LIVES AT RISK: HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS IN THE NORTHERN PLAINS REGION

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ABSTRACT

Education is essential to personal welfare. As educational levels increase, personal income rises, the quality of life improves, and society benefits as criminality declines, tax income increases, and the cost of social programs decreases. Unfortunately, every year thousands of students leave high school without graduating.

Various factors place students at-risk of dropping out, but the question remains why some at-risk students drop out while others graduate. This phenomenology investigates dropping out by following the philosophy of Jurgen Habermas, guided by the work of Max van Manen. Participants discussed their lifeworld experiences and explained factors that had caused them to leave school.

Through conversations with dropouts, this study discovered five themes related to dropping out. These were: In participants' lifeworlds, dropping out was not unusual; participants' worldviews often disconnected from life's realities; participants remained resilient despite their disadvantaged lives and educational setbacks; participants lacked social capital that could have helped them escape their lifeworlds, and participants had often been invisible to people who could have provided help. These themes do not stand alone, but meld into a picture of lives lacking the basic elements of success and the supporting relationships needed to succeed.

The study concluded that schools cannot alter many elements dropouts' lifeworlds but can reduce dropping out by identifying potential dropouts and providing supportive personal relationships. This dissertation includes recommendations on how schools can better support disengaged students and recommendations for further research and action to increase graduation rates.

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- The many high school students whom I have known throughout my career, people who challenged me as a professional, but also gave me great joy and satisfaction, people who shaped me and enriched my life beyond measure.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my wife Janis, who endorsed and supported my decision to redirect my life into this work. Her willingness to sacrifice and her unwavering encouragement made possible the successful completion of this work.

And, I dedicate this to my children, marvelous people who have ever enriched my life and who steadfastly cheered on their dad in what many could have seen as a quixotic effort.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background and Nature of the Problem

Annually, thousands of high school students leave school, ending their formal education at least temporarily and often permanently. According to the Children's Defense Fund, in 2009 20,715 students left American high schools every day; 18,493 were suspended; 2,222 simply dropped out (Children's Defense Fund [CDF], *Each Day in America*, 2008). In 2011, the CDF reported that 3,312 students dropped out every day, a large increase over 2009 (CDF, *Each Day in America,* 2011). In 2004, 1.3 million students failed to graduate from high school (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). The Alliance for Excellent Education [AEE] (2009) reported that 1.3 millions students dropped out in 2009 as well. In 2005, the total number of people age 20 who had not completed high school in America stood at 700,000 persons (Levin, Belfield, Muennig, & Rouse, 2007). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in 2012 reported that the averaged freshman graduation rate for 2008-09 was 75.5%, an improvement on the 1990-91 rate of 73.7%, but still below graduation standards set by various state and federal programs (Aud, et al., 2012). In 2000, not one state graduated over 90% of its students (Sum, et al., 2003), and in 2011, only Wisconsin with a graduation rate of 90.7% graduated more than 90% of its students (Aud, et al., 2012).

Estimates of the nation's high school graduation rate vary from 66 to 88% (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010). In 2007, the official national graduation rate, based on NCES data was 88% (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2007). However, using the same data interpreted differently, Heckman and LaFontaine (2007) reported a national dropout rate near 30% for 2007. Other researchers have reported the dropout rate in some states neared 40% (Laird, Cataldi, KewalRamani & Chapman, 2008). Furthermore, graduation rates vary within states, and in some cities the

graduation rate is even lower or is difficult to calculate because of inadequate or misleading data (Greene, 2002).

The AEE (2009) reported that 69% of America's high school students graduated in 2009. This corresponds to a rate of 70% reported by Greene in 2002. Sum et al. (2003) reported a national graduation rate of 25-30%. However, using a different interpretation of the national graduation data, some researchers place the graduation rate near 90%, which corresponds more closely with NCES reports (Mischel & Roy, 2006).

Although disagreement exists on the exact graduation rate in America, data generally show that the graduation rates among minorities and some special populations are lower than for White students. The graduation rate nears 75% for White students and Asian students, but is lower for African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans (Bridgeland J. M., DiIulio, J. J., & Morison, K. B., 2006). However, there disagreement also exists as to the true graduation rates for minorities with estimates of minority graduation rates ranging from 50 to 85% (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010; Mischel & Roy, 2006). For 1998, Greene (2001) reported an overall graduation rate of 71%, with 78% of Whites graduating, but only 56% of Blacks and 54% of Hispanic students. By 2003, these numbers had not improved according to Greene and Forster (2003) who estimated that 70% of all students graduated, but estimated graduation rates by race at 72% for Caucasian Americans, 51% for African Americans, 52% for Hispanic Americans, 54% for American Indians, and 79% for Asian Americans. Bridgeland, DiIulio and Morison (2006) reported that the graduation rate hovered near 50% for African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans. Levin, Belfield, Meunnig and Rouse (2007) reported dropout rates for 20 year-olds of 57% for Black males, 24% for Black females, 52% for Hispanic males, 31% for Hispanic females, and 29% for White males but only 9% for White

females. Generally, females drop out at lower rates than males (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Levin et al., 2007). In 2012, Aud et al. also found that Asian Americans and White American students graduated at higher rates than other ethnic groups.

Disabled students, who greatly need education, also drop out at a higher-than-average rate. Osher, Morrison, and Bailey (2003) reported that thirty percent of all special education students drop out of high school before graduation, as do 48% of students diagnosed with emotional or behavior disorders. That report also stated that seventy three percent of these special needs dropouts will be arrested within three to five years of leaving high school (Osher et al., 2003).

Students drop out for a number of reasons. Poor attendance, low academic achievement, retention in at least one grade, general disengagement with school, teen parenthood, and behavior problems all contribute to student dropout rates (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001; Cardon, 2000; Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007; Ensminger & Slusarick, 1992; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). Living in single-parent households, living in poverty, having a non-English language background, and having a mother who did not graduate from high school, may reduce a student's chances of graduation (Cardon, 2000; Malaspina & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008; Pallas, Natriello, & McDill, 1989; Werner & Smith, 2001). At-risk students usually share the home with several siblings and have little reading material in the home (Cardon, 2000; Werner & Smith, 2001). Male students are more at-risk than females (Cardon, 2000; Cataldi, Laird, KewalRamani, & Chapman, 2009; Peng, 1983; Wehlage, 1986) and at-risk students are apt to be employed full time (Cardon, 2000). Whatever the true dropout rate might be, and whatever motivation causes students to leave school prior to graduating, facing life without a high school diploma can pose a host of problems for the undereducated person and for society.

Significance of the Problem

Thousands of American students leave American high schools daily, some voluntarily, some not (CDF, 2008; 2011). Inadequate education causes many problems for these high school dropouts and their society. Financial costs are the most apparent result of dropping out. The 1.3 million dropouts of the 2004 cohort alone will cost America $325 billion in lost wages, taxes and productivity (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). If the number of dropouts in the 2004 cohort of 20-year-olds were reduced by half, America would realize $45 billion in increased tax revenue and reduced social costs over the lifetime these of those drop-outs. Similar savings would accrue for each annual cohort (Levin et al. 2007). A 2006 report of the Center for Cost-Benefit Studies of Education (CBCSE) of Columbia University corroborated this finding. The savings would come from increased tax revenues and decreased costs for public health, crime prevention and management, and welfare payments (CBCSE, 2006). Reducing dropout numbers by only one-fifth would save the nation $18 billion annually (CBCSE, 2006). If this dropout rate continues unchecked throughout the next decade, over 12 million students will drop out, costing the country of $3 trillion (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007).

In 2009, the National Center for Education Statistics reported consistently higher earnings for persons ages 25-34 from 1995 to 2007 (Planty et al., 2009). In 2007, the median incomes for persons in this age group were: $45,000 for persons with bachelor's degrees, $35,000 for those with associate's degrees, $29,000 for high school graduates, and $23,000 for people who had neither a high school diploma nor equivalent certification (Planty et al., 2009). This held true for males, females, Whites, Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians, and meant that four year college graduates earned 29% more than persons with associate degrees and 55% more than young adults with high school completion and no higher education (Planty et al., 2009). In 2012,

Aud et al. reported the median annual earnings for full time workers at $24,000 for male high school dropouts and $17,800 for female dropouts. This compared to earnings of $32,800 and $25,000 for male and female high school graduates and $49,800 and $40,000 for males and females who held Bachelor's degrees. Median earnings in 2010 dollars were $21,000 for high school dropouts, $29,900 for high school graduates, $32,900 for persons with some college, and $48,700 for persons with Bachelor's degrees (Aud, et al., 2012).

In a 2009 report, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) reported that 2008's median weekly earnings and unemployment rates according to education were: Doctoral degree, $1561 and 2%; Professional degree, $1,531 and 1.7%; Master's degree, $1,233 and 2.4%; Bachelor's degree, $1,012 and 2.8%; Associate of Arts degree, $757 and 3.7%; some higher education but no degree, $699 and 5.1%; high school diploma, $618 and 5.7%; and high school dropout, $453 and 9% (BLS, *Education Pays*, 2009). In 2011, the BLS reported the following median weekly earnings based upon educational attainment: Doctoral degree, $1,551; Professional degree. $1,665; Master's degree, $1,263; Bachelor's degree, $1,053; Associate degree, $768; some college but no degree, $719; high school diploma, $638; and less than high school, $451 (BLS, *Education Pays*, 2012). The Bureau of Labor Statistic's *Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey* for April 2012 shows a similar correlation between education and employment. Unemployment rates for that month were: less than high school diploma, 12.4%; high school, but no college, 7.7%; some college, but no degree, 8.0%; Associate degree, 6.2%; and Bachelor's degree or higher, 3.7% (BLS, *Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey*, 2012).

In 2007, The College Board reported on median incomes related to education for 25-year-olds in 2005. That report showed that high school dropouts earned $23,400; students with some

education but no degree could expect to earn $37,100; those with an Associate of Arts degree could make $40,600; graduates with a Bachelor of Arts degree would earn $50,900; persons with a doctorate earned $79,400, and those with professional degrees earned $100,000 (Baum & Ma, 2007). The median tax paid by professionals in 2005 was almost $19,000 more than that paid by high school graduates (Baum & Ma, 2007).

Society also benefits from reduced criminal behavior and reduced costs related to various social problems (Wolfe & Haveman, 2001). Low education levels can lead to increased crime, increased drug abuse, and other personal and social problems (Baum & Ma, 2007; Wolfe & Haveman, 2001). In 2007, using U.S. Census Bureau data, NCES reported that approximately 30% of federal prison inmates, 40% of prisoners in state prisons, and 50% of prisoners awaiting death sentences were high school dropouts (Laird et al., 2008).

Education brings other benefits as well. It enhances physical and mental health, increases individual longevity, leads to less chemical abuse, reduces criminal activity, and brings positive changes in life style (Wolfe & Haveman, 2001). These outcomes benefit society financially, but also make society less fractious and more stable (Wolfe & Haveman, 2001). High school graduates enjoy higher incomes, live better lives, more fully realize their potential and find personal satisfaction and self-actualization in the affairs of daily living. Graduating from high school is not only a significant rite-of-passage for American adolescents, it is also important in a number of ways for every person and for society.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to learn from dropouts their own perception of dropping out. The study looked for meanings and themes within students' lives and educational experiences that could explain why these students had chosen to leave school prior to graduating.

Research Questions

This study asked the following research questions:

1. What factors, as perceived by the students, caused students to quit school?
2. In the students' opinions, did the schools in any way fail the students and make it difficult for them to graduate?
3. What can schools and educators do to better meet the needs of at-risk students?
4. In their own opinion, could students have done anything differently themselves to remain in school?
5. In retrospect, how do students feel about their decision to quit school?

Definition of Terms

At-Risk Student: An at-risk child or youth is a school-aged individual who is at-risk of academic failure, has a drug or alcohol problem, is pregnant or is a parent, has previously come into contact with the juvenile justice system, is at least 1 year behind the expected grade level for the age of the individual, is a migrant or an immigrant, has limited English proficiency, is a gang member, has previously dropped out of school, or has a high absenteeism rate at school (United States Department of Education [USDE], 2006).

Alternative school: An alternative school is defined by its characteristics. It usually has a small enrollment and provides individualized instruction. It has a supportive environment, a flexible structure, and programming and curricula relevant to student interests and goals (College of Education and Human Development, 2005).

Dropout: A dropout is a high school student who left high school between the beginning of one school year and the beginning of the next without earning a high school diploma or its equivalent such as a GED (Laird, et al., 2007).

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Current Graduation Rates in America

As America changed throughout its history, the nature and purpose of education changed. However, as the nation became more industrialized and less agrarian, the importance of formal education grew steadily, and graduation from high school increased apace from 1900 to 1970 (Kaufman, 2001). However, graduation rates have leveled off or even declined in the last four decades (Kaufman, 2001). The national averaged freshman graduation rate had increased from 71.7% in 2000-2001 to 73.9% in 2006-2007, but decreased to 73.4% in 2005-2006 (Aud et al., 2010). Concern over the flat or declining graduation rate has appeared in many forms, and the dropout phenomenon has become the subject of much investigation and debate. Unfortunately, disagreement over the true graduation rate has also arisen, with different sources reporting widely disparate estimates of dropout numbers.

In 2006, the AYPF reported that one student leaves America's high schools every nine seconds. In 2009, the CDF stated that 20,715 students left American high schools every day; some returned to school, but 2,222 of each day's exodus did not. Sweeten, Bushway, and Paternoster (2009) reported that approximately 7,000 students drop out of the nation's high schools every day. The difference between the CDF (2009) figure and that of Sweeten et al. (2009) highlighted the confusion surrounding this issue; however it is worth nothing that The American Alliance for Excellent Education (AAEE) in 2009 also reported that nearly 7,000 students drop out every day. Sweeten et al. (2009) estimated the total number of dropouts stood between 1.2 and 1.3 million students every year. Kennelly and Monrad (2007) concluded that 1.3 million students failed to graduate from high school in 2004, and the AAEE (2009) reported that 1.3 million students dropped out in 2009.

The dropout rate varies across the nation. Unfortunately, some of America's largest school districts reported high dropout rates throughout the last decade. In 2007, the United States Department of Education, reported that dropout rates in the nation's 100 largest school districts stood near 31% (Rycik, 2007). In over 20 large cities in 2007, 75% of all high school students attended schools where graduation rates fell below 60% (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Chicago's high schools may have graduated only 54% of their students in the first years of the 21st Century (Rycik, 2007). New York City, which graduated a total of 33,520 students in 2001, discharged from school, either through dropping out or expulsion, 55,000 students that same year (Gotbaum, 2002). Swanson and Chaplin (2003) reported graduation rates for large districts in 1999-2000 varied from a high of 97.6% for Fairfax, County, Virginia to a low of 17.6% for Cincinnati, Ohio. Swanson and Chaplin reported, "In very large districts, in those educating large numbers of disadvantaged minority students, and in states with historically struggling educational systems, the odds of graduating from high school for the *average* student lie well below 50:50" (Swanson & Chaplin, 2003, p. 35).

In 2005, the total number of people age 20 who had not completed high school in America stood at 700,000 persons (Levin et al., 2007). In 2000, not one state graduated over 90% of its students (Sum et al., 2003). In 2003, New Jersey led the nation with a graduation rate of 87%, and both the District of Columbia and South Carolina had the lowest graduation rate at 60% (American Youth Policy Forum, 2006). In 2006 the highest graduation rate in the nation was 87.5% in Wisconsin (Planty et al., 2009). Nationally, in 2007 approximately two-thirds of the freshman class of 2004 graduated on time with regular diplomas (Aud et al., 2010). In that year, Vermont led the nation with an averaged freshman graduation rate of 88.6% while Nevada had the lowest rate of 52% (Aud et al., 2010). Sixteen states graduated 80% or more of their

students, but 11 states graduated less than 70% of their students (Aud et al., 2010). Different studies have shown the dropout rate in some states nears 40% (Laird, Kienzal, DeBell, & Chapman, 2007). For 2008-09, Aud et al. (2012) reported that 16 states graduated 80% or more of their students using the averaged freshman graduation rate, but nine states still graduated less than 70% of students.

Historically, understanding the national dropout rate has been difficult because different sources reported widely disparate estimates of high school graduation. In 2007, estimates ranged from a low of 66% to a high of 88% (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010). Estimates of minority graduation rates, ranging from 50 to 85%, varied even more than estimates of the overall graduation rate (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010; Mischel & Roy, 2006). These discrepancies have arisen from a number of causes that will be discussed later in this paper.

Since the 1960s, federal involvement in education has increased, intensifying concerns about graduation rates. Federal legislation passed in 2001, known as the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB), emphasized the importance of graduation and required school districts to improve graduation rates (Gill et al., 2008). That act mandated that schools not complying with the act's requirements faced a variety of consequences, including reduction in federal funding (Gill et al., 2008). This has evoked responses from the nation's educators and governors. In 2005, the National Governors Association (NGA) initiated a nationwide effort to address the situation and to raise graduation rates across all states and school districts (National Governors Association [NGA], 2005).

Amid the clamorous concern about high school graduations rates, it is easy to forget that historically high school graduation has not been the norm throughout much of American history. Although exact data are elusive, the majority of Americans did not graduate from high school

until the middle of the 20th century, following a great increase in high school graduation rates between 1940 and 1950 (Goldin, 1999). In 1940, graduation rates among Americans ages 25-29 stood around 38% (Kaufman, 2001). Using one measure (the status completion rate), Kaufman (2001) reported that graduation rates increased to 86% during the early 1980s and have remained near that number ever since. Current debates over true graduation rates, the causes for school leaving, and the effectiveness of the many state and federal efforts to reform education have grown from a national debate rooted in the earliest days of the European colonization of America.

Understanding the import of leaving high school requires understanding how the role of education has changed throughout the history of this country. As part of American culture, the roots of formal education trace back to the 17th Century English colonization of the Americas. One question needing study is whether contemporary American education meets the needs of all students or whether the nation's schools are actually pursuing policies that deter some students from graduation. Addressing that question requires understanding the history of American education and how education has, or has not, changed as American society has evolved.

The Evolution of Education in America

Formal education arrived with the earliest 17th century colonists and grew directly from the religious beliefs of those settlers. During the 17th Century, the English people seethed with religious fervor, convinced that *The Bible*, as the ultimate source of all wisdom and knowledge, should guide all human activity and must be known and understood by all people (Morgan, 1986; Noble, 1935). Fueled by this bibliolatry, Medieval Latin Schools flourished across England, and taught Latin, Greek, and Hebrew (Carter & Steinbrink, 1992; Noble, 1935). When the Puritans established Plymouth Colony in 1620, they brought to the New World this belief of the Bible's

importance. Hence, Puritans began operating schools soon after arriving on this continent. Although education was important throughout the colonies, it differed in form across the various regions: Schools in the New England colonies were truly church-state in nature; schools in Maryland and Pennsylvania were more parochial in nature (Carter & Steinbrink, 1992), and in the South, the "charity" schools that were established were mainly secular in nature (Carter & Steinbrink, 1992).

Early New England colonists who quickly realized the land was not suitable for extensive agriculture became entrepreneurs and businessmen (Carter & Steinbrink, 1992; Noble, 1935). Because their religion was based on the Old Testament with its theology of reward and punishment, New England colonists viewed their success as a gift from God (Carter & Steinbrink, 1992; Lauderdale, 1975). This belief encouraged the growth of an elite group, so New England society became dominated by class and status, a feature reflected in the region's schools (Carter & Steinbrink, 1992; Lauderdale, 1975). Early Puritan schools had two purposes: first, to teach orthodox, Puritan morality, and second, to teach obedience to the state (Lauderdale, 1975). The authoritarian school system that developed in New England adhered to the Puritan belief that children must be taught to obey God and their parents for the good of society (Litz, 1975). Carter and Steinbrink (1992) stated that since New England's education system became the standard across the colonies and later the nation, this view of education dominated American education until the 20th Century. One element of Puritanism, its belief in predestination, could account for the popularity of intelligence testing in America, beginning with the late 19th Century use of such tests to exclude supposedly inferior foreign immigrants (White, 2005).

New England's class structure contributed to competitive rather than cooperative learning (Carter & Steinbrink, 1992) and presaged the nation's continued emphasis on tests, rigidly

proscribed scores to define academic success, and possibly the consequent alienation of students not able to compete academically. Coupled with the continued use of various skill or intelligence tests, the division of society into groups defined by personal abilities or personal quality remains as an inheritance from our nation's Puritan roots (White, 2005) and could at least partially explain disparities between school districts, or between schools within the same district (Kozol, 2005). Although contemporary thought may speak of heredity rather than divine ordination, the Puritan concept of sorting people according to their personal attributes remains viable in modern education (White, 2005).

Puritans also believed that in America they could create a perfect society, a "City of God" (McKnight, 2003), and Puritans believed they had a mission to enlighten newcomers and bring them into this perfect Puritan world (McKnight, 2003). This emphasis on conforming to an ideal lifestyle has been reflected in American education's continuing reliance upon standardized testing and a common national curriculum (McKnight, 2003). John Calvin first viewed prescribed curriculum as essential for earning a terminal degree, and the practice remains part of the Puritan, Protestant work ethic that dominates American culture, including education (Doll, 2008). As Doll (2008) stated, "…the word and concept of curriculum have been embedded in a Protestant, bourgeois, commercial/capitalist culture" (Doll, 2008, p. 190). However, America's current high school students may not conform to these norms and may indeed be incapable of succeeding within an education system still committed to 16th Century precepts.

The Massachusetts colony grew rapidly, expanding from 8,000 people in 1635 to 20,000 in 1642, and many of the colony's newcomers were college-educated men, university graduates who had been forced from England, where their fiery brand of Protestantism was not welcomed (Tanis, 1970). Almost immediately these educated colonists built schools to train boys for

careers as ministers, bailiffs, secretaries, doctors, and lawyers (Carter & Steinbrink, 1992; Noble, 1935). The Boston Latin School opened in 1635, a mere 15 years after the first colonists arrived, and Harvard College began one year later (Noble, 1935). In 1647, motivated by strong Puritan beliefs, the Massachusetts legislature enacted the "Old Deluder Satan Act," that required all communities with over 50 families to provide public education to instruct youths to read the Bible and evade Satan's wiles (Noble, 1935). Education was important for religious reasons more than for learning practical information (McKnight, 2003).

These impassioned early settlers also viewed education as a means to Christianize the area's native population. John Eliot, a Puritan minister in early Massachusetts, attempted to create communities where Native Americans could learn to live as White men. To do this, Eliot established schools for Native children that were like schools attended by colonists' children (Tanis, 1970). Although these Utopian Indian communities soon faded as animosity between Colonials and Natives increased, recognition of education's importance grew and spread throughout the Atlantic colonies (Tanis, 1970).

Early in the 18th Century, the colonies, as providers of raw materials and consumers of manufactured goods, became England's most valued trading partners, and the rise of a mercantile middle class in America created a need to educate children for new roles in the new economy; this forced colonial schools to evolve from teaching the traditional Latin School curriculum to teaching a more worldly and functional course of study (Carter & Steinbrink, 1992; Litz, 1975; Noble, 1935). Called "English Schools," these schools offered instruction in mathematics, astronomy, business, and other courses related to commerce and industry; and throughout the 18th Century, these institutions sprang up in many major cities (Noble, 1935). During this same period, protestant religions in America underwent a fundamental change from

the rigidly authoritarian orthodoxy of earlier centuries to a belief that human reason could support morality (Lauderdale, 1975; Litz, 1975). Jefferson, while doubting that human reason could create morality, which he considered a basic human quality, did believe that reading good books could help a person cultivate morality (Lauderdale, 1975). Within a century, American education changed profoundly, moving away from its original religious roots toward a more rational, worldly role.

However, moral education did not disappear from American schools. Although Benjamin Franklin believed education should prepare people for real-world occupations, he also believed education should improve one's morals (Perkinson, 1976.) Thomas Mann, who worried about the dangers of sectarian education, also advocated teaching morality from the Bible without religious comment (Lauderdale, 1975). This practice survived for over a century in American schools. In 1959, 42% of schools included Bible reading as part of their educational program, and in the 1960s about a dozen states required Bible recitation as part of the public school curriculum (Lauderdale, 1975). That the importance of teaching morality in schools has not disappeared from American schools has been repeatedly shown in the continuing conflict over school prayer and posting the Ten Commandments in classrooms.

However, the change from classical to practical education did not happen overnight, and many colonial schools offered two strands of learning: the traditional curriculum focused on the classics, and the modern English curriculum intended to prepare students for lives in the new American society and economy (Noble, 1935). When Benjamin Franklin, who did not admire organized religion (Perkinson, 1976), opened his Academy of Philadelphia in 1750, he intended this new school should eschew the classic model and teach only the new curriculum to prepare young men for a world of work (Noble, 1935; Perkinson, 1976). However, the academy's

trustees resisted Franklin's efforts and maintained the original classical tradition in the Academy's early years (Perkinson, 1976). But, by 1824 a prominent area school, the Boston English Classical School, which had originally offered both traditional Latin and new English instruction, dropped its classical strand and became simply the English High School (Noble, 1935).

Franklin's emphasis on practical education to increase earning capacity survived and may fuel current concerns about the quality of education, particularly ongoing emphases on standards based education (Proefriedt, 2010). The change in the direction of colonial education indicated that current tension between traditional instruction and practical vocational classes began early on. This unresolved tension may have fostered current dissatisfaction with schools and thereby have contributed to the dropout problem.

After the colonies achieved independence, education continued to gain importance as the new republic's leaders saw education as a means to promote democracy and to guarantee the nation's survival. However, during this period schools shifted away from their religious nature and became more secular (Carter & Steinbrink, 1992; Litz, 1975; Proefriedt, 2010). Also, because schools had relied upon books from England that were no longer available, American schools began creating their own curricular materials (Carter & Steinbrink, 1992).

Early American leaders saw education as essential to preserving the new American nation. Franklin believed education should be practical; that educated people could better serve society, and that educating the public was the best way to improve society (Perkinson, 1976; Proefriedt, 2010). Thomas Jefferson believed that government existed to protect the population, but also that the people needed protection from the power of government (Perkinson, 1976). According to Jefferson, a society's people were the best protectors of that society, and those

people must be informed and well-educated to effectively fill the role of guardians (Carpenter, 2004; McDonald, 2004; Mercer, 1993). Hence, for Jefferson education became the best means of protecting a democracy and the ultimate safeguard against tyranny (Carpenter, 2004; Mercer, 1993; Perkinson, 1976). Jefferson understood the revolutionary nature of the new republic and believed America could only survive if the government were supported by an egalitarian and revolutionary education system (Mercer, 1993).

Jefferson proposed to divide counties into smaller units charged with the responsibility of educating all people (Mercer, 1993), an idea later embodied in the creation of local school districts. Concerning the need to continue reforming education, Jefferson said:

> There are two subjects, indeed, which I shall claim a right to further as long as I breathe, the public education and the subdivision of counties into wards. I consider the continuance of republican government as absolutely hanging on these two hooks… Education would have raised the mass of people to the high ground of moral respectability necessary to their own safety and to orderly government… and make it (education) the keystone of the arch of our government (Mercer, 1993, p. 21).

Although Jefferson failed to convince the Virginia House of Burgesses to institute free public education for all children, he did convince that legislative body to create the University of Virginia, the nation's first publicly funded university (Carpenter, 2004). Interestingly, Virginia offered publicly funded university education before it offered free education to younger students (Perkinson, 1976). Jefferson was also instrumental in founding West Point Military Academy (McDonald, 2004). Jefferson feared a standing army and a military school, but he had failed in his attempts to create a national university and managed to include in West Point's mission the promotion of useful national scientific and non-military knowledge (McDonald, 2004).

Throughout the 19th century, public education grew in importance and evolved beyond the elementary school classroom. Throughout the second quarter of the 19th century, Horace Mann, Massachusetts educator, struggled to improve the quality of education in Massachusetts, where the early system had fallen into disarray with some villages offering no schooling at all (Perkinson, 1976). This had resulted in good schools for the wealthy and inferior education or no education for the poor, a situation Mann feared would lead to a two-class society and the evolution of an ignorant, ungovernable rabble (Perkinson, 1976). This concern persists in contemporary America as socio-economic factors prolong vast disparities between the nation's schools (Kozol, 2005). Mann saw education as essential for teaching morality and preserving a secure middle class. He believed education led to prosperity and prosperity led to a stable society (Lauderdale, 1975; Perkinson, 1976). Because Mann believed good teachers were vital to good education, he campaigned for the creation of normal schools to provide well-prepared teachers. In the 1840s, under Mann's influence, Massachusetts became the first state to institute compulsory education for all (Perkinson, 1976). Mann's reforms in Massachusetts moved schools away from religious and municipal control toward control by an independent governmental body, the local school district (Litz, 1975). This change became the basis for the modern model of independent school districts (Litz, 1975).

Franklin, Jefferson, and Mann all viewed education as vital to the success of a democratic nation (Carpenter, 2004; Lauderdale, 1975; McDonald, 2004; Noble, 1935; Perkinson, 1976). The belief that education leads to better jobs and that better jobs lead to a more stable and healthy society remains alive in our society as shown by the nation's continued reliance upon education reform to solve America's social problems (Lauderdale, 1975).

Early America's educational efforts proved effective. The growth of the common school, not schools for "common people" but schools offering education common to all students, revolutionized education (Lauderdale, 1975). By 1840, elementary school enrollment in the United States exceeded that of Germany (Goldin, 1999). Kindergartens transplanted from the German education systems first appeared in Wisconsin, where instruction was conducted in German; however, the first English-based kindergarten opened in Boston in 1860, and kindergartens were well established in a number of cities by the end of the 19th century (Baader, 2004). The emergence of "normal schools" as institutions specifically for training teachers gained momentum from 1875-1925 (Graham, 1978).

Throughout the 19th Century, most European nations continued to educate a select few while ignoring education for the masses, a practice that resulted in universities of a higher quality than those found in America but also suppressed the overall educational attainment of most people (Goldin, 1999) However, because American schools were publicly funded and open to everyone (at least to everyone with white skin), literacy in America was almost universal by the end of the 19th Century (Goldin, 1999). Since 95% of all American students ages 5-13 attended at least some school every year, the nation's overall educational level exceeded the educational levels of most European nations by the end of the century (Ravitch, 2000).

During the latter half of the 19th Century, education at all levels expanded rapidly (Lauderdale, 1975), partly because of the need to familiarize the growing population of immigrants with life in America (Baader, 2004). However, American education before the 20th Century remained a part-time endeavor. In 1890, the average attendance rate was 86 days per year, and less than five percent of high school age children attended high schools (Cuban, 1993). Of that group, only 11% graduated, and most of those graduates were female (Cuban, 1993). By

any standards, even the worst estimates of current high school graduation rates far exceed national educational attainment levels of any time period prior to 1970.

The current debate over public school funding, as evidenced by the charter schools movement and the push for publicly funded vouchers to pay for private education, has been present from the early years of American education. For much of the 19th Century the debate over the public or private nature of schools continued, with the definition of "public" being a school that prepared students to better serve the needs of the public rather than a school totally severed from religious elements (Lubienski, 2001). However, throughout the 19th Century, education grew ever more entrenched in the public sphere of society as a number of state court cases affirmed the right of local governments, including school districts, to create and fund high schools with public tax revenues. The best-known of these cases, *Charles E. Stuart et al., v. School District No. 1 of Kalamazoo et al.,* from 1874, is often considered the key legal decision establishing publicly funded secondary education; however, between 1871 and 1893, seven court cases in seven different states supported publicly funded secondary schools, an indication that society accepted the need for education beyond simple reading and writing (Burrell & Eckelberry, 1934). Even earlier, in 1819 and again in 1846, the Supreme Court of Massachusetts had supported the use of tax money to fund secondary education (Burrell & Eckelberry, 1934). As the nation changed throughout the 19th century, the need for education grew, and the use of public funds to support education became entrenched in the fabric of American society.

The NCLB act calls for equitable educational opportunities and places uniform standards upon certain aspects of American education (USDE, 2006). However, concerns about educational uniformity have resonated throughout America's educational system for over a century. As public education spread during the 19th Century, and as more people wanted higher

levels of education, there arose a call for uniformity across schools and universities. In 1892, the National Education Association (NEA) addressed this problem by creating the *Committee of Ten* in response to pressure from Charles Eliot, president of Harvard from 1869 to 1909 and tireless crusader for educational improvement in America (Perkinson, 1976; Ravitch, 2000). In 1895, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching determined that colleges and universities could not properly identify students who were prepared for higher education without a common definition of a high school education. One product of this effort, the *Carnegie Unit*, which is simply a measure of how much time a student spends in a classroom studying one particular subject, is still used to measure academic progress and preparation (Perkinson, 1976). Another lasting effect of the Committee of Ten was the growth of a standardized curriculum that includes most subjects commonly taught today (Carter & Steinbrink, 1992).

