshman made up 33% of the students while the sophomores, juniors, and seniors comprised 29%, 22%, and 16%, respectively. Table 7 (Clark County School District, 1985) illustrates the ethnic make-up, special populations and economic status of the
students who attended ZHS.

Table 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identifier</th>
<th>Economic Status</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low income</td>
<td></td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identifier</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>44.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>33.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identifier</th>
<th>Special Populations</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regular Education</td>
<td>74.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gifted and Talented (GATE)</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English-as-a-Second Language</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The staff of ZHS consisted of 176 individuals. One principal, three assistant principals, and two deans of students comprised the school's administrative team. In addition, eight guidance counselors and 120 certified teachers worked at ZHS. The rest of the school personnel constituted support staff members including secretaries,
campus monitors, and custodians.

ZHS offers a variety of programs. The school participated in the Effective Schools Program of the Nevada School Improvement Project to try consistently to improve classroom instruction and the learning environment for students. ZHS also housed an Advanced Placement and Honors program for honor students along with a second-language and limited English proficient occupational program for non English speaking students.

Students are able to participate in many ways at ZHS. More than 24 athletic teams for males and females are available along with 42 extra-curricular activity clubs and organizations. The clubs ranged from the Art Club and National Art Honor Society for interested students to the Vocational Industrial Clubs of America for students who enjoy participating in vocational programs. ZHS also maintains a guidance program for students who need special attention due to behavior or attendance problems.

Participants

The participants in this study included 24 administrators, teachers, stay-ins, and dropouts equally divided between the two comprehensive high schools. Each school provided three individuals for each administrative, teaching, stay-in, and dropout cohort.

Once the schools were selected, the respective principals of XHS and ZHS were contacted to confirm their
willingness to allow the schools to participate in this study. After the principals agreed to participate, they were given the characteristics of the type of teachers needed for this research. The principals provided numerous names of teachers who met the established requirements who were then selected based on their availability and desire to be interviewed. The assistant principal in charge of student activities, the principal, and one dean of students from each school were also interviewed.

To select the stay-ins, the principals were again given the required criteria. They then provided a list of names of students who fit the characteristics of a stay-in. Each stay-in was formally contacted, and the first three from each school who were willing to participate were selected.

The deans' office of each school provided the researcher with a list of students who fit the established criteria of a dropout. The researcher then categorized the dropouts by grade level and last enrollment date. Students who had gone through four years of school but had not graduated were contacted first. Next, students who should be seniors, juniors, and sophomores who had not been in school for the past year and who did not intend to return were contacted. Tables 8 and 9 list the various characteristics of the participants from XHS and ZHS. The participants provided the information through questionnaires and interviews.
Table 8

**XHS Participant Profile**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Administration</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Occup.</th>
<th>Yrs.</th>
<th>Yrs.</th>
<th>Yrs.</th>
<th>Related</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mr.A</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Dropout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ms.D</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Asst. Prin.</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ms.C</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Dean of St.</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Dropouts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Classes</th>
<th>Yrs.</th>
<th>Yrs.</th>
<th>Yrs.</th>
<th>Related</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ms.S</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Spec. Ed. Leadership</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ms.A</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Science</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mr.W</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Guidance</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Environment Interactions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stay-ins</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Work</th>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Sblngs/D.O.</th>
<th>Parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peter M</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Honor Society</td>
<td>1/no</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tennis</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chess Club</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Minny F</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Key Club</td>
<td>1/no</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chess Club</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Susan F</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Cheerleader</td>
<td>5/no</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Choir</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dropouts</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Work</th>
<th>Attend</th>
<th>Alt. School</th>
<th>Sblngs/D.O.</th>
<th>Parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Steve M</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>3/0</td>
<td></td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shannon F</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>2/1</td>
<td></td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jay M</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0/n.a.</td>
<td></td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Table 9

ZHS Participant Profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Administration</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Occup.</th>
<th>Yrs. Educ.</th>
<th>Yrs. Job</th>
<th>Yrs. Loc.</th>
<th>Related Committees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mr. B</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Climate At-Risk Improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ms. P</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Asst. Prin.</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Dropouts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mr. G</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Dean of St.</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Effective School Advisory</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Classes</th>
<th>Yrs. Educ.</th>
<th>Yrs. Job</th>
<th>Yrs. Loc.</th>
<th>Related Committees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ms. Cl</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Effective Schools Teacher Advisory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mr. S</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Math</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Effective Schools Interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ms. R</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Math</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Student Guidance Student Advisory</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stay-ins</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sx</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Work</th>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Sblngs/D.O.</th>
<th>Parents</th>
<th>Graduate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Stud.Council</td>
<td>2/no</td>
<td>mom-yes</td>
<td>dad-no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bill</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Cross Country</td>
<td>3/no</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kim</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Cheerleader</td>
<td>1/no</td>
<td>unsure</td>
<td>Multicultural</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dropouts</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sx</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Work</th>
<th>Attend Alt. School</th>
<th>Sblngs/D.O.</th>
<th>Parents</th>
<th>Graduate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Edward</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>16</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>2/1</td>
<td>no</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dawn</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>3/2</td>
<td>no</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frank</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1/0</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Interactions with the Social Environment that Influence Students

The educational institutions selected facilitated and encouraged many different interactions between and among various groups. The school experience for administrators, teachers, stay-ins, and dropouts was both positive and negative. Participants stated that they were influenced by the educational programs and curriculum and that their involvement in school activities had an impact on their school experiences.

Degree of Involvement

The involvement of students at all levels of the high school was addressed by the administrators, teachers, stay-ins, and dropouts. Involvement ranged from participating in an organized school club to playing on an athletic team.

At ZHS, individuals addressed the importance of being involved which brought about interactions within the social environment and had an influence on students dropping out or staying in school. As Mr. G, Dean of Students, stated,

We have a lot of kids get involved in that (Brotherhood Week). I think our whole atmosphere and climate promotes that type of thing. We have kids that buy into it and then we have kids that don't.

Mr. G's statement indicated the influence the climate and social environment had on student involvement. Mr. G's experience as a school administrator emphasized his belief that, "it is a positive force for kids to become involved in school." For that reason, he constantly encouraged students
to get involved.

One of the teachers, Mr. S, suggested that involvement in clubs and activities assured that students were afforded individual attention. Getting involved in a club or an organization could reduce the number of students a professional came into contact with on a daily basis; which could allow for more individual interactions. As Mr. S indicated, "I think students get turned off to school for various reasons. Not enough individual attention in schools and classes." The interactions with the social environment were influenced by the individual attention that was given to the students through small clubs and activities.

Stay-ins expressed the same sentiments regarding involvement in school. Bill, a stay-in, indicated there were many facets of the school which allowed a student to remain and have positive interactions with the social environment. Bill expressed,

There are many clubs. I would like to think there is a club for anybody that wants to get active. [I]t is their motivation if they want to get involved, there is everything.

Extent of Fear

Fear about attending school was prevalent in speaking with the participants. Students being scared to attend school, fearing gangs in addition to faculty members being afraid were mentioned throughout the interviews. Some participants perceived that this type of negative event influenced the interactions with the social environment.
These negative occurrences made many participants believe that individuals would leave school prior to graduation.

Edward, a dropout, stated that his friends and he had constant problems with a group of students and feared them. He stated, "for us it was like we always had problems with gangs." Edward went on to articulate the history of the problems he had with this group of individuals:

We didn't get along with them. We had problems with those guys. They like told the whole gang that we were talking about them. They were spreading rumors and he got them all on us.

Eventually this situation contributed to Edward's non-attendance and finally leaving school.

Being scared to attend school influenced most of the participants. Administrators emphasized the same sentiments about the fear factor and its influence on the interactions with the social environment.

Ms. P, assistant principal at ZHS, pointed out that being scared could influence a kid never to return to the high school campus:

Some kids are scared to death to come to school. I don't think it is any fun to go to a place that you are not happy or you don't feel comfortable anymore. Or you feel somebody is waiting for you.

A dean of students at XHS who dealt with security and discipline on a daily basis, Ms. C, indicated the same beliefs as Ms. P. When asked if students stopped attending school because of fear, she stated, "I think (they would) if they directly felt intimidated and felt frightened
for their well-being." She was quick to point out that this was not a factor at her school. Ms. C stated, "kids feel safe here. I think it is not a free-for-all environment."

Peter, a stay-in at XHS, expressed a different viewpoint of what he encountered while attending this "not a free-for-all environment." Peter explained his feelings the first time he saw a student harassed:

That really scared me. I would see people picking on other people just for no reason. Other than the fact they are picking on them. [T]he atmosphere is what I would say is not too friendly to an outsider.

Even the thought of being in school where problems existed raised questions about the social environment of the school. Bill indicated the reputation of his school even scared students before they entered the school building. He commented, "the negative thing that happens with ZHS is the reputation it has." Bill continued by pointing out that many junior high school students were scared and did not want to come to ZHS because of the negative connotation attached to it.

Teachers also articulated a concern about fear factors as they related to the interactions with the social environment and its influence on students. One teacher, Ms. R, stated that the environment could be confrontational for students. She said, "if a student is at a locker and somebody bumps into him, not on purpose, that usually ends up in a fight."

Another teacher, Ms. Cl, expanded on the negative
interactions that brought about fear on campus and placed the blame on the laws that restricted regulating students. She pointed out,

(There is a) hindrance put on us by the laws and society. Graffiti, kids flashing in the quad because they belong to gangs. You know that creates a little bit of fear and anxiety.

A solution envisioned by her was impossible due to society and laws. Ms. C stated, "I think the reason it continues is because we can't just kick them out on the street and say you are never allowed back in here." She saw this as a problem in dealing with the different interactions that influence students' decisions to stay in school or leave.

This response and solution came about as Ms. Cl was describing an incident in which one of her students dropped out of school because of fear. Ms. Cl said that students were "pulling her (the student's) hair and grabbing at her physically." Ms. Cl then went on to describe what happened to the young lady, "then I guess she has been living in fear because they have been calling her names and saying they are going to get her."

Extent of Being Pushed Out

The concept of "pushout," school-related actions that influenced students to leave school, was addressed by many of the participants throughout the study. The school as a nurturing, caring environment was viewed in a different light
by former students who felt that they forced out of school.

Ms. P pointed out that students who contemplated dropping out, but still were attending school, would be forced out. In response to how the school system rids itself of students who do not attend, she stated, "eventually the policy or system that is in place will lead them to drop out because we will move them on from one alternative level to this level and that level." Alternative levels are non-traditional programs for students who are not allowed to attend the "regular" school any longer.

Ms. Cl also stated that the rules, regulations, and/or policies of the school district pushed students out of school. A student told her, "I had nineteen (absences) and they kicked me out." In her opinion, this had to be done in order to make the "Ed-Shed (School District Central Office) happy." Ms. Cl went on to point out the irony in a pushout system:

Everybody says you have to get an education. Make sure everybody is in school and if they are not, kick them out. Remember the ten absences (rule which states that students may be referred to an alternative program if they exceed ten non-medically excused absences).

The principal of XHS, Mr. A, blamed the pushout philosophy on the lack of any type of viable attendance program in the district.

We don't have an attendance program here. The problem I have with lack of an attendance program is that you see kids in the first, second, and third grades with twenty or thirty absences already.
This frustrated Mr. A because when the students get to high school with this same attendance pattern, they will be referred out of school for excessive absences.

Edward, a dropout from ZHS, indicated he got kicked out of school because he was having problems with a teacher, but the attendance policy was used as a reason to force him to leave. When asked for more details, Edward stated that he, too, had excessive absences which allowed the school to refer him to an alternative program for students with attendance problems. Edward decided that the only alternative he had was not to attend any school, so he dropped out.

Steve, a dropout from XHS, also indicated the same reason he was not attending school any longer. He went on to describe the conversation he had with a dean on his last day at school:

They caught me, my girlfriend and my sister ditching one day. They brought us all into the deans' office. She (the dean) called my mom and she checked mine (attendance) and not my sister's. She said, "awe, you are overdue. It is out for you."

Mr. W, a teacher, pointed to another problem with the school district's policies that forces students to depart school early. After 25 years in education, he blamed the increase in graduation requirements as a contributor to students dropping out. He stated,

Before they could fail a whole year; their ninth grade year and still take six classes in the tenth, eleventh and twelfth grades and graduate. Now they start off needing twenty-three and one-half credits; they fail one class and already
they are credit deficient.

Mr. W went on to indicate that once a student gets behind, he or she is more likely than not to stop attending school.

Symbolic Interactionism emphasizes that human beings engage in self-reflective behavior which allows them to act rather than respond (Schwartz, 1994). Individuals are purposive agents who go through an interactive process of defining their surroundings. As students became involved in school, dealt with the fear factor on campus, and worked within school rules and regulations in combating the pushout factor, interactions existed as collective behaviors which led to their decisions to stay in or drop out of school.

The degree of their involvement in school activities characterizes the Relationship Domain of the Social Environment Theory in which students become entrenched in their environment and the interactive process of the Symbolic Interactionism Theory. The extent of their fear is seen in the interacting and reacting phases of symbolic interactionism in which interactions between people will bring about meanings of fear for those individuals. The System Maintenance Domain of the Social Environment Theory was demonstrated through push out since this is one way, through rules and policies, that schools maintain control and order.

The Influence of the Social Environment on Interactions

The social environment impacted the different
interactions that occurred within the school. Darkenwald and Gavin (1987) and Boshier (1973) both pointed out how the social environment influenced students' decisions while attending school. They indicated that dropouts expected an environment characterized by less social interaction; therefore, dropping out was associated with incongruent in the student and educational environment.

**Degree of Student Participation**

The respondents discussed the impact of the social environment and the different ways individuals participated in school. Gastright (1987) indicated that participation within a school was essential to the interactions and possibly staying in school. This view of participation was seen differently by the respondents of this study.

Administrators indicated that student participation in school was a key to success and staying in school. Mr. B, principal of ZHS, stated that as a school they would "try to get them to participate as quickly as possible." His rationale for getting students to participate in a club or group or on an athletic team was based on a belief that he had acquired, "If kids participate, then there is a strong correlation to success in school because it is the uninvolved kid who has the greatest tendency to drop out of school."

Ms. P also strongly believed that participating in events was important for students. She stated, "If kids are participating in student activities, they will interact with
positive people and not drop out." Mr. G, dean of students, indicated that the school attempted to create an atmosphere where students wanted to participate. The administration attempted to promote student participation, but as Mr. G saw it, "Some kids buy into it and some kids don't, it is a positive force for kids to participate in school."

Ms. D, assistant principal at XHS, pointed to the number of students participating in activities as a sign of a positive school environment. She stated, "The activities and athletics have kept us going in school and given us that personal side of education." Ms. C, dean of students, indicated that the school district had lost an important aspect of curbing the dropout problem when it got rid of junior high school sports. She pointed out that it was necessary for the students "to start young" by participating. She believed this was essential so that students could have a foundation for participating before their high school careers began.

Teachers also articulated the importance of students participating while in high school. Mr. W saw the participation factor as being crucial. He stated, "Kids don't participate as much in the activities as I would like to see." Ms. A, teacher, indicated that it was essential for a student's self-esteem to participate in something positive while in school. She saw it as important because:

Everyone has a chance to participate in some manner. Even if it is to be an aide for a teacher or an aide for an office. A lot of
times a lot of those kids are not the most outstanding academically. But they get to do something important which makes them feel good about themselves [sic].

As Ms. A stated, students want to feel needed and sometimes participating in school programs brought about that feeling. She saw activities and students participating in school as an "area of success for kids."

The leadership instructor at XHS, Ms. S, indicated that she used assemblies to get the "at-risk" kids to participate. She said that the school took chances on allowing certain individuals to perform during the assemblies, but it paid off. She stated, "Being allowed to perform in assemblies really makes a difference." This type of participation allowed students to be successful at school.

Mr. S, a math teacher, addressed the importance of students participation in clubs or on teams while at school. He looked at the number of positive contacts that could occur when a student participates. He stated,

When students participate in activities, clubs, or sports, then they are now not part of one of 2,700 anymore [sic]. They are now part of, like on a basketball team, one of 15. Not like in a classroom where they are one of 35, but their self-importance rises dramatically when they participate.

Ms. R, a teacher, went on a little bit further and stated that students could improve themselves by "participating in extra-curricular activities".

The stay-ins also articulated the importance of participating while attending school. A stay-in, Kim,
indicated, "I think (activities) are very important. If you are not participating in them things then you are participating in others. It keeps you going and looking forward to school."

These same sentiments were expressed by all the stay-ins who voiced their opinions about participating at school: "there is anything you can ask for," "students can express themselves by getting involved," "the ones who choose to isolate themselves find school boring and those are the ones who drop out," and "that (activities) is what keeps a lot of them in school."

The dropouts did not all view participating the same way administrators, teachers, and stay-ins did. Edward indicated that he did not have a chance to participate while at school. He stated that he was not interested in any activities because, "Most of the sports I really don't play and the clubs were not for me." Steve, a dropout from XHS, indicated that he was involved in school activities for the social aspect. He stated the most positive aspects of school were the activities. Steve said, "the clubs, I love the Ski Club" when asked about his activities.

**Magnitude of a Nurturing Environment**

The school was described as a nurturing environment by many participants. The interactions were viewed as friendly and supportive by stay-ins because they felt that staff members were doing things to make them feel nurtured. These
nurturing aspects were described as essential and necessary to bring about various interactions between the students and staff.

Ms. P indicated that "how nurturing the school environment is," along with other factors, "is needed to make sure a student is successful and wants to continue." Mr. S viewed the nurturing environment in terms of teachers assisting students when they needed help. He went on to state that the most positive attribute about the social environment is "the willingness of the teachers wanting to help students with their problems, not academic, but social problems at home."

Ms. Cl indicated that the nurturing environment encouraged students to remain at school. In describing how she saw the social environment, Ms. Cl stated, "most of the kids are happy to be here" and "our students tend to be more grateful than many because of the caring attitude exhibited by the teachers."

Teachers on the XHS campus thought a nurturing environment was also present and needed. Mr. W indicated that the environment "is very good." Even though there was a drastic change in ethnicity and socio-economic status of their student body population, the "climate is still pretty good and the teachers are willing to assist as much as possible." Ms. S took it a step further by nurturing students on her own. She believed that teachers were there to go beyond the regular work day. She stated,
When the day ends you have a certain amount of teachers that want to go home. (Some teachers feel that) I am here to teach, I want to do my job and go home. I guess that is true, but I don't think that is what good teachers do. She sees a good teacher as one who is willing to go the extra mile for students by helping, assisting, and nurturing them as much as possible so they can succeed in school.

According to Symbolic Interactionism and the Social Environment Theory, it is important in social interactions to pay attention to individuals' behaviors and the settings along with their interactions. The social environment is a place in which interactions are dictated and interpreted. As Moos (1976) indicated, the environment has an influence on an individual's behavior.

The findings in this section aligned with Moos' (1979) Relationship Domain in the Social Environment Theory which is described as the extent of students' participation in school as well as their feelings supported there. The characteristics of this domain are consistent with this study's degree of participation of students and magnitude of a nurturing environment felt by many respondents while at school. The nurturing aspect also corresponds with interactions in which face-to-face encounters create meanings. For many students, the meaning derived from their interactions was one of being nurtured.

**Perception About Dropping Out**

The various participants articulated their different
perceptions about students dropping out of school and why they dropped out. The reasons students dropped out were as diverse for the various cohorts as were the reasons for staying in school. Research continues to report the various reasons students dropout (Ekstrom, 1987), and they were voiced once again in this study. The perceptions described were from the standpoint of the individual as well as from the third person. Both were valuable because the opinions and perceptions dictated how dropouts were viewed and eventually treated.

Extent of a School's Responsibility

The responsibility for dropouts extended to many areas. Participants stated different perceptions and beliefs with regard to who was responsible for the dropout dilemma. As an administrator, Ms. P believed, "it is completely my responsibility" in dealing with the dropout problem. In being her "responsibility," Ms. P saw herself and the school system as being "apathetic and to look at the whole picture." When evaluating the whole picture of a student's problem, Ms. P would ask herself, "Why is the kid having an attendance problem?"

The principal of ZHS, Mr. B, also felt that the educational system was lacking and at fault when dealing with a majority of the dropouts. He stated, "I think the way we try to educate kids today, that is the flaw." He went on to say, "We are trying to provide universal education and doing
the same thing for all kids and I think you have to have different approaches."

Mr. A, principal of XHS, also saw it in a similar way. He defined a dropout as "somebody we failed to accept or perhaps failed to turn-on" and it "could be a kid that is really, really bright that we bored to death." Mr. A believed that the school should do everything in its power to prevent students from dropping out.

Ms. D agreed with part of Mr. A's perception about the school's responsibility. She stated, "We have to take a little of the blame, but a lot of it is right in the home." In her opinion, the school can only do so much, but "the importance of learning in the home" must be stressed.

Teachers saw themselves as playing vital roles in dealing with the dropout problem. Mr. S thought the "educational system is responsible for not addressing the needs of individual students" along with "society not placing importance on education" as major factors in addressing dropouts. Ms. R, another teacher, agreed with Mr. S in that the students were bored and "not getting anything out of sitting in the classroom." This boredom would eventually cause students to start "thinking about what they could be doing on the street and if that is going to be better for them monetarily or for survival purposes."

Ms. R pointed out that school may be boring, but at some point the home environment must be an influence on the dropout. She stated, "Their home environment has got to have
a bigger influence than what we do" because the teachers have the students for a limited amount of time throughout the year.

Students became bored because of the few options for them. Ms. Cl emphasized this point by stating,

We just have high school. Most of the classes are academically oriented as if you were going on to college. It is just two-thirds of our society that will never go to college so they see no reason to study "Hamlet" or "Oedipus Rex."

Ms. A added her perspective of these students in the classroom when she stated, "I think a lot of times teachers fail to see where their kids are" in the classroom. Without being able to provide them with options, the needs of the students are not addressed properly. Ms. Cl felt that providing options within the classroom is vital and that teachers who were extremely challenging should be sensitive to the variety of students. She saw this as eventually leading to students' decisions regarding staying in or dropping out of school. Ms. Cl stated, "If a kid loves the teacher and the challenge and he is fortunate, he will stay in school; but if he comes across two or three (teachers) who are very weak, he gets bored and then they lose him."

Stay-ins had varied opinions on who was responsible for the dropout phenomenon. Bill explained that "students leave school because they don't feel comfortable there." He gets this perception from his personal experience in dealing with a friend who dropped out of school. Bill told how his friend
"moved to a new school and had a hard time making friends, so she decided to drop out."

Peter saw dropouts as having problems at home which influenced them at school. He could not see why a student would drop out other than external reasons because "schools offer different levels of classes so it is not that hard to get a high school diploma." He did admit that he did not "have high regard for a dropout" because he or she had opportunities and did not take them.

Different perceptions which existed were consistent with the elements of Symbolic Interactionism. As the social world changes and modifies, individuals place different meanings on situations. As administrators, teachers, stay-ins, and dropouts perceived who was responsible for the dropout dilemma, they created different perspectives of the world because of its ever-changing nature. Charon (1985) viewed these changes as integral elements of the human-being. The Personal Growth/Goal Orientation Domain's characteristic of task, within the Social Environment Theory, was articulated in this study as the extent of a school's responsibility for the dropout problem. The participants measured the goals of the school setting based on how each one of them was responsible for the dropout phenomenon.

Ekstrom's (1987) path model of the decision to drop out which addresses student demographics, family education, support system, disciplinary behavior, and school performance in relationship to deciding to dropout or stay in school was
expressed in this section. Many participants stated that, to their way of thinking, at least one of these elements was responsible for the dropout situation.

**Interactions which Influence Students to Drop Out**

Symbolic Interactionism Theory dictates that language, which is a special kind of symbol, brings about different interactions on campus. The different interactions between administrators, teachers, stay-ins, and dropouts had some influence on students' decisions to drop out. As Charon (1985) pointed out, "interaction means mutual social action, individuals communicating to each other in what they do, orienting their acts to each other" (p. 133). Individuals are in constant relationship with one another (Charon, 1985). Therefore, these interactions could influence a different course of action taken by dropouts and potential dropouts.

**Degree of Campus Conflicts**

Conflict with different individuals on and off campus ranged from teacher-student to student-student interactions. They were described as negative, confrontational, and conflicting. As Fine (1991) alluded to this concept, these conflicts may make a student feel alienated and want to leave prior to graduating.