Although American education had assumed its present form by 1890, schooling at the turn of the 20th century differed from contemporary education in several ways. In 1910, two-thirds of the nation's students attended one-room schools often taught by poorly educated, underpaid teachers (Cuban, 1993). Because many teachers were poorly prepared to teach, education came to depend upon textbooks more than teachers as sources of knowledge (Cuban, 1993; Ravitch, 2000). This led to the nation's reliance upon teaching materials and the continuing controversy about the content of those materials. Generally, high school teachers were better educated than elementary teachers, but high schools of fewer than 100 students often had only one teacher for all subjects (Cuban, 1993).

The main controversy surrounding education in the last half of the 19th Century had been whether or not tax dollars should support secondary education for all students (Burrell & Eckelberry, 1934); however, in the early half of the 20th Century debate shifted to what was

being taught and to the purpose of schools. The history of 20th Century education is largely a story of conflict between advocates of traditional, teacher-centered instruction and proponents of progressive, child-centered instruction (Cuban, 1993; Ravitch, 2000). Although progressive education assumed many forms, its supporters generally promoted focusing curriculum on so-called practical subjects such as agriculture, business, carpentry, homemaking, and other life skills supported by pedagogy that made the teacher a mentor and guide rather than a dispenser of critical knowledge (Cuban, 1993; Ravitch, 2000).

The continuing debate about child-centered versus teacher-centered education began with those early 20th century efforts to improve education (Cuban, 1993; Ravitch, 2000). Some progressives urged complete rejection of traditional courses such as mathematics, history, language, literature, and basic sciences in favor of courses on socialization and applied learning; other progressives took more moderate approaches, but most reformers united around the belief that only a minority of American students needed college preparatory education (Ravitch, 2000), an approach quite unlike today's concern with falling graduation rates and college preparedness. During the progressive era, which emphasized developing students to fill specific vocational roles, standardized testing that claimed to scientifically identify skills inn order to place people in roles that suited them well became an important element of American education (Carter & Steinbrink, 1992). However, while progressive educational experts such as John Dewey, Edward Thorndike, and Harold Rugg, questioned the value of traditional education, enrollment in public high schools continued to climb, and parents and students alike continued to choose traditional, liberal, education (Ravitch, 2000).

Although students opted for traditional courses, the nature of American education in the new century changed as American society changed. As the country became more urban and less

agrarian, school districts consolidated, especially in larger cities (Cuban, 1993; Goldin, 1999). In the 1930s, about 128,000 independent school districts operated across the nation (Goldin, 1999). Many of these districts operated rural, often one-room, schools. In 1927, 153,000 one-teacher schools served 4,000,000 students (Cuban, 1999). In South Dakota, 80% of all teachers served in one-room schools, and in North Dakota 50% of all teachers worked in such schools (Cuban, 1999). However, this situation changed following World War II. From 1940 to 1980, 100,000 districts were eliminated through the process of consolidation (Strang, 1987). By 2000, only 14,978 regular public school districts functioned in the United States (Swanson & Chaplin, 2003). This consolidation process was often pushed by state governments that assumed an increasingly prominent role in financing and controlling education, a process that was stimulated by the national fear of falling behind the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.) when, in 1957, that nation launched Sputnik, the first man-made satellite to orbit the planet (Berends, 2004; Carter & Steinbrink, 1992; Strang, 1987).

Fear of Soviet ascendance in science and technology focused American attention on the quality of the nation's schools and increased the level of federal involvement in education. In 1958, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) to provide money for students attending college and to fund improvements in local schools (Ravitch, 2000; Strang, 1987). The NDEA raised the level of federal funding for education and increased federal involvement in public education. However, the NDEA was not the beginning of federal involvement in education, which had actually begun before the adoption of the US Constitution.

Acting under the Articles of Confederation, the federal government enacted the Land Ordinance of 1785, which divided the nation into townships and reserved land within each township for the support of public education, and from this act grew the tradition of small,

locally funded and locally governed school districts (Trattner, 1988). Federal involvement increased in 1867, when the *Bureau of Education* was created to oversee the federal role in education (Goldin, 1999; Snyder, 1993). Originally within the Department of the Interior, the Bureau of Education was renamed the *Office of Education* in 1929; became part of the Federal Security Agency in 1939; moved to the newly created agency for Health, Education, and Welfare in 1953, and became an independent cabinet-level agency with the creation of the Department of Education in 1980 (Goldin, 1999; Snyder, 1993). This change in the status of the office marked the growing importance of American education. The agency's role in collecting data on American schools dates back to 1870 when the clerk of the Office of Education began compiling data on the nation's schools (Snyder, 1993). In 1872, congress authorized a special allocation of $1,800 annually for data collection, and from that beginning has grown the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), currently a major source of information on the nation's education system (Snyder, 1993).

Following World War II, the changing role of the federal involvement in education reflected the many other changes of that era of American history. Beginning in southern cities, the civil rights movement swept the country during the 1950s. In 1963, President Kennedy was assassinated and replaced by Lyndon Johnson. The United States caught the Soviet Union in the space race and put an American on the moon in 1969, and President Johnson pushed a broad agenda for social reform, including education and immigration reforms. The federal role in education grew more prominent at the very time American society began to change in ways not anticipated in 1960.

As part of Johnson's *Great Society* initiative to eliminate poverty, the federal government enacted the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. Divided into the

programs of Titles I, II, III and IV, the ESEA created initiatives to improve education, to create social equality, and to help people climb out of poverty (McAndrews & Scott, 2002). Related directly to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the ESEA raised national consciousness about racial inequities in education (McDill, Natriello, & Pallas, 1986). Although the ESEA dedicated only a small amount of money to public education for grades kindergarten through twelve (K-12), the act wrought major change in American education because the federal government became directly involved in American K-12 education for the first time in nation's history (Kantor, 1991). Furthermore, the ESEA changed education by forcing states and schools to shift education's emphasis from the needs of society to the needs of students and became the beginning of the accountability movement in American education (Halperin, 1975).

Although purely speculative, it seems unlikely that many of the changes that have occurred in American education since 1965, such as the creation of the Department of Education, special education legislation, the *Nation at Risk* report, *Goals 2000*, the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001 and much of the controversy currently gripping American education would have occurred had there not been some federal action at least similar to the ESEA of 1965.

President Johnson's Great Society initiative occurred in response to various forces already changing the character of America. One such force was the Civil Rights movement that began in the 1950s with a series of protests and one major judicial decision, *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). Writing for the Court in 1954, Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote:

> In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right that must be made available to all on equal terms (Yell, Rogers, & Lodge Rogers, 1998, np).

Those words from the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) show the connection between the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and federal involvement in educational reform in the 1960s. What began as an attempt to achieve racial equality quickly expanded into a movement for educational equality for all regardless of race or disability (Berends, 2004).

The seeds of this movement toward universal education for all Americans had been planted before 1960. Starting near the end of the 19th century, all states moved toward mandatory education for all students. This trend was completed by 1918 when some level of education was compulsory for all students in all states (Yell et al., 1998). Initially, this movement included efforts to educate students with disabilities. In 1910, the first White House Conference on Children addressed the needs of children with disabilities and special needs (Yell et al., 1998). However, over time state courts increasingly allowed schools to exclude students with physical or mental handicaps (Itkonen, 2007; Keogh, 2007; Yell et al., 1998).

Throughout the 20th century, various advocacy groups formed to combat discrimination against handicapped people. Nonetheless, as late as 1969, the state of North Carolina made it a crime for parents to persist in sending to school children who were mentally impaired (Yell et al., 1998). Encouraged by the *Brown* decision, advocacy groups intensified their demands, resulting in the enactment of several important pieces of federal legislation. In 1958, Congress passed the *Expansion of Teaching in the Education of Mentally Retarded Children Act* to train teachers to work with mentally handicapped students (Yell et al., 1998). The ESEA of 1965 provided funding to educate students with special needs, and *Section 504* of the *Rehabilitation Act*, passed in 1973, protected individuals with disabilities from discrimination based on those disabilities (Yell et al., 1998).

This crusade for equality regardless of physical or mental disability culminated in 1975 when President Gerald Ford signed *The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975*. Also known as PL 94-142, in 1990 this act was revised and renamed the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) and became the basis for current national efforts to provide education for all people (Itkonen, 2007; Keogh, 2007; Yell et al., 1998). Together with the *Civil Rights Act of 1964* and the ESEA of 1965, the *Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975* finally guaranteed that no children in America could be denied an opportunity to receive education. However, with children of all ability levels and differing backgrounds attending school, the nature of education changed, and that created new criticisms and new calls for reform. One of the most significant reform crusades began in 1983 during the administration of President Ronald Reagan.

In 1983, the nation felt pressure to change something as a result of increased competition from emerging Asian and European nations. As often happens in America, perceived problems were blamed upon education, and powerful voices united in demanding reform of the nation's schools (Berends, 2004). Hence, the Reagan administration called upon the newly created Department of Education to study American education. The result was the 1983 publication of a report entitled, *A Nation at Risk*, which claimed America was losing ground to foreign nations and blamed the nation's education system for that loss of dominance (Tanner, 1993). The introduction to the report set the tone by stating, "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war." (National Commission on Excellence in Education [NCEE], 1983, p. 112). Considered highly political by many, *A Nation at Risk* has been criticized for distorting statistics to attack American public schools and to further the agenda of various

political groups (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Bracey, 2003). Although faulted for bias and inaccuracy (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Bracey, 2003; Ravitch, 2000; Tanner, 1993), *A Nation at Risk* drove federal educational endeavors for the remainder of the 20th century and revived interest in the nation's schools (Ravitch, 2000). The NCLB and today's concern with high school completion both fit into a reform continuum initiated and defined by *A Nation at Risk.*

Unlike earlier calls for reform that advocated tracking students into various levels of education, *A Nation at Risk* envisioned American schools as providing the same high quality education for all students and called for renewed emphasis on basic, core courses at the high school level (Ravitch, 2000). Although this seemed admirable, some educators questioned the report's call for higher academic standards, increased time in school, and use of academic tests (McDill, Natriello, & Pallas, 1986). Critics claimed these elements were potentially dangerous for American students, particularly because such approaches could increase the rate of dropping out, a concern of American educators long before *A Nation at Risk* was published (McDill, Natriello, & Pallas, 1986). Roderick (1994) postulated the increased pressure to avoid social promotions resulted in increased grade retentions, which led to increased dropping out of school.

Although the administration changed in 1992, federal educational reform efforts continued largely unchanged. Throughout the 1990s, the Clinton administration continued a national education initiative begun President H.W. Bush in response to *A Nation at Risk*. Called *"Goals 2000, Educate America Act"*, this program outlined important goals America should strive to reach by the year 2000. Predictably, these goals continued the trend of increasing federal involvement in local education. In 2000, Wurz listed the following objectives specified in the *Goals 2000, Educate America Act*:

- All students would enter school ready to learn;

- High school graduation rates would rise to 90% by the year 2000;
- Students in various grades would demonstrate grade level competencies in a variety of challenging subjects;
- Teachers would have access to programs to improve and continue their skills as educators;
- American students would be first in the world in mathematics and science achievement;
- Every adult in the nation would be literate and possess the skills needed to be a lifelong learner;
- All schools would be drug-free and safe environments for students;
- All schools would promote positive relationships with parents enabling parents to be full partners with schools in the education of children.

Although the National Governors Association remains concerned with improving American education, and although the objectives defined by the *Goals 2000* movement remain largely unmet, a new federal education initiative came to the forefront in the 21st Century. Titled the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001 (NCLB), this legislation addressed a number of educational problems, including disparity between the quality of education available to minority and nonminority students and the disparity between the graduation rates of these groups (Fusarelli, 2004; Gill et al., 2008). To achieve these ends, NCLB mandated that every district and school in America be evaluated with a uniform system of standards and assessment (Fusarelli, 2004). Schools were to be rated on whether they make "Adequate Yearly Progress" (AYP) based on various criteria, including achievement test scores in specific academic areas and graduation rates (Linn, Baker, & Betebenner, 2002). Schools failing to meet AYP requirements faced a number of penalties, including loss of federal revenue, transfer of students to better performing

schools, and providing supplemental services to students needing assistance (Gill et al., 2008; Linn et al., 2002).

By following a market-oriented approach to school improvement, NCLB pressures schools to improve or lose students and federal funding and combines school choice and test-based accountability for the first time (Betebenner, Howe, & Foster, 2005). NCLB relies upon standardized testing to measure school effectiveness, but critics have charged that high-stakes testing forces teachers to concentrate on test items at the expense of other educational activities and that the tests drive the curriculum (Faulkner & Cook, 2006). An additional concern posits that reliance upon high-stakes tests may increase inequity rather than reduce it because schools that show improved test scores may actually show improvement because parents of higher achieving students will send those students to the best schools, thereby concentrating low-achieving groups in the same, low quality schools (Betebenner et al., 2005).

Amid the debate about the merits of standardized tests, attention has shifted away from concern over graduation rates (Swanson & Chaplin, 2003). Although NCLB does require that schools maintain a high graduation rate, concerns remain that increasing academic standards and relying upon standardized, high-stakes tests could force out lower ability students and increase rather than decrease national dropout rates (Swanson & Chaplin, 2003).

Summary of historical trends in American education.

This brief summary of the history of American education shows that education has figured prominently in American society since the earliest days of European colonization and reveals that repeated cycles of controversy have shaped and reshaped American education. Perhaps this controversy indicates the importance of education to America or perhaps this controversy is inevitable within the nation's participatory federalist society. Whatever the case,

education is important in contemporary America; and as American society has changed, American education has changed. In recent decades one such change is the increasing federal involvement in education, which has impacted how American schools operate. Adoption of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 began this federal involvement; the *Nation at Risk* report of 1983 questioned the quality of America's schools and initiated an era of high-stakes tests to evaluate education's successes; and the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001 transferred a great deal of control from local and state governments to the federal government.

Against this tapestry of change and controversy, the value of education has continued to increase while the structure of education has remained static. The Carnegie unit remains a standard measure of educational attainment; the 9-month school year and traditional, liberal curricula continue to dominate the nation's high schools, and promotion based upon letter grades or specific percentages remains a standard practice. However, the America of today is very different from the America of 1900 or even 1960, and failure to account for these differences may explain at least in part the nation's failure to solve the problem of high school dropouts. Schools must learn to function within the real world as it exists.

Changes in American Society

America has changed in the past century, much of that change occurring in the past four decades. One change was in the size of the population. In 1900, the population of the United States stood at 76,808,887 people (US Census Bureau, 1901). By 1950, that figure had doubled to 154,233,254 people (USCB, 1950), and in 2009, the population of the United States almost doubled again reaching 305,760,843 people (USCB, n.d.). This population increase alone impacted the nature of American schools.

However, numerical size has not been the only change in the American population. When President Lyndon Johnson signed the Immigration Act of 1965, he stated, "This bill that we will sign today is not a revolutionary bill. It does not affect the lives of millions. It will not reshape the structure of our daily lives…" (Daniels, 2008, p.77). On the contrary, the legislation President Johnson signed that day opened America to people from many nations, and eventually altered the makeup of American society in ways that continue to impact who Americans are, how America functions, and how America educates its children.

Prior to 1965, the immigration system in place since the 1920s allowed immigrants to enter the country based on a quota system related to national origin and favoring persons from northern and western Europe (Borjas & Freeman, 1992). Following 1965, family reunification, not nationality, became the guiding principle for American immigration policy (Borjas & Freeman, 1992). Also, before 1965 immigration from the Western Hemisphere was not controlled, and nearly half of the new immigrants who arrived before 1965 came from other countries in the Americas (Massey, 1995). In 1900, 84% of America's immigrants came from Europe. By 1990, only 22% of immigrants came from Europe, while 42.5% came from Latin America, and 25.2% from Asia (United States Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration Bureau of the Census, [DOC], 1993). From 1901 to 1930, 79.6% of immigrants came from Europe, 16.2% from the Americas, 3.7% from Asia, and .5% from other areas; however, from 1971 to 1993, only 13% of new immigrants came from Europe, 49.6% came from the Americas, 34.5% originated in Asia, and the balance of 2.9% came from elsewhere (Massey, 1995). Whether or not the Immigration Act of 1965 was solely responsible for these immigration patterns, such large changes in immigrants' countries of origin have changed the demographic composition of the United States.

These demographic changes took several forms, one being the places where immigrants chose to live. Predictably, immigrants usually settled near their original port of entry (USDOC, 1993). Thus, in 1990 New York and California together claimed nearly half of the nation's total immigrants because most immigrants arrived in those states upon reaching the United States (USDOC, 1993). In 1950, 25% of immigrants lived in New York City, while 14% lived in California. But, by 1990 nearly a third of immigrants lived in California and only 14% in New York (USDOC, 1993). This reflected the change from European immigration, which mostly impacted cities of the east coast, to immigration from Latin America and Asia, which mainly affected west coast cities.

Traditionally, immigrants settled in large cities, and in 1990, ten American cities had populations that were half or more immigrant (USDOC, 1993). This altered America's metropolitan areas and schools within those areas. President Johnson misread the future when he stated that changes in American immigration law would not reshape the structure of daily life for Americans because the changes that resulted from altering American immigration policy have been tremendous, perhaps revolutionary, and America's schools are constantly pressured to modify their methods in response to these changes.

Three major changes resulting from the new immigration system were: the size of the population, the racial composition of the population, and how the country views and defines racial groups. In 1900, the total population of 76,808,887 was 87.8% White, 11.6% Black, .15% Chinese, .1% Japanese, and .35% Native American (USCB, 1901). By 1940, the population was 131,669,275 with 89.7% White, 9.8% Black, and .4% described as "other" (USCB, 1950). In 1950, the population of 151,326,000 was 89.3% White, 9.9% Black, and .7% other (United States Census Bureau, 1965). In 1960, prior to the Immigration Act of 1965, the population

totaled 179,324,000, with 88.5% of that total being White, 10.5% being Black, and .9% being other (USCB, 1965). However, the 2000 census showed a total population of 281,421,906 people, 77.1% of them White, 12.9% Black, 4.2% Asian, and 12.5% Hispanic (United States Census Bureau, 2001). In 2009, the population of the United States reached 305,760,843 people (USCB, n.d.). The 2009 *QuickFacts* report showed a population that was 80% White, 12.8% Black, 1% American Indian or Alaska Native, 4.4% Asian, and .2% Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander (United States Census Bureau, 2009). This report also stated that 1.6% of the population reported belonging to two or more races and that 15.1% of the population were of Hispanic or Latino origin while 66% were White, but not Hispanic (USCB, 2009).

Changes in the methods and terminology used by the Census Bureau in reporting on the nation's racial composition indicate how America's view of race has changed. As time has passed, definitions of race have grown more complex. The 1990 census recognized four different racial groupings: American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian or Pacific Islander, Black, and White (United States Census Bureau, 2010). However, beginning with the 2000 census, respondents were able to claim membership in more than one race, and the number of categories was expanded to five by making Asian a separate category and adding Native Hawaiian (USCB, 2010). Furthermore, individuals who did not identify with any of the five groups specified in the survey could select a sixth category, "Some other race" (USCB, 2010). From the signing of the Immigration Act of 1965 to the year 2010, America's population changed, and the way Americans saw themselves changed as well.

Education, a fundamental element of American society, could not avoid being impacted by the changing nature of the American people. Between 1972 and 2007, while the number of White students in the nation's schools dropped from 78% to 56%, minority student enrollment

grew from 32% to 44%, due largely to swelling numbers of Hispanic students entering the nation's schools (Planty et al., 2009). From 1979 to 2008, the number of children ages 5 to 17 who spoke a language other than English in their homes increased from 3.8 to 10.9 million or from 9% to 21% of the population (Aud et al., 2010). Within America's schools, the number of public school students who spoke English with difficulty increased from 3% to 6 % (Planty et al., 2009). This change in the percent of English-speaking students within the nation's classroom, which affects how schools teach and whether or not students graduate from high school, may be one cause for the stagnation or decline in graduation rates in recent decades.

Despite concerns about the current rate of high school graduation, school enrollment rates and high school graduation rates have increased over the past century (Cuban, 1999). In 1890, although many American children attended school at least part of the year, high school enrollment was 3.5% of high school age students, but only 11% of those students graduated, and two-thirds of graduates were female (Cuban, 1999). In 1900, high school enrollment neared 10% with a graduation rate of 6.4% (Miao & Haney, 2004). Rumberger (1987) reported that only 40% of America's 25-29 year olds had completed high school in 1940, but that this figure neared 85% by 1980. However, the graduation rate, which peaked around 1970, has remained unchanged in subsequent years (Goldin, 1999; Sum et al., 2003). Heckman and LaFontaine (2010) and Maio and Haney (2004) claimed the graduation rate peaked in the 1960s and has either remained stagnant or has actually fallen in recent decades.

This study addresses causes behind the stalled or declining graduation rate. Within the context of American history, the nature and importance of education have changed, but education has remained a valuable asset contributing to the success of individuals and the health of society. High school graduation has long been an important milestone in the life of most

American youth as the passage from adolescence to adulthood, and education continues to confer benefits upon the educated. Why then do so many students drop out of school before achieving that important objective? What has caused this slowdown in graduation rates, and what can be done to reverse this trend and increase the number of students graduating from America's high schools?

Disagreement over the Actual High School Graduation Rate

Today's declining graduation rate is an issue of national concern. Because official numbers paint a bleak and often confusing picture of the dropout phenomenon, it is important to determine as precisely as possible the actual national graduation rate. Unfortunately, making that determination is not easy. Estimates of the national graduation rate range from a low of 66% to a high of 88%, depending upon the data used and the method used to interpret that data (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010). Some examples illustrate this problem.

In 2006, Bridgeland, DiIulio and Morison reported the graduation rate stood somewhere between 68% and 71%. However, for the same year, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported four different numbers describing high school graduation rates. These were: the National Event Dropout rate of 3.8%; the National Status Dropout rate of 9.3%; the National Status Completion rate of 87.8%; and the Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate, which stood at 74.7% for 2006 (Laird et al., 2007). The official 2007 graduation rate of 88% reported by the NCES (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010) was actually the status completion rate for that year (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010). However, using the same data interpreted differently, Heckman and LaFontaine (2010) reported a national graduation rate near 70% for 2007. This figure was not a status completion rate but an averaged freshman graduation rate. In 2009, the NCES reported an official Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate of 73.4% (Planty et al., 2009);

however, for the same year, AEE reported that only 69% of America's high school students graduated. This number corresponds closely to a 2002 rate of 70% reported by Greene and Forster (2003). In 2003, Sum et al. reported a national graduation rate of 70-75%. However, using a different interpretation of the national graduation data, Mischel and Roy (2006) placed the graduation rate near 90%, which corresponds more closely with NCES reports. Clearly, accurately defining the national graduation rate is not a simple matter.

Whereas disagreement exists about the exact national graduation rate, most studies agree that graduation rates among minorities and some special populations are lower than the rate for Whites. For example: Bridgeland et al. reported in 2006 that White students graduated at a rate near 75% while African Americans, Hispanic Americans and Native Americans graduated at a much lower rate. Estimates of graduation rates by race range across a very broad range from 50 to 85% (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010; Mischel & Roy, 2006).

For 1998, Green (2002) reported an overall graduation rate of 71% with 78% of Caucasian American students graduating, but only 56% of African American students and 54% of Hispanic American students graduating. In 2006, Bridgeland, DiIulio and Morison reported the graduation rate hovered near 50% for African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans. In a 2007 report on graduation rates for 20 year-olds, Levin, Belfield, Meunnig and Rouse reported dropout rates of 57% for African American males, 24% for African American females, 52% for Hispanic males, 31% for Hispanic females, and 29% for Caucasian American males while only 9% of Caucasian American females had dropped out. Generally, females drop out at lower rates than males (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Levin et al., 2007).

Students with disabilities, people in great need of education, also drop out at a higher-than-average rate. Thirty percent of all special education students drop out of high school before

graduation, as do 48% of students diagnosed with emotional or behavior disorders (Osher et al., 2003). Worse, 73% of these students will be arrested within three to five years of leaving high school (Osher et al., 2003).

Whether discussing special populations, minorities, or the nation as a whole, confusion has persisted over the exact rate at which American students graduate from high school. Three factors have caused this disagreement: one, defining a graduate (or a dropout); two, identifying data that accurately portray graduation and dropout rates; and three, agreeing upon a formula to calculate graduation rates. Annually, the NCES has published four versions of the dropout rate. Because these rates have been calculated in several ways, have been based on different data, and have described different realities, it has become difficult to accurately define one true graduation rate for the entire nation based upon NCES definitions (Laird et al., 2007).

Defining a high school graduate.

The first source of confusion, concisely defining a high school graduate, has been a problem because it has been difficult to accurately describe a dropout. Students who began high school in one school may have transferred to another prior to graduation, and schools have had difficulty tracking such data, perhaps due in part to the American tradition of state education systems rather than one national system. Some students did not graduate in four years, but might have in five. Some students quit and returned later to complete high school or to obtain a certificate of General Educational Development (GED). The question has become whether graduation rates should count as *graduates* only people who have earned a regular diploma from a traditional high school, or should also include *completers*, persons who have obtained a GED or other alternative form of certification. Should reported graduation rates have included persons who immigrated to the United States after age 18 and never attended American schools? Because

these questions remain unresolved, it has become necessary to use different rates to describe the level of educational attainment.

The NCES uses four definitions to describe high school completion. The *event dropout rate*, which includes both public and private school students, estimates the percentage of American high school students who leave school without a diploma between the beginning of one school year and the beginning of the next (Cataldi et al., 2009). The *status dropout rate* reports the percentage of people ages 16-24 that are not currently in school and have earned neither a diploma nor an equivalent certificate (Cataldi et al., 2009). This figure is the one most often thought of by the general public when considering dropout rates (Greene, 2001). The third definition, *status completion rate,* reports the percentage of people ages 18-24 that have earned a high school diploma or equivalent certification (Cataldi et al., 2009). This is not the inverse of the status dropout rate because different age groupings are used to calculate these rates (Greene, 2001). Finally, the *averaged freshman graduation rate* is calculated by counting the number of 9^{th} grade students in one year and comparing that figure to the number of graduates four years later (Cataldi et al., 2009). Each of these definitions has unique characteristics and can be used in different ways.

The event dropout rate, because it counts the number of graduates in individual years, is often used to track changes in the dropout behavior of all students across American high schools (Cataldi et al., 2009). The status dropout rate counts all people ages 16-24 including immigrants who may never have attended school in the United States and is used to track population trends (Cataldi et al., 2009). The status dropout rate has always been higher than the event dropout rate because the status dropout rate includes everyone in an age range and not just those who quit in one year (Cataldi et al., 2009). The status completion rate also includes only one age group,

people ages 18-24. Like the status dropout rate, the status completion rate is used to study trends within a population; however, this rate derives its data from more sources than the status dropout rate (Cataldi et al., 2009). Finally, the averaged freshman graduation rate counts only public school students and indicates how many students are graduating from the nation's public schools in any given four year period (Cataldi et al., 2009).

Reports of the nation's graduation rate vary greatly depending upon which definition is used. Every year, the NCES the four sets of graduation rates disaggregated by race, gender, and geographic region. For example, in the 2009 NCES compendium report entitled *High School Dropout and Completion rates in the United States: 2007*, Cataldi et al. reported the following figures for 2007: The event dropout rate was 3.5%; the status dropout rate was 8.7% of persons ages16-24; the status completion rate was 89.0% of 18-24-year olds; and the averaged freshman gradation rate for the class of 2005-2006 was 73.2%. In 2011, Chapman, Laird, and KewalRamani reported the following data for 2009: The event dropout rate between 2008 and 2009 was 3.4%; the status dropout rate as of October 2009 was 8.1%; the status completion rate for 2009 was 89.8%; and the averaged freshman graduation rate for the class of 2008-09 was 75.5%.

Graduation rates also vary within states, and graduation rates in some cities are difficult to calculate because of inadequate or misleading data (Greene, 2001; Swanson & Chaplin, 2003). For example, in 2004 the state of Illinois reported a graduation rate of 71% for Chicago, but analysis of individual student records showed that only 54% of students who were freshmen in 2000 graduated in 2004 (Rycik, 2007). In the same year, the state of Illinois reported a statewide graduation rate of 97.6% (Laird, DeBell, & Chapman, 2006), questionable at best if data from the largest city could not be trusted. In 2007, Rycik referred to NCES data indicating the nation's

100 largest cities had dropout rates of 31% or more. Some of this confusion may had resulted because reporting graduation rates has long been delegated to the states, and the states may not have reported data at all, may have reported inaccurate data, or may not have used data management systems able to provide accurate data (Swanson & Chaplin, 2003; NGA, 2005).

According to a 2005 report of the National Governors Association:

> Dropout data are exceptionally difficult to track accurately because they rely on local school officials and outdated data collection systems to track the whereabouts of individual students who have left a given school for any of a number of reasons. In many schools, a missing student is presumed to be either in another school or to have graduated; in some cases, missing students are dropped from the records as if they had never existed. Some states do not require schools and school districts to request transcripts for transferring students, and so transfers may or may not be documented, making it all too easy for officials to code as transfers students whose status is actually unknown (NGA, 2005, p. 9).

The NGA report observed that the federal NCLB act requiring states to report graduation rates also allows states to determine their own method of measuring such rates. This has caused variation in reporting methods and has allowed states to underreport their dropout rates (NGA, 2005).

Different sources of graduation data.

Ironically, the controversy over accurate graduation definitions and data begins at the source of most data, and researchers who report widely disparate rates may have used data from that the same source, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the data acquisition

and storage office of the United States Department of Education. The official NCES website describes the office in this way.

> The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) … is the primary federal entity for collecting and analyzing data related to education in the U.S. and other nations. NCES is located within the U.S. Department of Education and the Institute of Education Sciences (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2009, sect. About Us, para. 2).

The NCES gathers educational data from several sources, including the states, the United States Census Bureau, and the Department of Labor and makes this data available to anyone studying American education. Annually, the NCES publishes this data in several reports, including: *The Condition of Education*, *Digest of Education Statistics*, *Indicators of School Crime and Safety*, and *Projections of Education Statistics*. Although researchers use data from other sources as well, NCES data remain the core around which most debates swirl, and the graduation rates published by the NCES are the rates most commonly quoted and debated. Thus, it is important to understand what NCES rates mean and how those rates are calculated, and that leads to the second source of controversy, the actual data itself.

Stating an accurate graduation rate requires accurate data on high school completion rates. Much of that data comes from the NCES; however, concerns remain about NCES data sources. One source used by the NCES is the Current Population Survey (CPS), a monthly survey of 60,000 households by telephone and personal interview conducted jointly by the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Census Bureau (BLS, 2009). The CPS gathers data on employment, income, gender, occupation, marital status, and other indicators (USCB, 2009). Once annually, the CPS concentrates on data related to educational history and to the educational levels of people within the households sampled (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010).

Critics fault CPS data for several reasons. The CPS does not locate every person who might be eligible for the survey and most often misses low income and minority people, the people most apt to be high school dropouts (Greene, 2001). Also, the CPS excludes military personnel and institutionalized people; however, recent immigrants are included whether or not they attended school in the United States (Laird et al., 2007), and CPS data treat GED recipients as regular graduates (Laird et al., 2007), a practice questioned by some (Cameron & Heckman, 1993; Cataldi et al., 2009; Green, 2002; Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010). Over time, the CPS survey instrument has changed in ways that may have improved the document, but have also affected the nature of data gathered by the CPS (Kaufman, 2001).

Critics also charge that the use of proxy respondents renders CPS information unreliable because responders may not know the education status of others in the household or may deliberately deceive survey takers (Sum et al., 2003). CPS figures might be skewed relative to gender-related data since nationally more males than females are incarcerated and would be excluded from CPS numbers (Sum et al., 2003). Furthermore, CPS data may not properly represent young minority men and women (Mischel & Roy, 2006) and may not accurately count GED recipients (Greene, 2001; Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010; Sum et al., 2003).

Another source of educational information the Common Core of Data (CCD). This data, collected annually by the NCES from state departments of education, show the numbers of students attending public schools and graduating from those schools every year, can be used to calculate both the event dropout rate and the averaged freshman graduation rate and do provide information about participating states, but not about specific school districts (Cataldi et al., 2009). Critics allege that several problems exist with CCD data. These are:

- Not all states report every year (Cataldi, 2007; Greene, 2001; Planty et al., 2009).

- Not all states meet reporting requirements or report data in the same format (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Cataldi, 2007; NGA, 2005; Sum et al., 2003).
- CCD data report only on public schools and give no information about private schools (Sum et al., 2003).
- Students who transfer may not be accurately tracked or properly reported by school districts (Bridgeland et al., 2006; NGA, 2005; Sum et al., 2003).
- Because some students, especially Hispanic males, quit school after the eighth grade and are never included in high school statistics; it is estimated that 18% of high school dropouts never attended high school and do not appear in CCD reports (Sum et al., 2003).