Ms. P felt that conflict could contribute to many students not attending school. The conflict could be with various individuals and cause anxiety on behalf of the students. She stated, "Kids are scared to death to come to
school. It might all be a perception or a conflict they had with a teacher or student or their parents [sic]." Ms. P felt this type of conflict was the most negative attribute on her campus. She commented, "unfortunately our students do not know how to deal with conflict situations, so it explodes into violence." Ms. C similarly felt as though this type of conflict on her campus would cause a student to stop attending. She stated, "I think if they directly felt intimidated and felt frightened for their well-being, students would stop coming to school."

Ms. Cl constantly talked about a student who was intimidated and threatened by a group of young men. Ms. Cl stated, "I'm wondering if she dropped out because she has not come back because of being confronted." Ms. S described the same feelings when discussing what another student told her. She indicated a student told her that gangs were necessary at school because they protected students from conflict. Ms. S described the student's position:

"Some of them (gangs) are just a group of kids to protect all of us so we don't get hurt." And she said it three times, "you don't know what it is like walking the halls every day."

From that statement, Ms. S knew that conflict within her school was inevitable. By this "straight A's" student's own testimony, an outsider does not know what it is like to walk the halls as a student on a day-to-day basis.

Peter, a stay-in, described this type of conflict which occurs on a daily basis. At first he thought it did not
exist because "nothing is actually real until you feel it or see it." Once he actually saw conflict himself, his position changed. He explained that he saw "people picking on other people just for no reason" and it caused him to adjust his interactions with individuals on campus.

As a dropout, Edward dealt with conflict on a daily basis. He came into conflict with a teacher who "would send me up (to the office) for no reason" and with other students who said he and his friends "were spreading rumors and he got them all (a gang) on us." Edward said the first time this group of individuals approached him, they did not do anything, but "the next time they approached us there was about thirty of them." These conflicts eventually caused Edward to leave and not return to ZHS.

Amount of Encouragement

Even though conflict would cause many students to drop out of school, encouragement within a school was also noted as an interaction that influenced students. Stay-ins voiced their gratitude for teachers and the necessity of their support and encouragement.

Bill expressed his pleasure with his teachers. He emphasized that they were "willing to stay after when you want them to" and "very supportive of what the students do and are very helpful and friendly." This not only made the student feel wanted, but it also "builds a student's confidence as well as make them comfortable".
Minny, a stay-in at XHS, felt the same way about her teachers as "being friendly" and her being able to communicate with the school's administrators. "I feel like I can talk to them. If I respect them, they will respect me. As long as you treat them the way they want to be treated, they will treat you the way you want to be treated," Minny stated with regard to her interactions with the professional staff.

The various interactions that students encountered at school dictated, in large part, their decision to stay or leave. Symbolic Interaction indicates that perspectives and actions are learned, altered, and transformed when one individual comes into contact with another (Charon, 1985).

Ekstrom (1987) indicated that the behaviors of stay-ins differed from those of dropouts due to the low academic achievement, the discipline problems, and the attendance concerns exhibited by the dropout. This could also cause some type of conflict within the school because behavior affects all the people in an environment. The various interactions are dynamic as well because students, teachers and administrators are constantly acting in relationship with one another, creating either a support mechanism or a conflict generator while at school.

Summary

The section headed "School Experiences" addressed various aspects of the school that influenced students. The
degree of involvement, extent of fear, and policy of push out were pervasive in describing the interactions with the social environment that influenced students. Further, the influences of the social environment on interactions consisted of the degree of student participation in different activities and the magnitude of a nurturing environment for the students.

The school's responsibility for the dropout dilemma was addressed by various participants. The interactions addressed within the school experience which influenced students to drop out were the degree of campus conflicts experienced by students and the amount of encouragement they either received or lacked. The school experiences described the importance of what occurred in school through interactions and the social environment that influenced students and their behaviors.
CHAPTER 6

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Introduction

In this chapter, the relationships of the participants' responses to personal experiences, feelings, perceptions, and beliefs are analyzed. The research questions under investigation explored the many personal issues that influenced interactions, students' decisions to remain in or drop out of school, and the social environments.

Symbolic Interactionism Theory addresses the different interactions that occur from a personal standpoint and the symbols created from those interactions. Participants' stances were noticed in discussing personal interactions with administrators, teachers, stay-ins, and dropouts. The interactions along with differing social environments created varied and unique personal experiences for the participants.

Interactions with the Social Environment that Influence Students

As Roark and Standford (1974) indicated, social interactions in the school are the media through which students learn. Interactions familiarize students with rules, policies, procedures, and actions. Those interactions with the social environment that influenced students were
described in various ways by participants.

Administrators, teachers, stay-ins, and dropouts pointed to consistent interactions that influenced students on their respective campuses. The two sources of interaction that were most prominent were the impact of school programs and the extent of school inclusion. The different programs discussed by the participants were both school-related and non-school-related programs. Student inclusion was also described as it related to interactions that influenced students and their decisions.

**Impact of School Programs**

Mr. B, principal of ZHS, emphasized throughout his interview how important it was to have a program for those students "in the cracks." His school instituted the Junior Reserve Officers Training Corps (JROTC) program to help students participate in a positive activity at school. He put it best when he stated, "You got programs for outstanding athletes, leadership programs for outstanding leaders but what the JROTC does is give that middle student an opportunity." This type of program allowed for interactions with the social environment which influenced students to participate and, hopefully, stay in school.

Ms. A, a teacher, enabled student success in school by providing a program that would help them overcome their weaknesses. She envisioned a support system created external to the school. She stated, "If you have a support system
that can work with other people, then they are more destined to succeed."

Another teacher, Ms. S, stated that these types of programs exist to help students become active in school and eventually graduate. The only concern she had was that no one knew what programs were available for the student. She said, "There are a multitude of school programs that kids don't even know about, programs that assist students with personal problems and school-related situations." Ms. S reiterated that many professionals are not aware of the various programs available for students. She recalled when she found out about one such program, "I just recently found out that kids can get credit for external community activities" which could assist students with graduation requirements.

Even though there are many programs that assist students personally and eventually educationally, Ms. S argued that the community must continue being involved and become more active in creating programs for potential dropouts. She perceived the community as taking on more responsibility for providing programs for all students to help keep them in school. Ms. S argued, "I think the community has to take responsibility (in creating activities). There are not enough community services, period!"

**Extent of Student Inclusion**

As students became included in different school areas,
their personal interactions at school and outside of school fluctuated. As a stay-in, Bill stated, "It is up to the individual to get involved and the group of individuals he gets involved with." Bill saw people not getting involved because their friends may not be. He commented that it was "okay to belong to more than one group" especially if the two groups were doing different activities.

The unfortunate part, according to Bill, is that dropouts hung around with other dropouts and "those are the individuals that rarely are included in school functions." Like Bill, Minny indicated that she hung around students who were on the verge of dropping out, but she decided to get involved in school instead. She stated, "I did [hang out with dropouts] but once I got involved in school, I kind of fell away and I don't talk with them anymore." She started spending her personal time with individuals at school who were being included in school activities and functions.

Ms. D, assistant principal at XHS, saw the opportunity for student inclusion at her school, but due to many outside personal factors students decided not to participate. She commented, "There are a lot of opportunities . . . the biggest drawback has been kids working."

Mr. A, principal, also felt that students having jobs hindered many of them. He placed some of the blame for students' lack of being included in school activities and potentially dropping out of school on businesses. Mr. A stated, "Who hired these kids at young ages and work them

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forty hours because they say it is okay? They want to do it. They, business people, know better than that. They know you can't study and work forty hours a week and make something good happen."

Ms. C saw the lack of being able to participate as harmful as she related back to her personal childhood experiences. She stated, "The activities for me is what got me up sometimes during the days." Ms. C viewed participation as crucial to keeping her in school and for keeping those students in school who were the potential dropouts. Mr. A also discussed how his past experiences made him stay in school. He further commented on how his parents emphasized education, "My parents would say, 'do you want to do this [work for minimum wages] and raise a family on this income.' The primary objective was not to just go to school, but to get an education."

Mr. W saw students' lack of being included as a possible sign of their disinterest in school. He stated, "I think they [students] don't get involved as much. I don't know if it is because they don't feel like they are a part of it or they are so involved in themselves or their groups that they feel comfortable."

Steve, a dropout, liked being involved in school, especially when it related to his personal life. He saw joining a club as beneficial because he could use the knowledge in the future. In this regard, Steve said, "I loved the Photography Club because I could go somewhere with
that." Even though Steve left school, he also knew participating and being included in school programs were essential to a student's status on campus. He stated, "Students who hang out with people who are involved, like hanging out with the football team, they probably would be more apt to stay in school."

Jay, a dropout from XHS, argued that one would have to like school in order to get involved and stay in school. He proposed if one hung around individuals that did not like school and did not go to school, then they would start ditching and eventually drop out of school. Jay stated,

If they got caught in my situation of just kicking it everyday . . . there isn't really anything else to do. It is like you go to school and if you don't like school you hang with them [friends and associates] and eventually leave school.

The impact of school programs and the extent of student inclusion point directly to the Personal Growth/Goal Orientation and Relationship Domains, respectively, of the Social Environment Theory. The Personal Growth/Goal Orientation Domain calls for innovation and the use of different programs to influence the environment to meet the goals of the school and students, while the Relationship Domain entails the extent to which students can become a part of the school environment.

The Influence of the Social Environment on Interactions

Moos (1979) indicated through his Social Environment
Theory that the social environment influences students' behaviors. This study expands on this theory in examining the various social environments of the participants. Consistent with the factors of the Relationship, Personal Growth/Goal Orientation, and System Maintenance Domains, the various factors described in this study also examined the influence a social environment had on dropping out. The factors in the social environment that were described by this study's participants consisted of the impact of an external environment and the importance and pervasiveness of racial identity and grouping. The external environment in which the students came from had many occasions to influence their behaviors. Various participants described these environments and how they influenced interactions on campus.

Racial identity and grouping of individuals was articulated as being noticeable by a majority of the participants. They described how race played a role in determining the interactions on their school campus. Both of these factors related to the social environment and how it influenced the interactions described by the individuals.

Impact of an External Environment

Many participants discussed the environmental factors that made working at or attending their respective schools difficult. Mr. B, for example, discussed how he had diligently worked to create a positive environment even though his students came from a tough background. He stated,
"Our kids are very, very, tough kids. They come from the toughest communities and the poorest zip codes." For that reason, Mr. B and his staff tried to create a school environment that would be considered home to many of the students. Due to many of the students' difficult home environments, the staff at ZHS was able to observe growth in a student as it occurred. Mr. B reiterated:

The nice thing about this place is that you see a lot of growth when the growth starts. Our kids aren't as successful, they don't have the good ground, they don't have the good base. So as a teacher, you establish the base and watch that student progress.

This different type of environment influenced how teachers and administrators reacted and were proactive toward their students. Ms. P, assistant principal, stated the same ideas with regard to students' personal backgrounds. She said, "Everybody does not come into the school system with the same skills." For that reason, the environment in which the students interact is influenced by various outside factors including the type of background a student had. Ms. P continued, "They [students] don't come with the same skills, ideas, backgrounds, environments or parental expectations." She therefore believed that educators needed to implement different types of school environments to assist students who had varied backgrounds.

Bill reiterated the importance of how one acts in the school environment and how that behavior influences different interactions. He believed that potential dropouts' social
environments caused them to interact with one another and eventually lose interest in school. Bill stated, "I think that [environmental influence] is what causes the lack of interest and ignorance. That is what makes them drop out of school."

**Pervasiveness of Racial Identity and Grouping**

Many participants saw race or ethnicity as a factor in determining the different interactions that occurred on campus. The social environment of both schools indicated that many students of particular races would interact and socialize with students of their own race more than individuals of another race.

Ms. C noticed this trend at her school and described her perception of the social environment, "It is very segregated and it has gotten worse from a race standpoint!" Ms. C believed that race played a large part in determining who interacted with whom on campus. Peter also described what he saw at one of the assemblies as he worked the lights, "All the Hispanics were in one area, all the Asians were in one area, all the African-Americans were in one area and all the Whites were in one area." Peter was concerned about this because of the lack of interaction. He stated, "I don't think people are allowing themselves to interact with other people."

Ms. D, the assistant principal in charge of the
assemblies, saw this segregation of students another way. She stated, "That is a lot of their friends and they want to be with their friends. That may not be negative." She did not feel the different races sitting together during an assembly was a problem. Ms. D believed that "you have a group that integrate very well; then you have a group that isolate itself."

Peter gave another explanation for students who did not interact much beyond their respective races. He stated, "They are afraid of being looked at as an outcast." Ms. C also discussed an incident at school in which a teacher fostered the separation of students by race in her classroom. She stated, "One teacher actually sit [sic] them [students] in the class by race. It was absolutely detrimental to the social interaction." When the administration heard about this seating arrangement, they immediately addressed it and devised another seating chart for the class.

Mr. G indicated how the social environment of a school influenced the participation of certain students in different activities. He stated, "The Black kids are more apt to be involved in sports and those kinds of things. They are less likely to be involved in clubs and student council, plays and that [sic]." Therefore, most of the interactions of the students would be stratified because of the different interests students had on campus. Mr. G did not see this as a problem on campus because he felt they do more interacting between races on campus than when they are not in school.
He stated,

I think they interact while they are here on campus. But I think once they leave here that is history, they go back to within their little groups and stay within their community and group.

The principal of ZHS, Mr. B, saw race as being a very strong factor on his campus. Mr. B stated while describing his school's social environment, "I'd like to be at a school where kids could accept each other as individuals. I still see race being an element." He noticed a change in his 30 years in education where he did not "see social-economic status as much [of a problem] because most of the kids come from a tough background, but race" he noticed too often.

Ms. P described how race has become a concern on the different interactions on campus. She stated,

We still have all the Hispanic kids hanging out together, sit together in the cafeteria, in the assembly and in the quad. All our Mormon kids, Black kids, Asian kids, they are all in their little groups.

She did not only see this as a problem during activities and lunch, but also during passing periods between classes and in the classroom. Ms. P pointed out, "When they walk to class they congregate and then walk to class. In the classroom, if the teacher does not delegate the groups, you have all different groups based on race."

The influence of race on the social environment and the different interactions on campus were addressed by more than half the participants from both high schools. Most individuals believed that race influenced the social
environment and the different interactions on their campuses. The Relationship Domain (Moos, 1979), with its characteristics of emotional support and affiliation, and the attribute of student influence within the System Maintenance Domain address the various influences described by the impact of an external environment as well as the importance and the pervasiveness of racial identity and grouping.

Perceptions About Dropping Out

Research points to many reasons why individuals drop out of school (Ekstrom, 1987; Hernandez & Ochoa, 1994; McDill, 1987). The administrators, teachers, stay-ins, and dropouts of this study also had various perceptions about why students left school prior to graduating. The importance of the family unit in helping a student stay in school or being a co-dependent for dropping out was voiced by most participants. This was the most dominant and salient topic with regard to perceptions about why students dropped out of school.

Impact of Family

The family unit and its importance on students who remained in school and dropped out of school have been well researched and documented (Fine, 1991; Neill, 1979; Wehlage & Rutter, 1987). The participants in this study also described, discussed, and addressed how the family influences a student's status while in school.

Mr. B correlated a student dropping out of school sometimes to a dysfunctional family. He stated, "Perhaps a
serious family dysfunction begins to develop . . . and if we begin to look at dropouts, I think there is a common thread that goes all the way through." Mr. A also saw the family unit as having an influence on a student's graduation status. He stated that a dropout "could be a kid that stopped for economic reasons to help out the family."

Both principals, Mr. B and Mr. A, discussed how parents played a large role in assuring that students stayed in or dropped out of school. Mr. B commented that a lot of students lacked direction and needed someone on a consistent basis to provide it along with motivation. He stated, "They [students] don't necessarily want adults to give them orders, but they want somebody to give them direction. They are not getting it at home."

Mr. A remembered a difficult conference he had with a parent and a student. The student was being referred to an alternative program and was on the verge of dropping out of school. The parent was appealing the school's decision to seek an alternative placement for the student to the principal, Mr. A. He recalled how upset he got when the parent told him that she was going to sue him and have his job because of the school's actions. Mr. A strongly replied to the parent, "She could have it [his job] and I bet you couldn't do it." He stated that he was "sick and tired of parents telling me that these teachers that care, counselors who care and deans who care didn't give a damn about their kid." Mr. A continued:
I said you are going to sit here and hear something you don't want to hear. You've abdicated your responsibility as a parent. You've raised a hell-on-wheels. Unless you grow up and face the fact, you ain't going to cure this. Lady, you are crying in my office right now, but you haven't cried all the tears you are going to cry because you've abdicated your responsibility as a parent.

Mr. A finished the conference with the parent by saying, "Go do what you need to do or join us and fix this problem [with the student]." Mr. A felt that he had to point out to parents that they also have a responsibility in assuring that students graduated from school. Mr. B summarized it by saying, "There is no doubt that the greatest outside [the school] influence on our kids is the family."

Mr. G saw that the parent sometimes forced a kid to miss school and not to get involved in school activities for external reasons. He stated, "Some of them [students] [sic], the parents require them to do things. They have to come and babysit their brothers or sisters or what-have-you." This limited the availability students had in getting involved in school and "buying into the school."

When asked if these family situations caused students to leave school prior to graduation, many of the participants indicated they did. Many comments were along the same line. For example, Mr. G stated, "If you are brought up with the idea that you are not going to succeed, then people are not going to allow you to succeed." Similarly, Ms. P commented, "If a student is not very successful [in school] but they got
a nurturing environment at home, a student will be successful." Mr. S further added, "Families don't value education enough and I think it happens at an early age, so by the time they get to high school, I think many of them have their minds made up." Finally, Ms. R agreed, "Their [students] home environment has got to have a bigger influence than what we do. We only see them X amount of hours."

In contrast, stay-ins articulated their admiration and thanks for having strong family support that kept them in school. Bill stated, "A lot of support from parents keeps me working and keeps me on track." He even discussed, in general, that the family unit must provide support in order to make it through high school. He continued, "The more support you have at home the more encouragement you get from others, the more likely you are to stay at school." Maria went a little further and discussed how her parents influenced her. She stated, "My family has a lot of control of what I do and what I feel." Peter also saw the family as an important factor in a student's personal life because it dictated his or her progress towards graduation.

Peter thought an unstable home would cause students to have "mental instability which would cause them to lack interest in their education," nor did he see himself as having a choice to stay in or drop out of school. He felt a lot of pressure from his family to do very well in school. Peter described those feelings, "I've always been known to
work hard in school. You stay in school, you get good grades, you go to college. I see my father with a Ph.D. and I have my own aspirations."

Three of the six dropouts addressed the family unit and its importance in deciding to drop out, while the other three did not want to mention the involvement of their families in their decisions to leave school. Shannon stated, "My mother really wanted me to finish school, but told me whatever I did she would support me." At that point, Shannon knew "that I wouldn't get too much grief from moms when I did drop out." Jay also stated that his mother "didn't say too much. She said, 'I raised you the best I can and if you want to be grown, be grown somewhere else.'" At that point, Jay realized that he had to move out of his mother's home because of his lack of attendance at school.

Students, in this study, stated that the family unit was one of the leading causes of staying in or dropping out of school. Administrators, teachers, stay-ins, and dropouts each discussed the importance of the family and their influence on a student's decision to graduate or leave school prior to graduating. Consistent with Symbolic Interactionism Theory, face-to-face interactions within the family unit created various meanings about their importance or lack thereof.

**Interactions which Influence Students to Drop Out**

Various studies continue to discuss multiple reasons why
students drop out of school. Darkenwald and Gavin (1987) and Boshier (1973) point to the many interactions between teachers and students that caused students to leave school prematurely. Similar to Eckert's (1989) study, peer groups as an influential factor were also noted by a majority of the participants in the present study.

Impact of Peers

The various interactions that occurred between students and their peers were reported to be among the many factors that caused students to drop out of school (Ekstrom, 1987). The various interactions, as described in Symbolic Interactionism Theory, dictated and prescribed meaning to the various ways individuals communicated and interacted with one another (Charon, 1985).

The dropouts interviewed discussed their peer groups, or individuals they associated with, and how they had an influence on one another. Jay, for example, did not hesitate in saying that he would always ditch school with someone else. He stated, "I was like 'forget sixth period' and ditch with my friends" when asked how he decided to ditch on a daily basis. He went on to say those individuals he ditched with are also no longer in school. Dawn, a dropout from ZHS, ditched with her best friend and boyfriend before they all decided to drop out of school. She stated, "My friends and boyfriend were more exciting than school, if it wasn't for them I would have been bored and went to school."

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These references to peer groups that the dropouts associated with had a major influence on most of them. Shannon also only ditched with her "so-called friends" and finally dropped out of school. She discussed how a friend and her would orchestrate their plans, "We would call each other the night before and talk about where we'd meet and what we would do. It got into a bad habit and before we knew it, we weren't going to school any longer."

Edward discussed how he stood by his friends which caused him to get into trouble. He stated, "That was the day we had some trouble with some students and there were only a few of us. I didn't want to leave my friends. That is when the hall monitors caught me (ditching)." Edward thought it was more important to be with his friends than in class. When asked did his friends still attend school, Edward responded, "Not right now. A lot of them left or we are not friends anymore."

Steve was the only dropout that stated that his significant peer members tried to keep him in school. He discussed how his girlfriend "stopped him from dropping out of school at that time [earlier in the school year]." Even though Steve did eventually leave school, the fact that his girlfriend remained in school gave him incentive to return. He indicated returning to school was important because they "are engaged and I know that I need to do something with my life to be a good family member and good husband." This insight was another indication of how influential a peer
group member could be on a student.

As a school administrator, Mr. B discussed how both potential and actual dropouts did not get involved in activities and clubs because their peer groups did not get involved. He stated, "The peer group becomes their club. Maybe that is the problem with gangs and all the other things." Mr. B understood that a student would usually follow the direction of his or her friends. Ms. D also discussed the association most dropouts had with one another, "I think they tend to group with each other or else some of them don't interact with anybody." Mr. G's comments were similar to Ms. D's. He stated, "Those kids [dropouts] just don't seem to relate to anybody I can think of."

Mr. B placed some of the blame on the school system for dropouts and potential dropouts by forming unhealthy bonds. He thinks homogeneous grouping based on academic levels prepared individuals for failure and put them in a position to drop out. He stated,

You tend to isolate them together and to me that is the wrong thing to do. I don't think you can put them together and get success . . . they have a tendency to feed off each other and that is not good.

Mr. G used almost the exact same terminology when he stated, "They reinforce each other's negative behavior, like ditching. I think that they feed off of that. . . They feed off the people they are surrounded by."

Ms. C described a conference she had with a parent and student which magnified the peer group's influence on
students:

The parent came in and she was very distraught. She said, "Johnny wants to go to Horizon [an alternative school] because his buddies are there." I asked, "So your friends have dropped out of the regular school." He said, "yea, that is right." He want [sic] to go to Horizon so he can interact with his friends.

The stay-ins described peer groups in a different light. Susan indicated, "As long as their friends are in school, there is always something to come back to" with regard to staying in school. When asked why dropouts normally associate with other dropouts, Peter stated, "I don't go out of my way to meet people that are smarter than me. If I was a dropout I wouldn't necessarily go out of my way to find somebody else still in school." Paul associated being a dropout with someone who does not want to learn and hence the dropout must affiliate with that same type of person. Bill best described this philosophy when asked why he did not drop out of school. He stated with pride, "All of my friends are here!"

Summary

In exploring the personal issues that influenced the social environment, interactions, and decisions that students made on campus, various aspects of a student's personal experience were addressed.

The degree of school programs and how they influenced students was discussed by the professionals of both schools.
They felt that certain programs were needed at school to facilitate the personal needs of students. The extent of student inclusion into the daily activities, programs, and curriculum were also noted as interactions with the social environment that influenced students.

The impact of the external environment and the pervasiveness of racial identity and grouping were also prevalent with regard to the influence of the social environment on interactions. Both point to the importance of external factors on dropouts and how those factors are perceived by the participants. The impact of family and peers was seen as critical perceptions about dropping out and interactions that influence students to drop out, respectively.