Another criticism of CCD data is the failure to address the problem of *freshman bias*, which results because high school students are most likely to be retained as freshman, thereby inflating freshman class numbers and distorting graduation rates based on comparisons between freshman enrollment in one year and graduation numbers four years later (Greene, 2001; Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010; Mischel & Roy, 2006). Freshman bias impacts some groups more than others because Black or Hispanic students are more apt to be retained than White or Asian students (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010). Some researchers address freshman bias by averaging ninth, tenth, and eleventh grade enrollments when calculating graduation rates (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010). Some researchers use eighth grade exit figures rather than ninth grade entrance numbers (Greene, 2001). Critics who assert that only 50% of America's minority students graduate from high school often fault claims of higher graduation rates for relying upon data potentially flawed by freshman bias (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010).

A third set of data used to calculate dropout rates derive from longitudinal studies conducted by the NCES and by the United States Department of Labor (DOL). The three

longitudinal studies most often relied upon in dropout research are: the Department of Labor's *National Longitudinal Study*, the *High School and Beyond* studies, and the *National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988* (Adelman, 2004).

The Department of Labor began the National Longitudinal Surveys (NLS) in the 1960's and renewed the cohort in 1979 (Pergamit, 1991). In 1979, the department began a new survey on youth. This survey, the NLSY:79, contained 12,000 persons and continued annually with interviews concerning a number of areas, including education (Pergamit, 1991; United States Department of Labor [USDOL], n.d.). An earlier study, the NLS:72, used a sample of 22,500 seniors from the class of 1972 and followed subgroups of this class up to 1986 (Adelman, 2004). In 1984, when most of these people were 30 or 31 years old, postsecondary transcripts were gathered to chart educational trends within this cohort (Adelman, 2004; Mischel & Roy, 2006).

The High School and Beyond Longitudinal Study of 1980 (HS&B) began with two groups of students, the sophomores and the seniors of 1980. These groups were surveyed every two years until 1986, and the sophomore cohort was sampled once more in 1992 (USDOL, nd). In 1993, when most subjects were 29 or 30 years old, postsecondary transcripts for 8,400 of the participants were gathered and analyzed (Adelman, 2004).

The third commonly used longitudinal study is the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88/2000). This study began with a national sample of 25,000 students in the 8th grade in 1988. Subgroups of this cohort were tracked to 2000 when researchers gathered and analyzed 8,900 transcripts of this group's participants, who were 26 or 27 years old at the time (Adelman, 2004). Critics of the NELS studies point out that Limited English Proficient and learning-disabled students were excluded, but no accounting was given for the number of students who were omitted for these reasons (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010). In addition, the

NELS:88 survey sampled students born around 1974, a cohort not representative of other years because this group had an unusually high graduation rate (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010).

Some studies of graduation rates have used data from other sources such as the General Educational Development Testing Service (GEDTS), the agency administering GED testing across the nation. However, data from the GEDTS do not indicate the schools that GED participants previously attended and cannot be used to calculate graduation rates for any cities or states (Cataldi et al., 2009). Another information source, the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS), a project of the University of Minnesota's Population Center, provides richly detailed data on many facets of American life and has been used by some researchers. However, IPUMS material is drawn from the decennial census; hence, it only offers information on one year out of ten (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010). Kaufman (2001) recommends utilizing education data from the American Community Survey (ACS), a new survey conducted nationally by the Census Bureau on a monthly basis. Because the ACS contacts 3 million households annually and is conducted in 12 monthly surveys, it could provide data that are more statistically reliable about population characteristics (Kaufman, 2001).

In their 2006 study of graduation rates, Mischel and Roy defend higher graduation rates based on CPS data and pointed out that much of the criticism of CPS data has never been verified through research. Mischel and Roy (2006) challenged studies finding lower graduation rates. For example, Mischel and Roy (2006) questioned results of the Swanson-UI or Cumulative Promotion Index, which is calculated by dividing each year's starting class size for grades eight, nine, and ten by the previous year's starting class size over a four-year period. According to Mischel and Roy (2006), this formula ignores the freshman bulge and fails to account for freshmen transferring in from private schools or dropping out prior to entering the ninth grade.

Because few minority students attend private schools, this could negatively alter reports on minority graduation rates (Mischel & Roy, 2006). Mischel and Roy (2006) also questioned graduation rates calculated with Green's formula. Like the Swanson-UI, the Greene formula uses averaged enrolments for grades eight, nine and ten, adjusted by a district's population trends for the high school aged population (Greene, 2001).

According to Mischel and Roy (2006), the Swanson-UI results for 2004 showed that only 68% of America's high school students graduated with 85% of the Whites graduating, 53% of the Hispanic students graduating, and 50% of the Blacks receiving diplomas. Mischel and Roy (2006) pointed out that Green's data for 2005 were similar to Swanson-UI results and showed a national graduation rate of 69%, White graduation at 76%, Hispanic at 53%, and Black at 55%. However, Mischel and Roy contended that the true graduation rate in America is close to 88% overall with only 25%, not 50%, of Black students failing to graduate (Mischel & Roy, 2006). Furthermore, Mischel and Roy (2006) found the overall graduation rate in the United States to be trending steadily upward. Mischel and Roy (2006) based their figures on research combining CPS data with results from the NELS study, which Mishel and Roy (2006) considered the most reliable data available.

However, Heckman and LaFontaine (2010) criticized Mischel and Roy for their reliance upon longitudinal studies. According to Heckman and LaFontaine (2010), both the HSB and the NELS studies excluded from their baseline data persons who should have been counted and failed to account for the number of students who might have been excluded. Also, Heckman and LaFontaine (2010) pointed out that Mischel and Roy used data from the fourth NELS follow-up, which excluded incarcerated people. For these reasons, Heckman and LaFontaine (2010) asserted that the conclusions of Mischel and Roy (2006) were inaccurately biased upward.

Besides disagreements about the quality of different data sources, dissension also debate arises about students who do not earn a diploma from a regular high school, but opt instead to earn a GED or similar equivalency certificate. The disagreement centers on whether or not these people should be considered graduates (Cameron & Heckman, 1993; Greene, 2001; Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010; Mischel & Roy, 2006; Tyler, 2004). Although GED earners may gain some long-term benefits from earning a GED (Tyler, 2004), the real benefits of earning a GED are questionable since studies indicate that GED recipients are comparable to high school dropouts in terms of earning power, post-secondary education completion rates, and success in military careers (Cameron & Heckman, 1993; Green, 2002; Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010). However, proponents of counting GED recipients as graduates hold that GED recipients are often considered equal to high school graduates in meeting the bureaucratic requirements for entry into most post-secondary education institutions (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010).

This debate around the GED has gained importance as the number of students choosing the GED route over regular graduation has increased from 2% of the completing population in the 1960s to 14% by 1987 (Cameron & Heckman, 1993) and 20% in 2001 (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010). The controversy surrounding whether or not to consider GED recipients as graduates impacts some populations more than others. Minority male high school completers are more than twice as likely as White completers to hold a GED rather than a regular diploma; prison inmates earn 10% of all GEDs issued, and 56% of the incarcerated population claiming high school completion have done so with a GED (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010).

Selecting a formula to calculate high school graduation rates.

The third cause for confusion about graduation rate involves selecting a formula that accurately interprets the data. Different approaches utilize different data or analyze it in different

ways. The NCES *completer rate* is basically longitudinal and can be calculated by dividing the graduates of one year by the number of dropouts during the four years that class was in high school. For illustrative purposes, using the year 2000, the formula would be Graduation Rate 2000 = $C_{2000} \div (D_{2000} + D_{1999} + D_{1998} + D_{1997} + D_{1996})$ where C is the number of students who graduate in year 2000, and D is the number of dropouts for that year and the preceding four years (Swanson & Chaplin, 2003). Since this formula simply counts dropouts rather than tracks them, it is easily applied; however, dropout rates are often unavailable for some states or school districts and may be unreliable since these NCES data rely on persons reporting honestly and accurately (Swanson & Chaplin, 2003).

Greene (2001) uses a different formula to calculate graduation rates. This is: The graduation rate for year X = Number of regular diplomas issued in year X ÷ Adjusted 8^{th} grade enrollment from year X-5 (Greene, 2001). Greene's adjusted eighth grade enrollment rate multiplies the actual eighth grade enrollment times the percent of change in the total high school population during the five-year period under study (Greene, 2001). This formula allows for changes caused by the freshman bulge and accounts for students who might drop out of school between grades eight and nine. The Greene method uses reported district enrollment data rather than reported dropout data; hence, this formula is simple to calculate and relies upon facts that are easily obtained and verified (Greene, 2001; Swanson & Chaplin, 2003).

Swanson and Chaplin (2003) approach the question somewhat differently. Their formula is sometimes called the "Swanson UI" because its originator, Christopher Swanson, developed the formula at the Urban Institute (Mischel & Roy, 2006). Because this formula measures a school's promotion power, Swanson and Chaplin (2003) term the result the Cumulative Promotion Index, or CPI. The CPI looks forward toward a target year by calculating the degree

of promotion in each of the class's four years in high school (Swanson & Chaplin, 2003). The formula for Swanson's CPI is shown in Figure 1:

$$Swanson - UI_{2001} = [\frac{E^{10}_{2002}}{E^{9}_{2001}}] * [\frac{E^{11}_{2002}}{E^{10}_{2001}}] * [\frac{E^{12}_{2002}}{E^{11}_{2001}}] * [\frac{G_{2001}}{E^{12}_{2001}}]$$

Figure 1. Formula used to calculate the likelihood of a student graduating from a particular school in a particular year. E^{9}_{2001} is the number of students enrolled in 9th grade at the beginning of the 2001 school year; E^{10}_{2002} is 10th graders at the beginning of the 2002 school year, etc. (Mischel & Roy, 2006, p. 21).

This formula calculates the power of a school to retain and graduate students with their original 9th grade class over time (Mischel & Roy, 2006). Mischel and Roy, in their 2006 article claiming higher graduation rates, criticize both the Swanson method and Greene's method for minimizing the effects of the Freshman Bulge.

A more complex method of calculating graduation rates has been proposed by John Warren of the University of Minnesota in a 2005 article published in the Educational Policy Analysis Archives. Warren's method, the Estimated Completion Ratio or ECR, uses the number of graduates compared to the number of 8th graders five years earlier (Mischel & Roy, 2006; Warren, 2005). To correctly predict the number of 9th graders in one year, Warren compares the total population of 17-year-olds (the model age for graduating seniors) in one year to the total population of 13-year-olds (the model age for 8th graders in the fall) from four years earlier (Warren, 2005).

This mélange of formulae used to calculate high school graduation lends confusion to the study of high school dropouts, a phenomenon already rife with complexity and controversy.

Hence, in 2005, the National Governors Association recommended the adoption of one formula based on a standardized set of data collected according to uniform protocols used by all states (NGA, 2005). The formula recommended by the Governors closely resembles the formulae used by both Swanson and Greene, and it is: "Graduation rate = [on-time graduates in year x] ÷ [(first-time entering ninth graders in year x – 4) + (transfers in) – (transfers out)]" (NGA, 2005, p. 7).

The NGA also recommended a common set of protocols all states should use to define graduation and define pertinent data. These are:

- Defining graduates as people who earn regular high school diplomas or modified diplomas if the modified diploma meets state and district standards;
- Students who earn GEDs are not considered high school graduates;
- Students in Limited English Proficiency programs or special education programs may be placed in other cohorts allowing additional time to graduate (NGA, 2005).

Other NGA recommendations were: to create databases adequate for maintaining and reporting on graduation rates; to seek additional information, such as longitudinal data, to enrich the understanding of the dropout problem; to inform the public about the dropout problem and the need for good information about graduation rates, and to collaborate with local education leaders, business leaders, government leaders, and other community leaders in understanding and addressing the dropout problem (NGA, 2005).

These three problems, defining a graduate, identifying good data, and agreeing upon a formula with which to analyze the data, have caused controversy distracting policy makers from addressing the dropout problem. Until agreement is reached on how to study the problem, it is likely that estimates of high school graduation will continue to range across a wide gamut and

provide material for scholarly debates that could delay action and prolong the academic struggles of many American students.

The effort to define the true high school graduation rate and the debate about definitions, data sources, and appropriate formulae is more than academic. Federal legislation has pushed the high school completion rate to the forefront of education reform since 2002 when President Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). One provision of this law required states to consider graduation rates in assessing school effectiveness (NGA, 2005). The NGA's 2005 report on high school graduation was issued at least partly in response to the NCLB. The NGA's report assumed that understanding required using one common information base. To that end, the report presented five recommendations for addressing confusion about graduation rates. The report's first recommendation was creating a formula to be used by all states for calculating high school graduation rates. This formula, presented above, could generate an Averaged Freshman Graduation rate. Although the Governors' formula ignored the freshman bulge, if all states used the same formula, all states would be working with similar data (NGA, 2005).

Reasons Why American Students Leave the Nation's High Schools

Any discussion of high school dropouts must define a dropout and explore reasons students leave high school without graduating. *At-risk* and *dropout* may not have the same meaning since many at-risk students remain in school and graduate (Suh, Suh & Houston, 2007; Vang, 2005). However, most dropouts begin as at-risk students, so understanding the dropout problem begins with understanding at-risk students. In the No Child Left Behind act, the United States Department of Education (USDE) gives the following definition of an at-risk student:

> An at-risk child or youth means a school-aged individual who is at-risk of academic failure, has a drug or alcohol problem, is pregnant or is a parent, has previously come into

> contact with the juvenile justice system, is at least 1 year behind the expected grade level for the age of the individual, is a migrant or an immigrant, has limited English proficiency, is a gang member, has previously dropped out of school, or has a high absenteeism rate at school (United States Department of Education, 2006, Section O-1, par. 5).

Cardon (2000) described students as at-risk if they had all or some of the following traits: poor attendance, low grades, weak basic skills in math and reading, low self-concept, a history of discipline problems, social alienation, and low socio-economic background. Pallas, Natriello, and McDill (1989) discussed at-risk students as educationally disadvantaged and identified five indicators of being educationally disadvantaged. Those were: belonging to a racial or ethnic minority, living in a poverty household, living in a single-parent family, having a poorly educated mother, and having a non-English language background (Pallas, Natriello, & McDill, 1989). At-risk students' fathers may be absent or frequently missing, unemployed if present, and high school dropouts themselves (Cardon, 2000). Often an at-risk student's mother may be absent from the home (Cardon, 2000; Werner & Smith, 2001), and often the mother, whether absent or present, did not graduate from high school (Malaspina & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008). At-risk students usually share the home with several siblings and have little reading material in the home (Cardon, 2000; Werner & Smith, 2001). Male students are more at-risk than females (Cardon, 2000; Cataldi et al., 2009; Peng, 1983; Wehlage, 1986) and students who are employed full time are more at-risk than those who do not work full time (Cardon, 2000). Peng's 1983 study used High School and Beyond data indicating low socio-economic-status (SES) contributed to dropping out. Other researchers have also found that low SES contributes to the dropout problem (Christle et al., 2007; Laird et al., 2007).

Students who have difficulty learning are often at-risk for dropping out (AYPF, 2006; Christle et al., 2007). Forty-eight percent of "Emotionally Behaviorally Disturbed" (EBD) students drop out of high school, as do 30% of all students with disabilities (Osher et al., 2003). Some at-risk students have poor grades in core subjects, poor attendance, failure of at least one year, and classroom disengagement, which may include behavioral problems (AYPF, 2006; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). Vang (2005) considers students at-risk if: they have two or more failing semester grades, are two or more years older than their grade-level peers, miss more than 20% of their required classes, have one or more school suspensions, or move three or more times in one school year. In 1986, Wehlage identified similar indicators in a study finding that at-risk students also had an external locus of control, were often truant or in trouble, had low grades, or had failed at least one course. Kennelly and Monrad (2007) identified key indicators of dropping out as poor grades in core subjects, low attendance, failure of at least one grade, and disengagement within the classroom, which could include behavioral problems.

Retention of at least one grade is an indicator of dropping out before graduation (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Ensminger & Slusarick, 1992; Kelly & Monrad, 2007; Roderick, 1994; Rumberger, 1995; Wehlage, 1986; Vang, 2005). In 1994, Roderick studied the impact of school retention. Although confined to a cohort from one large metropolitan school, this study explored retention in detail and found retention to be a powerful indicator of future dropping out. Roderick (1994) reported a 70% dropout rate for students in the cohort who had been retained compared to a 27% dropout rate for students who had never been held back. Being retained one grade increased by 40% a student's chances of dropping out, and being retained two years raised that figure to 90% (Roderick, 1994). Roderick (1994) also discovered that retention in the earliest

grades had the same negative impact on graduation as retention in later years. Alexander et al. (2001) also concluded that retention was the most powerful indicator of later dropping out.

In 1992, Ensminger and Slusarick reported on a longitudinal study that tracked Black students from an inner city school from 1966 to 1982. Major causes of dropping out were: retention in at least one grade, truancy, early consumption of alcohol, low socio-economic status, and the number of elementary schools a student had attended. The same study found that strong predictors of dropping out included: substance abuse, problems with authorities, poor academic achievement, and aggressive behavior, even in the early grades (Ensminger & Slusarick, 1992). Interestingly, aggressive behavior was a strong indicator for males from families that were not poor, but had no effect on males from poor families (Ensminger & Slusarick, 1992).

Parental involvement with school may affect students' decisions to drop out; however, Ensminger and Slusarick (1992) concluded that parental involvement with the school through PTA, parent-conferences, and the like had little effect during a child's early years in school, but had positive effects on students who were in high school. High parental expectations for education and strict parental rules increased a student's chances of graduation, but overall, children from poverty have lower chances of graduation despite the presence of other, positive, influences (Ensminger & Slusarick, 1992).

Race also impacts a student's chance of graduation (Calabrese, 1990; Christle et al., 2007; Lochner & Moretti 2004; Peng, 1983). In 1983, Peng reported that American Indians and Alaskan Natives had the highest dropout rate at 29%; Hispanics had a dropout rate of 18%; African Americans 17%; Caucasian Americans 12%; and Asian Americans only 3%. Later studies confirmed the influence of race on dropping out (AYPF, 2006; Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Cataldi et al., 2009; Christle et al., 2007; Greene, 2001; Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010;

Lochner, & Moretti, 2004; Mischel & Roy, 2006; Planty et al., 2009; Vang, 2005). Interestingly, Battin-Pearson et al. (2000) concluded that race itself did not contribute to dropping out if other factors such as low SES, academic achievement, and gender were controlled for. In fact, Pirog and Magee (1997) stated that Black males had a greater chance of graduating than White males if analysis controlled for other factors such as low SES and academic achievement. But, Pirog and Magee (1997) also pointed out that Blacks were more apt to live in poor areas and attend poor schools than Whites, so the overall result was lower graduation rates for African American males. Some students drop out because of family and personal issues, specifically getting married, being pregnant, or supporting their family (Bridgeland et al., 2006; CDF, 2009; Peng, 1983; Terry, 2003; Werner & Smith, 2001).

Gender is another predictor of dropping out with males being more apt to drop out than females (Cataldi et al., 2009; Peng, 1983; Sum et al., 2003; Wehlage, 1986). Sum et al. (2003) found that during the years 1998 to 2001, the median numbers of dropouts showed 131 males dropped out for every 100 females, and this difference held true for all racial subgroups. In 2003, Sum et al. found that the male to female dropout ratio for African Americans was 108 to 100, and for Hispanics 143 males dropped out of high school for every 100. On page 41 of that report, Sum et al. (2003) warned, "The high concentrations of school dropouts, especially male dropouts, in many of these large central cities should be viewed as the new 'social dynamite' of the twenty-first century."

When asked to explain their own reasons for leaving school before graduation, dropouts have revealed a gradual pattern of disengagement with the schooling process. Bridgeland, DiIulio and Morison (2000) interviewed students and reported that 47% of them said classes were uninteresting; 69% had not felt motivated to work hard; 80% had done less than one hour

of homework per day; 45% felt they had been poorly prepared academically; and 70% believed they would have graduated had they worked harder. The same study reported 32% of these students had needed to work full or part-time; 26% had become parents; 22% cared for a family member; 35% were failing in school; and 32% had already failed at least one grade (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Citing data from eighth graders who had been included in NELS:88, Rumberger (2001) reported that 77% of dropouts identified school-related reasons for quitting; 34% mentioned family problems; and 32% had work-related issues. Forty-six percent did not like school; 39% were failing; 29% could not get along with teachers; and 27% had taken jobs (Rumberger, 2001).

Although many factors may influence a student's decision to quit school, the final act of dropping out is usually the culmination of a long period of disengagement that possibly began in the early grades (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Christle et al., 2007; Ensminger & Slusarick, 1992; Roderick, 1994). In 1986, Wehlage concluded that students decide to drop out based on an accumulated sense of alienation resulting from school and family experiences. For some students, the key factor could be the kind and amount of *social capital* (the number and quality of connections one has with other persons) possessed by the student (Coleman, 1988; Werner & Smith, 2001).

Social capital includes human factors within the family. Single parents have less time and energy to give a child, and this reduces that child's supply of social capital (Coleman, 1988). Birth order (being the first is good), the number of children in the family (fewer are better), and changing schools while young all affect a child's social capital and influence whether or not that child graduates from high school (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Coleman, 1988; Ensminger & Slusarick 1992; Malaspina & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008). Coleman (1988) reported on HS & B data

showing that a sophomore with one sibling, two parents, and a high maternal expectation for graduation had an 8.1% chance of dropping out while a sophomore with four siblings, one parent, and no maternal expectations of graduation had a 30.6% chance of dropping out.

Relocation to new neighborhoods or schools also reduces a child's total social capital, and Christenson and Thurlow (2004) noted that moving or changing schools negatively affected graduation rates; partly because the constant need to build new relationships reduced the amount of social capital a student could create. Children who never moved had an 11.8% dropout rate; those who moved once had a 16.7% dropout rate, and those who moved twice had a 23.1% dropout rate (Coleman, 1988). Vang's 2005 study supported Coleman's 1988 finding on the negative impact moving had on graduation rates. Coleman (1988) also found that poor attendance decreased a student's connection to school and the student's social capital, thereby increasing the probability that the student would drop out of school prior to graduation. Croninger and Lee (2001) concluded that students who enter high school socially at-risk of dropping out but without previous academic problems are twice as apt to drop out than students who enter high school with strong social supports.

Finn (1989) explored the issue of dropping out and described dropping out as the culmination of a process Finn termed the "Frustration-Self-Esteem Model." According to this model, if a child's academic performance begins to decline, the child becomes frustrated and begins to act out until a certain level of misbehavior is reached wherein the child's behavior, not academic performance, becomes the central issue within the classroom, and the child eventually disengages from the school to the point of dropping out (Finn, 1989). Finn (1989) concluded that students drop out when they become alienated from the school, and students become alienated because they feel powerless, meaningless, normless, socially isolated, self-estranged, and

culturally alienated. Finn (1989) also noted the power of homes and peer groups, and stated that dropouts often come from homes where graduation is not a high priority. Dropouts may also associate with peers for whom dropping out is not stigmatized (Finn, 1989).

In a later study, Finn, Fish, and Scott (2008) explored the relationship between disruptive, violent misbehavior and dropping out. Finn et al. (2008) used NELS:88 data to explore the issue of misbehavior. Not surprisingly, Finn et al. (2008) concluded that students who behaved well in school were more apt to graduate and to succeed in post-secondary education than students who misbehaved either moderately or severely. Unfortunately, students who misbehaved only moderately did not perform better than those who misbehaved seriously (Finn et al., 2008).

Early use of drugs or alcohol, a form of misbehavior, may be connected to dropping out, but whether such use is a cause in its own right or part of a greater picture of social alienation and misbehavior remains uncertain (Gasper, 2011). The Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America (CADCA) in 2011 reported that early use of both alcohol and marijuana was connected to lower school performance and lower educational attainment. In their 2008 review of literature on high school dropouts, Rumberger and Lim noted that a number of studies had found correlations between drug and alcohol use in either middle school or high school and eventual dropping out of school.

Based on the literature, characteristics common to dropouts include: belonging to an ethnic group that is neither White nor Asian-American; having limited English language skills or living in a home where others have limited ability in English; living in poverty; having only one parent in the home; having a poorly educated parent; having several siblings; living in a home with little reading material; being male; having learning difficulties; having repeated at least one school year; having discipline problems in school; having poor attendance in school; being

delinquent or having problems with legal authorities; being pregnant or already a parent; having parents who were not involved with the school; moving or changing schools often, and feeling disengaged from school.

Factors Keeping Students in School

Although it is possible to delineate factors that could lead to dropping out, the question is why students who exhibit combinations of these factors do not all drop out. What enables some students to rise above their realities and graduate? Studies of this question have posed various answers. In a large study of children raised in poverty, Werner and Smith (2001) found the causes placing students at-risk of failure to similar to causes noted previously in this paper. However, Werner and Smith (2001) also identified factors that protected at-risk children from failure in life. Werner and Smith (2001) divided these factors into personal protective factors and environmental protective factors. The personal protective factors included: positive socialization (being outgoing and socially mature); scholastic competence, which included a high IQ and good problem solving skills; an internal locus of control; an even temperament, and good health throughout childhood (Werner & Smith, 2001). Environmental protective factors included: having a mother who was a competent parent, having access to reliable sources of emotional support, and having experienced a small number of stressful life events, such as death in the family, moving often, major illnesses, or loss of a parent (Werner & Smith, 2001).

In the 1989 study identifying the "Frustration, Self-Esteem" model as a cause for dropping out, Finn (1989) proposed a "Participation-Identification Model" to explain why some students succeed. According to this model, students who develop positive connections to education are more likely to remain in school through graduation (Finn, 1989). Finn builds this model upon earlier work of Berrueta-Clement, Schweinhart, Barnett, Epstein, and Weikart

(1984), who conducted a longitudinal study on students who had attended the Perry Preschool Program. This study involved Black students from poverty homes who were at-risk of school failure and concluded that students given high quality preschool experiences were more likely to remain in school and succeed in their education (Berrueta-Clement, Schweinhart, Barnett, Epstein, & Weikart, 1984). Whereas Berrueta-Clement et al. (1984) did not conclude that preschool could overcome the influence of strong negative educational biases in children's homes, they found that preschool could reinforce the constructive effects of positive educational biases. Citing the importance of positive role models on middle-school children, Berrueta-Clement et al. (1984) proposed that preschool could increase the chances children would develop positive relationships with adults by acclimating children to the school environment early in their educational experience. Berrueta-Clement et al. (1984) also concluded that preschool enabled children to make positive connections with schooling and to experience success in school at an early age, factors enhancing students' feelings of being connected to education.

Ream and Rumberger (2008) also explored the importance of being connected to school. Using data from NELS:88, Ream and Rumberger (2008) studied the positive and negative influences of social capital in the lives of Hispanic youths. Like Werner and Smith (2001), Ream and Rumberger (2008) found peer support and social capital significant factors in whether or not students succeeded. However, Ream and Rumberger (2008) also explored how peers can influence students to drop out of school. This study found that involvement in learning activities and extracurricular activities did increase the chances that an at-risk student will graduate; however, because of factors such as low family SES and peers who do not value education, many Hispanic youths failed to access these sources of support (Ream & Rumberger, 2008).

Christle, Jolivette, and Nelson (2007) in a study of 194 Kentucky high schools concluded that students were less apt to drop out of school if they felt connected and felt a sense of belonging within the school. In fact, Christle, Jolivette, and Nelson (2007) concluded that engagement with school, even from first grade, rivaled academic success as a predictor of dropping out. In 2001, Alexander et al. found that attachment to school during the elementary and middle school years may have more influence on students' chances of success than either students' attitudes or academic achievements. Alexander et al. (2001) explored the influence of feeling connected to school versus feeling connected to life outside of the school and concluded that, "…many poor performing students find life outside school more to their liking than life inside school. It is an implicit pain-gain calculation in which the school oft-times will lose. The decision is not so much irrational as shortsighted…" (Alexander et al., 2001, p. 803).

Alexander et al. (1997) reported on a 14-year longitudinal study indicating that most children start school eager to learn and glad to be in school, but some begin a downward spiral that eventually causes them to give up on school and quit. According to Alexander et al. (1997), dropping out was the culmination of a long process of detachment that may have begun as early as first grade. This study noted the importance of parenting practices; students were less apt to quit school if parents read to them, took them to museums and special events and were generally involved in the children's educational development (Alexander et al., 1997). Also, parents who monitored children's activities and whereabouts positively impacted students' chances of graduation (Alexander et al., 1997). According to Alexander et al. (1997) academic success was both a state of mind and a pattern of behavior. Students who followed normal school routines, such as completing homework on time, were more apt to graduate than students who felt strong psychological connections but did not follow the requisite procedures common to schools

(Alexander et al., 1997). In the same study Alexander et al. (1997) pointed out that most students left school in good academic standing, so they had left for reasons other than classroom failure. Ironically, some dropouts had a strong internal locus of control and saw dropping out as a way to exert influence over their own lives (Alexander et al., 1997).

Although the disengagement process takes time and involves a number of factors, social capital, the connection to a supportive adult either in the school, the family, or the community, can strengthen students' feelings of connection to the school and reduce the chances that a student will drop out.

How Schools Can Reduce Dropout Rates

Many factors that influence students' decisions to drop out are social or personal and beyond the control of schools. Schools cannot change students' race or SES. Schools cannot eliminate single-parent families or change parental education levels. Family movement patterns, family expectations, and family circumstances are all beyond the control of schools. In 1996, Payne pointed out that generational poverty creates a culture as difficult to leave as one's national culture, and schools cannot change the culture within which students live and grow. Neither can schools change the language spoken in the home, a student's racial background, or a student's gender.

Various researchers have addressed the question of how schools might prevent students from dropping out. Strom and Boster (2007) explored the negative effects of low home support for graduation and concluded that teachers could help students by supporting their interests. Junior high students' perception of whether their teachers believed the students were doing well positive impacted students' later choices regarding school completion (Strom & Boster, 2007). Battin-Pearson et al. (2000) reported that students who bonded to their school were less inclined

to drop out, and Christle et al. (2007) reported that engagement with the school, even from the first grade, rivaled academic achievement in predicting whether a student would graduate. When teachers interact informally and supportively with students outside of the classroom, the odds of students graduating increase (Croninger & Lee, 2001). Students entering high school with low academic expectations and a history of problems related to school are the students most apt to benefit from such interaction with teachers (Croninger & Lee, 2001).

Suspension and grade retention policies have been shown to impact a school's dropout rate. Students who have been retained even one year are more apt to drop out (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Ensminger & Slusarick, 1992; Kelly & Monrad, 2007; Roderick, 1994; Rumberger, 1995; Vang, 2005; Wehlage, 1986). Roderick (1994) reported a 70% dropout rate for students who had been retained compared to a 27% dropout rate for students who had never been held back. This was true even for students who had been retained as early as first grade (Roderick, 1994). Alexander et al. (2001) found retention to be the most powerful indicator of dropping out. Discipline policies also impact dropout rates with schools using out-of-school suspension policies showing increased dropout rates (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004; Christle et al., 2007).

Christenson and Thurlow (2004) compared schools with high graduation rates to those with low graduation rates and concluded that schools with the greatest holding power had small enrollments, fair discipline policies, an openly caring staff, high academic expectations and opportunities for students to meaningfully participate in their education. According to Christenson and Thurlow (2004), participation in school is a powerful deterrent to dropping out, and personalizing education, which is possible in smaller school units, helps students feel connected and reduces the chances those students will drop out of school.

Christle et al. (2007) found great differences in school atmosphere and student-staff relationships between schools with low dropout numbers (low drop out schools or LDOS) and schools with high dropout numbers (high drop out schools or HDOS). In LDOS, students smiled more; the restrooms were clean, orderly and in good condition; the staff dressed more professionally; few adversarial interactions occurred between staff and students; staff maintained a high level of supervision, particularly in common areas; staff members acted with greater authority; there was a high staff to student ratio; and teachers used a greater variety of teaching techniques (Christle et al., 2007). Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bokern (1990) also found a connection between graduation and student-teacher relations and stated that students most at risk for dropping out had never been friends with a teacher. Wehlage (1986) and Calabrese (1990) also concluded that good student-teacher relationships within a school could improve the chances that students in that school would graduate.