These concepts point to the influence others have on students' and dropouts' interactions and on decision-making. Consistent with Plummer's (1991) tenets of symbolic interactionism, the self is realized through the presence of others in their lives. The personal experiences of the participants of this study exemplified the influence and interactions of others on decisions of students to stay in or drop out of school.
CHAPTER 7

COMMUNICATION

Introduction

When students, administrators and teachers interact with one another, communication is an essential element. By communicating, individuals are able to prescribe meanings to what they are saying, doing, or feeling. Symbolic Interactionism embodies the concept of communication. Charon (1985) addressed this by arguing that humans are "communicating symbolically in almost everything they do" (p. 133). Communication is a way of interacting with one another. It can be done in numerous ways, but verbal communication was prevalent in this study.

Participants discussed how they interacted by communicating their feelings, emotions, and actions throughout the interviews. Verbal communication was not the only means in which the participants interacted. In line with Charon's (1985) writings, students indicated that other means of communication were present such as gestures, stares, frowns, and smiles.

In examining communication among the participants in this study, the Relationship and System Maintenance Domains of the Social Environment Theory (Moos, 1979) were visible.
Student involvement, attentiveness to class activities, and teacher support were evident throughout this study. Many participants addressed the control mechanisms used within the environment and how behavior was initiated and terminated when needed. These characteristics of Moos' Social Environment Theory were articulated by numerous participants in discussing how communication was a part of their interactions within the schools' social environments.

**Interactions with the Social Environment that Influence Students**

Various interactions occurred on the campuses through different communication patterns which influenced students. Many participants addressed attracting students and persuading them through different communication strategies to help them remain in school. With this type of communication, individuals attempted to influence behavior that would attract students to school and keep the potential dropouts in school.

**Importance of Attracting Students by Communicating**

Many adult participants expressed that the school should do something to get students involved. Some professionals stated that the school should attract students to activities through open communication and, in that way, get them "hooked" into school.

Mr. B, principal of ZHS, used the term "hook" in
describing how students must be attracted to school. He saw a need to hook students early on in order to keep them in school. He stated, "If we could hook them, then the hook needs to go in as early as the ninth grade." Mr. B believed that students' problems were created before they entered high school, but "we wind up with the problem."

Mr. A, principal of ZHS, emphasized that schools needed to communicate to students what they offered and how it could benefit them more. His school used various strategies to inform students about what was available to them, but it did not seem like enough. Mr. A stated in frustration, "I don't know how to get to them, we try. That's why you have activities and athletics and clubs and whatever else to try to get kids."

When students are attracted to a part of school, it allows for a better line of communication between students and teachers. Teachers, as club advisors or coaches, were able to work with fewer numbers of students than in the classroom. Mr. B even noticed many of his teachers who were advisors going the extra mile for students. He proudly commented, "We have teachers, as advisors, in our school who in many instances do more for their kids than their parents do. Club advisors take kids home; if they were somewhere else maybe they wouldn't do those sorts of things." He saw this bond between an advisor and students as necessary in order to facilitate appropriate lines of communication. Mr. G, dean of students, paralleled the same sentiments about
attracting students to different school programs. He stated,

More often than not they don't see the need or necessity of what they are learning in the classroom. So we have to have something else to hook them, grasp them, to keep their interests here. I know that activities are so important to do that [sic]. For no other reason than that he comes to school.

Ms. C, dean of students at XHS, envisioned attracting students in a different way. She believed that students dropped out of school because "they haven't bought-in for whatever reason." In her day-to-day dealings with students who had attendance and discipline problems, she took another approach in hooking them. She felt that she constantly communicated with students about their needs and wants and how the school could attract them. In recalling how she dealt with a potential dropout, she commented, "Most kids just don't drop out. But I've always made referrals [for them] to commit to one class. I said to him, 'you can go to Sunset [High School, an evening alternative school] and take an auto shop class because that is what you like.'" Ms. C saw providing students with various options beyond school activities as important. She wanted to attract students to school with academics and activities as well as their own interests to place them on track to graduate.

Mr. B agreed with using as many different methods as possible to attract students to school. Another technique that he used at his school was to bring out the positive qualities and abilities of students. This form of
communication would have more students wanting to buy into the school system and build on the students' strengths. He stated, "We do a lot of recognition stuff. Where we publicize these young people. We publicize their names just to try to hook them." Mr. B articulated the key to keeping students in school and having an open line of communication with them is to get their attention by any means necessary.

Ms. P, assistant principal, communicated how ZHS was able to attract and eventually open the lines of communication with a certain group of students who had never participated nor cared about school before. She stated,

We had a group of students around kicking this little hacky-sac. So we said why don't we get a few of them together and structure this in a way that they would be interested in a tournament. Channel all that into some positives. We had like 64 kids involved in the tournament. We gave out four awards, recognized them in the school newsletter that goes home to parents.

Ms. P continued to articulate the importance of attracting these students and how it opened up a line of communication for individuals that rarely used it. Ms. P proudly continued,

We get a parent that calls and says, "that in all the years that my son has been in school, he's never talked about school until he's got into this hacky-sac tournament. Now all he wants to think about is getting back to school, being in class so he is eligible to participate in the tournament."

Attracting students by communicating is an example of how students can be influenced by the social environment of
the school. The Personal Growth/Goal Orientation Domain of the Social Environment Theory addresses attracting individuals with a form of recognition. In this, the students have a better chance of buying into the social environment of the school. Through Symbolic Interactionism Theory, attraction is contingent upon how the individuals symbolize the interactions. If the outcome of the interactions, through communicating, creates symbols that are meaningful to the students, then those interactions can influence students.

**The Influence of the Social Environment on Interactions**

The environment in which students participated seems to influence the communication they have. Administrators, teachers, stay-ins, and dropouts all point to the groups students are in as influential.

Communication through activities was another way students were influenced by the environment of the school. When activities were emphasized and became a part of the environment, they too, had an influence on students' behaviors, actions, and decisions.

**Impact of Communication in Groups**

Communication occurred on the high school campuses in many forms and fashions. The environment of the school created an atmosphere that influenced interactions on the
secondary campuses. Participants saw the importance of groups and how a collection of individuals influenced different interactions.

Mr. B argued that academic grouping of students was harmful to most of the students. It dwarfed communication between different students and emphasized homogeneous communication. Mr. B believed that grouping academically hindered the potential dropout because students do not have an opportunity to see the positive side of education if placed in a negative group. He stated, "I think you have to get them in the positive side of the school. That means breaking down the tracks, getting them out of the environment where they reinforce each other." Mr. B continued, "That means getting them into [classes] where there are all levels of kids . . . . Some of the things we've done over the years we guaranteed failure because of putting them all together. I think that is a mistake."

Under Mr. B's direction, ZHS instituted a new program that brought students together to discuss current and relevant issues. He saw this open line of communication as beneficial to ZHS because it allowed the administration to hear what the students wanted to discuss. Mr. B addressed the drawbacks along with the benefits of this type of program,

When you talk about those things, you sometimes have a tendency to create more problems for yourself. I believe that when you discuss, when you bring it out verbally, it will eventually pay a lot of dividends
for you.

Ms. D, assistant principal at XHS, stated that students must continue to integrate and mix among one another in order to make school beneficial. According to Ms. D, this must occur in the classroom and outside the classroom. She stated, "If I could have anything, it would be a little more natural mixing." Ms. D continued, "We have a good cross-mix. I noticed since [another school] opened up, this has become an inner-city school more or less. We have to be more careful to keep our magnet kids mixing with the comprehensive school kids."

Ms. C understood the importance of interacting with different groups of individuals, but emphasized that people do not interact and communicate with others outside their own groups. She correlated her personal position in life with how students interacted or did not interact with one another. Ms. C stated, "I don't socialize with people that are not college graduates. It is not by choice but by circumstance." She continued, "I don't feel comfortable socializing with people that have not gone through some type of formal education. I think it is the same with kids. You socialize with the people you are comfortable with."

Teachers saw the social environment as important in forming groups and providing a means of communication. Ms. R, teacher, talked about how one of her classes bonded together. She stated, "In my guidance class we developed a camaraderie. It is a small group of kids and . . . it is intimate
conversation." This type of bonding allowed the group to communicate openly with Ms. R and with one another. She discussed how she learned different things about her students and could talk with them more openly when they became close to one another.

Ms. R commented, "Kids today have a lot of baggage. As educators, we are not aware of this or maybe they don't want to let us know about it. Unfortunately, that baggage colors their whole framework." Ms. R felt good about being able to bond with her students and learn about their "baggage." In doing so, she was able to address some of their concerns and hopefully kept them in school. She felt that a lot of her students were in school "for that social interaction, that bond."

In his 23 years at XHS, Mr. W, another teacher, saw groups as important avenues of communication. He stated, "Kids feel more comfortable with their groups. So if they feel comfortable with their group, they tend to stick with their group." He continued in describing how groups of kids came to school but did not feel as though they were an important part of the social environment. He commented, "The better kids from the West Side at times didn't feel part of the community as the school setting was concerned." Mr. W felt that this decreased the communication between these kids and the school.

Stay-ins' voices were heard as they discussed the different groups in school and how they interacted by
communicating. Stay-ins articulated their various viewpoints in multiple ways. For example, Bill commented, "Once you get involved in expressing your opinion and start to make your name, you start to get to know other people. It is just all one big group"; "I think through the support of [different school programs], it makes it so that people get used to each other and don't create cliques"; and "the classes bring students together. You don't have the same people in every class. You can interact with a lot of people that way. As far as culture goes, interacting with someone who is not in your group."

Maria, another stay-in, stated, "Being around other people and meeting other people" assisted her in forming special groups, opening her lines of communication, and learning at school. Susan saw forming different groups as essential in understanding and communicating what was going on at school. She commented, "I have friends in gangs. That is scary, but I always interact with different people." In doing this, Susan felt that she could communicate with all types of individuals at school. She explained, "They [the gangs] would show me their gang signs and I would do it when I walk down the hall." She thought this was important in being able to communicate with that group of individuals.

Dropouts viewed groups and the importance of communicating within them in a similar manner. Steve described how he still went to XHS to talk with his former group of friends. He stated, "I go to see my friends during
lunch. They are there also, hanging out. When asked why it was important, he commented, "I think it is a social thing. I think that is all high school is—a social thing."

Jay, another dropout, felt that since he was with a group of individuals who were not "academically talented," the lines of communication were not there between him, his friends, and the faculty. He stated,

I didn't feel free to converse with any of them. Only the hall monitors. But no teachers or administrators. They would say you need to go to the counselor, but they would be on the phone. They were always on the phone. I would try to talk to them and they would be like, "Would you hold on please?" There was always something more important.

Communication in groups addresses various aspects of the Social Environment Theory and the Symbolic Interactionism Theory. The Relationship and System Maintenance Domains of the Social Environment Theory characterize the importance of affiliation and the individual's control over communication. This is in line with how the participants discussed who they felt comfortable communicating with and how students felt that adults controlled many of their communication patterns. The interpretive process of symbolic interactionism helps define what meanings were derived by communicating in groups. In this process, the interactions occurred, roles were defined, reference groups were established, and perspectives were placed on the interactions.
Importance of Communication

Through Activities

Many participants discussed the importance of being involved in different activities. Activities were defined as any type of function that occurred on the school campuses. This included sporting events, clubs, groups, and social organizations.

Ms. R expressed her support for a school activity that helped the communication between students and staff. She stated, "The [Advisory Period] is supposed to be a communication avenue so kids can express to their teachers which then gets back to me and back to administration how they feel about certain things" in response to the school-wide activity that emphasized communication. Ms. R thought the athletic program was also an essential element at school. She stated, "The athletic events create a positive social interaction and force students to bond and come together."

Ms. C credited the Advisory Period with maintaining an open line of communication for her students. She commented that this activity gave students an opportunity to talk with teachers. Ms. C felt that students related better to teachers in this program, as club advisors, and as coaches because "... they see that you are a human-being and a lot of teachers have kids over to their homes for parties and thank yous."

Ms. D argued that activities with the use of clubs provided ample opportunity for students to communicate their
feelings. She stated, "Students can express themselves through clubs; I think we don't do that enough." Ms. D believed that teachers and counselors should also be available to talk with students and listen to them when necessary. This belief was based on her understanding that students needed to be able to express themselves whenever necessary to whomever possible. She contended that the deans of students were the first "counselors" on campus because they dealt with so many difficult problems. In conclusion, Ms. D commented,

A good dean is a good listener and a good counselor. They try to mold lives. I don't know if there should be a lot of other forums to express one's feelings because sometimes they just become gripe sessions. Where I think clubs where you bond enough, where you can express your feelings without it being a gripe session.

Stay-ins overwhelmingly discussed the communication avenues available to students through activities. Peter stated, "There are always clubs and organizations ... I'm on the tennis team and it is great when you do something for fun and get rewarded. It is great, it is teamwork. Friends on the team." Not only did this activity provide Peter with a chance to communicate with others on campus, it gave him an opportunity to build his confidence while interacting as well. He continued, "Those things build your self-esteem and confidence."

Susan, a cheerleader, also thought activities were essential in school and for the communication aspect of the
social environment. When asked about interacting and communicating with the administration and teachers, she stated, "It is different this year compared to the last couple of years. It is better . . . because I am on the executive council now." Susan correlated her participation in an activity with being able to improve her communication with school administrators and teachers. Her participation not only increased her chances of interacting with faculty members, but also with students. She relayed a story which emphasized how her participation influenced her interactions,

When I went to Brian Head [ski resort] last weekend, some people came up to me and said, "you are a cheerleader at XHS and how are you doing?" I did not know who they were, but because I was in that activity, it gave me a chance to interact with them.

Bill argued that activities not only improve communication, but they also build pride in the students. The prouder they were to be in school, the more they would open up and express what they felt about school. He commented on how being in "student council and the pep club . . . can produce a lot of pride in the school and can meet new friends." Kim also articulated that by joining school activities, she had improved her communications with other students. She stated, "By joining clubs and activities . . . I got closer with my friends and we know each other more so we hang out more and have fun." These positive interactions provided by being in different activities exemplified the importance of activities for Kim and her
friends.

Perceptions About Dropping Out

Participants felt that many dropouts gave up before communicating their needs, wants, or concerns. Not being able to communicate by freely expressing themselves was a factor that led some dropouts to give up and leave school prematurely.

Extent of Dropouts Communicating that They Gave Up

Mr. G felt that students did not try hard enough to communicate their concerns before leaving school permanently. He talked about students' creating a dropout syndrome, "It is where a student gets in and gives up without trying."

Another administrator, Ms. D, saw students dropping out and giving up as a way of expressing themselves and communicating a different message. She argued, "Kids think they are expressing their freedoms by doing what they want and drop out." This is how they communicate they are in control of their own lives. She also stated that most of the time dropouts do not communicate with other individuals and just give up going to school. Ms. D commented, "They feel like they are unloved and nobody cares about them in school or any place else. They are probably the ones that don't interact enough with anybody on campus."

While teaching at a middle school, Ms. A saw students give up on school before entering the school building. She
stated, "I had sixth graders who had already dropped out emotionally." She continued to state that the only reason they did not leave school was because of their age, but "by the time they get to this level [high school], that is when they can walk away." Ms. S indicated that students gave up and did not communicate because they did not want to be failures. She stated,

I don't think kids get up and go to school and say I am going to fail and drop out. I think every kid that comes to school has a part of them that wants to be successful. Nobody wants to fail and we have to be able to capitalize on that.

She contended that students reached a point where they did not "know how to communicate their concerns and just left school rather than dealing with their situations."

Stay-ins also perceived dropouts as giving up without communicating or interacting at school. Minny commented, "They can't handle it [school] or they just don't like it and don't want people to know" when asked about why dropouts existed. Peter gave a more extensive view on why dropouts finally gave up. He stated, "There would be people that have the potential, they just don't want to apply it. There are people that have so much going on in school that they burst and give up."

When communicating with some of these dropouts, students find out that many of them are too proud or too embarrassed to discuss their situations and even come back to school. Susan experienced this when she talked about a friend of the
family that dropped out of school. She stated, "He didn't want to come back because he was too proud. Once all the kids your age have graduated they are too proud to go back and get that degree and say I flunked." Not being able to communicate openly with individuals on campus precluded some individuals from attempting to come back to school. Pride was noted as being one of the reasons dropouts did not go back to school and communicate what was needed to make them remain in school.

The interpretive process and interactions of the Symbolic Interactionism Theory were articulated by individuals communicating that dropouts gave up. This process addresses the images that are consistent with the procedures of understanding communication patterns through interactions. In this case, dropouts were seen as purposive agents (Schwartz, 1994), in which they defined their own situations. Through the interactions, dropouts were seen as engaged in interpreting their situations and reacting to them. Dropouts interpreted their situation as one that was too difficult and their reactions included giving up.

**Interactions which Influenced Students to Drop Out**

Various interactions between and among different participants from the two campuses were stated as reasons students dropped out of school or decided to stay in school. Many individuals mentioned the positive and supportive interactions of school personnel which influenced them.
Being trustworthy was also a factor that was stated by teachers, stay-ins, and dropouts alike. Many participants articulated that being able to communicate through listening was essential in the daily interactions of the students. Negative communication and interactions were also seen as catalysts to students deciding to leave school prior to graduating.

**Impact of Positive Support**

Being able to provide support to students was a salient theme articulated by every administrator. They encouraged themselves and their staffs to be positive with stay-ins, potential dropouts, and dropouts. These types of interactions were seen as strategies that would limit the possibility of students dropping out of school.

Mr. B argued that support came down to one thing: a good teacher. He stated, "Improvement comes by individual teachers working with individual students to bring about progress." In being supportive, Mr. B addressed the importance of interacting and communicating. He continued, "I think it is all a one-to-one situation; it all comes down to good teachers interacting with students."

Mr. A supported the idea that teachers' interactions were important influences on students, but also stated that administrators must provide additional positive support and interactions. He commented,

I think we have principals in the halls, administrators in the halls. I'm not just saying standing and leaning against the...
walls because kids don't come up to you and say anything. Kids go by and slap my hands and say good mornings and hellos and tell mamas I said hello and what is going on and nice game. . . . Enforcing rules and regulations to the "T" without making it sound mean and ugly.

Other administrators commented on the importance of interactions and keeping students in school. Comments by administrators consisted of "I would personally meet with some of them if I find out they are having problems and take them under your [sic] wing"; "Every day you hope that you make a little difference by complimenting kids"; "If we all picked one student and make a difference in that one person's life, it would be doing something"; "We all try to have open doors to talk to kids . . . and I think the students feel comfortable coming in"; "There are an awful lot of positives that go on here"; "As a dean I don't take the negative approach, I approach it by [saying], 'I am here to help you and keep you out of trouble'"; and "I don't think there has ever been a kid that we haven't given 15 million breaks to help them be successful." Administrators were quick to indicate the steps that were taken to provide positive interactions which limited students from dropping out.

Stay-ins expressed their views about interactions that influenced students to drop out in a similar fashion. Maria talked about how supportive the administration was and how they would assist students in different ways. She stated, "I think the administrators are strong supporters. I mean every time someone comes up and says [something], they will try to
get whatever they want or try to make it possible." She admired the administration for being open to students' ideas and feelings. Bill was also quick to point out that the staff at ZHS was behind the students. He exclaimed, "My/our teachers and administrators are 100% supportive! I've never had a problem."

Peter discussed how different teachers and administrators came across as positive and supportive. He commented, "The principal is very caring. I see him and others; he goes in the halls and talks to kids. The fact that administrators interact with students make this a good school." The stay-ins pointed to these positive interactions which influenced their attitudes at school. If they did not perceive these interactions as important, they could have felt like some of the dropouts who talked about their interactions.

Shannon, a dropout from XHS, explained how she did not know the principal and only knew the dean of students. She stated, "I only talked with Mr. X, my dean. It seemed like the only time he talked to me is when I was in trouble." Shannon continued later by stating, "I met the assistant principal one time when my mom was fighting to keep me in school. It didn't make a difference because they sent me to Opp [Opportunity School, a school for students with behavioral concerns] anyway."

Jay talked about the only time he saw an administrator was when the dean of students was watching him to see if he
was doing anything wrong. He stated, "Me and the dean already had our problems in the past and she already had her mind made up about me." He continued, "She was like, 'Jay, go to class, what are you doing not in class.' She would take me out of class and send me to her office." Jay stated that he responded to this type of interaction by saying, "I ditched because she wanted me to go to class. She was like, 'I will be checking on you for sixth period' so I would forget sixth period and ditch with my partners." Edward, a dropout, felt the same way about a teacher at ZHS. He refused to go to her class because "she [the teacher] would pick on me and find reasons to send me out of school."

Frank, a dropout from ZHS, and Steve, a dropout from XHS, talked about the positive interactions they had with their teachers and administrators. Steve stated, "All of my interactions were positive. I'm just the quiet kid who sits in the back and nobody said anything to me." Frank also articulated that he would get along with all the adults at his former school. Frank commented, "They all liked me because I was kind and polite. They wanted to help me as much as possible." When asked if any of the interactions persuaded him to leave school, he stated, "No, but I never talked about my problems and concerns, I just left that alone."

Support and positive interactions between staff members and students played a large role in many of the participants' high school careers. The stay-ins commented about how
positive the interactions were and how the teachers and administrators were supportive. On the other hand, dropouts viewed most of the interactions as mediocre or non-existent at best. They saw themselves as students who got into trouble or were overlooked. Many of them saw themselves as the quiet and shy students that did not cause any problems or bring attention to themselves.

**Degree of Listening while Communicating**

Being able to listen to the concerns, problems, and situations of various students was a topic that 20 of the 24 (83.7%) participants addressed or commented about. Symbolic Interactionism addresses communication as an important component of the theory because it entails listening and understanding what is taking place during interactions. Listening is a form of interaction that many participants felt was essential during communication.

Dropouts, like Steve, discussed how they wished they could have spoken more with someone and how they could have listened. Steve commented, "I didn't interact as much as possible with administrators and teachers. I don't think they could understand what I was dealing with and going through."

Edward discussed how he could communicate with only one teacher while at school. He stated, "I didn't have a chance to talk with any of my teachers but my guidance teacher
because she tried to help me." Edward continued, "They wouldn't listen to me when I tried to explain to them why I stopped going to Ms. Z's class. They just all want me gone!"

Edward's comments were paralleled by Dawn, a dropout from ZHS. She stated, "Teachers and principals heard only what they wanted to hear. There was a couple of times when I said something good and they didn't say anything, but as soon as I said something bad, they wanted to kick me out."

Stay-ins, on the other hand, had a different perception of how teachers and administrators listened to them. Susan stated that she was lucky because she had good communication with her instructors. She stated, "The ones I am thinking of are really positive and say, 'hey how are you doing?' You can go and talk to them after school if you have a problem."

Minny also commented about how her teachers had a listening ear for her and her classmates by stating, "You could talk to them if you had a question, just don't sit there and do nothing." Minny also emphasized the fact that her teachers were receptive to students as long as they had something to say. If the students did not approach a teacher, how were the teachers to know there was something wrong? Bill pointed out that it was easy to communicate to and with his teachers. He stated, "They are really cooperative with you. They will stay a little late or come a little early to talk with you and help you out. That is important."

The professionals at ZHS spoke about listening as a part of communication at their school and how they were able to
influence students' decisions to stay in or drop out of school. Ms. P noted that at times they did not listen enough to the students. When she looked back at a situation on campus in which the students told the adults a certain program was not effective, Ms. P stated, "As adults we need to listen to what kids think is cool. That was a nice, little rude awakening there."

Mr. G pointed to the responsibility of the adults to communicate with students in order to prevent them from dropping out of school. He commented, "I think somehow we have to communicate to kids what is needed in order for them to get the extra help they need." Mr. G was quick to say that students were sometimes hesitant, and the adults had to "pick up the slack where students leave off."

Ms. R emphasized teachers must build some type of rapport with students in order to communicate properly and be able to listen to their concerns. She stated, "If a student has a rapport with the teacher, the teacher can be very influential. I think I am that way because I listen and then I act upon it." She continued by saying teachers who truly listen and communicate with students about "anything" should be worn out by the end of the day. Ms. R commented, "Because I listen and then I act upon it, I am so exhausted every day. I have very large shoulders [to carry the students' problems and concerns on]." Ms. R closed out her comments by stating, "For any system to be successful at any level, you have to have communication - open communication."
Mr. S, a teacher, saw the administration as being open and receptive to students. He commented, "Mr. B's [the principal's] door is always open. Listening to kids, hearing what they have to say if they have problems." From a teacher's standpoint, Mr. S thought it was important that each teacher take care of his or her individual classes with regard to communicating with students and helping solve their problems. He stated, "In my own little world, I try to make it better for the students by being an open teacher, being able to listen to their problems if they want to discuss their problems."