In 2006, Bridgeland et al. sought from dropouts their own reasons for leaving school. Many students reported their parents were not involved in school matters; 68% reported their parents became involved with schooling only after learning their child was dropping out of school (Bridgeland et al., 2006). A majority of these students (59-65%) reported missing class often during the year before they dropped out (Bridgeland et al., 2006). However, these dropouts also identified ways they felt the schools had failed them. Thirty-eight percent said the schools gave them too much freedom and did not have enough rules; 81% wanted better teachers; 75% wanted smaller classes with more one-on-one instruction; 70% wanted better supervision in school; 62% wanted more classroom discipline; 57% reported the school should be safer, and 71% said they found school uninteresting (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Sadly, after dropping out 47% reported it was hard to find a job without a diploma; 81% stated they believed high school

graduation was important, and 74% of these dropouts said they would stay in school if they could relive the experience (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

Studying the issue of school influence on dropout rates, McDill, Natriello, and Pallas (1986) addressed the issues of the higher standards and high stakes testing called for by the *Nation at Risk* (1983) report. McDill et al. (1986) expressed concerns that increasing academic standards could force lower performing students from school, thereby reducing the national graduation rate. Faulkner and Cook (2006) also expressed concern that high stakes testing may pressure schools to push out low performing students, which could increase the dropout rate. Likewise, Faulkner and Cook (2006) feared that schools may abandon proven middle school practices to find the time needed to prepare for high stakes testing and that any benefits offered by high stakes testing might be outweighed by the negative consequences, including increased dropout rates.

Rossell (2005) commented on the potential harm NCLB (2001) and its testing requirements could do to Limited English Proficient (LEP) students. Since being deficient in English is a possible cause of dropping out (Pallas et al., 1989; United States Department of Education, 2006), testing programs that discriminate against LEP students could frustrate efforts to increase the national graduation rate. Powell, Higgins, Aran and Freed (2009) reported that rural teachers and administrators in Maine and Missouri felt frustration caused by the testing requirements of NCLB and expressed concerns NCLB benefited some students at the cost of others. Because of emphasis on high-stakes testing, some experienced teachers reported desires to leave the profession (Powell et al., 2009), which could negatively impact graduation rates given the oft-noted importance teachers can make in a student's chances of success (Calabrese, 1990; Christenson & Thurlow, 2004; Christle, 2007; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Wehlage, 1986)

If the dropout problem results at least partially from a mismatch between the learners and the school (Kerka, 2003), solutions to the problem could lie in teaching techniques unlike the traditional pedagogy found in regular school classrooms. Coincidentally, while concerns about at-risk students have grown, so has the use of educational technology within schools. Starting in the 1970s, computers and other technologies entered the schools, and there exists a growing body of evidence that such technologies can help keep at-risk students in school (Fouts, 2000).

This use of classroom technology has spread rapidly. In 1994, 3% of all American classrooms had Internet connectivity. By 2003, that number had grown to 77% (Culp, Honey, & Mandinich, 2003). Assuming that trend has continued, even more schools and their students have access to the Internet today. If educational technology offers the potential to better serve the needs of at-risk students, the benefits of this innovation could be widespread, given the ubiquity of technology in our schools.

This use of classroom technology is a relatively new phenomenon. Since technology is often implemented as part of larger reform efforts, it is difficult to accurately determine the impact of technology alone (Edmonds & Li, 2005). However, evidence is growing that technology can help lower-achieving students find success.

Edmonds and Li (2005) conducted a study indicating that use of technology did increase the success rate for at-risk learners. Similar results were reported in a 2007 study that explored the success of High Tech High Schools, a California charter school movement based on using technology in teaching (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2007). In 2002, this study found that 71% of all 9th graders in the High Tech High Schools scored at the proficient level in language arts, compared to a statewide average of 30% (Gates Foundation, 2007). In 2007, all of the High

Tech Schools' graduates were accepted into higher education programs, and over half of these students were the first in their family to attend colleges (Gates Foundation, 2007).

Whitney (2007) reported significant increases in students' reading scores using an Internet based reading program. Whitney (2007) also reported on an unscientific study showing academic gains for students utilizing email between teachers and other students on a writing project and strong positive results from using technology to teach reading in the middle grades. Schacter (1999) reviewed five studies showing strong positive influences of technology on student achievement. Although there remains a shortage of definitive research on the effectiveness of educational technology, a growing body of information indicates that technology, used properly, can help at-risk students succeed.

Summary of Literature Review

Throughout the past four centuries, America has become a vast multicultural country of many people, many languages, great opportunities and great problems. Education is a vital to maintaining and advancing the prosperity and vitality of this nation. Education is a powerful means to gain personal economic security and a good quality of life. However, in America today many people quit high school before graduating, thereby limiting their own prospects and threatening the overall strength of American society.

From the earliest days of European colonization, education has occupied an important niche in this country. Although the earliest schools were religious and grew from a belief that education was necessary for one's spiritual welfare, the need for education to meet economic and social goals quickly superseded the spiritual goals of schooling. After the colonies achieved independence, education became a means of insuring national economic prosperity and of preserving the democratic nature of the United States.

However, early education remained rudimentary. Not until the mid-twentieth century did a majority of Americans complete 12 years of schooling as the rate of high school graduation soared during the nation's post-war economic boom. However, America changed in many ways throughout the 20th Century. Changes in immigration law and patterns, the civil rights movement, and the burgeoning population all impacted society. In recent decades the proliferation of new technologies and the change of the economy away from heavy industry have altered the type of education needed by Americans while increasing the importance of being educated.

Against this background of change, the high school graduation rate has stagnated or fallen. Exact figures are elusive because differing approaches to collecting and interpreting data could obfuscate rather than clarify the issue. Nonetheless, a great deal is known about factors that put a student at risk of dropping out of school. Many of these conditions are beyond the control of the nation's schools. Schools can neither influence nor change race, family income, family makeup, parental education levels, and family mobility. However, education occurs in schools, and educators cannot ignore the problem nor avoid their role in finding solutions.

Whether the dropout rate is 12% or 40%, every student who drops out represents potential losses in the form of diminished personal life quality and increased costs to society. While political leaders and social reformers formulate a plethora of ways to improve America's schools, one thing remains clear: High school graduation is essential and increasing the graduation rate must be a goal of every American educator.

We may know what factors put students at-risk of failure, and we have ideas of how to improve at-risk students' chances of graduation. In this study, I shall explore the problem through the eyes and experiences of people who have dropped out of school. I shall seek to learn

from these people their own perception of dropping out, their own feelings of responsibility or failure, and their own assessment of how education could change to better serve their needs. With the knowledge thus gained, I shall address the question of how schools can change to reach this goal.

CHAPTER 3: METHOD

Personal Commitment

This study grew from my years as an educator and my interest in students who struggled to succeed in school, not because of ability, but because they could not fit in, could not conform or accept the structure and expectations inherent in public schools. Today, I view at-risk students sympathetically and feel strongly that schools and teachers could better serve many of these students if schools and teachers could rethink their views of such students and the approaches used to educate at-risk students. My opinions and knowledge of at-risk students blend with my personal feelings toward such students, and my sympathetic bias toward at-risk students has influenced my decision to research this topic. This study will reflect this bias. This study is a phenomenology, and van Manen (1990) states that phenomenology begins with a strong personal commitment to the phenomenon being studied. Dedication to the topic and personal involvement with it enable a researcher to better understand the topic and to discover the essence of the topic as expressed by people who have experienced the phenomenon (van Manen, 1990).

As a principal, I had unique opportunities to interact with at-risk students in ways neither their parents nor their teachers could. Over time, I built special relationships with many students that changed my opinion of at-risk students and how I interacted with them. However, this experience also colored my view of how schools and teachers work with at-risk students. Hence, I approach this study in the true spirit of critical theory research. I believe that at-risk students are a marginalized group often overlooked or misunderstood by people who work with adolescents. I believe changes must be made in how educators view these students, how educators interact with them, and in the methods used to teach at-risk students. This belief informed and drove this study, but also biased my interpretation of the study's results.

I worked as an educator in small rural schools. For nineteen years, I was a secondary principal. During that time I worked closely with students and became familiar with many who had behavioral, educational, and social problems that hindered their success in school. For 17 years, I was principal in a school that provided special education services, including vocational training, for a consortium of local school districts. Because of those programs, and because that school's climate was accepting of troubled students, the regional juvenile court placed many troubled students in foster care in that district. Some of these youths had severe behavioral and educational problems, and I worked closely with those students and their families. I came to know them well.

Initially, I saw these students as problems, and indeed they did disrupt the school to varying degrees, but I eventually came to see these people as fascinating young persons with their own talents, aspirations, fears and needs, and I concluded that the students who tried us the most were often the students who needed us the most. As I learned about students' personal and family lives, I realized that many lived in worlds where the hours spent in school were the best hours of their day, and the time they spent out of school or at home was time of disruption, stress, and often danger. Sometimes I found myself becoming an advocate for these students, sometimes against law enforcement authorities, sometimes against classroom teachers, and sometimes against the students' parents.

After 27 years in education, I decided to redirect my professional efforts, and I operated an alternative learning center where at-risk students from area schools could come and work on classes with the goal of eventually returning to regular school or of graduating through alternative routes such as distance education. That venture provided more insights into the lives of at-risk students and strengthened my conviction that many at-risk students could succeed in

school if the schools and teachers better understood these students. I remain in contact with many of these people, now grown adults. Some have succeeded; some have not. But, in my opinion all remain special, interesting people who began their lives deserving what others have.

Two visions hover before me. One is of little children embarking on their first day of kindergarten grinning and eager to learn; the second is of surly high school students skipping school, challenging teachers and administrators, anxious to leave the building, despairing of their own abilities to fit in and succeed. For me, the question is: "What happens to make some students persist and graduate while others tune out, drift away, and finally quit?" From these personal experiences grew my concern for at-risk students and my commitment to work for such students. All are valuable. That belief drives this study.

Delimitations of the Study

I began this study planning to interview a number of high school dropouts who had neither returned to school nor obtained a certificate of General Educational Development (GED) and who did not intend to continue their education. I believed that I would easily find participants by initiating dialogues with dropouts I already knew and building a participant pool through snowballing. However, this was difficult. True dropouts, those people who had no intention of returning to school or of obtaining a GED, proved hard to locate. In this area, the graduation rate is above the national average, and many students who drop out of regular high school continue their education through alternative programs, usually adult education classes leading to the GED.

Furthermore, I had difficulty connecting with the true dropouts in the area. Perhaps some were ashamed and did not want to discuss their lives. Some may have been apprehensive about adult authority figures or distrustful of anyone connected with education; many were unreliable.

They would agree to meet, but would not show up. Some responded but never managed to arrange meetings. Some parents I talked to were reluctant to connect me with their dropout children. I could not use telephone messages since none returned calls. I did get responses to text messages, but the disconnected nature of such communication made it almost impossible to connect personally with potential participants.

Eventually, I modified my research plan to include students who were pursuing a GED or had already obtained one. Also, I arranged to contact participants through a drop-in support center focused on assisting homeless and potentially homeless youth. That proved fruitful and resulted in a participant group that included a variety of young men. These young men had varied backgrounds, and conversations with them provided interesting and rewarding. I was forced to modify my original plan to fit the available participants; however, this does not negate the value of this study, since a qualitative phenomenology follows a course set by the people involved. Nonetheless, I reduced the number of participants I had hoped to interview, and I found that my conversations with participants focused on their life stories and their educational experiences.

Philosophical Basis for This Study

This study is built upon two elements. Philosophically, this study stands upon hermeneutic phenomenology as articulated by Jurgen Habermas, and the process of this study followed the six-steps developed by Max van Manen. Habermas (1984) provides the foundation upon which the study builds, and van Manen (1990) provides the research structure within which the study proceeded.

Phenomenology as a research method fits within the field of qualitative social sciences research, which studies human interactions and behaviors. Qualitative research should be used

when trying to create a complete picture of something because qualitative research explores issues to discover key elements that may need further research (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative research is based upon the belief that human behavior cannot be reduced to numerical descriptors because people are too complex and human interaction too involved to be properly defined by statistical analysis alone. Strangely, perhaps the best explanation I have found of using qualitative research to study human behavior comes from a book about raising wild turkeys. In this book, the author speaks of the mysterious nature of wild turkeys' innate knowledge of their world. Relating this to human consciousness and scientific research, he says:

> All our quantitative, empirical understanding tends to fall apart as we begin to observe the source of our own perception. For a scientist, the door of perception can be the entrance to a house of cards. Consciousness is everything that science is not--abstract, subjective, and qualitative. It is probably the height of irony that reason should attempt to proceed from such a place. (Hutto, 1995, p. 129)

Although not from a scholarly journal, this is a wonderfully perceptive statement of the need for qualitative research: Consciousness motivates behavior, and consciousness defies quantifiable data. Phenomenology, which explores the intangible essences found within human experience, is an attempt to derive reason by exploring consciousness, rather than through numbers and statistics. To truly understand human behavior, one must understand human consciousness. Sartre says, "All knowing is consciousness of knowing" (Sartre, 1999, p. 156), and qualitative research explores human consciousness seeking truths about human experience not found in numerical data.

A phenomenon is an event, a trend, or a concept, and Gay and Airasian (2000) describe phenomenology as a form of qualitative study that explores the experiences related to an activity,

event, or concept from the perspective of people actively involved in that activity, event, or concept. Creswell (2002) describes phenomenology as an approach to social science research based on the belief that the true essence of human experience cannot be described by traditional scientific inquiry relying solely upon theory, observable data, and quantifiable statistical analysis, but can only be found by seeking deeper meanings and more personal truths that defy definition by numbers alone. Sartre (1999) says that any search for essence cannot begin with facts. According to Sartre, "...phenomenology is the study of phenomena--not facts" (Sartre, 1999, p. 198). Phenomenology seeks the universal truths of a phenomenon by discovering commonalities in the experiences of several individuals who have experienced the phenomenon (Burch, 1991; Creswell, 2002; Norlyk & Harder, 2010). In a phenomenology, the element of personal experience is key; without personal experience, a study cannot be a phenomenology.

Creswell (2002) identifies three elements essential to phenomenology. First, it is a study of experiences actually lived by people; second, those people must consciously know that they lived those experiences; and finally, those people must be able to identify and to describe the essence of those experiences (Creswell, 2002). Norlyk and Harder (2010) describe two forms of phenomenology. *Philosophical phenomenology* seeks to describe the essential truths of a phenomenology based on personal reflection on the experience, and *scientific phenomenology*, seeks to describe the essence of a phenomenon based on descriptions supplied by others (Norlyk & Harder, 2010).

Phenomenology is a research method and a philosophy, a way of viewing the social world and a way of understanding it (Creswell, 2002; Norlyk & Harder, 2010; van Manen, 1990). In phenomenology, one seeks universal truths by exploring how people understand experiences they have lived (Burch, 1991; Habermas, 2001). According to van Manen (1990)

natural science research seeks to "explain" nature, while human sciences research seeks to gain an understanding of human life. van Manen (1990) also emphasizes the inherently philosophical nature of all human science research because the questions asked and the understandings gained from asking those questions are more important than the method used (van Manen, 1990). Hence, human science researchers must believe that the essential realities of human existence cannot be fully described by quantifiable research alone (Burch, 1991; van Manen, 1990).

Because phenomenology is both philosophy and research, it can be difficult to describe and understand. Traditionally, most researchers consider research in objective, tangible terms and view research and philosophy as different endeavors. Because phenomenology blurs the line between philosophy and research, understanding phenomenology as a research method requires discussing phenomenology as philosophy.

As philosophy, phenomenology is an attempt to make objective that which is subjective about human experience and holds that people are the sum of the experiences they have lived (Burch, 1991). Everything a person encounters throughout life is not only a lived experience that has its own meaning but also generates other meanings; therefore, things are either completely within the realm of a person's lived experience or are nothing in the life of that person (Burch, 1991). Lived experience is self-constituting, that is each person creates his or her own self through the experiences he or she has, and phenomenology seeks the realities of human existence and the meanings people find in their existence (van Manen, 1990). Lived experience is totally personal and can never be fully understood by others. Sartre says, "In effect, understanding is not a quality coming to human reality from the outside; it is its characteristic way of existing" (Sartre, 1999, p. 197). However, through proper inquiry a person inferentially gains access to the experiences of others (Burch, 1991). These inferences cannot be understood through calculations

and positivistic research, but only through participating in the lifeworld of others. Burch (1991) says:

> The principle aim of phenomenology and its chief contribution to all such ventures is not to recover subjective expressions and intentions, but to disclose and explicate the underlying intelligibility of lived experience. It is not the individual psychological subject, but a truth, which precedes and makes possible anything subjective or objective, that phenomenology truly seeks (Burch, 1991, n. p.).

Phenomenologists of the critical theory school identify traditional scientific research as *positivistic* because it posits the existence of essential and immutable truths and defines a specific set of rules for seeking such truth (Burch, 1991). Because positivistic research follows set boundaries, everything it discloses must fall within those boundaries; and, although new facts may be discovered this way, critics claim that those facts will be limited by the boundaries within which the research must be done (Burch, 1991). However, phenomenology allows the subject to lead the investigation, which determines the methodology and enables phenomenology to reveal essential truths about something (Burch, 1991).

Phenomenology as a method of understanding humanity was developed by Edmund Husserl (1959-1938), a German philosopher whose work spanned the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Kultgen, 1975; Tan, Wilson, & Olver, 2009; van Manen, 1990). Husserl maintained that social science research begins in the *lifeworld*, a world of natural existence where people share experiences and share one another but do so without reflecting upon what they are doing (Aspers, 2010; Tan et al., 2009; van Manen, 1990). Husserl believed a person was the total of his or her lived experiences, which included literally everything the person experienced, including the objects and actions of one's world and the people with whom one interacts within that world

(Aspers, 2010; Kultgen, 1975; Tan et al., 2009; van Manen, 1990). According to Husserl, people experience the lifeworld prereflectively without thinking about it; hence, people do not immediately discern their lifeworld's true essence because people are conditioned by experience to accept without question the realities of life (Tan et al., 2009). Husserl maintained the individual discovered and interpreted everything in isolation, unaffected by other people (Aspers, 2010).

Husserl's view was challenged by Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), an assistant of Husserl's, who split from Husserl to formulate his own interpretation of phenomenology (Aspers, 2010). Heidegger claimed the individual does not exist in isolation but is part of a greater world, which includes other people, and thus one's lived experiences include others, and one's interpretation of her or his lifeworld is made as a social creature aware of interacting with others (Aspers, 2010). Heidegger maintained the important element of being human was social, that all persons are part of the world, and that the world of people is part of each individual's lifeworld and can be neither separated nor ignored when studying the individual (Aspers, 2010). Heidegger spoke of *Dasein*, the inescapable being that one is and of *das Man*, which includes everyone else (Aspers, 2010). According to Heidegger, a person's life is a whole made of that person and everyone else, and a person can escape neither his or her own selfhood nor the persons with whom she or he interacts (Aspers, 2010).

Although Heidegger greatly influenced the evolution of phenomenology, its modern roots trace back to Husserl (Aspers, 2010; Kultgen, 1975; Lyle, 1996; Tan et al., 1975), and Creswell (2002), defines four characteristics of Husserlian phenomenology. First, it is a return to the traditional task of seeking truth through philosophy rather than pure scientific research or positivism. Second, seeking to reveal the unbiased truth, phenomenology approaches a

phenomenon free from presuppositions. Third, the people being studied must be conscious of their involvement with the phenomenon because the reality of something is connected to conscious thought about it. Fourth, phenomenology rejects the subject-object dichotomy. This means the reality of an object as perceived by an individual is only perceived by that person within the context of that person's experience with the object. In Husserl's approach, the researcher stands apart, merely observing and reporting on the phenomenon (Lyle, 1996).

van Manen (1990) calls the Husserlian approach *transcendental phenomenology* because it seeks to describe a phenomenon through observation only. In this approach, the researcher sets aside personal experiences (an act Husserl calls *bracketing* or *epoche*) and works from a fresh perspective, unbiased by personal experience (van Manen, 1990). In transcendental phenomenology, the researcher remains aloof, an observer and reporter not imposing his or her beliefs or interpretations upon the study's findings (van Manen, 1990). This transcendental view is analogous to philosophical phenomenology as described by Norlyk and Harder (2010).

Hermeneutic phenomenology is the second form of phenomenology described by van Manen (1990). In this approach, a researcher seeks to translate life's events and to interpret meanings individuals find in those events (van Manen, 1990). In hermeneutic phenomenology, the researcher mediates between all different meanings possible in seeking the universal truth of an experience (van Manen, 1990). This hermeneutic view is analogous to the scientific phenomenology described by Norlyk and Harder in 2010.

Because phenomenology seeks deeper understandings of the meaning of everyday life, it is a study of lived meanings, not simply of lived experiences (van Manen, 1990) and is based on the belief that the realities of human experience are known best by those who have lived that experience and are free to describe and define that experience as it relates to them.

Phenomenology does not strive to solve problems, but rather to find the meanings and human significance embedded within the phenomenon (van Manen, 1990). Thus, it is, "... a search for what it means to be human" (van Manen, 1990, p. 12).

In doing phenomenology, one seeks the essences of something as experienced and interpreted by persons who have lived that something (Burch, 1991). However, essences cannot exist without a frame of physical reality; therefore, the researcher must seek to understand the reality in which the participant lives (Burch, 1991). Phenomenology seeks both the component parts, called essences by Burch (1991) and themes by van Manen (1990), and the whole because the essences have no meaning by themselves, and the whole cannot exist without all the parts from which it is made (Burch, 1991).

Whether transcendental or hermeneutic, phenomenology requires that a researcher interact personally with people to understand their lifeworlds, to discover how they interpret a phenomenon, and to learn how they feel about that phenomenon. Phenomenology is inductive, seeking to aggregate the experiences of many persons into a universal truth of human existence. It deals with events that are past because a person cannot reflect upon an experience while it is occurring since the very act of reflection alters the experience; hence, true reflection is "retrospective," never "introspective" (van Manen, 1990).

Although phenomenological research is founded in the work of Husserl, others expanded and modified his techniques, and this study shall not follow the transcendental phenomenology of Husserl, but shall be a hermeneutic phenomenology based on the work of Jurgen Habermas (1929---), German sociologist and philosopher. In Husserl's approach, the researcher works apart from the subject, uninvolved and unbiased, seeking only to describe a phenomenon (Lyle, 1996).

However, Habermas demands the researcher go beyond description seeking to interpret a phenomenon (Lyle, 1996).

Habermas is associated with the *critical theory* tradition of social science research, which arose in reaction to the rigid rationalism of the Enlightenment (Agger, 1991) and strove to forge a dialectical synthesis of philosophy and modern scientific methods of understanding society (van Manen, 1990). To achieve this synthesis, critical theory sees a widened concept of rationality, resists all forms of domination, is oriented toward praxis over theory, and is committed to the concept of human emancipation (van Manen, 1990).

Philosophically, critical theory is an attempt to connect human knowledge with human experience; sociologically, critical theory explores historical social forms to enable people to understand their own role in directing the course of history (Scott, 1978). Thus, critical theory attempts to reveal the forces arrayed against humanity in its quest for autonomy and equality (Scott, 1978). Critical theory goes beyond studying what *does* exist to discover what *could* exist, that ideal state humanity could potentially achieve in its struggle to create a truly rational, egalitarian society (Scott, 1978). Critical theory research often concentrates upon disfranchised or marginalized groups and seeks to help individuals in those groups rise above the social constraints society places upon such groups (Creswell, 2007). Because high school dropouts often fit the descriptors of a marginalized group, in my study I strove to determine whether society, through established educational practices, has manipulated this group to keep it marginalized. Hence, this study fits within the bounds of critical theory research.

Critical theory has long been connected to the *Frankfurt School* of Marxism, associated with scholars at the *Institute for Social Research* at the *University of Frankfurt am Main* where critical theory originated from an effort to explain why the Marxist revolution had not occurred

as expected (Agger, 1991). Established in 1923, the Frankfurt School was exiled to the United States in 1933, but re-established itself in Frankfurt following the Second World War (Ewert, 1991). Scholars within the Frankfurt School believed that capitalism survived by perpetuating falsehoods to convince people that existing social structures are both necessary and inevitable, thereby negating calls for change (Agger, 1991; Ewert, 1991). This assumption led scholars of the Frankfurt School to scrutinize scholarship, seeking flaws resulting from perpetuated falsehoods. Critical theorists found those flaws in the very nature of research itself. According to the Frankfurt School, traditional positivistic research--the approach associated with research in the natural sciences--sees the world as rational and subject to investigation without assumptions about phenomena being investigated (Agger, 1991). Because positivism remained aloof from the phenomena under study, it missed the subjective elements of social behavior. The Frankfurt School found positivism pervading all research and faulted positivism for promoting the view that all problems can be dealt with as technical problems not influenced by human intangibles (Carr & Kemmis, 1986).

The Frankfurt School believed that scientific research, which relied solely upon descriptions of existing realities, perpetuated those realities and served existing power structures by teaching people that society exists as it is because there is no other way for society to exist; therefore, according to critical theory, efforts to change the world based on a positivistic perspective are useless and doomed to failure (Agger, 1991; Carr & Kemmis, 1986). The Frankfurt School assumed current realities are distortions of ideal conditions that originally existed at some point in the past (Agger, 1991; Ewert, 1991). Critical theorists claimed traditional empirical methods could not accurately describe social truths because empiricism only describes existing realities without attempting to understand why those realities exist (Carr

& Kemmis, 1986; Ewert, 1991). Critical theory not only sought to understand why existing conditions exist, but also strove to know what the ideal reality should be (Ewert, 1991). Thus, critical theory aimed to emancipate individuals by making people aware of the distorted nature of common knowledge (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Ewert, 1991).

Although identified with the Frankfurt School and critical theory, Habermas has defended the enlightenment for its reliance upon reason and has faulted critical theory for abandoning both reason and social reform (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Ewert, 1991; Simon, 1994). Unlike other philosophers of the Frankfurt School, Habermas maintained that morality is not transcendental but is connected to the external world; however, he did accept that some universal moral norms exist (Keller, 2008). Habermas's approach to social science research, called *communication theory*, shifted critical social theory from consciousness to communication in the belief that significant dialogue between individuals can create working strategies to address society's problems (Agger, 1991; Habermas, 1984, 2001). Habermas (2001) believed that sensory experiences relate to the objective world, but communicative experiences can lead to the personal domain where people express themselves through speech and action and gain an understanding of their world through experience and language. According to Habermas, (2001) communication is essential for the preservation of society; thus, understanding communication can lead to understanding society.

Because Habermas acknowledged the need for rigor and structure in research and did not totally reject positivism, he tried create a theory that redirects rather than negates positivism grown from Enlightenment thought (Habermas, 1984). For Habermas, positivism was too rigid, a set of procedures to be followed rather than the passion-driven process of critically examining the world and society (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Habermas, 1984). Habermas did not believe all

human behavior could be reduced to the objective elements revealed by "scientism," as he termed positivism, and he maintained that no research exists free from the personal nature of the researcher (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Habermas, 1984). Habermas accepted the fundamental positivistic approach, but attempted to reveal the flaws of positivism, thereby synthesizing a more effective approach to social science research (Scott, 1978). Habermas acknowledged the need to consider the objective world in which people live and work but advocated using rationalism tempered by recognition of the subjective elements of human existence (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Scott, 1978). For Habermas, scholarship must seek truth, but, "Truth is not a relative property... The meaning of truth does not consist in the method of ascertaining truth" (Habermas, 2001, p. 87). At a time when modernism questioned or even rejected the rationalistic empiricism of the enlightenment, Habermas would redirect rather than reject enlightenment thought (McCarthy in Habermas, 1984).

Habermas considered communication a critical element of human behavior, both individual and social. He stated, "The communicative theory of society whose development I am advocating conceives the life process of society as a generative process mediated by speech acts" (Habermas, 2001, p.86). Habermas posited that communication could perpetuate subjugation and oppression by fostering false ideas (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Habermas, 1984; Smyth, 2006). In this, Habermas parallels Paulo Freire (1921-1997), Brazilian educator and social critic, who asserted that education exists to control and exploit society's dispossessed masses (Freire, 1970). Habermas also believed that positivism, by imposing upon study an artificial form reflecting the world of the researcher rather than the subjects, controls the study to insure it produces knowledge already consonant with social norms (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Habermas, 1984; Smyth, 2006).

Habermas (2001) saw proper social discourse as a means to combat the manipulative misuse of communication. For Habermas, the truth of an assertion can be proven only through argument, and a claim grounded only in experiences is unjustified because speech can conceal as much as it reveals, and the validity of something can be established only through mutually acknowledged interpretations (Habermas, 2001). According to Habermas (2001) reality exists only in regard to true statements. He said, "Reality is the totality of all states of affairs about which true statements are possible... Truth is not a relative property" (Habermas, 2001, p. 87).

To guide the process of seeking truth through mutually acknowledged interpretations, Habermas differentiated between *communicative action* and true *discourse* (Habermas, 1984). Habermas believed the *actual spirit* of humanity consists of both *instrumental action*, which is social labor, and *communicative action*, which is social interaction (Scott, 1978). According to Habermas (2001), action differs from behavior in that a behavior is a response to something occurring in the world around us: It is a reflex or instinct. However, an action is a deliberate event that has purpose or meaning to a person. People observe behaviors, but understand actions, and communicative theory attempts to lead to an understanding of human action (Habermas, 2001). Thus, society understands and directs itself through communication.

Underlying this theory of communicative action is Habermas's belief that all human knowledge derives from experience, which is shaped by three *knowledge-constitutive interests*, the cognitive and transcendental results of human history (Habermas, 1984; Scott, 1978; Smyth, 2006). The first of these interests is the *technical interest*, a process of extending human understanding of the physical world to control humanity's surroundings; the second, *practical interest,* subjectively applies that knowledge of the world to create communities beneficial to all people; and the third, *emancipatory interest* is a meta-interest seeking to unite the technical and

practical interests without the distortions of traditional social assumptions (Habermas, 1984; Scott, 1978; Smyth, 2006). Social evolution as seen by Habermas is a struggle to emancipate humanity from the restrictions and exploitation resulting from false assumptions (Habermas, 1984; Scott, 1978).

Like Husserl, Habermas called this social world of interrelated experience the lifeworld, a physical reality where people exist and interact with one another, consciously sharing experiences (Habermas, 1984). The lifeworld includes rationality, objective realities, shared beliefs, and shared communication (Habermas, 1984). According to Habermas: "This lifeworld is bounded by the totality of interpretations presupposed by the members as background knowledge" (Habermas, 1984, p. 13). Habermas's lifeworld of shared experience and significant communication forms the foundation for all human activity. He stated:

If we assume that the human species maintains itself through the socially coordinated activities of its members and that this coordination is established through communication--and in certain spheres of life, through communication aimed at reaching agreement--then the reproduction of the species also requires satisfying the conditions of a rationality inherent in communicative action (Habermas, 1984, p. 397).

To develop this theory as a phenomenology addressing society's problems, Habermas formulated three forms of knowledge upon the three forms of interest. *Analytic-empirical knowledge* results from traditional scientific explanations of the natural world (Scott, 1978). Although providing necessary information, this knowledge also leads to technical control of the world and the social manipulation resultant from that control (Scott, 1978). *Historical-hermeneutic knowledge* provides interpretation of phenomena based upon fully understanding those phenomena (Scott, 1978). Finally, *critical-dialectical knowledge*, unique to the social

sciences, melds the other two forms of knowledge into a synthesis useful for understanding society free from the deception and flaws present in both analytic-technical and historical-hermeneutic knowledge (Scott, 1978).

Habermas asserted that exploitation results from distorted communication and the false beliefs it engenders and that constructive communication cannot occur unless all participants are emancipated and equal (Habermas, 2001). Without equality and mutual respect for all persons, pseudo-communication will result, and--although such communication cannot address society's problems, it can be used to manipulate people and to maintain established social norms (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Habermas, 2001; Keller, 2008). Habermas (2001) believed that communicative action, the communication most commonly used, follows rules and norms and does not vary or challenge accepted constraints. In communicative action, people are controlled by two factors: their own intentions, which are personal and internal; and the norms imposed upon them by society, norms that are social and external (Habermas, 2001). Discourse or discursive action, however, requires suspending constraints and accepting that everything is open for discussion free of conventions or presuppositions (Habermas, 2001). In discourse, all participants assume the validity of one another's statements and assume that each participant is aware of his or her own intentions and the norms controlling their speech (Habermas, 2001). True communication and true emancipation can occur only through the use of discourse.

Habermas (2001) believed that discourse could improve society by revealing universal truths that can free and enlighten people. This can be done through *constative speech acts*, which must meet two conditions: The speech act cannot conflict with dissonant experience and must have basis in experience, and the speech act must be *discursively redeemable*, the act must stand against all counterarguments and must earn the agreement of all potential participants in the

discourse (Habermas, 2001). To earn the consensus of others, true discourse must meet *four validity claims*. Habermas (2001) explained these validity claims.

1. *Intelligibility*--Can the statement be understood by all participants in the discourse?
2. *Truth*—This is a measure of the relation between utterances and the reality in which they are made.
3. *Normative rightness* (termed moral truths by some)--The statement must be recognized as a prevailing norm, something that "ought" to be true.
4. *Sincerity*--Sincerity requires that a speaker believes his or her own statement and does not deceive self or others (Habermas, 2001).

Whereas the consensus of the group can be used to validate both truth and normative rightness, sincerity can be proven only through action, and intelligibility can be proven only through the mutuality of all persons' backgrounds and those persons' actual acceptance of what is said (Habermas, 2001).

For Habermas, true discourse uses argumentation to deal with validity claims that have become problems (Habermas, 2001). In true discourse, participants do not exchange information but argumentatively address problems that have arisen through untested communication (Habermas, 2001). The goal of discourse is a mutually acceptable interpretation that eliminates the problem (Habermas, 2001).

Because Habermas did not completely reject positivism, his theory of communicative action went beyond critical theory to describe *critical social theory*, which combined both philosophy and sociology (Scott, 1978). The philosophical component of critical social theory attempted to connect knowledge and interests, and the sociological component examined the structures of societies that have existed throughout human history (Scott, 1978). Although

Habermas accepted that academic research and discussions within society might never be totally free and honest, his approach illustrated the powerful connection between truth and social justice (Scott, 1978). For Habermas (2001), truth is authentic and original. This authenticity is paramount for Habermas, who maintained that an image or a copy could be more similar to or less similar to the original; however, a true proposition cannot be more or less like itself because it is itself (Habermas, 2001). "Truth is not a relative property" (Habermas, 2001, p. 87).

Phenomenologies based on Habermas's theory seek truth through the scientific investigation of individuals' subjective perceptions of their lives (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). According to Ajjawi and Higgs (2007), hermeneutic phenomenology follows the patterns of both hermeneutics and phenomenology. Thus, unlike traditional educational research that breaks things into small parts for analysis, hermeneutic phenomenology strives to understand the unified whole of a thing (van Manen, 1990); thereby revealing the truth of the phenomenon. Such an approach provides a powerful means to study the lived experiences of people, and is well suited to explore the experiences and feelings of people, thereby revealing the inner truths of a phenomenon (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007).

Habermas's hermeneutic phenomenology follows three phases: First, a researcher seeks technical control by knowing the facts of a phenomenon; second, the researcher seeks meanings within the facts; finally, the researcher strives for emancipation, the freedom to derive critical or self-reflective knowledge (Lovat, 2004). According to Habermas, total knowledge and comprehension only occurs once the researcher has achieved the third phase of self-reflection (Habermas, 1984; Lovat, 2004). Such research becomes a quest for the subjective elements of a phenomenon, as those elements exist within the objective framework of the natural world. Habermas does not reject the positivist use of quantitative methods to seek the technical realities

of education but asserts that such knowledge is used to structure and control education, whereas true social exploration and improvement require seeking broader truths, a search beyond the scope of technical, traditional quantitative research (Scott, 1978; Smyth, 2006).

This study followed Habermas in four ways. First, Habermas is associated with critical theory, and critical theory research focuses on marginalized groups and often explores issues affecting minorities, gender, or sexual identity (Creswell, 2007). At-risk students are often marginalized persons overlooked or dismissed by society and can best be viewed through the lens of critical theory.

Second, although critical theory rejects enlightenment positivism, Habermas does not. He accepts the need for objective data to inform and guide social science research. He believes people live in a world of objective elements and that research cannot reject information founded upon traditional scientific methods; he simply believes true understanding of the human world can only be reached by exploring the subjective elements of human experience. Following Habermas, this study explores data related to dropouts and relies heavily upon information derived from quantitative studies.

Third, Habermas's theory of communicative action holds that only through honest and open discourse can people arrive at solutions acceptable to all; communication can create meaningful and lasting social change. In this study, I attempted to communicate freely and honestly with a number of at-risk persons in an effort to learn from them how their lifeworld shaped their educational experiences and how that knowledge might be used for improving how schools educate at-risk students.

Finally, Habermas belongs in the tradition of hermeneutic phenomenology that does not merely describe experiences but seeks to interpret them in search of essential truths beneficial to

humanity. Through conversing with participants, studying our conversations, and exploring other sources of information about at-risk students, I have sought to interpret participants' educational experiences to better inform educators about dealing with at-risk students.

Habermas believes there are two levels of communicative action: These are the words people use to communicate and that which people communicate about (Fultner in Habermas, 2001). Habermas (2001) states that merely hearing words may not lead to understanding the phenomenon. Since communication occurs within the speaker's lifeworld, a researcher must seek out the totality of the subjects' existence within that lifeworld.

Hence, I explored the lifeworld of dropouts to determine whether their dropping out was in some way a failure to achieve true discourse between themselves and education professionals who worked with them. The question was: Although words were most certainly spoken between dropouts and their former teachers, did true understanding occur? Plainly put, I tried to learn whether these young men had made significant connections with teachers or other adults in the schools.

I also followed Habermas's belief that true inquiry must seek inner realities discernible only through personal interaction between the researcher and the subject and through a hermeneutic approach to the knowledge thus gained. Habermas (2001) believes that behavior is a response to an external stimulus and action is a deliberate event a person does for a purpose relevant to that person (Habermas, 2001). It is not enough that a researcher observes a human behavior; the researcher must strive to understand the human action. I explored the behavior of dropping out as a response to some stimulus, and sought to understand the action of dropping out within the lifeworld of persons who dropped out.

My research was guided by Habermas's belief that true discourse can occur only when all participants view one another with complete trust and accept the validity of each other's intentions and speech (Habermas, 2001). I tried to establish discursive communication with the subjects of the study. This required achieving active and mutually respectful communication that made the participants and me equal in status and mutually respectful of one another. With each participant, I tried to create a conversation among equals, hoping to discover the truth about dropping out as interpreted by students who had experienced the phenomenon personally. I endeavored to go beyond knowing how dropouts understood their experience of leaving school to understanding how dropouts interpreted their experiences.

Methodology

It is difficult, if not impossible, to define a phenomenological research method. European phenomenology in particular is notable for the absence of method. Regarding this lack of defined methods, van Manen says, "…the method of phenomenology and hermeneutics is that there is no method" (van Manen, 1990, p. 30). Habermas writes, "Hermeneutics is an art and not a method. We make use of hermeneutics, the art of interpretation, *instead* of a measurement procedure, but it is not such a procedure" (Habermas, 2001, p. 6).

Because one person's life is private, it can never be wholly understood by another (Burch, 1991). We can understand others only by becoming part of their lifeworld and letting them become part of our lifeworld. Phenomenological research cannot follow a predetermined set of procedures, but must let the individual subject guide and form the research (Burch, 1991). Traditional research gains legitimacy from conducting research with a method agreeing with the subject being studied; however, in phenomenology the method is a means of going beyond that which is already known to reveal hitherto unknown truth (Burch, 1991; Sartre, 1999).

Phenomenology as philosophy is a radical way of thinking that is self-defining and self-legitimizing; therefore, it becomes impossible for phenomenology as research to prove that its claims relate to reality (Burch, 1991). However, in doing my research, I needed structure to provide academic rigor and to legitimize my work. For this, I chose to conduct my research according to guidelines formulated by van Manen (1990).

The van Manen method.

Habermasian phenomenology, as a qualitative research method, is not clearly defined, but van Manen (1990) offers guidance to doing such research, and I followed that guidance. According to van Manen (1990), phenomenological research always begins in the lifeworld and studies persons as they find their world in all of its various aspects. This mandates seeking meanings rather than solutions: "… a good phenomenological description is collected by lived experience and recollects lived experience--is validated by lived experiences and it validates lived experience" (van Manen, 1990, p. 27).

The van Manen (1990) approach is a dynamic interplay between six activities. These are:

- Investigating a phenomenon that interests us and commits us to the world;
- Investigating experiences as we live them, not as we conceptualize them;
- Reflecting on essential themes that characterize the phenomenon being studied;
- Describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting;
- Maintaining a clear pedagogical focus related to the phenomenon;
- Balancing the research context by considering all of the parts and the whole created by those parts.

The first of these activities, investigating a phenomenon that interests us, requires delving into a phenomenon with passionate personal commitment. A researcher must commit to the

phenomenon and become immersed in its many aspects. The phenomenon must matter to the researcher and relate to the researcher's personal experiences and knowledge. Because I studied high school dropouts, I was always guided by the question: *What is it like to be a high school dropout?* I strove to remain open to van Manen's (1990) observation: "Can phenomenology, if we concern ourselves deeply with it, do something with us" (van Manen, 1990, p. 45)?

The second activity requires investigating experiences as we have lived them. This activity essentially defines the data gathered in a phenomenology. However, it is misleading to state that we gather data; rather, we seek truth drawn from human experience (van Manen, 1990). But, there remains the problem that research requires gathering information, so a phenomenology must obtain something for analysis and reporting. Hence, van Manen (1990) suggests various sources of information that might be used in a phenomenological study.

The beginning point in the search for such information is the researcher's personal experience related to the phenomenon being researched (van Manen, 1990). If a researcher has no personal experience with a phenomenon, she or he will have difficulty collecting phenomenological data on that experience (van Manen, 1990). Because personal experience enables the researcher to gain understanding in search of truth in the experiences of others, such experience becomes the point from which a researcher begins (van Manen, 1990).

Beyond the essential element of personal experience, van Manen (1990) suggests the following as possible sources of data in a hermeneutic phenomenology:

- *Etymology:* A researcher must be sensitive to the sources of words. Social science research focuses on people's lived experiences, and people communicate through words. However, people may use words carrying meanings not consciously ascribed to them. Fully

understanding the words and phrases used by research subjects can open a door to deeper meanings lying beneath the surface of those words.

- *Idiomatic language:* Different persons may have different personal meanings for idioms they use; hence, researchers must be aware of and understand phrases and idioms used by participants. Because a speaker's choice of phrases may reveal something about the speaker, phenomenology requires sensitivity to a subject's spoken idiom.
- *How people describe their experiences:* This is not an in-depth analysis seeking hidden meaning as much as a direct awareness of what others say about their experiences. The way a person describes experience can reveal how that person interprets the experience.
- *Writing:* A researcher may choose to have subjects describe experiences in writing. However, a researcher who asks subjects to write about an experience must develop and follow a protocol to insure that information relates to the same phenomenon.
- *Interviewing:* Interviews are often chosen as a means to obtain phenomenological data. To be worthwhile, the interview must focus on the phenomenon being studied, and this requires a balance between structure and freedom. Structure insures that the interview gathers needed data and not just verbiage. But, too much structure could inhibit personal expression, so the interviewer must allow subjects enough freedom to express their own experiences. The interview becomes more of a conversation, true discourse in the Habermasian sense.
- *Close observation:* Observing subjects may provide useful information and is particularly useful for subjects such as small children. In phenomenology, however, close observation is not covert, but an open excursion into the lives of others, a sharing of lifeworld.

Observations may be recorded for use later, and observations may include anecdotal information written by the observer.

- *Experiential descriptions in literature:* Often literature, both non-fiction and fiction, offers insights into a phenomenon. A researcher seeking the personal realities of people who lived through the Great Depression might read the *Grapes of Wrath* or other books written about that historical era.
- *Biographies:* Written life stories of people who experienced the phenomenon under study can provide insights helpful to the researcher.
- *Diaries or journals:* A researcher may ask subjects to keep a journal related to their experiences. Also, the researcher should keep a journal of his/her experiences while doing the study.
- *Art:* Like literature, works of art can provide insights and inspiration. Human science research is a study of humanity, and artistic expression offers glimpses into the inner beings of people.
- *Phenomenological literature:* By reading existing phenomenological works, a researcher can gain direction to help her/him better envision and form phenomenological research.

This is a lengthy list, and no phenomenological study will utilize all of these sources. What is appropriate for one study may not work for another. However, van Manen (1990) provides these suggestions as starting points or guidelines. Because phenomenology is more a philosophy than a technique (Habermas, 1984; van Manen, 1990), researchers must seek a variety of sources and utilize those that best fit the study.

The third activity van Manen (1990) explains is hermeneutic phenomenological reflection or the search for themes. Themes in a phenomenology are essences, not facts; central junctions

connecting the various concepts within the narrative (van Manen, 1990). A theme is a focal point allowing one to enter the experience; however, the theme is not a fact; it is a simplification that highlights greater truths lying within the phenomenon (van Manen, 1990). According to van Manen (1990), phenomenology offers three techniques for uncovering themes. The first is the *holistic* or *sententious* technique, which studies the text as a whole seeking phrases to capture the meaning of the whole (van Manen, 1990). The second technique is *selective*. In this approach, the researcher studies texts seeking statements or elements that stand out and reveal the true essence of the experience (van Manen, 1990). The third technique is a *line-by-line* analysis of every sentence or sentence cluster to determine what it says about the phenomenon under study (van Manen, 1990).

The search for themes begins with the questions asked by the researcher (van Manen, 1990). In a true hermeneutic interview, questions must be open enough to allow subjects to respond as individuals while remaining structured enough to maintain a focus on the substance of the research (van Manen, 1990). van Manen (1990) describes a good interview as a conversation: "It is talking together like friends" (van Manen, 1990, p. 98). Once themes have been identified, they must be explored through further interviews or conversations (van Manen, 1990). van Manen (1990) suggests that phenomenologists work together in discussion groups or seminars concentrating on similar phenomena because such conversations create a dynamic environment where each researcher gains new insights through interactions with others.

Identifying themes, although difficult, is the goal of phenomenological research (van Manen, 1990). The researcher must seek truth by learning which themes are most important and universal: "The most difficult and controversial element of phenomenological human science

may be to differentiate between essential themes and themes that are more incidentally related to the phenomenon under study" (van Manen, 1990, p. 106).

The fourth element of van Manen's (1990) method is writing and rewriting. Phenomenology seeks human experience, and humans interact through language. Language is central to Habermasian thought (Habermas, 1984), and language is central to phenomenology. "For indeed, to do research in a phenomenological sense is already and immediately and always a *bringing to speech* of something" (van Manen, 1990; p. 32). Writing is how we record and share our experiences, and van Manen stresses the importance of writing in the phenomenological process and says, "…hermeneutic phenomenological research is fundamentally a writing activity" (van Manen, 1990; p. 7).

For van Manen (1990), writing is the method of phenomenology. Research and reflection have meaning only if they have a substance others can understand, and writing enables others to understand. Writing mediates between reflection and action; it gives form to ideas; it makes internal subjective thoughts external and real (van Manen, 1990). Hence, the art of writing and rewriting become essential to phenomenology. "The object of human science research is essentially a linguistic project: to make some aspect of our lived world, of our lived experience, reflectively understandable and intelligible" (van Manen, 1990; pp. 125-126). Through writing and rewriting a phenomenologist experiences epiphanies revealing the true nature of human experience and reflects upon material gained in the study (van Manen, 1990). This enables reflexive thought to become the core of hermeneutic phenomenology (van Manen, 1990).

The fifth step of van Manen's (1990) process is maintaining a strong pedagogical relationship to the phenomenon. van Manen's work is rooted in the education of children, and pedagogy is a relationship between research and vocation, between theory and life (van Manen,

1990). For van Manen (1990), much educational research loses touch with the child while seeking facts about children. However, van Manen (1990) asserts that knowing the child is the entire point of phenomenology. Because pedagogy is knowing and understanding the essence of students while remaining sensitized to their lived experiences, pedagogy must be constantly renewed and recreated (van Manen, 1990). Pedagogy assumes responsibility for another and seeks that which is unique in every person and situation (van Manen, 1990).

Phenomenology connects to pedagogy because phenomenology studies lived experiences that bridge the gap between knowledge and action forming valid bases for practical action (van Manen, 1990). According to van Manen (1990), hermeneutic phenomenological reflection, which depends upon thought and radicalizes actions flowing from thought, is a philosophy of action in a pedagogic context, a philosophy of action in a personal and a situational sense. Thus, for van Manen (1990) to realize its full potential as a research method hermeneutic phenomenology must maintain a strong connection to pedagogy.

The sixth and final activity in van Manen's (1990) approach to phenomenology is balancing the parts with the whole. Because a phenomenology can quickly become a meaningless, rambling narrative, a phenomenological study must follow a research proposal (van Manen, 1990). However, there is no set format for such a proposal (van Manen, 1990). Instead, van Manen (1990) offers suggestions researchers can follow in planning a study. Phenomenology must concentrate on an identifiable and manageable question and must be planned within the context of that question (van Manen, 1990). van Manen (1990) suggest the following three things be considered:

- What is being studied? Is it an event, a trend, an illness?

- What is the intelligibility of the experience? It must be something that can be described and can be communicated to others so they may understand it.
- What experiential situation does the researcher enter?

Although some form of structure is necessary, van Manen (1990) suggests several possible alternatives. One is *thematic*; as themes emerge, the study can be divided and developed around each. Another is *analytic*; evolving stories maybe analyzed and presented as anecdotes or emerging life stories. The third is *exemplification*; after the essential nature of a phenomenon is uncovered, it may be explored and presented through examples. Another structure might be *exegetic*; a study could be built around existing written works related to the experience being studied. Finally, a study may be structured *existentially*, woven about the existential elements of temporality, spatiality, corporality, and sociality. Or, van Manen (1990) suggests that a phenomenologist invent a structure unique to the study, remembering always that the nature of the phenomenon itself must always guide the approach used to develop and present a study.

In a phenomenology, the method and format may change just as a painting changes as the artist paints; however, the central idea remains constant and always guides and informs the study (van Manen, 1990). Researchers doing phenomenologies must constantly seek the details while remaining focused on the central truths of the whole (van Manen, 1990).

Data collection.

Data collection followed the framework outlined above. Hence, data collection began with Habermas's (1984) Theory of Communicative Action, which holds that society depends upon communication to change and to solve social problems. However, constructive communicative action that reveals truth is not simply talking, but rather discursive interaction

wherein all participants communicate from positions of equality and with respect for others and trust in their statements.

Data collection following Habermasian principles is a process of conversation between equals, and to achieve this conversation this study was structured according to van Manen's (1990) technique. This technique follows six precepts. These are: researching a phenomenon toward which we are passionately committed; investigating experiences as they are lived, not as they are conceptualized; reflecting upon essential themes characterizing the phenomenon; describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting; maintaining a pedagogical focus of the phenomenon; and balancing the research context by considering all of the parts and the whole created by those parts. Data collection following van Manen's principles requires personal commitment and personal communication with people who have experienced the phenomenon; hence, the van Manen approach becomes a phenomenology that adheres to Habermas's vision of action and understanding deriving from open, respectful communication between people.

To derive data suitable for analysis and interpretation, I used van Manen's (1990) approach to phenomenological research. First, I followed the concern for at-risk students I had acquired throughout years of working with these students. That passion impelled and guided my inquiry. My inquiry took the form of interviews with males who had dropped out of high school and were not actively seeking alternative forms of education. I questioned these participants about dropping out and tried to enable participants to describe their own educational experiences as they had lived those experiences. Although participants were allowed to ponder and reflect upon their experiences, questions focused on exploring actual events and not merely participants' impressions. Our discourse sought subjective assessments of events, but conversations were

grounded in reality by exploring participants' reflections and memories of things that had happened, not solely of participants' feelings.

The written transcripts of conversations with participants formed the data for my analysis. I studied these transcripts seeking themes essential to the experience of dropping out. Themes were explored for commonalities, were grouped together, and were explored through the process of writing and rewriting my interpretation of participants' experiences. My overall goal was achieving a synthesis of participants' words, of my own knowledge about dropping out, and of understandings I gained through conversations with participants. Always, I sought truths to guide educators to better serve the needs of at-risk students.

Data collection began with asking participants to answer a set of five questions on paper. These questions explore the dropping out experience as it occurred within the lifeworlds of participants. Participants' responses to these questions then became topics we explored together through mutually respectful and egalitarian conversations. These questions and directions are found in Appendix E.

Data collected with these questions became the basis for further conversation exploring in depth the participants' own understanding of their experience of dropping out. Participants also responded to a set of demographic questions concerning basic life conditions and questions about participants' basic educational information. These questions served to expand and enrich conversations with participants. Conversations with participants focused on topics raised in the first part of the interview, expanded and enhanced with information from the demographic section. This conversation was recorded and combined with written responses for transcription and analysis. Since this part of the interview was open-ended, no format can be given here.

Basic demographic and background educational information collected about the participants is shown in Appendix F.

Participants

I interviewed 13 individuals. All were males between the ages of 18 and 25 who had quit high school before graduating. Some had obtained GED certification; some were in the process of seeking such certification; some were planning to return to high school, and some had no clear plans for any sort of future education. This data is presented in Table 1, found in Chapter Four.

Finding participants.

The biggest problem I encountered was finding participants for my study. Numerous high school dropouts live within the research area, but working with these dropouts proved more difficult than I had envisioned. Initially, I hoped to find participants through the process of snowballing. According to Creswell (2002), snowballing allows for creating a sample when the researcher may not know who best fits the population. Snowballing begins by contacting one person who fits the participant description. If that person participates, he or she is then asked to suggest other participants who might fit the participant profile. Each time a satisfactory participant is contacted and included, that person is asked to suggest others. The participant group grows as the project proceeds. Any persons who are not appropriate to the study will be eliminated during the initial contact phase.

I had believed this method would work. From personal experience I knew that at-risk students often interact socially and form their own groups. This conclusion is supported by sources in the literature review (Alexander et al., 2001; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Calabrese, 1990; Cameron & Heckman, 1993; Cardon, 2000; Colman, 1988; Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010;

Pallas et al., 1989; Payne, 1996; Wehlage, 1986). I believed that once I had established contact with some persons, the participant pool would grow by working from one person to another.

However, I encountered problems for several reasons. First, high schools do not always track their dropouts closely, and even if high schools did track dropouts, that information is protected, and schools were unable to provide me with such information. Several high school counselors in the area offered to contact dropouts and put those people in touch with me, but I made no contacts that way. I also spoke with the directors of area adult education programs offering GED certification to see whether any of their students would be willing to participate, but again, no one volunteered.

I did locate high school dropouts whom I knew personally and asked them to participate and to suggest other potential participants. Three young men agreed and suggested other names, but only two of the three actually participated, and I had difficulty arranging conversations with most of the other young men. Some simply were not interested, and several agreed to work with me but failed to keep arranged meetings or stopped responding to my calls or texts. I have concluded that such unreliability may be relevant to describing the high school dropout phenomenon, but I could not devise any way to research or report on this possibility for this study.

Eventually, I developed a brief statement about the study and offered a small reward in the form of a $10.00 gift certificate to a national fast-food chain. I posted this in several places, but only had responses from one location. That was a resource center for young people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. The client population of this center included young people who had quit high school, and the incentive of the gift certificate induced a number of them to participate. Even so, it was difficult to arrange conversations because the lifestyles of

these at-risk youth do not always include reliability. Furthermore, there were issues of trust because many such young people do not automatically trust adults, particularly older male educators.

I conducted interviews with 13 young men who fit my descriptors. I had planned to converse with more; however, at some point I realized I was hearing very similar stories, and I knew I had saturated my data for this study. Saturation is that point in research where the researcher no longer encounters new themes (Creswell, 2007; Eisenhardt, 1989; Francis, Johnston, Robertson, Glidewell, Entwistle, Eccles, & Grimshaw, 2010). A sample size ranging from 10 to 20 may be adequate (Krieger, Ashbury, Cotterchio, & Macey, 2001). Kreiger et al. (2001) report that a group of 13 participants is sufficient for a study, depending upon the scope and purpose of the study. Although I continued to hear fascinating, and sometimes sad, narratives from the participants, I concluded that I was no longer hearing new themes and ceased my research after the 13th participant.

This does not mean that all participants were alike. I heard a variety of lifeworld stories, each unique and powerful. However, from these stories there evolved an overall picture unified by several themes. Although this picture continued to expand and grow more detailed, there came a point where I found it difficult to remember clearly which participant had made which statement because a common structure was forming over all. At that point, I realized the data was saturated, and I ceased conducting conversations.

Analysis

I analyzed data by seeking themes that emerged from my conversations with participants. Recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, and I studied these transcripts in detail seeking common concepts and statements. As distinct concepts emerged, these concepts became themes,

and I grouped themes together as described by van Manen (1990). Through writing and rewriting as well as continued reading about at-risk students, I explored these themes seeking truths about the dropping-out experience as lived by the participants, themselves high school dropouts.

This continuous process of listening to recorded conversations, of rereading transcripts, of writing and rewriting the material, and of continued research in the area resulted in a phenomenology as described by van Manen (1990). Because this process uses real-life experiences as described and developed through mutually respectful and egalitarian discourse, the end result is a hermeneutic phenomenology in the Habermasian (1984, 2001) tradition.

This study followed the guidelines for human subject research set forth by the Institutional Review Board of North Dakota State University and is in compliance with all federal and institutional requirements. The IRB certification number is HE11130, and the certificate of compliance is found in Appendix J.

CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

Analysis of Findings

Explanation of the analysis methodology.

Hermeneutic phenomenology seeks truths embedded in the lived experiences of people and interprets those truths to more fully understand a phenomenon. According to van Manen (1990), phenomenological analysis is a matter of reflection upon the interactions and communication between the researcher and the participants. van Manen says, "Human science research is concerned with meaning--to be human is to be concerned with meaning, to desire meaning" (van Manen, 1990, p. 79). van Manen (1990) sees themes as *structures of experience*. In interpreting participant data, I considered themes as focal points of meaning, not objects, but intangible simplifications capturing the essence of lived experience.

Summary of the participant group.

Of the 13 participants, three had dropped out in their senior year; five in their junior year; three as sophomores, and two as freshmen. The participants' average age at dropping out was 16.9 years with the youngest age at dropping out being 16 and the oldest 18. All were between the ages of 18 and 24 at the time of the interview. Six of the participants had repeated at least one grade, which follows findings that retention is a powerful predictor of dropping out (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Ensminger & Slusarick, 1992; Kelly & Monrad, 2007; Roderick, 1994; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Strom & Boster, 2007; Vang, 2005; Wehlage, 1986). Two participants were African American; seven were Caucasian American; three were Native American, and one was half Native American and half Hispanic. All were born in the United States, and all spoke English at home. One participant spoke both English and Spanish. Two participants had been raised in a home with both biological parents present, and nine had at least

one parent who had graduated from high school. Four had siblings who had not graduated; eight had siblings who had graduated, and one participant was uncertain about his siblings' graduation status. Twelve of the participants either planned to obtain GEDs or had already done so, and one participant was undecided about working for a GED. Three did not regret dropping out; two were undecided, and eight did regret dropping out. Three had attended school on Native-American reservations; four had spent all or most of their school years in large, urban schools; eight had attended schools in small metropolitan areas (under 200,000 people). Of those eight, two had attended very small schools (fewer than 100 students per grade), but only one had spent all of his years in a very small school. Although the questionnaire did not specifically inquire about participants' socioeconomic status, interviews indicated that most came from lower income homes. Participants' demographic and educational data is in Table 1.

Themes related to the research questions and participants' lived experiences.

Themes emerged from participants' written responses and recorded conversations. Through reviewing transcripts, revisiting audio recordings, and reflecting upon our conversations in light of the literature, I developed the following themes:

Lack of social capital.

Most participants lacked strong connections to adults who could have and should have guided these young men through their trials. Except for Participant One, all participants had been failed by someone important.

Invisibility.

This could be considered a sub-theme of the lack of social capital; however, I identified invisibility as a theme in its own right because it impacted most participants' lifeworlds. Eight of the 13 participants had exhibited signs of being at risk, yet no one had noticed or taken action. I

found two causes for this: First, most of these young men caused little or no trouble in school. Because they caused no problems, their personal problems were often overlooked. Second, most of these young men were not involved in any form of school activity. Those who had participated in activities like sports, music or art, had quit those activities before dropping out.

Table 1

Summary of demographic and educational backgrounds for all participants

	Participants												
Characteristics	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Grade quit	11	10	10	9	11	10	11	11	11	12	12	9	12
Age quit	17	16	18	16	18	17	17	16	16	17	18	16	17
Retained	no	no	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no	no	no	yes	no
Grade repeated			K,10	1,5	7	10	10					1,9	
Gender	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
African American						X				X			
Native American							X	X			X*	X	
White	X	X	X	X	X				X				X
Hispanic											X*		
Alaskan Nat.													
South Sea Isl.													
Asian Amer.													
Language	En	En	En	En	En	El	En	En	En	En	E/Sp	En	En
Native born	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Both parents home	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	Y
Parent graduate	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y	N	N
Sibling graduate	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	N	na	N
GED	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	NA	Y	N	Y	Y	Y
Regret quitting	N	Y	N	Y	Y	???	Y	???	Y	Y	N	Y	Y
Age	24	19	19	18	19	20	20	25	21	20	20	19	21
Urban school						X		X		X			X
Small city school		X	X	X	X				X	X	X		X
Small town school	X		X										X
Reservation school							X	X				X	

* Indicates this participant claimed both Native-American and Hispanic ethnicities.

Lack of a realistic worldview.

This did not apply to all participants. However, most were generally out of touch with basic realities. Some participants who had been retained could not tell me how many times they had been retained or in which grade they had been retained. Some participants had unrealistic expectations for their futures and believed they would live successful lives like most people without attaining the educational level of most people.

Resilience.

A fine line divides resilience from an unrealistic view of the world, but a difference did appear through these conversations. Although some of these young men did not appreciate the potential harm their choices could wreak upon their futures, they remained determined to take what they had, start where they were, and begin to build good lives. I admired the strength of spirit shown by these young men.

Failure was a logical event in participants' lifeworlds.

Quitting school, which educators might view as a tragic failure, was a normal event in the lives of most participants. I do not mean these young men were doomed from birth to fail, nor did I find anything inherently inferior about these participants. Rather, quitting school fit the overall picture of the lifeworlds in which they lived.

Discussion of Research Questions

Research question 1: What factors, as perceived by the students, caused students to quit school?

These young men gave a number of reasons for quitting school. On the written portion of the study, participants wrote the reasons they had quit, but participants also expanded on those reasons during our conversations, and I integrated insights from conversations together with

participants' written statements to more clearly understand participants' experiences. A more complete description of participants' lifeworlds is found in Appendix A.

The following is a list of reasons for quitting school that participants' gave in the written portion of the survey. These are reported here *ad verbatim* with no editorial corrections. The question was: The main reason I quit school was:

Participant One: To work full time and move to Wyoming

Participant Two: Became tired from working late nights at McDonalds- eventually started sleeping in class more and more eventually leading up to skipping classes to get sleep. Was caught by my mother who agreed to let me drop out.

Participant Three: Cause I was 18 and I didn't want to be in school untill I was 21.

Participant Four: Family and personal reasons

Participant Five: Working 3 jobs - dad wanted me to help pay bills - @ 18 dad threw me out of home, tried school, alt. - bigger issues than school.

Participant Six: I was geting to a lot of fight.

Participant Seven: I wasn't thinking, things were moving to fast, I didn't care

Participant Eight: No support from family - Trying to look cool in front of friends, trying to be accepted as the badass in school.

Participant Nine: I got my girlfriend pregnet and we had a son together so to support them I got a full time job

Participant Ten: I never had much or some one to talk to about life. So i left school to live with some girl to fill like i belong

Participant Eleven: people dont really take the time to get to know a person or understand them they just expect you to meet there request

Participant Twelve: was because of my drinking and having a kid and not having the right family.

Participant Thirteen: My girlfriend in my Junior year broke up with me and passed a rumor about me saying that I raped her. it was partly because of the rumor and partly so I didn't have to see her any more.

Table 2 shows reasons for quitting school given by participants in both their written statements and in their conversations with me.

Table 2

Reasons participants quit school

	Participants												
Reason	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**10**	**11**	**12**	**13**
Chemical abuse		X	X				X	X			X	X	X
Family problems			X	X	X						X	X	X
School problems	X								X	X	X		X
Violence						X	X	X					
Age disparity			X									X	
Parenthood									X				

The impact of chemical abuse.

The factor most often cited by participants in their written responses and in our conversations was the impact of drugs or alcohol upon participants' lives. Seven of the thirteen participants indicated that drug or alcohol abuse contributed directly or indirectly to their decisions to drop out. Sometimes participants were users themselves, and sometimes the chemical abuse of others made academic success difficult or impossible for the participants. This corresponded to studies associating the early use of drugs or alcohol with academic problems and dropping out (CADCA, 2011; Gasper, 2011; Rumberger & Lim, 2008).

Participant Two, whose personal life was damaged in several respects, exemplified this theme well. At age 13, he had sat up late smoking and drinking with his mother and her boyfriend and had arrived at school the next morning too hung-over to stay awake or do class work. Over time, P2 disengaged from school, began working late night shifts and eventually quit school with his mother's consent to help pay family expenses.

Alcohol and drugs partially caused P2's lack of social capital because he lived in a lifeworld dominated by chemical dysfunction and never made connections with supportive adults. Although P2 was using alcohol and came to school hung over and unable to stay awake or do homework, no one in the school had noticed or attempted to intervene on his behalf. This demonstrates his inability to find positive social capital as well as the link between invisibility and inadequate social capital.