The teachers of XHS also commented extensively on listening to students and communicating with them as much as possible. Ms. A stated students spoke with her all the time. She explained, "They tell me about their home lives, pregnancy, and how their days are going." She attributed this to having an open personality in which students felt comfortable around her. Ms. A explained, "Because my mannerism is so open, they know it [communication] is pretty open." Ms. A explained how this openness allowed students to feel good in her class and not want to miss her class. She stated, "I told them [students] I don't care if they missed every class in school but they have to be in mine. I had 100% attendance from the beginning of class." For that reason, Ms. A attributed her students' successes and low drop out rates to her personality and the way she communicated with students.
Mr. W argued that even if students dropped out, they would come back and communicate with individuals they thought were important. He stated,

They still come back again and again. They talk with these English and Social Studies teachers. They come and talk with the counselors. They come in and talk with me about what they need to do and how to help them with their problems.

When talking with students, Mr. W stated that it was important to be honest with them. He "talks with them and says how many credits do you have?" when he is trying to get a point across to the students and assist them through listening and communicating.

**Impact of Contravening Communication**

Participants talked about the various types of interactions which would be considered contravening or negative. These interactions were catalysts to students thinking about or deciding to drop out of school.

Administrators stated various reasons for non-positive interactions. Ms. P commented about the interactions that would influence students to feel unimportant and leave school early. She stated, "If the kid has not received good interactions with teachers and administrators" and "there are some students we probably didn't communicate with them as often as we should or when they want to communicate."

As a dean of students, Mr. G's communication with students is frequently not positive. Mr. G stated, "I do a lot of conversing with students about what is going on here.
on campus. Most of the stuff is negative. Most is negative
I'm afraid." The type of work he has to do makes it seem
like he does not care about students. He commented, "Before
students drop out, I am the last person they see." Mr. G
thought in his position, contact appears to be more negative
than positive.

Ms. D felt that when some students do have problems,
they do not know how to articulate them or feel comfortable
enough to discuss them with staff members. She stated, "Kids
that are dissatisfied with something may not verbalize it
because they really don't care, they say screw it." She
continued by saying that students frequently stated, "I hate
this place or hate that teacher." Ms. D believed these type
of negative feelings placed students in a negative frame of
mind toward school. She stated that students needed a
"comfort level" to be successful in school and if this type
of animosity existed, it would be difficult to feel
comfortable.

Teachers who had an opinion about negative communication
also articulated their perceptions of its influence on
dropouts. Ms. A talked about how students were turned off at
an early age due to teachers. She stated, "Teachers from an
early age on can shut kids off. They just hammer them and
kids just can't do it. They will have a block between them
and letting anybody in." This block would eventually cause
students not to communicate with or trust teachers. Ms. A
believed it was easier for students to depart school when
they shut down and their problems or concerns were not
discussed or noticed. She commented, "If you are a face in
the mass of humanity and you have a problem and nobody
notices, it is not long before you shut down and care if
anybody notices."

Ms. S believed that teachers, counselors, and
administrators demonstrated a caring attitude toward
potential dropouts. Her concern was there was limited follow-
through on students with problems. She believed there was
only time to dedicate "lip service" to these students, not
any substantial assistance. Ms. S stated, "when kids are in
a crisis, it is like the doors get shut and you take care of
it that moment and the follow-through isn't always there."
Ms. S believed that professionals do their best in helping
potential dropouts, but many of the professionals do not
care. She stated, "I would say it is about 50-50 [teachers
who have positive-negative interactions with students]. I
wish I could say they are all wonderful and we have great
teachers, but for the most part, kids who are potential
dropouts, I don't think it is real positive."

Stay-ins had mixed feelings about interactions they
perceived as negative. Peter talked about how the school was
like a "prison" because all the adults were worried that
something would happen. He discussed how the administrators
and teachers would not let a group of kids congregate
together. Peter commented, "If you see a group of students
crowded together or talking together, somebody will come and
separate them. He talked about how this type of stance taken by the school limited the interactions students had on campus. He continued, "Not everything is learned in the classroom. You don't live in the classroom . . . you are not given the freedom to be yourself as much as other places."

Peter contributed not being able to interact in the halls to the "violence and negative behavior" on campus. He stated, "When you're in a big group of students, chances are there will be some kind of brawl or something."

Kim talked about the negative interactions with other students and how that caused problems for her and her friends. When talking about these interactions that bothered her the most, her major concern was that "rumors are spread around a lot. That can cause a lot of problems." These problems ranged from "losing a friend to not wanting to come back to school."

Maria thought the negative interactions on campus were related to how she looked at many of her teachers. She stated, "Some teachers, . . . they are prejudice." When asked why she felt that way, she stated, "You just see a different attitude toward other people and people there. You can tell it is one certain group that she or he doesn't like." Maria continued to argue that this type of interaction could cause a person to stop coming to a class and eventually to school. She commented, "I think that you know of [a teacher], I don't want to go to that class and it starts building up [the possibility of dropping out]."
Dropouts also stated that there were many negative interactions on campus which stifled communication. Edward talked about an on-going battle he had with a teacher. He stated, "I guess the teacher was having a bad day also. She said something and we started arguing and she had sent me up to the office many times before. So they just withdrew me." When probed a little further, Edward was not withdrawn but he was placed in an alternative school setting. He chose not to attend the alternative program, which in essence meant he dropped out of school.

Edward talked about a barrage of problems he had with a teacher. He stated, "If I wouldn't have my paper or I answered her wrong, she would send me up," and "One day when I needed to go to my locker, she was mad and wrote me a pass to the counselor to change her class." He also extended those feelings to other school personnel. For example, Edward thought the school administration communicated with him in a negative way. He commented, "They always thought I was writing on the school. They were always searching us for drugs. We never did it but they were always checking us and taking us out of class."

Dawn also expressed a feeling of negativity when discussing her interactions at school. She stated, "I had a lot of problems with some of these girls. They would always start trouble and want to fight. I finally decided I had to kick their butts or just leave school." The interactions between her and other students lead her to believe that she
should not attend school any longer. She continued, "My mom tried to send me to another school, but I had too many absences and they wouldn't take me. So for my own good, I decided to miss days and before I knew it, I was out of school." Dawn felt like these negative interactions would not have changed because "the school couldn't or wouldn't do anything about it"; so she took it in her own hands and stopped attending.

**Summary**

The value of communication was expressed by all participants. The importance of the school's attracting students to programs and the school, in general, was a vital communication device that influenced students. School administrators argued that communication must occur in order to keep students interested and in school.

The impact of communication in groups and the importance of communication through activities were seen as social environment influences on interactions. When individuals were in groups, they communicated differently than when they were alone. Activities and programs were also used as avenues to expedite communication needs. A critical perception among the participants' was that dropouts communicated that they had given up on school. Respondents talked about dropouts' giving up and communicating verbally and non-verbally about giving up.

Various interactions influenced students to drop out or
stay in school. The impact of positive support communicated to students by teachers and administrators was seen as necessary by the students. Dropouts overwhelmingly felt that they did not receive positive support while stay-ins felt they did. The degree of listening while communicating was also seen as important to the respondents. Listening provided students with the feelings that someone cared or was interested in hearing their points of view. The impact of contravening communication on dropping out was also addressed. The negativism experienced by some participants related to how they viewed their non-positive communications while they were on campus.

In line with symbolic interactionism, the communication patterns of the respondents paralleled the interactions, process, and symbols described by Charon (1985). Through these forms of communication, meanings and perceptions were created, interpreted, and symbolized.
CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Conclusion

The findings of this study point to many salient themes which addressed the problem statement. These themes were consistently verbalized across the three core categories of School Experience, Personal Experience, and Communication. The core categories indicated that the social environment of schools and the interactions of those who work in or attend the schools had an influence on the participants.

In relationship to the influence of schools' social environments on interactions, the response of being involved, offering various programs, and attracting as many students as possible with numerous activities point to the need for these schools to take an active role in increasing positive interactions. Conflict on campus, which created a sense of fear for many, was a finding that continued to be verbalized throughout the study by the participants. These interactions were seen as relevant because many students left school due to conflicting or negative interactions.

In exploring the perceptions of the interactions as they pertain to dropouts, communication that occurred on campus and the impact of peer groups and associates were seen as
essential. Also noted were mixed perceptions of how the dropouts were blamed for dropping out of school, the responsibility of the family, and the influence of friends and associates.

Communication, as a form of interaction, was articulated as essential in dealing with students and dropouts. Horizontal communications, those with peers, and vertical communications, those with school officials, produced numerous interactions that were seen as either positive or negative for students. This communication influenced the perceptions respondents had about interactions, as they pertained to dropping out of school.

Peer groups, associates, and friends also played a large role in influencing the interactions of the participants. In fact, the social environment created and sometimes maintained grouping patterns which were seen as positive by some, but mostly negative with regard to interactions by most. The groups and peers were discussed in a positive manner by stay-ins who used them to assist in remaining in school, while all participants, including dropouts, saw peers of the dropouts as another reason for them to leave school. These group and peer interactions within the social environment of the schools were seen as influential and relevant.

From this study, perceptions that caused a dropout to leave school were varied, but most of them focused on the dropout and his or her auxiliaries. The family, peer group, or the dropout's giving up was the perception that most
respondents had about the reasons dropouts left school.

Previous studies indicate that these findings are prevalent in most studies on dropouts (Barber, 1987; Belts, 1988; Ekstrom, 1987; Fine, 1991; McDill, 1987). The importance of student involvement; need for special programs; presence of conflict/fear on campus; influence of peer groups and associates; lack of responsibility and blame for dropouts; and importance of communication found in this study reiterate the conclusions stated in many other studies. With that, the relevance and implications of this study point to the continuous need for educational policy makers to address its findings due to their consistency in research.

Implications

Consistent with trustworthiness criteria of Guba and Lincoln (1985), the findings were applied only to the two settings under investigation. Naturalistic research methods permit transferability and generalizability of the findings only when similar settings with similar criteria and characteristics are present. Any and all implications from the findings are internal and can not be externalized generally to other school settings.

This study brought out five relevant and salient themes. The responses of administrators, teachers, stay-ins, and dropouts indicated the following:

1. It is important to involve all students in school activities and programs.
2. It is important to recognize that conflict and fear on a high school campus affect the social environment.

3. It is important to recognize the influence of peer groups and associates.

4. The blame and responsibility for the high school dropout are mainly placed on the dropout.

5. The ways in which feelings, perceptions, and beliefs are communicated are very important in interpreting the meanings of interactions.

These findings suggest that the schools had a great deal of influence on students and dropouts. As a school administrator, teacher, or individual who is concerned with a school's role in assisting students in dropping out, the implications of this study address what could be done to limit the number of students who drop out of school.

The school could take an active role in providing opportunities for potential dropouts to participate in school activities. This would include providing programs for students who normally would not participate, emphasizing the importance of activities to potential dropouts, and making a commitment to attract students, who are on the verge of dropping out, to school activities and functions.

The recognition of conflict and fear on campus are important in alleviating future conflicts and fear by students on campus. Once conflict is recognized by school personnel, proactive measures can be taken to limit the
number of future conflicts. Students who are afraid of attending school may feel more comfortable if they knew the school was aware of the fear factor. School officials would have to maintain a firm, fair, and consistent stance in reducing the number of conflicts and the fear factor on campus.

Peer group influence will continue to be a major factor in dropouts' decisions. A role school personnel could take would be to expand the dropouts' peer groups beyond associating with other potential dropouts. This would mean creating heterogeneous classes based on academics, encouraging potential dropouts to serve on certain school committees where various groups of students participate, and having students attend school functions, like assemblies, with their classes - not on their own. This would allow the potential dropout and stay-in access to different types of students on campus without pressuring them to leave their "assigned" peer groups.

Even though various factors contribute to students dropping out, the schools must take an active role in determining their responsibility. The only factor all dropouts have in common is they all attended school. For that reason, the school plays an important role in deterring students from dropping out and not placing all, or a majority, of the blame on the dropout and his/her auxiliaries. The school should revisit its course offerings, commitment in assisting the dropout, and programs which
alleviate the dropout rate. In doing so, the school is taking a proactive stance in addressing its responsibility for dropouts.

How school personnel and students communicate with one another create perceptions students have about school. It is important that school administrators and teachers positively communicate with all students. Many potential dropouts point to negative communication by and with school personnel as a reason for wanting to leave school. School professionals must be cognizant of their communication patterns with students and convey a positive, non-threatening message to students. This could limit the reasons students drop out of school and eventually affect those who may contemplate dropping out.

Symbolic Interactionism and Social Environment Theories provided a sound means of viewing the importance of interactions within a school's social environment. Symbolic Interactionism Theory allowed the findings to be viewed in terms of interactions, how people came into contact with one another, as well as in relationship to symbols, or what was meant by the different interactions, and interactions. Many symbols were created by the respondents, which represented conflict or fear and programs or activities, that explained the role of the school in dealing with students and dropouts. The importance of the means of communication, responsibility and blame for the dropout, and the manner of interaction within groups provided a synopsis of the importance of
interactions on campus. The results of this study indicate that various interactions and the social environment are meaningful and important factors in exploring participants' perceptions as they pertain to dropouts.

Further Research

This study points to four areas of emphasis, consisting of implementing a one-unit case study, limiting the study to one theory of analysis, utilizing observation as a research method and conducting only focus group interviews, if possible, that may broaden its conclusions.

By implementing a one unit case study, the researcher may be able to investigate in greater depth with more students, teachers, administrators, and dropouts about a particular school's interactions and social environment. In doing so, that school could be analyzed, given specific recommendations, and re-evaluated to assist in addressing the dropout problem.

The use of one theory for analysis provides a sufficient means of reviewing the data collected. It may limit any confusion, difficulty, or concern about the relationship of two coexisting theories in examining the research questions. The researcher is then able to focus on a limited set of characteristics from a single theory and revisit those characteristics over time to substantiate the domains of one theory.

Even though the observation of potential dropouts while
they are still attending school may be difficult because of the need to estimate who would drop out, it would be beneficial to observe the social environment and the interactions of dropouts. By using predetermined factors that would indicate who was a potential dropout, a researcher may target a number of students who align with those characteristics and observe their interactions while at school. The unpredictable aspect of this recommendation is that students would have to drop out of school in order to be classified as a dropout. Therefore, results may be limited to potential dropouts.

The use of focus group interviews could bring about different responses than the individual interview format used in this study. The use of a focus group interview format may guide the participants' responses in a different direction due to peer pressure, student conformity, individual communication skills, and group dynamics. This could assist in establishing a study for interviewing techniques and how they do or do not influence the perceptions of administrators, teachers, stay-ins, and dropouts.

Directions for further study also point to a need to investigate the importance of communication, activities and programs, conflict and fear, dropout's responsibilities, and group influences on campuses. Each one of these findings could be singled out and focused upon in an independent study to investigate its relationship with interactions at school and the early departure of students from high school.
REFERENCES


Appendix A

Professional Staff Interview Questions
Professional Staff
Interview Questions

A. Perceptions about dropping out:
1. What is a dropout?
2. What do you think about dropouts?
3. Why do you think students drop out of school?
4. At what point do you think dropouts decide to leave school?
5. Who is responsible for the dropout problem?

B. Student interactions with the school's social environment on decisions to leave school prior to graduating:
6. How would you describe the social environment at your school?
   a) Relationship Domain
      i) How are students involved?
      ii) What is the support system like?
      iii) How is one able to express him/herself?
   b) Personal Growth Domain
      i) What access is there for personal growth at school?
      ii) How do you bring about self-enhancement (self-improvement) at your school?
   c) System Maintenance Domain
      i) Are expectations orderly and clear? How?
      ii) How much external control exists at your school?
      iii) Do you have a chance to create change or participate in the change process? If so, how?
7. Do you think students have the same feelings about the social environment of this school that you have?
8. What are the most positive attributes about the school's social environment?
9. What are the most negative attributes about the school's social environment?
10. How would these positive/negative attributes contribute to a student's decision to drop out?

C. The social environment's influence on the different interactions between administrators, teachers, stay-ins, and dropouts:

11. Does the social environment at your school bring about interactions between staff members? students? staff members and students? If so, how? If not, why not?

12. If so, are these interactions positive or negative?

13. How important are school activities?

14. What does this school do to encourage interactions?

15. Do students freely converse with you about situations?

D. Different interactions that cause students to drop out of school:

16. With whom do you think dropouts interact at school?

17. Do dropouts have many friends at school?

18. How do you think students feel about the interactions on campus?

19. What responsibility do you have in dealing with the dropout phenomenon?

Probes:

Probes were utilized during the interviews in order to gain a deeper insight into the responses given. Some of the following probes were used:

• Why?    • What brings that about?
• How did you come to that belief?
• Can you give an example of that?
• Please elaborate on that point.
• Where does that come from?
Appendix B

Interview Questions for Stay-ins and Dropouts
Interview Questions for
Stay-ins and Dropouts

Key:
SI - stay-ins
DO - dropouts

A. Perceptions about dropping out:

1. What is a dropout?
2. What do you think about dropouts?
3. Why do you think students drop out of school?
4. (SI) Is the information you are learning at school important?
   (DO) Was the information you learned at school important?
5. (SI) At what point do you think dropouts decide to leave school?
   (DO) At what point did you decide to drop out?
6. (SI) Why do you stay in school?
   (DO) Why did you drop out of school?
7. Who is responsible for the dropout problem?

B. Student interaction with the school's social environment on the decision to leave school prior to graduating:

8. How would you describe the social environment at your school?
   a) Relationship Domain
      i) Were/are students able to get involved?
      ii) What is/was the support system like?
      iii) How is/was one able to express him/herself?
   b) Personal Growth Domain
      i) What access is/was there for personal growth at school?
      ii) How do/did you bring about self-enhancement (self-improvement) at your school?
c) System Maintenance Domain

i) Are/were expectations orderly and clear?

ii) How much external control exists(ed) at your school?

iii) Do/did you have a chance to create change or participate in the change process?

9. Do you think teachers or administrators have the same feelings about the social environment of this school as you did?

10. What are/were the most positive attributes about the school's social environment?

11. What are/were the most negative attributes about the school's social environment?

12. How would these positive/negative attributes contribute to a student's decision to drop out?

C. The social environment's influence on the different interactions between administrators, teachers, stay-ins, and dropouts:

13. Does/did the social environment at your school bring about interactions between students? staff and students?

14. If so, are/were these interactions positive or negative?

15. How important are/were school activities?

16. (SI) What do you do to get closer to individuals at school?

(DO) What interactions would have helped you stay in school?

17. (SI) Do you freely converse with teachers and administrators about situations?

(DO) Did you freely converse with teachers and administrators about situations?

D. Different interactions which cause students to drop out of school:

18. (SI) With whom did dropouts interact at school?

(DO) With whom did you interact at school?
19. (SI) Do dropouts have many friends at school?  
(Do) Did you have many friends at school?  

20. How do you think students feel about the interactions on campus?  

21. (SI) Describe your interactions with students who dropped out.  
(Do) Describe your interactions with students who stayed in school.  

22. What were\are your interactions with teachers and administrators like?  

Probes:  

Probes were utilized during the interviews in order to gain a deeper insight into the responses given. Some of the following probes were used:  
· Why?  
· What brings that about?  
· Can you give an example of that?  
· Please elaborate on that point.  
· How did you come to that belief?  
· Where does that come from?
Appendix C
Coding Samples
N: culture goes. My opinion personally I like to learn from the other cultures. I have friends from all different cultures. That is another unique opportunity you have here. So many people here from different places and you get to know them. It is neat to hear about the other things. Once you get involved in expressing your opinion and start to make your name, if that is what you want to call it, you start to get to know other people and their opinions and where they come from. It is just all one big group. We have a peer mediation group, so a lot of the problems are worked out by the students. And that makes it a lot more social environment. I think that helps out a lot.

D: Do you think the other students feel the same way about the social environment of this school?

N: Some of them do and some of them don't. I've heard complaints there's the Mexicans, theirs the African-Americans and then there's the Whites and everybody stays in their own group. I think that is up to the students. I know a lot of students that go up to other students and talk. I know myself and my friends hang around with the different groups. People know it is okay to belong to more than one group. It is not going to hurt you or anything. The students that realize that get the most out of what ZHS has to offer. This is due to our culture.

D: Do you think teachers and administrators feel the same way?

N: I think our administration does. Our administration gears a lot toward
## Coding Samples - Alpha List of Codes

**ALPHABETICAL List of codewords used in coding bill 1/8/1995**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N CODEWORD</th>
<th>N CODEWORD</th>
<th>N CODEWORD</th>
<th>N CODEWORD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 ACTION</td>
<td>1 DEFST</td>
<td>15 EDUCATE</td>
<td>3 EXENV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 INTER</td>
<td>6 NENV</td>
<td>8 PENV</td>
<td>11 PERS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 REFGP</td>
<td>1 SYMBOLS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Coding Samples - Sorted Output

SORTED OUTPUT FOR FILE BILL 1/13/1995 03:53 Page 12
SORT CODE: NENV

+ Perceptions about dropping out

BILL N
SC: NENV

#-NENV
: was because she didn't like the 27 -#
   environment. 28 -#

+ Perceptions about dropping out

BILL N
SC: NENV

#-NENV
: work with these students the adults 71 -#
   can become more pressure. Try to 72 -#
   pressure them to get it done. 73 -#

+ Student interaction with the school's

BILL N
SC: NENV

#-NENV
: negative things that happens with ZHS 378 -#
   is the reputation it has. Just 379 -#
Appendix D
Administrator Questionnaire
Administrator Questionnaire

Name________________________________________

Ethnicity_________ Sex_________

1. Number of years in education?_________

2. Number of years doing present job?_________

3. Number of years at present work location?_________

4. Highest level of education? (B.A., M.S., Ph.D.)_____

5. Area(s) of Responsibility?_____________________

6. Children_____ 7. If yes, how many?___

8. Did any drop out of school?_____ 9. Retained?_____

10. Serve(d) on any committees that deal(t) with:

   a) Dropouts____________________ When?_____________

   b) School environment___________ When?_____________

   c) Student, teacher, administrative interactions

   ________________________________ When?_____________
Appendix E

Teacher Questionnaire
Teacher Questionnaire

Name__________________________________________
Ethnicity__________ Sex__________
1. Number of years in education?____________
2. Number of years doing present job?__________
3. Number of years at present work location?__________
4. Highest level of education (B.A., M.S., Ph.D.)__________
5. Classes presently teaching and level (basic, avg., advanced):
   a)______________________________________________
   b)______________________________________________
   c)______________________________________________
6. Children_____  7. If yes, how many?__
8. Did any drop out of school?_______  9. Retained?_____
10. Serve(d) on any committees that deal(t) with:
    a) Dropouts________________________ When?________________________
    b) School environment__________ When?________________________
    c) Student, teacher, administrative interaction
        _______________________________ When?________________________
Appendix F

Dropout Questionnaire
Dropout Questionnaire

1. Name_______________________________________

2. Age_______ 3. Ethnicity_______ 4. Sex_______

5. Working?____ 6. If yes, how many hours per week?___
   If no, why not?________________________________________

7. How long have you been out of school? ___ yrs.___ mos.

8. How far did you think you would get in school?___grade.

9. Did you like school?_____ 10. Was the school environment friendly?________

11. Were you ever retained (held back)?________

12. If yes, what grade(s)?________________________

13. Did you ever attend an alternative program in place of attending a comprehensive high school?____

14. Did you participate in school activities (clubs/sports)?____

15. Do you know other dropouts?____________

16. How many brothers/sisters do you have?________

17. How many brothers/sisters dropped out of school?____

18. Did your parents graduate from high school? M____ F____

19. Parents' occupation
   M_______________________________________________________________________
   F_______________________________________________________________________

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Appendix G

Stay-in Questionnaire
Stay-in Questionnaire

1. Name___________________________________________

2. Age________  3. Ethnicity________  4. Sex________

5. Working?_____  6. If yes, how many hours per week?____
If no, why not?____________________________________

7. Plans after graduating?___________________________

8. Did you always see yourself graduating?___________

9. Do you like school?____

10. What school activities/sports do you participate in?
__________________________________________________

11. Is the school environment friendly?________

12. Were you ever retained (held back)?________

13. If yes, what grades?___________________________

14. Did you ever attend an alternative program in place of attending a comprehensive high school?____

15. Do you know any dropouts?____________

16. How many brothers/sisters do you have?________

17. How many brothers/sisters dropped out of school?____

18. Did your parents graduate from high school? M____ F____

19. Parents' occupation
M________________________________________________
F________________________________________________