Participant Three, a young man with learning difficulties who had spent most of his life bouncing between foster homes, also had used alcohol from an early age and would have used drugs had he been able to obtain them. He had been introduced to drugs at age seven by someone in a mentor program. Participant Seven, a Native-American youth, had been raised on a reservation by his grandmother because his own mother had neglected him to drink and party herself. Participant Seven reported doing well in school until his freshman year when he began failing classes and had started hanging with older boys and using marijuana. He said, "I was good in school; f---, I was on B honor roll until 9th grade. Started the beginning of 10th grade year, I started getting wild…" After that, partying became the focus of P7's life. He said, "Partying and just not going to school. I missed a lot of school. I think I missed the max days you could miss without getting kicked out. I think we could miss 30 days so I'd miss 29."

As partying came to dominate his time, P7 used his grandmother's devotion to evade school. According to him:

> Yah. I missed like 29 days, and the rest of the days I couldn't miss I'd constantly be having my Grandma come get me half way through school. I'd call her and tell her at lunch or something, I'm sick come get me. Or I almost got in a fight come get me. Or I'm just in too much trouble today come get me.

Eventually, P7's involvement with chemicals and the wrong social group led to fighting in school, expulsion and failure to graduate. Participant Seven's life not only showed the harmful results of chemical abuse upon success in school (CADCA, 2011; Gasper, 2011; Rumberger & Lim, 2008) but also illustrated the difficulties Native-American students face, which corresponds to the high dropout rate associated with non-White students (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Heckman & LaFontaine, 2007; Laird et al, 2007; Mischel & Roy, 2006; Rumberger & Lim, 2008).

Participant Eight was also a Native-American who had attended high school on a reservation. Throughout his elementary years, P8 had lived with his mother in an urban area and had attended a large metropolitan school district, and during that time his mother had used drugs and alcohol heavily. After returning to her home reservation, she had stopped using. However, P8 eventually began drinking and said he was a recovering alcoholic and drug addict. He described a life of drinking and fighting, which had led to an arrest for assault. Rather than be tried as an adult with an almost certain conviction and penitentiary sentence in his future, P8 had chosen to quit school. Although P8's life story is complex (See Appendix A), chemical abuse played a major role in his withdrawal from school.

Participant Eleven, who was half Native-American and half Hispanic, had no reservation connections, but also had a complex lifeworld. Although his decision to quit school related

mainly to the school's actions, chemical abuse was an element in P11's failure. He had become homeless after his mother threw him out for using marijuana, something P11 had not expected because both his mother and her husband used marijuana.

Participant Twelve, a young Native-American who had spent his school years in reservation schools, also identified alcohol as a major factor in his decision to quit school. Like most participants, P12's lifeworld had contained several risk factors that contributed to his failure. However, P12 considered alcohol abuse a major cause of his life's problems. At age 5, P12's father had taken P12 from his mother because of her drinking; but when P12 turned 16, his father sent P12 back to live with his mother, and he began drinking. When I asked whether he had gotten into trouble for using alcohol, P12 said:

> I never got in trouble for it, but I see my mom always doing cause I'm from the reservation. Mostly, reservations don't have jobs there, and basically just drinking all the time there and so…. So, I saw my mom do it and just started drinking at the age of 16.
>
> Basically I never drank and stuff like that. And I got into it 'cuz my friends were doing it, so I decided to do it too. So, I starting drinking, going like partying, out late and never having time to go to school or get up in the mornings.

By sending him to his mother's home, P12's father had deprived P12 of the social capital the father had provided to that point. Once back with his mother, P12 was failed because his mother continued to abuse chemicals and neglected P12's needs as an adolescent in school. Participant Twelve's school had not intervened to help him. Hence, the school, P12's mother, and his father had all failed to provide him support and guidance at a crucial time in his life.

Participant Thirteen had also been influenced by chemical abuse, his and his parents. Although he stated several reasons for quitting that were unrelated to alcohol, chemical abuse

had dominated P13's life. He had grown up with an alcoholic father, and a mother who enabled the father's drinking. Participant Thirteen said he did not get along with his father largely because of the father's drinking habit. Participant Thirteen said:

> So, it was a time consuming thing, so more or less we didn't get along because, $100 bucks a night when you don't barely have enough money to live in the mobile home you're living in. At an early age, I caught on. I had a little resentment on that part.

Participant Thirteen said for a time his mother had tried to deal with the father's drinking, but eventually had encouraged the father to leave home for a bar at night because this reduced the chances of fights within the home. She had also allowed P13 to host drinking parties in their home when he was nine years old. She had rationalized that it would be better for P13 to drink under her supervision than out somewhere.

Although P13 chose to drop out for academic and social reasons, the negative impact of chemicals (he later switched from alcohol to marijuana because he disliked hangovers) was a major element in P13's lifeworld and contributed to his academic failure.

I found early use of drugs and alcohol as a factor in dropping out and not a theme in itself. Rather, chemical abuse forms part of the lifeworld wherein academic success became unlikely, and that reality emerged as a theme. Also, this study corroborated the connection between chemical abuse and dropping out that is noted in the literature (CADCA, 2011; Gasper, 2011; Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Chemical abuse increased participants' disengagement from school and diminished support from school personnel and adult guardians. Furthermore, chemical abuse often caused participants to seek social groups that provided negative rather than positive social capital. The negative influence of peer groups has been noted in the literature. (Finn, 1989; Ream & Rumberger, 2008; Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Terry, 2003).

Family problems.

Six of the participants quit school for reasons related to family problems other than chemical abuse. For example, P2, who had drunk late nights with his mother, had also been moved from a stable home with his father to the unstable environment of his mother's home. She had been married a number of times before and after her marriage to P2's father. (Participant Two said that for years even his father had been unaware of one of her marriages.) Participant Two described his mother as abusive and promiscuous, and said she had encouraged him to work rather than attend school. Ultimately, P2 decided to quit school to work full time to help pay the rent, a decision his mother supported. Chemical abuse may have underlain P2's problems, but overall bad parenting had influenced his lifeworld to place him at-risk of school failure and had created for P2 the lifeworld where academic failure was a logical event.

Participant Three had also been parented badly. His mother was a single mom, and P3 had never known his father. At one point he and a brother were victimized by someone in a mentoring program who had introduced P3 to marijuana laced with something that drove P3 violently out of control. After that incident, P3 had lived in a number of foster homes and treatment centers. He had attended many schools and had numerous problems in the schools and the foster homes. It is less accurate to say that P3 was impacted by family problems than to say that his total lack of family or domestic stability caused his failure.

These conversations revealed the inadequate social capital possessed by these young men. Most lacked meaningful relationships with supportive adults, and Participant Three exemplified this theme. Although he had a good relationship with one foster parent (see Appendix A), that relationship came late in his youth and had proven inadequate to offset the

damage done earlier by adults who either gave no support or contributed directly to P5's problems.

Participant Four's life had not been impacted by chemical abuse, but he had lived in a family marked by acrimonious divorce and constant conflict, risk factors cited in the literature (Christle, Jolivettez, & Nelson, 2007; Osher et al., 2003; Rumberger, 2001). Participant Four spoke of his parents fighting and cited his own anger management problems as a major reason he quit school. Participant Four had numerous problems with juvenile legal authorities and had been institutionalized several times. Participant Four said he had considered dropping out of school from an early age, but when I asked him why he had quit school, P4 spoke about his parents' divorce and its impact on his life. He said:

> You know my parents were--you know--they had gotten divorced like two years prior to me going into high school, and I was supposed to join football to help--you know, you know--put away my anger and other problems. And I decided with all the stuff going on at home, parents still arguing, even though they divorced, and--you know--they still find ways, that I'm not just going to do this cause I feel that I could actually really hurt someone in football, and I would feel really bad about it. Ah... I quit school just 'cuz my motivation to get things done kind of took a dive for the worst. Umm... I started arguing with teachers and--you know--everyone at school and getting in fights, and I figured, well, I'll just save myself the problem--and you know--drop out basically.

Like P4, Participant Nine had been harmed by his parents' divorce, which resulted in his parents overlooking P9. Participant Nine, who had quit school as a junior when his girlfriend became pregnant, said he had never been in trouble either in or out of school and had never tried alcohol until he was of legal age. However, he had disengaged from school and had become

invisible in school and to his parents. He said this had resulted from his parents' contentious relationship. Participant Nine said, "Oh, high school. I think the reason I was under the radar is because I could be. I didn't have people at home telling me, 'You have to do this; you have to do that'."

And, he said:

> Right... I--when my parents started getting divorced, I was 14 years old. I had just got my license. I lived with my dad, and he worked. He works 4:00 in the morning 'til pretty much 5:00 or 6:00 at night. So I had pretty much free reign.

Participant Nine summarized his parents' supervision this way, "So I would come when I want, left when I want. No repercussions."

Both inadequate social capital and invisibility had impacted P9's life, and he typifies the disengagement factor cited in the literature (Alexander et al., 1997; AYPF, 2006; Bridgeland et al., 2000; Christle et al., 2007; Ensminger & Slusarick, 1992; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007 Roderick, 1994). Participant Nine said that he might have been involved with school activities had anyone pushed him. However, his parents had focused on the details of their own failing relationship and had ignored P9's problems. Since he was neither a discipline problem nor an outstanding student, school personnel overlooked P9 to the point that he was not informed about vocational classes available to him (See Appendix A). In short: no one had noticed P9 drifting away. He had become invisible.

Although 12 of the 13 participants described homes characterized by poor parenting, Participant Five's situation was unique. This young man had been raised by an aunt and uncle and then rejected by them because he came to question the religious views of his aunt, a full-time Christian pastor. Participant Five had then lived with his real father, who ultimately put P5 out

on the street when he turned 18 because of problems between P5 and his stepmother. It is difficult to envision a more egregious example of poor parenting than simply making a child homeless even if he was legally an adult.

Participant Ten had also been impacted by family situations. He described his mother as poor and hard working, but spoke poignantly and with resentment of a father who had abandoned the family. Participant Ten's family life had been characterized by loneliness and sadness. Participant Ten's written response to the question of why he quit school was, "I Never had much. Some one to talk to about life. So i [*sic*] left school to live with some girl to fill like i [*sic*] belong."

Regularly, Participant Ten had left home on Friday night and had not returned until Sunday or Monday. He said he had done this to save his mother the money needed to feed him. When I asked whether she worried about him, P10 replied, "No, she wouldn't know if I was alive or dead. But I would always--she gave me a cell phone from when I would--say16 or 17, and she could always get a hold of me."

In addition to learning difficulties and poverty, P10 had been most influenced by his own need to belong and by his lack of a father. At one point, P10 had been sent to a camp specializing in treatment for young men with problems related to alcohol abuse. Participant Ten remembered this as a good event. He said:

> Oh it was a really good experience. I was surrounded by all boys, which was pretty cool. A lot of them had dads and a lot of them had--you know--really good intentions to live the rest of their life. There was like some male figures that were staff there that I looked up to, too.

Participant Ten remembered that experience fondly because he had interacted with good male role models. However, P10's search for older male guidance was not always constructive. He spoke of spending time with an adult male who let kids hang at his house rather than attend school. This man may have believed he was helping young people, but allowing them to use his place as an escape from school had distanced students from professional help and had contributed to students disengaging from school.

Participant Ten also spoke of living with a girl so he could belong. This young man's lifeworld was dominated by his desire to belong to someone, and his eventual decision to quit school resulted from his lack of a supportive family and the stability it could have provided. Like other participants, P10 showed the harm done by inadequate social capital, but in P10's case, the lack of a strong father figure colored his entire conversation with me, and his search for belonging had led him to seek the company of an older man who had contributed to P10's dissociation from school.

Participant Ten exemplifies the themes of invisibility and inadequate social capital. His mother had not cared where P10 had spent his weekends, and neither P10's mother nor the school had intervened when he began to skip school. Participant Ten caused little trouble in school and had gradually faded from the notice of anyone who might have helped him. He said, "So I just knew automatically, it was me and myself. And only myself. As many people as I were around, it was just kind of like always just me."

Participant Eleven had also been impacted by bad family life. Half Native-American and half Hispanic, he had been rejected by his Native-American mother's adoptive White family but had no connections to her birth-family on a reservation. He had attended school in Florida and had lived with his biological father for a time. However, P11 described his father as a violent

man who abused drugs, and P11 had lost contact with his father. Participant Eleven's mother had remarried and held a steady job as did her husband. However, P11 said that his mother drank steadily and his birth father was heavily into drugs. Participant Eleven's mother had thrown him out of the home when she found marijuana paraphernalia in his room. Participant Eleven expressed surprise at this since both his mother and her former husband used drugs extensively. Although P11 said he had quit school because the school had changed his placement from a resource room to a regular classroom where he felt he would fail, the dysfunctional nature of his family and lack of supportive home life had contributed to P11's ultimate failure in school.

Participant Twelve's life had been severely impacted by alcohol abuse and a dysfunctional family that had contributed to P12's failure to graduate. His mother's alcohol abuse allowed P12 to drift away from school. However, his father had contributed to the situation. Participant Twelve had lived with his father until the age of 16. At that time, his father had remarried and had sent P12 to live with his mother on a different reservation. According to P12, this move was the major source of his problems. After moving, P12 fell in with a bad crowd, began drinking heavily, had a child at an early age, and eventually dropped out of school. Although chemical abuse was the main reason P12 failed, a pattern of overall poor parenting had made P12 vulnerable to chemical abuse and had contributed to his failure.

Participant Thirteen, the young man whose mother had allowed him to host drinking parties at age nine, also illustrated the relationship between broken families, chemical abuse, and failure in school. Participant Thirteen's family had moved around the nation seeking a better life, but the family was always dominated by the father's drinking. Participant Thirteen's mother had allowed P13 to drink at an early age and had not supervised his activities. His life was a canvas of poverty, alcohol abuse, and poor parenting.

Participant Thirteen had also suffered from invisibility. When I asked whether school personnel had ever noticed his drinking, he said, "No, they were all oblivious to what was going on. Because they were--I did it at home. I left all of that stuff, home was home." Perhaps he left "all that stuff" at home, but someone in his school should have been aware of a nine year old hosting drinking parties.

Poor parenting, whether combined with chemical abuse or not, allowed these participants to seek negative social capital and stimulated their disengagement from school. Because these young men were marginally involved in school and rarely engaged in activities, they gradually became invisible to school personnel and lost opportunities to establish supportive social capital that could have enabled them to graduate.

School problems.

Chemical abuse and poor parenting were not the only reasons these young men failed to graduate. Several participants spoke of problems within the schools and indicated that schools had somehow failed to meet their individual needs.

Sometimes, schools failed to offer instruction other than college preparatory work; sometimes schools placed students in inappropriate academic settings. Five participants related their decision to quit at least partially to school structures or actions. Participant One quit because he saw no personal value in the college-preparatory classes he was taking. He concluded school had nothing to offer and did not meet his perceived needs. He said: "...I mean it's only so many times you're going to be using x and y, and you know I mean, it really don't matter what pronouns are to me, you know..." He also felt teachers had not been sensitive to his individual learning styles. He said:

> ...I think they should have spent more time like talking to us and teaching not just you know "this is the book here" you know "read this book and do this and take this test" and so that proves that you're smart enough to read a book and take a test...

In a review of studies on high school dropouts, Rumberger and Lim (2008) reported that taking vocational courses had a mixed influence on high school success rates, so it is not proven that a curriculum built solely around college prep courses causes dropping out. However, for P1, the preponderance of traditional college prep courses in the high school curriculum at least provided a rationale for dropping out. His choice to quit school resulted from gradual dissociation, perhaps exacerbated by taking courses in which he found no value.

Other participants expressed similar dissatisfaction with traditional classes or instruction. Although Participant Two never expressed dissatisfaction with traditional classes, he mentioned not being able to concentrate on anything for any length of time. When asked to write down his reason for leaving school, P2 wrote:

> a [*sic*] lot had to do with me having a short attention span and daydreaming while the lecture was going on. The school I went to was a very good school, but I would never pay attention I could never pay attention and remember homework.

Since P2 was never tested for Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) I cannot say that he had a learning disability. However, if P2 truly could not concentrate on anything for more than a few minutes, it seems the school should have noticed this and explored remedial alternatives. Although drug and alcohol abuse influenced the course of P2's life, his possible learning difficulty could have worsened the problem since students with learning disabilities are at high risk for dropping out (Osher, Morrison, & Bailey 2003).

Participant Four spoke about loving auto mechanics and wanting to feel oil beneath his fingernails. This need for tactile activities had caused him problems. He said, "I always have to be fidgeting with something in class, and that can kind of get me in trouble at times. Whether it's my keys or cell phone." He was not interested in college prep courses, nor did he do well in such courses. He had opportunities to take mechanics during his stay at a correctional institution. Unfortunately, he was returned to regular school before he could complete the program.

Participant Nine, who quit mainly because he became a father, had disengaged from school over time; however, he also mentioned a desire to take auto mechanics. This confused me because the school P9 had attended did offer auto mechanics. Apparently, P9 had disengaged to the point that he was unaware of his options. Participant Nine's disengagement had been driven largely by his parent's divorce. Absorbed in their own conflict, his parents had ignored P9. As a result, he had drifted away from school, had not participated in activities, and had hung out with older guys. He said, "Oh--high school--I think the reason I was under the radar is because I could be. I didn't have people at home telling me, 'you have to do this; you have to do that.'" Participant Nine did not express dissatisfaction with classes; nonetheless, his disengagement might have been prevented had P9 been drawn into classes that met his personal needs and had he been encouraged to participate in extra-curricular activities.

Participant Nine said he might have remained in school had he been able to continue in classes while holding down a job that provided for his new family. Unfortunately, the district P9 had attended offered no alternative scheduling. He had a choice of traditional classes during the traditional school day or of dropping out, getting a job, and working toward a GED. Participant Nine would have tried to graduate had alternative programming been available. His disengagement with school and his failure to be involved in activities both resulted from and

contributed to his invisibility. Overlooked by the school and by his parents, P9 found significance with a girlfriend, became a father, and dropped out of school.

Participant Ten did not focus on inappropriate classes during our conversation, but he had transferred many times and talked about changing placements as he moved from school to school. He had never spent two consecutive years in the same school. Sometimes he had been placed in special education math classes, and sometimes in regular or even advanced math classes. The literature mentions the harmful effects of changing schools often (Ensminger & Slusarick, 1992), a problem that compounds when students are shifted from one type of learning environment to another as was the case with P10.

Participant Eleven had also quit specifically because of class placement. He had been in special education language arts for a number of years, but as a senior, he had been moved to the regular English classroom. He said:

> I had never taken a normal English class. I was always at a different reading level. I don't remember which one it was. But my last year they moved me up. And it was like the hardest thing ever. She made you read all the time--I don't know, nothing was ever good enough for her. Or me--at least, I couldn't take notes the way she expected it--I don't know. If you weren't really a prep or a jock in school, people just don't really pay attention.

Participant Eleven explained his classroom difficulties, particularly his problems with reading, this way:

> Well, I do have ADD and it is very hard to focus on things that are very difficult--or not difficult but I guess I don't have a keen sense for. Like, reading…never read a book in my life. I can't; I stink. I hate it.

This failure of schools to alter educational practices to meet students' needs is addressed in the literature and follows the historical development of American education. The current American education system traces its roots back to schools created by New England Puritans (Deschenes et al., 2001; Doll, 2008; McKnight, 2003; Noble, 1935). This system emphasized the value of education to mold students to universally accepted social and moral standards. Later, schools within the academy movement continued to emphasize good citizenship (Perkinson, 1976). The common school movement led by Horace Mann in the early 19th century also strove to create people who were good citizens of a republican nation and morally fit (Deschenes et al., 2991; Lauderdale, 1975; Perkinson, 1976).

According to Deschenes, Cuban, and Tyack (2001) most efforts to reform American education have concentrated on making students fit the schools rather than making schools fit the students. Deschenes, Cuban, and Tyack (2001) state that this can alienate students and cause them to drop out of school. I found that this was true for some participants in this study, and I concluded that schools could inadvertently cause students to drop out by failing to consider students' needs when designing curriculum and instruction. Furthermore, the failure of schools to recognize individual needs and to respond with programming related to student needs became a variation on the theme that dropouts may lack social capital and that schools can help build such capital. It also indicated the harm that invisibility can do. No one had noticed the needs or problems of most of these young men.

Violence.

Three participants had quit school at least in part because of violence. Participant Six had attended a large inner-city school dominated by gang-related violence. Because P6 had refused to join a gang, he had become the target of gangs. Participant Six said, "They didn't like me or, I

wasn't in their gang or…I wasn't smoking, drinking, hanging out with them." He had been expelled once for being in a fight involving three students. Participant Six had been cut with a knife, but was suspended along with the others due to school policies. Participant Six said the school did little about the violence and that police were never involved. That school had mainly African American students with a smattering of Hispanics but no White students.

Participant Six had changed schools often and said his mother had allowed him to skip school because she feared for his safety in school. When I asked what his mother thought about his absences, P6 said, "What she knew is like, the school was like real bad. Like I told her, I didn't really wanna go to that school. Then she moved me to another one."

Participant Seven, the young man raised by an overindulgent grandmother, had quit largely because of his own alcohol abuse and dissociation from school. However, a fight had precipitated his removal from school and subsequent dropping out. Some guy had started pushing him and his friends, so they had agreed that whoever was pushed next would hit him. Participant Seven said: "...he just kept pushing us every time we walked past him, so me and my friends were like--ok, the next guy he pushes, we'll just hit him--whoever he pushes, him. And he pushed me, so I hit him."

Unfortunately, Participant Seven had been near the end of his junior year when this happened, and he chose to simply quit school for good. He wrote:

> It was like 3 weeks away from the end of the school year; I got in a fight. They expelled me for the year and told me I could go back, and I just got mad cause I got expelled and I just never went back.

Other factors had contributed to P7's drift away from school, but violence within the school sparked his final decision to quit, and violence is a factor leading some students to drop out (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Kozol, 2005; Rumberger & Lim, 2008).

Participant Eight's decision to quit school was related to violence, although not violence within the school. A Native-American youth attending school on a reservation, P8 told a complex and intriguing story (see Appendix A). Participant Eight's life had been dominated by his mother's chemical abuse and poor parenting, but violence had also filled his lifeworld. Participant Eight described his reservation world this way:

> It was more of a last name thing. It's a small town. It's your last name and you gotta live up by it. I went by ___ and there was mostly ___s and they were mostly like the fighting type around there. So I had to prove myself around there, so it was more of a non-choice kind of thing. But I didn't mind it.

I asked P8 if there was much fighting in the school, and he said there was not, but that teachers were aware of the violence out of school. He said:

> No, we had actually worked our way around that. See, the teachers talked to the students, it's a very corrupt town, and they talked to us about going to other places and then stay. So we worked it out that way. The teachers would say if you get kicked out of school you're not going to be able to go. If you want to fight somebody just take it up after school and not on school grounds or in school grounds.

Violence was a prominent part of P8's lifeworld. When he was 11, P8 had his arm broken by his uncle because P8 had drunk up the uncle's vodka. Participant Eight also mentioned another uncle who was his godfather. Participant Eight said his godfather loved and guided P8 and his sister. However, according to P8, this uncle, "... was always bad. I never knew him to be

a good guy." At the time of our conversation, this uncle was serving an 80-year prison sentence for shooting someone in the face during an armed robbery.

Not surprisingly, the incident that precipitated P8's withdrawal from school was violence related. Participant Eight had beaten another boy whose father was in local law enforcement. Participant Eight said he and his mother had been given a choice of quitting school, so the other boy would not encounter P8 in the school, or of being tried for assault in adult court. Participant Eight chose to quit, a decision related directly to violence.

Participant Eight claimed to have good support from family members and from school personnel, some of whom were relatives. Hence, he may not have lacked social capital. Nor was he invisible; he claimed to have been very popular and bragged of his sexual conquests. However, he did lack a realistic view of life and bragged about unlikely successes in athletics and his post-secondary career life. The theme P8 best exemplified was that failure was the expected norm for his life. Although claiming to be academically outstanding and well socialized, P8 lived in a lifeworld dominated by violence, poverty, and chemical abuse. In such a world, dropping out of school would not be an unusual event. For P8, success in school might have been unusual.

Age disparity.

Another factor cited by participants was that of age disparity. Two participants mentioned age as a factor in their decision to quit school. Participant Three and Participant Thirteen both said they felt uncomfortable being two years older than their classmates. Participant Three said he had begun to feel uncomfortable about his age after being held back in tenth grade. He had already been retained in elementary school and said, "...to be honest, I did not want to be older than everyone else in school."

Participant Thirteen expressed the same concern. He had missed so many credits that he was considered a sophomore although he was actually 18. When I asked whether he could have graduated with another year of school, P13 said:

> Oh, no, no….not by far. By the time I would've been the cut-off age, I wouldn't have graduated unless I took summer school every year. Extra early-bird classes, which means I would have had eight full classes, and I still would've barely graduated. I had to pass every class.

He had chosen against that option and had quit school rather than continue after his classmates had graduated.

Age disparity relates to retention as cause of dropping out as cited in the literature (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Ensminger & Slusarick, 1992; Kelly & Monrad, 2007; Roderick, 1994; Rumberger, 1995; Vang, 2005; Wehlage, 1986). Although only two participants specifically referred to age disparity as an issue, six participants had been retained at least once and would have been older than their classmates at the time they quit school.

Parenthood.

Becoming a parent while in school can lead students to drop out (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001; Cardon, 2000; Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007; Ensminger & Slusarick, 1992; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). Only one participant in this study mentioned parenthood as a major problem, but others had become parents at an early age or while still in school. Participant Nine cited parenthood as the main reason he had quit school. He could not find work to support his new family while going to school, and the school had no programs allowing students to work full time while attending school. When P9's girlfriend became pregnant, he felt an obligation to marry her and to assume the duties of a full-time father and husband.

Happily, P9 obtained a GED and attended post-secondary career tech programs. At the time of the interview, he had a good job in a local business. He and his wife have another child, and he seemed pleased his life. He said he wished he had completed high school and followed a more traditional life curve, but he also said about his wife, "Stayed with her for--stayed with her for the wrong reason, but I ended up falling in love with her." When I asked P9 if he was happy with his family and his life, he replied, "Yes, very."

My venture into Participant Nine's lifeworld was refreshingly positive. He grew up under adverse conditions beyond his control; he made a bad decision about early sexual involvement, and he quit school. But, he used his abilities and inner strength to persevere, to make good choices, and to make a good life. He showed true resilience.

Although they did not cite parenthood as the reason they quit, other participants had become parents in school or early in their adult lives. Participant Two had conceived a child after quitting school, and P8 claimed to have fathered five children, his first when he was 15 years old. Although P8 did not identify this as a reason he quit, it was part of a life picture that included violence, chemical abuse, and a badly disrupted family. Participant Ten had also become a father after moving in with a girl. He wrote, " So i left school to live with some girl to fill like i belong" [*sic*] That statement summarizes P10's dissociation with school, his lack of social capital, and his need to connect with someone. Becoming a father was a result of his life, not necessarily a cause for dropping out.

Participant Twelve also became a father at an early age. He was 15 when he had his first child, but he saw dropping out as the result of bad choices he had made. Specifically, he said that he had quit because he connected with the wrong peer group and chose to party rather than focus

on school. Like P10, becoming a father was part of a lifeworld characterized by at-risk behaviors and factors detrimental to educational success.

Participants in this study quit school for a variety of reasons, and these reasons corresponded to at-risk factors already presented in the literature. Drug and alcohol abuse, single-parent families, low socio-economic status, minority status, retention in school, learning disabilities, emotional difficulties, poor parenting, and disrupted home lives all surfaced in my conversations with participants. The characteristics of participants' lifeworlds are summarized in Appendix I.

In conversations with these young men, I discerned themes revealing the essence of school failure for these participants. It became apparent that most of these young men had lacked the support and guidance of important adults in their lives. This understanding grounds my conclusion that lack of social capital is a theme related to dropping out. An element of inadequate social capital was the invisibility of these young men in their schools and homes. Adults who could have made a difference in the lives of these men had overlooked them, either because they made no trouble, because they were not involved in sports or other activities, or because their behavior put them beyond the pale of concern. This invisibility complemented the cycle of waning social capital. As participants had drifted away from school, people in the school gave them less attention. In turn, this resulted in diminishing social capital, which further aggravated their disengagement from school. Put succinctly: These young men lost touch with school, and no one noticed.

However, some participants had failed, at least in part, because schools did not provide adequate support or instruction that met participants' personal needs or wants. This leads to

research question 2, which addresses directly the role schools played in participants' decisions to drop out.

Research question 2: In the students' opinions, did the schools in any way fail the students and make it difficult for them to graduate?

American education evolved from the Puritan schools founded in New England during the 17th century (Carter & Steinbrink, 1992; Lauderdale, 1975; Litz, 1975; White, 2005). Because these schools were rooted in the Puritan religious tradition, American education values conformity to accepted social and moral norms (Lauderdale, 1975; Litz, 1975; White, 2005). Deschenes, Cuban and Tyack (2001) stated this tradition instills a moral element into academic success and places responsibility for success on the individual, a fact reflected in the modern accountability movement with its reliance on standardized tests that value individual conformity to socially established standards (Deschenes et al., 2001). Students who cannot conform will not succeed. Freire (1970) posited that such systems inevitably create failures to provide society with individuals to perform the most menial, albeit essential, tasks required. Deschenes, Cuban, and Tyack (2001) noted that efforts to reform American education consistently seek means to make individuals meet the expectations of schools rather than making schools fit the needs of individuals.

Question two addressed the issue of whether schools had in some way contributed to the failure of the study's participants. I expected to find participants placing at least some blame upon the schools, and I found instances where schools had not taken steps necessary to enable student success. However, this question targeted the participants' own view of why they failed to graduate, and I was surprised to learn that most participants placed little or no blame upon the schools. Only one young man, Participant Eleven, directly blamed the school for his decision to

drop out because he had been moved from a resource room to the regular classroom and knew he would never pass the class and graduate.

However, other participants spoke of problems within the school and mentioned policies or actions that had contributed to their failure. Participant One had quit because he found classes irrelevant to his future plans, but he did not blame the school. When asked whether he could have adapted and done the work rather than drop out, P1 replied, “It wasn’t even an option in my head.” When I asked P1 how he felt about his decision to quit, he said, “50-50, but I am glad I did. I like the way things have turned out for me.”

When critiquing their schools, participants spoke of individual teachers or specific school policies. For example: Participant Six wrote that he quit school because he was getting into fights; however, he did hold negative feelings toward school mainly because he felt teachers had not cared whether students learned. He said, “Humm, like my teachers, a lot of stuff like--they wasn’t helping me. They mostly clown around with the students.” Participant Six had attended a predominantly African American school in a large urban district, a school dominated by violence and teacher apathy, the same type of school described by Kozol in his work on the decay of urban schools (Kozol, 2005). Even though he expressed dissatisfaction with the schools he had attended, P6 accepted responsibility for his decision to quit and did not feel that the school had forced him out.

Participant Seven had quit because of his own drinking and violence and did not blame the school for his decision. Participant Seven was critical of a principal who had refused to readmit P7 a year after he had been expelled. Participant Seven felt he should have been allowed to return because he was more mature and ready to learn. However, he accepted full responsibility for his decision not to return when he could have. He said, “School wasn’t--it

didn't have nothing to do with the school. I already know I dropped out because of me. School was good; school did everything they were supposed to." Participant Ten mentioned that no one in the school had shown interest in him and that he had quit school because he was seeking someone to care for him. However, P10 was more concerned about his father's desertion than any failure by schools.

Participant Eleven, who did blame the school for his decision to quit, said teachers had not understood his learning problems. He said this had become a major problem after he had been moved from Language Arts in a resource room to the regular 12th grade Language Arts room. Neither P11 nor his resource room teacher had known why he was moved out of special education, and P11 said that teachers in regular classes had failed to comprehend his situation. Describing class in normal classrooms, P11 said:

> And just--you get too far behind and you can't catch up. And normal teachers that don't teach resource or anything they just expect you to keep up. Not know that really, I guess--I guess they would know. I guess they just expect you to go do that right away. They don't know what it's like to have ADD I guess. How hard it is to focus.

Participant Thirteen criticized his school when he spoke of a district policy that students could not pass a class until they had completed all assignments in that class. He felt this policy was unreasonable and placed a burden upon students who had difficulty keeping up. However, P13 described himself as a good student and acknowledged that he could have kept up had he not missed so much school. Participant Thirteen was critical of the district policy, but he did not blame the school for his decision to quit school. He said he liked school. In his words, "No, actually that was the place that I was... I loved going to school; it was my escape. I used to be a star student as far as test taking goes. Never missed a day." But then, P13 qualified that statement

when he said, “Well, can’t say I never missed a day, there’d be times when I’d be just having a hard week, and I’d be like I don’t wanna go to school.” Eventually, cutting school and having incomplete work placed P13 in a situation where he would have been an 18-year old sophomore, and he quit rather than remain in school under those circumstances. But he did not blame the school for this and emphasized he had caused his own ultimate failure.

I was surprised to find that most participants did not blame schools for the decision to drop out. Instead, the reasons participants cited follow patterns found in literature, including: poor attendance, use of drugs and alcohol, family problems, violence, and behavioral problems outside of school (AYPF, 2006; Cardon, 2000; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007; Osher et al., 2003; Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Throughout these conversations, I heard statements that caused me to question the actions of schools, particularly some of the policies and some decisions made by administrators or teachers. However, I did not voice my thoughts, and few participants saw the schools as critically as did I.

Research question 3: What can schools and educators do to better meet the needs of at-risk students?

According to van Manen (1990), phenomenology must be pedagogical in nature, and he observes that few educational theorists have connected educational research to teaching. He says:

> To be unresponsive to pedagogy could be termed the half-life state of modern educational theory and research, which has forgotten its original vocation: that all theory and research were meant to orient us to pedagogy in our relations with children. (van Manen, 1990, p.135)

In this study, I maintained a pedagogical focus by seeking themes to help educators better meet the needs of students. Because few participants saw schools as the reason for dropping out,

I sought themes revealed through conversations with participants and from literature on dropouts, which indicates that most dropouts leave school as the culmination of dissociation with school (Alexander et al., 1997; AYPF, 2006; Bridgeland et al., 200; Christle et al., 2007; Ensminger & Slusarick, 1992; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007; Roderick, 1994). Hence, the question becomes what schools can do to prevent students from disengaging and dropping out.

I found the most pervasive theme to be participants' lack of social capital. With the exception of P1, every young man in this study either had been let down by someone or had never developed strong supportive relationships with people who could have steered him through difficulties and buoyed him up enough to succeed. In their study of resilience among at-risk students, Werner and Smith (2001) found that social capital was essential for students to succeed. Groninger and Lee (2001) found that two risk factors, academic and social, jeopardized students' chances of success. Students with academic risk factors can succeed with positive support from others, but students who dropped out reported fewer positive social interactions with teachers than students who graduated (Groninger & Lee, 2001). Worse, students who failed to develop supportive social relationships in schools failed to create social support networks that could benefit them in later life (Groninger & Lee, 2001), and Croninger and Lee (2001) concluded that teachers were the most important source of social capital needed for success by at-risk students.

The life stories of this study's participants support research on the importance of social capital. Participant Two's mother had allowed him to drink with her and had encouraged him to quit school; that was not only bad parenting but negative social capital. However, the problem was aggravated by the school, which failed to notice P1's hangovers or to intervene. Thus, the school failed to provide P2 the positive adult support he needed at a crucial point in his life. Participant Three had been moved through a series of foster homes and could only recall one

foster parent who had cared. Sadly, P3 had also been abused by someone in a mentoring program designed to provide social capital. Both P4 and P9 had been overlooked by parents gripped in divorce and unable to see the needs of their sons. Participant Eight wrote that he had, "No support from family." Participant Ten, who had been abandoned by his father, sought the companionship of an older male, who allowed P10 to skip school to hang out. Participant Ten wrote, "I never had much or some one to talk to about life. So i [*sic*] left school to live with some girl to fill like i [*sic*] belong." When I asked P11 why he hung out with wannabe gang bangers, he said, "I guess the reason why is 'cuz they were more understanding." Participant Eleven had been thrown out of his home by his mother after she found his drug paraphernalia despite her own use of alcohol and drugs, and the lack of support from either the school or his parents figured prominently in P11's decision to quit school.

In this group of participants, Participant Five demonstrated well the destructive influence of inadequate social capital. Participant Five was rejected several times by adults who could have provided support. First, his father gave P5 to an aunt and uncle after P5's mother died. That couple allowed P5 to remain out of school one year to help them renovate their home. Later, when P5 decided he could not accept the tenets of his family's religion, his aunt, who was a pastor, refused to let him remain with her and sent him to his real father. Unfortunately, when P5 turned 18, his father put him out on the street. When I asked P5 why his father had thrown him out, P5 replied, "it just… I don't know. He was responsible for me when I was like 17, 16, but not really when I was 18. He didn't have to pay for me any more, so just threw me out." Homeless, P5 could not remain in school while working three jobs and eventually lost those jobs because the stress of being homeless rendered him an ineffective employee.

Homelessness also made it impossible for P5 to succeed in school. Participant Five wrote that when his father had thrown him out of the home, he had tried alternative school, but that he had, "…bigger issues than school." Survival is indeed more important than education, and the adults in P5's life had forced him into a situation where school success was not a priority.

As the literature reveals, many factors place students at risk of failure. However, most of these factors are beyond the scope of a school's control. Schools cannot influence a student's socio-economic status, race, home situation, parental education level or language in the home. However, schools can address the issue of social capital. As Croninger and Lee (2001) observed, "For socially at-risk students, benefits are almost exclusively linked to a single form of social capital--*student-teacher talks*…" (Croninger & Lee, 2001, p. 565). In 1990, Brendtro, Brokenleg, and van Bokern stated that students most at risk of dropping out had never been friends with a teacher. Schools can directly assist students by fostering supportive relationships between students and teachers and thereby increasing the social capital possessed by at-risk students.

The literature also reveals other actions available to schools to reduce dropouts. Retention of even one grade has been cited as a cause of dropouts (Alexander, et al., 2001; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Ensminger & Slusarick, 1992; Kelly & Monrad, 2007; Roderick, 1994; Rumberger, 1995; Vang, 2005; Wehlage, 1986). In 1994, Roderick determined that being retained one year increased a student's chances of dropping out by 40%, and being retained two years increased those chances by 90%. The dropout rate for students who had never been retained was 27%, but the rate for students who had been retained was 70% (Roderick, 1994). Roderick (1994) also found that retention in the earliest grades had the same results as retention in later grades. Six of the thirteen participants in my study had been retained; three of those had been retained twice.

Finn (1989) determined that age-disparity could lead to dropping out, a factor mentioned by P3 and P13. Since dropping out often results from a process of gradual disengagement, being older than one's classmates can make a student feel out of place and exacerbate the process of disengagement. Participant Three told me he had dropped out because he was still in the tenth grade when he turned 18 and he said, "...and I didn't want to stay in school until I was 21." Feeling inappropriate in his or her class setting also reduces a student's social comfort, which can lead to greater loss of social capital.

Research also indicates that a school's discipline policies may affect its dropout rate. Schools relying upon out-of-school suspensions tend to have higher dropout rates than schools that use in-school suspensions or other forms of discipline that do not remove the student from school (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004; Christle et al., 2007). Since students often drop out after disengaging from the school, policies that remove the student from school may increase students' feelings of alienation and their inclination to drop out. Again, this would also reduce students' opportunities to build positive relationships with teachers, which would in turn reduce student's opportunities to build social capital.

Schools with high graduation rates tend to have fair discipline policies (as perceived by students), small enrollment numbers, caring staffs, high academic expectations, and opportunities for students to participate in their educations (Christianson & Turlow, 2004). Christle et al. (2007) noted the importance of high staff to student ratio, of teacher visibility and supervision, particularly in common areas, of teachers acting with authority and utilizing a greater variety of instructional methods. Christianson and Turlow (2004) also noted that students who participated in activities had higher graduation rates. Schools should be aware of the individual learning needs of students and should place students in classes adapted to special needs. Some

participants in this study had been inappropriately placed in regular classrooms and had not received needed help. Participants One and Four might have benefited from more hands-on learning. Schools must also confront the problem of violence both within the school and beyond it. Some participants had struggled to succeed in schools marked by violence. Sometimes school policies can cause students to drop out. Participant Thirteen said the school's policy on incomplete assignments had made it impossible for him to graduate on time.

Generally, I found that schools should review instructional methods and policies to insure that such factors do not reduce the chances that at-risk students will graduate. But the one area where schools can have a direct impact would be in building social capital through fostering positive relationships between students and teachers.

Research question 4: In their own opinions, could students have done anything differently themselves to remain in school?

Participants were vague in their responses to this question, and I gained little understanding from this research question. Although most participants assumed responsibility for dropping out and did not blame the school, few clearly articulated what they could have done differently. I shall cite each participant's written response to this question and add my own observations. I present the respondents' written statements as written by the young men with no corrections by me.

Participant One: "Care more about school and study more."

This young man quit because he saw no value in school, and at the time of our conversation, he did not regret that choice. He said that he could have cared more, but when I asked what he meant by that, he said that he could have wanted the things that a high school graduate wants, but that he really did not want those things. Participant One said he could have

done a number of things differently; but when I asked whether those things had seemed important at the time, P1 responded, “It wasn’t even an option in my head.” Because he had quit as a matter of choice and did not regret that choice, P1 could not articulate anything he would have done differently. He liked his life as it was.

Participant Two: “I could have tried harder to focus on my studies and not let my mind wander.”

Participant Two claimed to have serious attention problems and had lived with a mother who encouraged him to work and allowed him to drink at an early age. The school had never addressed his attention problems or noticed to his hangovers and sleepiness. I respected his assertion that quitting school had been his mistake and that no one else could be blamed, but I understood why he could not be more specific about what he could have done differently. He lived in a world he did not control, and it was not a world conducive to academic success.

Participant Three: “Well, I could of studied more and not sleep in school.”

Participant Three manifested severe learning disabilities and had spent his school years migrating from one foster care setting to another and from one treatment program to another. He had been abused by a stepfather and introduced to drugs by a youth mentor. He said he had serious depression and great difficulty sleeping at night. So, although P3’s response is generic, it is difficult to see that he could have done much to improve his chances of success in school. From early on, P3 had lived in a lifeworld where success in anything was unlikely.

Participant Four: “Focus more on myself and my education instead of other things and/or people.”

I found this response from Participant Four to be interesting. Participant Four had lived in a family fraught with tension caused by his parents’ marital failure. Participant Four also had

some form of learning disability coupled with severe anger management problems, and he had spent time in various treatment programs as a result of delinquent behavior. However, P4 believed he could have graduated, and he regretted being unable to complete a course in auto mechanics.

Possibly Participant Four's reference to "...other things and/or people" related to his anger and how he focused too much on what others were doing. Apparently, he was confrontational and unable to curb his anger enough to focus on schoolwork. He said, "I started arguing with teachers and--you know--everyone at school and getting in fights, and I figured, well, I'll just save myself the problem--and you know--drop out basically."

Again, I respect P4's willingness to assume responsibility, but I also see forces beyond his control, his parents' divorce and his own emotional problems, negatively shaping his life and directing his actions.

Participant Five: No written response.

Participant Five was the young man whose aunt had sent him away because he rejected her religious view and whose father had put him out of the home when he turned 18. Participant Five did not respond to the question of what he could have done differently. Apparently, P5 could see nothing he might have done differently. Throughout our conversation, his affect was unemotional and his answers terse. He expressed resentment toward his aunt and uncle. He said that he remains in touch with them, but is not close to them. He said, "I didn't get to talk to them that much. I really didn't have a lot of contact with them." And, "It was just kind of a silent agreement. I'd see them when I see them."

Participant Five remained angry toward his father who had thrown him out. I asked if his stepmother had wanted him out, and P5 replied, "I could question that but you know my dad

really... I don't know." He also said, "Dad didn't want me to just you know end up homeless. I mean it still ended up that way."

Given the facts of his lifeworld as seen by P5, I can understand why he could see nothing he might have done differently. I could speculate on whether he could have worked things out with his aunt and uncle or with his father and stepmother, but I am not P5, and he saw no way to change his past. He hoped to complete high school somewhere and to continue his plan to become a veterinarian. However, he also showed a deep vein of fatalism, which probably resulted from the actions of important adults in P5's life more than his own actions.

Participant Six: "Do not get a lot of friends."

I do not truly understand this response. Participant Six was the young man who had quit an urban school because of violence. He had moved from that city for reasons that were never clear to me. He spoke about hanging out with friends and committing petty thefts. Participant Six also mentioned being expelled from Job Corps for fighting. However, I am not sure why he referred to friends causing problems. Perhaps he felt his friends had led him to skip school and break the law, or P6 may have been unable to clearly articulate mistakes he might have made but felt an obligation to write something.

Participant Seven: "Could've went more and actually tried, coulda stayed outta trouble."

This young man had lived with his grandmother, who had indulged and spoiled him. He had manipulated her trust to skip school and hang with a bad peer group. Eventually, he quit trying in school and slid away from school to party. He had been expelled for fighting, but that expulsion was actually the culmination of a process of disengagement that had begun when P7

entered high school. Our conversation reinforced P7's statement and showed that he understood clearly his own mistakes.

Participant Eight: "Ignoring ignorance, its all up to me to be the person that cooperates with school rules follows directions the school tried its best."

This is interesting. Although P8 stressed that the school had done its best and that he alone was responsible for quitting, he also referred to the negative aspects of his reservation community and the chronic conflicts between groups in that community. When he wrote, "Ignoring ignorance," P8 was indicting someone for doing something that had incited him to fall away. He spoke of a fight and how the tribal justice system had boxed him into a situation he could not control that had ultimately led to his dropping out. Although P8 claimed responsibility for his choices, he still directed the conversation to how he had reacted to other people, which could be an indirect way to place blame on others and evade his own responsibility.

I agreed with P8's assessment of life. He was right to assume responsibility for his choices. However, he had lived in a family and community plagued by poverty, violence, and chemical abuse. Although it is good to accept personal responsibility, it would be disingenuous to ignore the negative influence of environment.

Participant Nine: "Not had a son in high school. Or tried to work and go to school."

Participant Nine showed a solid grasp of his life throughout our conversation. He had quit school to work full time because he and his girlfriend were expecting a baby, and P9 saw no other option. When P9 wrote that having a son while still in school caused him to drop out, he summed up the situation well. Certainly, his parents' marital conflicts had contributed to P9's problems, and it is possible the school could have noticed P9's gradual disengagement from school and intervened in some way. Had an alternative school been available, P9 might have

graduated, but such a school was not available. In every way, P9 understood his situation and assumed responsibility for his decision to quit. He had made that decision as the result of concrete realities and as a logical means to handle those realities.

Participant Ten: "have goal of some sort. Work hard. an have patience."

Participant Ten's life had been shaped by his father's absence and his own lack of strong male support. He had spent weekends away from home, apparently with his mother's acquiescence. Eventually, he had moved in with a girl and quit school after she became pregnant. Participant Ten lacked both direction and guidance. His comment about patience was interesting because he spoke of moving in with a girl so he could have someone special in his life, and I believe P10's remark about patience refers to needing that girl. Rather than patiently build a life and then include someone special, he had sought the special person first. Sadly, because P10 did not plan to marry his child's mother, she was apparently not that special person; and by choosing her over school, P10 had also lost the chance to graduate from high school.

Participant Ten referred often to his father, and explained his lack of goals as a result of his father's absence. Participant Ten said, "I never really had a dad who said. 'Look what you can get when you work this hard'--I never really saw, you know?" Participant Ten saw his own lack of direction as a result of being abandoned by his father, and I believe he was right.

Participant Eleven: Participant Eleven gave no written response to this quest

Participant Eleven had been raised by a Native-American mother who had been adopted by a White family. Participant Eleven had learning problems and had lived for a time with an abusive father. He had lived with his mother near her adoptive family, but he said his mother's adoptive family had nothing to do with him because of his Native American heritage. He had hung around with a bad crowd, had used drugs, and had been in trouble with juvenile legal

authorities. He had been thrown out of his home by his mother for having drug paraphernalia, but said he could not understand why his mother had done that since she and his father both used drugs and drank.

I do not understand why P11 did not answer this question. Perhaps he did not know why he had quit or could not articulate his reasons in writing. Perhaps he overlooked the question, or perhaps he just did not care. Of all the participants, P11 seemed the most indifferent to his plight and the least concerned about our conversation. He appeared to be cooperating with me because he had nothing better to do. However, if this is true, it is not insignificant since a general lack of goal orientation or a realistic view of life was a theme I detected throughout this study.

Participant Twelve: "I coulda move in with a friend so I coulda learn more about school."

This statement was a reference to Participant Twelve's belief that his life went bad when he moved from his father's home to his mother's. He described going from a stable life where he acted responsibly and worked in school to one where he hung with friends, partied, and ignored his schoolwork.

It is difficult to assume that living with a friend rather than his mother could have solved P12's problems since his friends were a cause of the problem. I assumed he believed that living in the home of a friend would have provided more guidance and stability and could have helped him escape the lack of structure present in his mother's care. It is possible P12 was referring to a specific friend whose home would have been a better environment for him.

Participant Thirteen: "Not overreacted, sucked it up and ignored the rumors."

Participant Thirteen said he had quit school when an ex-girlfriend spread stories about him that made it unpleasant for him to remain in school where he would encounter her and the

friends who believed her. This young man appeared immature and out of touch with reality in his view of the world and of his life. His choice to quit school because a girlfriend was telling nasty stories struck me as typical middle school thinking rather than the thinking of a high school senior. Also, he spoke at length of his father's alcoholism and his own use of alcohol and drugs since an early age without identifying those things as factors shaping his lifeworld or his decision to quit school. He agreed that his mother had made poor parenting choices by letting him host alcohol parties while he was still in grade school. However, nothing in his voice or demeanor indicated that he was surprised by her behavior or that it was unusual.

I found that self-delusion or at least a poor grasp of reality was a theme recurrent in my conversations with participants. However, of all participants, P13 evinced this theme the most powerfully. Obviously an intelligent young man with grand plans and a wonderfully optimistic vision of his future, he did not articulate a realistic plan for building that future. His explanation of why he quit school reflected his poor grasp of the realities of his life.

Research question 5: In retrospect, how do students feel about their decisions to quit school?

Of the 13 participants, eight regretted quitting, three did not regret it, and two were uncertain. Those who did not regret quitting were participants 1, 3, and 11. Participant One had quit because he saw nothing in his courses that related to his future plans. At the time of our conversation, P1 had a good job, was dating a woman he hoped to marry (and whom he did marry several months after our conversation), and was satisfied with his life. He continued to believe that his life would not have been better had he graduated from high school. I must note that P1 had a solid home, a good record of academic achievement, and clear goals for his future

as well as a network of people that included his parents, his fiancé, his friends and coworkers. He had strong personal capital and social capital, things most participants lacked.

Participant Three also said he did not regret quitting. He was the young man who had moved through various treatment programs and foster homes. He had learning difficulties, was unable to sleep well, had used drugs and alcohol, and was not averse to continue using chemicals. He had been bullied in school and said that he suffered from severe depression. When I asked whether he still had bouts of depression, P3 replied, "...every day." He spoke of recurring suicidal urges and said, "Actually at one point, I was planning to hang myself or cut my neck, or something like that."

I believe P3 is a person whose past life, combined with his low intellectual ability and emotional problems made it unlikely that he could have graduated from a school unless that school had therapeutic programs tailored for someone like P3. Unfortunately, the public school system is generally ill prepared to work with someone like P3, and I understand why he did not regret dropping out.

Participant Eleven also did not regret quitting school. He had ADD and claimed he could not take the medication because of its side effects. His mother was a Native-American who had been adopted by a White family that had eventually rejected both his mother and him. Participant Eleven expressed bitterness toward schools, which had failed to address his needs or to understand how difficult it was for him to learn. He said: "People don't really take the time to get to know a person or understand them."

When I asked P11 if he regretted losing touch with his family, he replied, "Truth be told I don't even think they care." He wrote that nothing really changed when he quit school. Asked to explain what he meant, P11 said, "Parents still don't care. I think the only thing that changed is

that I have to look for a job. And that I'm here instead of at my house." (The last statement refers to living at a homeless shelter rather than at home.) That statement defined his life and explained why he did not regret quitting school. If you believe no one cares about you, it is difficult to care about yourself. People need the support of others, social capital, to achieve success.

Two of the participants, P6 and P8, were uncertain about whether they regretted quitting school. Participant Six was the young man who had attended all-Black urban schools and had quit to escape the violence of those schools. He also had learning difficulties that had been addressed only in one school, a predominantly White school. Unfortunately, P6 had spent little time in that school and had never spent two consecutive years in any one school. He said most teachers he had known were not interested in teaching. He said, "Humm, like my teachers, a lot of stuff like--they wasn't helping me. They mostly clown around with the students."

Participant Six had lived in poverty with his single mother and a brother who had joined a gang, and I believe his ambiguity about quitting school resulted from living in a lifeworld of poverty and insecurity. For P6, school had been a place of danger and violence and not a place of safe, structured learning time. I understood why he was unable to believe that quitting had been a bad choice.

The remaining eight participants regretted quitting. These young men understood the harm that can result from dropping out of school. The words of participants describe best their feelings about quitting. Participant Two expressed it this way:

> Really major regret. I wish I would have just stayed, been capable of paying attention and just going through so I could go to college and get a specialization somewhere, get a degree, get a better job cause now if I lose this job, which pays fairly well, where am I gonna go? I don't know. It's a mystery.

Participant Seven spoke of wishing he could have completed high school. When I asked if he regretted quitting, he said, "I thought about it for year. Ever since I left." He added:

> I think about it all the time, every time I see someone going to school. If I'm always hanging with younger cat someone like 16, 17 he's kicking it with us and he's like "nahh, f--k school." I'm like you better go to school tomorrow. I always tell people that if I could go to school I would.

Participant Seven also had a personal reason for regretting his failure. He had let down his grandmother. She had enabled his failure by loving and trusting him too much, but she had also wanted him to graduate, and P7 felt deeply his regret about hurting her. He said, "Cause that's all my Grandma wanted, the only thing she asked. My Grandma gave me everything. The only thing she asked was to graduate. Didn't even do it."

Participant Twelve, who had quit school after getting into a bad peer group on his mother's reservation, had two children and was seeking custody of one. He hoped to get an education through Job Corps, go to the military, and then create a better life for himself and his child. He said, "I know it's gonna be hard and stuff because if you do that you gotta have a job and stuff like that."

Participant Thirteen also had a child and had big plans for moving to Texas and working in some technology field. However, he wished he had a high school diploma for reasons other than economic opportunity. He said, "So I actually would have been priding myself on being the first in my immediate family to graduate high school." He felt bad about failing to reach that goal. Like P7, Participant Thirteen saw failure to graduate as more than a bad choice that would make life difficult; it was also a personal failure with an emotional element attached.

Reviewing their decisions to quit school, these eight participants believed that decision had harmed their lives. Phenomenology seeks to learn how people understand their life experiences, and these young men saw quitting school as a major mistake. Participant Seven said, "I always tell people that if I could go to school I would." It can be said no better than that.

Summary of Themes Revealed by the Participants

These conversations revealed five distinct themes related to the experience of dropping out as lived by these young men. These were:

- Lack of social capital,
- Invisibility,
- Unrealistic world view,
- Resilience,
- Failure was a logical event in participants' lifeworlds.

Because phenomenology seeks essential truths about something, these themes are not discreet concepts, but intertwined threads. As van Manen (1990) points out, themes are merely connecting nodes within the web of one's lifeworld. As such, themes must be seen as parts of the whole. Without the component themes, the whole lifeworld does not exist, but without the whole lifeworld, themes have no importance. I identified five separate themes, but I also understand these themes are elements of participants' greater lifeworld experiences. Although all five themes were interwoven into one greater picture, two were pervasive, fundamental blocks connecting all themes into that one picture.

One of the pervasive themes was lack of *social capital*, which had resulted from various factors. Some participants lived in homes damaged by drug or alcohol abuse. Some participants' parents were inept at parenting and failed to provide guidance, support or encouragement. For

some participants, schools had failed to provide supportive frameworks suited to individuals' needs. Schools also failed to address participants' personal or academic problems. Even Participant One, who had lived a relatively normal life, had not received the type of instruction he needed, and his school had been unable to understand or respond to his personal situation.

The importance of social capital has been noted in the literature on at-risk students (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1990; Calabrese, 1990; Christle et al., 2007; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Ream & Rumberger, 2008; Wehlage, 1986; Werner & Smith, 2001). At-risk students are more able to succeed in schools if they have a significant adult to care and to support. That adult could be a family member or adult friend; however, within schools, teachers provide the best source of social capital a student can have.

This study showed that the lack of positive adult relationships can adversely impact the lifeworld of at-risk adolescents, but I also identified *invisibility* as a theme common to participants. By invisibility, I mean that these young men had been overlooked by people who were important in their lives. Invisibility is an element of inadequate social capital; however, I considered invisibility an independent theme because it is one of the few factors a school can directly address in any effort to help at-risk students. Many of these young men had drifted away from school because no one had noticed them. Either they caused few problems within the school, were not outstanding students or were not involved in any school activities. They reminded me of the story *Cipher in the Snow* (Mizer, 1975), a fictitious tale of a young man who died simply because no one had noticed him. My participants had not died, but they had drifted away from school largely because no one had noticed them.

I also found that participants often lacked a grasp of reality, so I identified an *unrealistic worldview* as another theme. This element appeared in various forms, and I see it as a theme in

itself. Although in retrospect most participants regretted their decision to quit school, the stories participants told of their pasts showed disconnects with important realities. For example, some could not recall which grades they had failed or even how many grades they had failed. Several spoke candidly about their misuse of drugs and alcohol yet did not articulate how that had caused them to drop out. Or, they spoke of dysfunctional families as if those families were normal. Some participants did not see clearly how their past decisions would impact their futures and spoke of seeking further education when they had been unable to succeed in past educational efforts.

Although optimism may result from an unrealistic worldview, I learned that many young men continued to believe good things would happen, so I found *resilience* to be another theme in the lifeworlds of participants. Most continued to believe they would achieve success and planned to continue education in some form. Participant Twelve best exemplified this. He recognized that drinking and ignoring obligations had caused him problems, but he had changed his behavior and had a solid plan for getting his life on track. He planned to complete Job Corps training, to enlist in the military, and then to use military benefits to continue his education and become a paramedic. He was motivated by the desire to raise a son and to give that son a good life. Participant Nine, who had quit school to marry his pregnant girlfriend, also showed resilience. He saw his past mistakes, but he also saw how to proceed with life and was pleased that his life had turned out as it had. He said he wished he had done things differently, but when I asked if he was happy with the life he had, P9 replied, "Yes, very."

Finally, I found one more theme, the second pervasive theme. It is this: *Failure was a logical event in the lifeworlds of these participants*. By this I mean that most of these young men had lifeworlds characterized by problems. Alcohol, neglect, violence, legal problems, emotional

problems, learning problems, and other negative factors were commonplace in their lives. Hence, quitting school was simply a logical event in their lives.

Initially, I labeled this theme as inevitability; however, that term implied these young men were somehow doomed from birth to fail, and that belief resonates with the negative implications of Social Darwinism or the message of *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994). However, considering the overall picture of most participants' lifeworlds, I concluded their view of dropping out was different from mine because it was not unusual in those lifeworlds.

Although nine participants had at least one parent who had graduated from high school, most existed in lives of transience and poverty, characterized by low family incomes, unstable marriages, chemical abuse, and uncertainty. Few participants had examples of success to motivate them to graduate. It became apparent to me that graduation from high school would have been an unusual event in participants' lives and that dropping out was almost a routine event for most of these young men. This theme linked other themes into a picture of failure that had culminated in participants' decisions to quit school. Participants' invisibility, unrealistic views, lack of social capital, and even resilience were components in a world dominated by failure, at least failure as measured by contemporary social and economic perceptions of success.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study was grounded in Jurgen Habermas's communication theory, which holds that significant dialogue between individuals forms a praxis wherein strategies for solving society's problems become workable (Agger, 1991; Habermas, 1984, 2001). According to Habermas, positivistic research cannot reveal the essential truths of human existence. However, because Habermas believes that positivistic research provides data needed to describe social behavior, he does not totally reject positivism but uses it as a foundation supporting qualitative research (Habermas, 1984). Habermas uses empirically derived information to guide his exploration through dialogue.

In this dissertation, I followed Habermas's lead by seeking positivistic data in the literature and using that data to guide my conversations with participants and to interpret themes I found in those conversations. Habermas worked within the critical theory framework of scholarship, and I concluded that at-risk students are best viewed through the lens of critical theory, which focuses upon marginalized groups. I believe that at-risk students are within a group of people disregarded by social institutions. Often defined by poverty, poor education, violence, chemical abuse, and poverty, at-risk students live as a group from the American social mainstream. This study is pedagogical in nature because throughout this study I sought meanings to help educators better serve the needs of students and to reduce the number of students who drop out prior to graduation.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to learn from dropouts their own perception of dropping out. The study looked for meanings and themes within students' lives and educational experiences that could explain why these students had chosen to leave school prior to graduating.

Research Questions

This study asked the following research questions:

1. What factors, as perceived by the students, caused students to quit school?
2. In the students' opinions, did the schools in any way fail the students and make it difficult for them to graduate?
3. What can schools and educators do to better meet the needs of at-risk students?
4. In their own opinions, could students have done anything differently themselves to remain in school?
5. In retrospect, how do students feel about their decision to quit school?

Discussion of Themes

I divided findings into five themes: Failure is a logical event in the lives of many at-risk students; many at-risk students have unrealistic worldviews; these students often display great personal resilience in the face of adversity; at-risk students are often invisible to people who should provide support; and at-risk students who drop out often lack social capital adequate for success in school. However, as essential parts of the whole, themes do not stand alone, but blend together. Some are sub-themes of two others: Both resilience and an unrealistic worldview are subthemes within the theme that failure is logical in at-risk persons' lives, and invisibility is part of inadequate social capital. One theme, the logical nature of failure in the lifeworlds or at-risk students, is an umbrella embracing and unifying the others. Both resilience and an unrealistic worldview can be seen as different facets of the same construct, and the lack of social capital is both descriptive and predictive. It explains the dropout experience and reveals what schools could do to reduce dropouts. Together, these themes form a picture of at-risk students, of their world, and of forces that cause at-risk students to quit school prior to graduation (See figure 2).

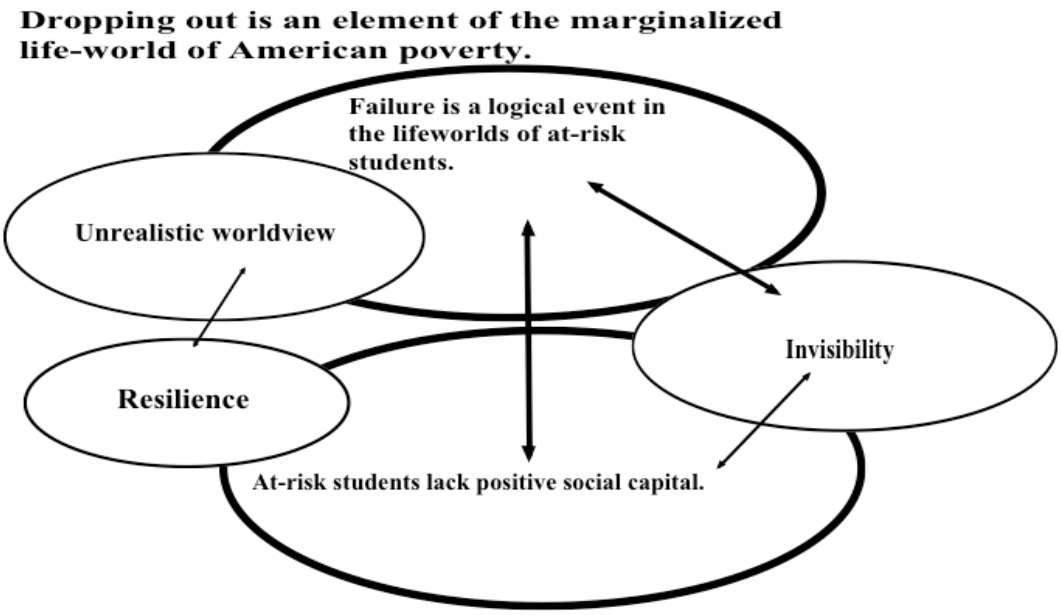

Figure 2. Shows the interconnected nature of factors contributing to students' choices to quit high school. All themes function within an overall reality of poverty and failure characteristic of participants' lifeworlds.

Figure 2 shows the relationship of themes and how they interconnect to form a unified image of the dropping out experience. The top large oval indicates that failure is logical and not unexpected with the lifeworlds inhabited by most participants. Within that oval, the smaller oval represents the unrealistic worldview held by participants. They did not understand realities most students take for granted. That theme connects to the theme of resilience because the difference between optimism and self-delusion may be slight, and some participants remained remarkably optimistic about their lives.

The lower large oval represents the lack of social capital common to participants. Few had any adult support and little or no contact with teachers. This is a major deficiency, one that could have prevented participants from failing. It connects to the theme of failure being logical because participants often lived in worlds where the adults did little to encourage success in school. The final small oval represents invisibility, and it connects both to the lifeworld of failure

and to the lack of social capital. Students who are not noticed by teachers will not develop supportive relationships with those teachers. Likewise, participants occupied lifeworlds where no one made the effort to encourage success or to assist students overcome the negative elements within their lives. Put together, all themes form an interconnected web of realities that represents the lifeworld experience of dropping out of school.

Theme: Failure is a logical event in the lifeworlds of at-risk students.

This theme is comprehensive, uniting all themes. In short: these students quit school because it was a logical and normal event for people in their world. This does not mean that quitting was inevitable or foreordained because everyone has the power to use his or her talents for success. However, within the lifeworlds of most of this study's participants, quitting school was not an aberration, but an event congruent with the lifeworld in which participants lived.

This follows Payne's (1996) research that moving from one social stratum to another is tantamount to moving from one culture to another. The lifeworlds of participants incorporated elements associated with generational poverty, and these elements coincided with characteristics of at-risk students found throughout the literature. Poverty, ethnicity, parental education levels, parental marriage status, retention in school, changing schools, delinquency, drug and alcohol abuse, learning difficulties, lack of social capital, becoming a parent, and association with the wrong peer group all put students at risk of dropping out (AYPF, 2006; Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001; Cardon, 2000; Christenson and Thurlow, 2004; Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007; Ensminger & Slusarick, 1992; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007; Malaspina & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008; Morrison, & Bailey, 2003; Osher et al., 2003; Pallas, Natriello, & McDill, 1989; Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Werner & Smith, 2001). From birth most participants' lives had included many if not all of these elements, and within such lifeworlds, quitting school became

part of an overall picture of life not shaped according to mainstream American success. Although dropping out was not preordained from birth for participants, it was normal--not expected, certainly not desired, but unfortunately not unusual for the participants or others in their worlds.

This theme reinforces the view that at-risk students be considered a marginalized group best understood through critical theory. At-risk students dwell in a world where high school graduation and further education might be hoped for but where dropping out is not stigmatized. This theme connects other themes because all relate to the reality of a lifeworld separate from the model American Middle Class.

Theme: Lack of a realistic worldview.

Participants often lacked knowledge of realities important to life. For example: Several could not recall how many or exactly which grades they had failed or which grades they had failed. Others spoke of glowing educational futures despite having failed to complete basic high school requirements. One mentioned that he loved school and rarely missed school, but then he said, “Well, can’t say I never missed a day, there’d be times when I’d be just having a hard week, and I’d be like I don’t wanna go to school.” He did not notice the incongruity of that statement.

Some participants spoke of violent homes and parents who abused chemicals or neglected their families as if such factors were normal. Some participants discussed their own youthful chemical abuse as routine behavior. For participants, these factors were just part of life. Participants’ failure to see the potential dangers of such behavior indicates that participants had difficulty realistically viewing their lives.

This relates to the previous theme of failure being a logical event. These at-risk participants lived in a world where failure was normal. As a result, a number of these participants

did not see how education improves life. Better incomes, better personal health, fewer emotional problems, less trouble with the law, and greater access to the American ideal can all result from increased educational levels (Baum & Ma, 2007; BLS, 2009, 2012; CBCSE, 2006; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007; Laird et al., 2008; Levin, et al., 2007; Wolfe & Haveman, 2001), but participants failed to connect these benefits with education. Although participants usually accepted responsibility for dropping out, they often failed to comprehend the negative impact of their lives' realities and how those realities had caused failure in school. Participants seemed not to connect their failure in school with the potential for failure in other aspects of their lives, and this led to problems both in school and in their lives beyond school.

Theme: Resilience.

It is difficult to differentiate between the unrealistic view of participants and resilience; however, I identified this as a distinct theme because most of these young men were not ready to give up on themselves. Most knew that quitting school had been a mistake and saw their own hand in that decision, but most also believed they could put things together and proceed with a good life.

This optimism for the future, despite past misfortunes and failures, indicated the personal strength of these young men. One loved his current life and saw no reason to change. Another, whose chaotic lifeworld had caused him to quit school, understood the difficulties he faced, but continued to hope that he could continue with his education and create a good life. One young man spoke with pleasure of his children, his wife, and how good his life had become. Some envisioned good lives themselves and their loved ones. For example: one confidently spoke of moving to Texas with his wife and child, of working in a technology field, and living on an acreage where he could watch his family grow. He said, "Oh yeah... just imagining myself sitting

by this... like at the age of about 40-50 years old... with my little one and my wife. You know? Well... not any more little one, little ones." He smiled as he spoke, and he appeared to sincerely believe this dream would come true.

Perhaps this was simply youthful optimism. If so, I did not disillusion these young men, and I do not doubt that they could succeed given the right circumstances. Hence, participants' resilience was a theme in itself. Most participants possessed strength of character that could overcome the problems and failures of their pasts. I believe this is important because it indicates that quitting school was not merely a matter of giving up, but a more complex action driven by multiple forces.

Theme: Lack of social capital.

The literature shows the importance of social capital for success in school (Christle, et al., 2007; Coleman, 1988; Ream & Rumberger, 2008; Werner & Smith, 2001), and this theme recurred throughout this study. In different ways and to varying degrees, all but one of these young men (Participant One) had been let down by someone. Often this lack of support was within the family, sometimes as bad parenting practices, sometimes as parental neglect caused by divorce or other family strife, and sometimes as chemical abuse. In two cases, parents actually put children out of the home, rendering them homeless and unable to continue in school.

Sometimes, adults other than parents had failed these young men. Several participants had shown risky behavior in school, but school personnel had not acted upon these warning signs. Most of these young men had gradually withdrawn from school and had eventually dropped out, following a pattern described in the literature (Alexander et al., 1997; Christle et al., 2007; Ensminger & Slusarick, 1992; Finn, 1989; Ream & Rumberger, 2008; Roderick, 1994; Terry, 2003). Apparently, neither parents nor teachers had noticed this gradual withdrawal and

tried to reverse it. Some participants had received extremely poor support: A mentor had introduced P3 to drugs, and P5 and P11 had been expelled from home by their parents.

Twelve participants had lacked social capital. Although these young men lived in lifeworlds where dropping out was a normal part of life, the one thing that could have helped them, positive social capital, was not available when they needed it.

Theme: Invisibility.

Originally, I felt this was a sub-theme of inadequate social capital. However, because the low visibility of some participants was a major factor in their lives, I chose to identify this as a distinct theme within the broader theme of accepted failure defined by theme one. Literature reveals that students often drop out after a lengthy period of disengagement from school (Alexander et al., 1997; Christle et al., 2007; Ensminger & Slusarick, 1992; Finn, 1989; Ream & Rumberger, 2008; Roderick, 1994; Terry, 2003), and participants in this study had gradually dissociated from school at least partly because no one had noticed them.

One participant, a quiet young man not involved in athletics or other activities, began working nights at a fast food restaurant, gradually increased his hours, and ultimately chose work over school. Because he had few friends and little contact with teachers, he made the transition easily. Several had problems with violence and the law, and spent time in various programs and institutions and gradually lost connections to school, partially because these participants had been removed from school by placement in other programs. Some participants had initially succeeded in school, but eventually allowed a life of partying and/or violence to displace school in their lives.

One young man talked of hanging out with older kids and failing to enter vocational training because no one had told him that such courses were available to him. The parents of this

participant were divorcing and lost track of him because of their own problems. Unfortunately, school personnel had also ignored his problems. He said, "I could've probably done a lot better than… I was just an under the radar kind of student." He said, "...I think it would have been better if somebody would have pushed me to join clubs or..." No school personnel had contacted him when he did not return for his senior year. When problems arose in his life, he chose to quit school, partially because no one made the effort to help him because he had become invisible.

Viewed holistically, these themes reveal that quitting school is a complex experience grounded in a lifeworld where dropping out is less a failure than simply a manifestation of other negative realities. For most of the young men in this study, quitting school was not an aberration but a normal event. Few participants had planned to quit, and few said their parents had wanted them to quit, but within their world, success was unusual; failure was not. Participants' lifeworlds were characterized by poverty, chemical abuse, divorce, and unstable relationships. Participants had often moved from school to school or from community to community. Retention in school often accompanied or resulted from other factors and became itself a factor leading to dropping out. For some participants, age disparity, violence, ethnicity or parenthood factored into their lifeworld experiences. For most participants, dropping out occurred gradually as they aged through school, focused on activities outside of school, and slowly disengaged from the school community and the pursuit of education.

The Role American Education Plays in Causing Dropouts

According to Deschenes, Cuban, and Tyack (2001), education reform in America consistently focuses on molding students to fit schools rather than changing schools to serve students. However, it is conceivable that the current nature of American education makes success difficult for some students. High school graduation rates did not surpass 50% until some time

following World War II (Goldin, 1999; Kaufman, 2001). Graduation rates peaked during the 1970s, fell a bit, and stabilized since the turn of the century (Aud et al., 2010; Kaufman, 2001). Perhaps today's dropouts quit school for the same reasons people quit in earlier decades; however, because of the changes that occurred in America following the second world war, not completing high school may have graver consequences today than in 1940. We may be seeking causes for failure that have existed for decades at the core of American education and those causes for school failure may lie at least partially in the fundamental nature of American education.

Contemporary American education is rooted in the school system started in the New England colonies in the 17th Century (Carter & Steinbrink, 1992). Such schools had a distinctly religious purpose and emphasized the responsibility of the individual to learn those things needed to save his or her soul and to fit into Puritan society (Lauderdale, 1975). For some, New England's strict protestant ethic emphasized that God showed favor through material rewards; hence, worldly wealth indicated moral rightness, and poverty indicated moral failings (Carter & Steinbrink, 1992; Lauderdale, 1975). As some people prospered and others failed, New England society became stratified by class and disapproved of persons in the lower classes. This element of classicism dominated New England education and remains a feature of American education today (Carter & Steinbrink, 1992; Lauderdale, 1975). This could explain why the nation tolerates poorly funded schools for minority people in urban ghettos while creating marvelous learning institutions for students in affluent White suburbs.

The common school movement launched by Horace Mann in the 19th century advocated broadening education to reach everyone, strove to create productive, civically responsible American citizens imbued with strong character and guided by high moral standards (Deschenes,

Cuban, & Tyack, 2001). American education continues to value personal effort and to view dropping out as potential evidence of flawed character. Hence, school dropouts are often considered inferior persons, destined by innate qualities to slide into lives of perpetual poverty.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) Paulo Freire proposed that modern school systems, particularly those using standardized tests to measure success, deliberately create dropouts to insure a continuing labor force to perform the those tasks that society finds menial but essential. Freire also stated that the dominant class in a society will create, intentionally or unintentionally, an ideological fog around education and will use that fog to serve the interests of the dominant group. Freire (1998) believed the dominant group used education as a form of control to perpetuate the ideology of the dominant group. He said, "There is no education here, only domestication" (Freire, 1998, p. 57). Dewey referred to the negative nature of education designed to control when he said, "When preparation is made the controlling end, then the potentialities of the present are sacrificed to a suppositious future" (Dewey, 1997, p. 49).

However, contemporary leaders continue to demand that schools mold students' character as well as their minds. According to Ravitch, "The schools must reassert their primary responsibility for the development of young people's intelligence and character" (Ravitch, 2001, p. 17). Reform efforts remain focused on changing students rather than schools. The federal report, *A Nation at Risk* (NCEE, 1983), which issued a call to reform schools according to set academic standards, grew from the political agenda of persons and groups within society who manipulated statistics within the report for political ends (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Bracey, 2003; Ravitch, 2000; Tanner, 1993).

Later calls for reform, such as the *Goals 2000, Educate America Act* of the George H. W. Bush and Clinton administrations and the *No Child Left Behind Act* of the George W. Bush

administration, which continued to emphasize standardization and redesigning education to make students conform to standards, did not always place student learning first (Deschenes, et al., 2001). By retaining the elements of class distinction and morally stigmatizing academic failure, American education remains focused on changing students to fit schools rather than changing schools to better serve students' needs.

As American high schools proliferated throughout the last half of the 19th century, colleges sought standards to determine whether or not a high school graduate was prepared for college. The result was the Carnegie Foundation's Committee of Ten. This body created standards that included the Carnegie Unit, which uses class time rather than student learning to determine whether a student has achieved in a course (Perkinson, 1976; Ravitch, 2000). The same committee created a standardized curriculum much like that still used across America (Carter & Steinbrink, 1992).

Although the progressive era of American education struggled to place emphasis on child-centered rather than teacher-directed learning (Cuban, 1993; Ravitch, 2000), the progressive movement also introduced the use of standardized testing to assess students' strengths and to identify vocations students should pursue. This reliance upon standardized tests to measure student achievement remains central to educational reform efforts (Carter & Steinbrink, 1992).

Essentially, 21st Century American schools remain similar to late 19th Century schools. The nine-month school year, short school day, Carnegie Unit, and use of standardized testing continue to shape American education. However, American society has changed a great deal in the past century. In 1900 the nation's population stood at 76,808,887 people (US Census Bureau, 1901). Today that population exceeds 305,000,000 people (USCB, n.d.). The composition of

society has also changed as changes in immigration policy have altered the face of the American people. In 1900 84% of immigrants came from Europe, but by 1990, less than a quarter of immigrants came from Europe with over 40% coming from Latin America and 25% from Asia (DOC, 1993).

The racial desegregation policies of the Johnson administration integrated America's schools to bring racial minorities into the educational mainstream. Although advocates of social reform continue to find racial separation in schools resulting from socio-economic factors (Kozol, 2005), America no longer operates two legally separated school systems based upon race.

Changing demographics, changing technologies, and changing economic realities have conjoined to create a society quite unlike that of 1900. Yet the nation's schools still operate in ways reminiscent of that era. In this study, I determined a major reason for dropping out was that educational success simply was not a powerful goal for many students. Put another way, there exists a socio-economic grouping characterized by low income, high social and personal problems, and low educational expectations; and within this group, dropping out of high school remains neither unusual nor unacceptable.

Deschenes, Cuban, and Tyack (2001) contend that school reforms attempting to change student behavior cannot address the fundamental problems within American education. I found that the lives of my study's participants differed greatly from the lives of mainstream students, and I concluded that this difference caused participants to drop out of school prior to graduation. Such students will remain at-risk in schools as long as schools continue to emphasize student change rather than systemic educational change.

This concern about education not adapting to societal realities is not new. Writing in 1938, Dewey criticized schools for viewing knowledge as essentially unchanged in a world where change was occurring rapidly. Referring to the content of education, Dewey said, "It is to a large extent the cultural product of societies that assumed the future would be much like the past, and yet it is used as an educational food in a society where change is the rule, not the exception" (Dewey, 1938, p. 19). Unfortunately, concerns Dewey expressed in 1938 remain valid today.

Recommendations

Recommendations for schools to assist at-risk students.

- Use research-based knowledge to better meet the needs of at-risk students;
- Explore alternatives to grade retention;
- Explore the use of research-based applications of educational technology;
- Modify operational policies and procedures to ensure such factors do not discourage students and stimulate their disengagement from school;
- Create and maintain a pleasant, supportive, and structured school climate;
- Strengthen students' engagement with school through involving students in activities outside of the classroom;
- As a society, America must engage in open, respectful dialogue about the nature and purpose of education and how school reform can better serve students and increase national graduation rates;
- Understand the value of social capital and encourage teachers and other staff to connect with students and build positive, supportive relationships.

Use research-based knowledge to better meet the needs of at-risk students.

Adhering to van Manen's (1990) demand that pedagogy drive educational research and practice, educators must seek out best practices as determined by research and apply those best practices to classroom instruction. Many factors behind a student's decision to drop out are beyond the control of schools. Furthermore, no individual school district, educational leader, or teacher can change the fabric of America's education system. Public schools are publicly funded and publicly controlled, and education remains part of the American political process, another factor complicating reform efforts whether local or national. However, schools can use research-based knowledge to modify school operation for the benefit of at-risk students. Several items stand out as characteristics found within school with high graduation rates.

Explore alternatives to grade retention.

First, schools should consider alternatives to retention. Because retention is a major cause of dropping out (Alexander, et al., 2001; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Ensminger & Slusarick, 1992; Kelly & Monrad, 2007; Vang, 2005; Roderick, 1994; Rumberger, 1995; Wehlage, 1986), schools must find other ways to remediate problems and to improve student learning. Evidence also suggests that retention does not improve long-term achievement but rather that students who are socially promoted do as well as those who were retained (National Research Council, 1998). Given the strong correlation between retention and dropping out versus the questionable evidence for the benefits of retention, schools should seek alternatives such as summer school, after school programs, special tutoring or revision of instruction in ways that reduce failure.

Explore the use of research-based applications of educational technology.

Technology has proliferated in all aspects of life, and schools must explore ways to effectively use technology in teaching. The Bill and Melinda Gates foundation has supported

charter schools based on extensive use of technology for learning, and has found that use of technology may enhance student learning and increase the percent of high school graduates even among traditionally at-risk populations (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2007). In 2007, Whitney reported that students improved their reading scores by using an Internet based reading program. Schacter (1999) reported academic gains for students utilizing email to communicate with teachers and other students. Nisbett (2009) reported on studies showing that playing video games may improve a child's ability to multi-task and to concentrate on tasks. Technology remains ever in flux, and data on its effectiveness as a teaching tool remains scarce. However, technology is a ubiquitous factor in modern life. Although technology may change constantly, it will not go away, and schools must seek ways to use technology effectively in the classroom.

Modify operational policies and procedures to ensure such factors do not discourage students and stimulate their disengagement from school.

Without major financial investments or tackling the big issue of systemic change, schools can use a variety of tools to improve graduation rates within existing educational frameworks. For example: Using out-of-school suspension as a discipline tool could increase dropout rates (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004; Christle et al., 2007). Since students usually drop out after gradually disengaging from school, removing students from school possibly increases this disengagement process, so schools must explore other disciplinary procedures such as in-school suspension. Maintaining fair discipline policies and high academic expectations also contributes to higher graduation rates (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004).

Create and maintain a pleasant, supportive, and structured school climate.

School climate matters. Schools with high graduation rates generally have clean, well-maintained buildings, faculties that dress nicely, and teachers who interact with students outside

of classrooms (Christle et al., 2007). Graduation rates also increase in schools with high staff to student ratios and with teachers who use a variety of teaching techniques and who interact with students in common areas and exercise authority and fairness (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004).

Strengthen students' engagement with school through involving students in activities outside of the classroom.

Christianson and Turlow (2004) have pointed out that students who were involved in activities were more apt to graduate, so schools should find ways to involve students in activities, including but not limited to athletics. Just as career-Tech programs often include group activity as part of the curriculum, language arts programs could require participation in speech or drama as part of the program. Many schools require music of younger students and could require it of secondary students. Since personal interests and abilities vary, schools must seek activities that appeal to a broad spectrum of students. Math clubs, chess, birding, painting, weight lifting, writing, astronomy, and a host of other activities could be offered at little expense. Requiring involvement in some activity for graduation could increase graduation rates, and should be explored as a means to prevent students from disengaging and dropping out.

Educators must lead society in open, respectful dialogue about the nature and purpose of education and how school reform can better serve students and increase national graduation rates.

Viewed from the large-scale perspective, American society must continue to debate the fundamental structure and purpose of education. The question is whether a system founded in 19th Century structures designed to serve a pre-WW I population can adequately meet the needs of students living in the contemporary world. Such debate must be conducted, but requires time.

Fortunately, schools can utilize existing knowledge to revise operations and curricula to better serve students and reduce dropout rates.

Understand the value of social capital and encourage teachers and other staff to connect with students to build positive, supportive relationships.

Most adolescents cannot change the nature of their lifeworlds, nor can schools alter the realities of students' lives or the neighborhoods in which schools and their students exist. Schools cannot alter the fiscal realities governing schools. Some schools are well funded and can provide high staff-student ratios, a variety of learning technologies, and clean, attractive facilities; some schools cannot provide these things. However, any school, no matter how financially deprived, can do one thing to increase student success: Schools can enhance students' social capital.

This is true because social capital in schools begins with the most basic educational link, the relationship between a student and a teacher. Freire (1970) said that education occurs whenever a student and a teacher come together and both learn. The student-teacher relationship is the essence of education, and teachers hold the key for giving at-risk students positive social capital. Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bokern (1990) observed that students most at-risk of dropping out never had a good relationship with a teacher. Wehlage (1986) and Calabrese (1990) both found that supportive student-teacher relationships were powerful tools in the effort to reduce dropouts. Teachers can best serve at-risk students by noticing them and actively reaching out to them.

Creating a strong relationship between two people is not simple, but simple steps can enable relationship building to begin. Teachers should stand in hallways between classes and associate with students in the common areas of the school before school, at noon, and during

other long breaks. Teachers should encourage students to drop by classrooms before or after school. Teachers can interact with students through school activities. This does not require that teachers be athletic coaches or speech directors, but most activity directors would welcome teachers willing to assist with chores such as timing at speech meets, building sets for plays, or chaperoning on band trips. In these settings, teachers interact with students on an informal basis and may build relationships that go beyond the formal teacher-pupil interactions within a classroom. Such relationships create social capital and could be the difference between success and failure for some students.

However, the best relationship building will not reduce dropouts unless teachers and other school personnel actually see invisible students, who eschew involvement and never seek attention through either good or bad behavior. Perhaps more than anyone outside of the home, teachers are positioned to notice students who need someone. Teachers must be alert for students who are chronically late, who sleep or appear drowsy in class, who rarely complete assignments, who interact with other students only marginally, and who generally fade from view while in school.

Coaches seek out athletes; music teachers seek out musicians, and drama directors seek out actors. Everyone seeks out academic stars, and the over-socialized class clown is a reality in every school. However, it is easy to miss the student who participates in nothing, who neither fails nor excels in the classroom, and who rarely if ever acts out or challenges authority. Yet those are the students teachers must find because they most need the benefits social capital can provide in the form of positive relationships with supportive adults. As a principal, I reminded teachers that the students who tested us the most probably needed us the most. It is also true that the student who withdraws from people may most need human contact.

By seeing the invisible and interacting with the withdrawn, teachers can build relationships that could be the difference between success and failure in school. Although this seems easy enough, teachers are generally busy people concentrating on a host of activities, chores, and obligations throughout the school day. Finding time to look around and contact the unnoticed student is one more obligation; but, it is an obligation that could make the difference in a person's life, and making difference in lives is the essence of teaching. Teachers may forget who got the best grades or rarely missed a class, but no teacher will ever forget or regret being the person who reached out and saved a child. That is the potential reward of creating social capital; it can be achieved with no extra cost and very little extra work, and it must be the goal of every teacher in America.

Recommendations for further research.

This study highlights the importance of social capital to help at-risk students graduate and to reduce the national dropout rate. It also illustrates that at-risk students may inhabit lifeworlds were quitting school is not a failure but simply a reality consonant with other elements of that lifeworld. This study points toward several areas where further research can move forward scholarship on at-risk students.

- Research should be done to explore social capital and ways it can be built by schools and teachers;
- Further research should continue on how school policies and climate affect graduation rates;
- Continue research on the overall impact upon high school graduation rates that result from high-stakes testing and reliance upon standardized tests as indicators of achievement;
- Continue investigating how technology can be used to improve learning and increase graduation;

- Other operational areas need study to determine how schools can change to better meet the needs of students;
- Continue dialogue about school reform and what the nature of American education should be.

Research should be done to explore social capital and ways it can be built by schools and teachers.

Data should be sought about the effectiveness of activities to keep students engaged. Will mandatory activity involvement increase graduation rates? Are there differences in the engagement potential of different forms of activities? Are the added costs of activities offset by student membership and financial gains for the school? A variety of areas for research arise from this question and should be pursued.

Research should continue on how school policies and climate affect graduation rates.

Most importantly, schools should explore alternatives to grade retention for students who are performing below expected levels. Retention is a major cause of dropping out, and educational reforms that ignore this reality could be increasing the nation's dropout rate at a time when America needs more well-educated people, not more high school dropouts.

Continue research on the overall impact upon high school graduation rates that results from high-stakes testing and reliance upon standardized tests as indicators of achievement.

Persistent voices have long warned that such practices may increase a school's test scores, but can result in increasing student dropout rates. There remains concern about test validity, test administration, and the importance of testing as a measure of school success. This must be studied more fully.

Continue investigating how technology can be used to improve learning and increase graduation rates.

Data exists on technology use, but technology changes rapidly and new technologies are rarely studied well before being used by schools, making it difficult to conduct such research. However, given that schools spend considerable money on technology and that technology is ubiquitous in students' lives, more research must be conducted in this area.

Other operational areas need study to determine how schools can change to better meet the needs of students.

Does out-of-school suspension increase dropout rates and what alternatives are available? Does teacher attire and appearance matter? Does maintaining an orderly and clean building reduce dropout rates? What are the effects of zero-tolerance policies? Do such policies improve education or merely move problems from sight? These and other practices need more research.

Continue dialogue about school reform and the ideal nature of American education .

Educators must continue a dialogue on how to best reform schools. This dialogue must consider that profound changes could be needed to create schools appropriate for the realities of life in the 21st Century. Society has changed; the American people have changed; technology has changed; and yet schools continue to function much as they did a century ago. Reform efforts that ignore this reality can never adequately address the educational needs of this nation. Furthermore, reforms that continue to ignore students' needs and realities while attempting to force students into set patterns of behavior may never improve learning for students and may result in disengaging students and causing them to drop out of school without graduating.

I realize the political nature of education makes significant change controversial and difficult to achieve. But I also believe the entire structure of American education needs scrutiny.

Anachronisms continue to dominate American education. The nine-month school year is a holdover from the days when farmers needed children home for the planting season. The short school day remains from a time when farmers needed children home for morning and evening chores. Use of the Carnegie unit to measure progress is questionable. Relying upon concepts such as standard deviations and the normal distribution curve to identify levels of learning must be debated.

Finally, the structure of the local school district governed by a locally elected school board needs objective scrutiny. In America's agrarian, small-town past, local school districts run by local school boards were effective means to operate schools. However, the nature of American society has changed greatly throughout the past century, and the idea of allowing vaguely qualified local politicians to govern schools needs to be revisited. Research should be conducted on different governance models currently used and how school operation could be conducted should the traditional local district model be altered. This recommendation carries heavy political ramifications, and obstacles abound to eliminating school districts. Perhaps local districts are the best way to operate America's schools, perhaps not. Study and debate must be conducted despite the controversy such an effort could raise.

In Closing

The picture of the dropping out experience that emerged from this study was one of young men filled with dreams and ideas, but also lacking key elements needed for success contemporary America. For most, the act of dropping out was a natural element in their lives and could be a symptom of a much greater problem, the problem of generational poverty and a growing underclass of people whose lifeworlds are defined by low incomes, chemical abuse,

unstable relationships, violence, low-level delinquency, and expectations of failure. Unfortunately, persons living in that underclass remain invisible to most Americans.

If America is serious about increasing graduation levels and giving the best education possible to all persons, the nation must address the bigger question of how to enable people to escape that underclass. Addressing this problem of poverty and disempowerment requires commitment to preventive rather than remedial action. I have written that students quit school when they disengage from school, but the reality is that they disengage from mainstream American society and remain engaged with a world familiar to them, but that is world is one of chronic deficiency and need. Confronting that problem must become the goal of our society, and if America can address the needs of all people, including the generational poor, the problem of high school dropouts will assume a different nature and will become an issue of individual student problems rather than broad social issues. If that can happen, dropping out will be more easily defined and more easily solved.

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APPENDIX A. NARRTIVES OF PARTICIPANTS' EXPERIENCES

The Participants and Their Stories

The following analyses of each participant's contribution are in two parts. The first describes each young man's lifeworld and the forces that led him to quit school. This is the ontic, the realities of participants' lives and includes a summary of our conversations and a summary of events and forces that moved that participant to quit school. In the second part of my analysis of each participant, I seek the meanings of each conversation, the ontological, which lies within these conversations.

Participant One (P1).

Were this a quantitative study, P1 would be an outlier, someone whose characteristics set him apart from the population because his lifeworld includes few of the factors most often associated with high school dropouts. A White male in his early twenties, P1 grew up in a stable family with both biological parents present. His father had a steady income from a lifelong career, and the family had a lifestyle typical of most working class families in this region. Participant One had the social support of his peers and community; he was involved in school activities, was White, was not failing in school and had no drug, alcohol, or legal problems. He had attended a small school with fewer than 200 students in grades K-12 located in a community with fewer than 500 residents. Participant One was surrounded and supported by family, which included an extended family of grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. He also had friends and did not lack for social capital. The only factor connecting P1 to the normal dropout profile was that his father had not graduated from high school. However, P1 stated he had not known that fact until he had decided to quit school. According to P1, his mother had graduated and both of his younger siblings had enjoyed school and had graduated.

It would be difficult to predict that P1 would drop out of school simply by looking at the realities of his lifeworld. However, the phenomenological approach involves considering those realities along with the participant's feelings and thoughts and seeks a greater understanding by studying the intangibles of life as known to a person who experienced a particular event. Hence, one must reflect upon a participant's words seeking themes expressed in those words.

According to P1, he quit school because he saw no connection between what he was doing in school and what he wanted to do with his life. When asked to explain why he quit, P1 stated:

> I don't know. I guess I just, kind of figured I learned what I needed to learn from school and I just needed to move on. It was time to go. You know, I mean sit around and waste my life sitting at school you know, get out, I mean, see the country…

Despite feeling he was wasting his life in school, P1 said he had enjoyed school and had done well in school. He had participated in sports for a while and had enjoyed music. (He still plays his trumpet for pleasure.) He had friends and had no discipline problems in school. His grades were good, and he did not find schoolwork difficult. Initially, P1 had considered a career in agronomy. His father worked in agronomy, and P1 believed he would like that work. However, during his sophomore year in high school, P1 had begun to question his goals and to believe that his work in school in no way related to what he wanted from life. He had grown frustrated in classes designed to prepare students for further education and had grown frustrated at the lack of education he considered practical. Participant One had taken carpentry classes and had worked for a contractor after dropping out, but P1 felt the academic classes had not met his needs. He said: "...I mean it's only so many times you're going to be using x and y, and you know I mean, it really don't matter what pronouns are to me, you know..." Participant One

repeatedly expressed frustration that teachers focused solely on preparing students to attend college, something P1 had decided he would not do.

After dropping out, P1 had worked for a local contractor for a time, and then had traveled to a western state where he worked for a large cattle ranch. He literally became a cowboy and spoke fondly of that time. Participant One said he hoped to return to the mountains some day to live there permanently. After living in the mountains, P1 had returned to his home area and was working in a local factory at the time of our conversation. He had a supervisory position at the factory and was planning to seek promotion. He expressed satisfaction with his decision to quit school and felt no regrets about dropping out. He said, "...I am glad I did. I like the way things have turned out for me."

Participant One said he harbored no ill feelings toward teachers and that the school had not failed him. However, several times P1 mentioned that teachers had one way of doing things and one clear objective: preparing students for college. When asked what might have happened had he asked teachers to use a different approach, P1 said he did not think it would have mattered, that "...they probably would have told me to sit down. I suppose--you know--I mean…" After saying this he laughed and said, "...it's just, you know their planner; they have it set up, and this is the way they teach, and this is the way they do things, you know."

Other factors emerged when P1 described his school experience. Although he said he felt no ill will towards teachers, several times P1 repeated that classes could have been more hands-on and more relevant to students' real lives, and he talked of dreading tests. He mentioned that he had to take tests for promotions in his current work and that he dreaded those tests even though he anticipated doing well enough to get the promotion. Concerning testing on his job, he

said, “I mean--like even at my job now they... to move up you test. You take all these tests to move up--you know, and I just, I hate it. You know...”

Although P1 may not fully fit the profile of most American high-school dropouts, the theme of growing dissatisfied with school and of gradually concluding that school was not meeting his personal needs does follow the pattern that dropouts leave school after a prolonged process of dissociating from the school as indicated by the literature grades (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Christle et al., 2007; Ensminger & Slusarick, 1992; Roderick, 1994). Although P1’s life differed from the lives of many dropouts, and although P1 had not experienced most factors associated with at-risk students, he had slowly drifted away from school as he matured and began to see himself and his future in ways that differed from the traditional views of his teachers.

Participant One did not disengage because he failed or because the adults in his world had overlooked him, but because the school had failed to respond to what he perceived as his individual educational needs. In that sense, P1 had been allowed to drift away, to disengage because he saw the school providing nothing he would need. I believe that P1 showed a bit of disconnect with reality, given the proven importance of education. However, his resilience and solid self-image may allow him to succeed in life by persisting through adversity and relying upon his own skills.

Because he did not fit the common description of a dropout, this conversation did not relate strongly to my research questions. Participant One did not regret dropping out, nor did he find fault with the school other than his observation that classes were overly directed toward education beyond high school.

Participant Two (P2).

The lifeworld of Participant Two differs markedly from that of Participant One. Like P1, P2 was a White male in his early twenties living in a small urban center at the time of the conversation, which occurred when P2 was 19 years old. Participant Two had quit school at age 16 when he was in the 10th grade. Participant Two had neither a stable home nor a good experience in school. His parents were divorced, and he had spent his childhood living with his biological father and attending a small school where he had been the victim of bullying. He had moved to his mother's home and had changed schools specifically to escape that bullying. Participant Two described difficulty concentrating on anything for more than a few minutes, but he said he had never been referred for any special needs testing. Participant Two described a family situation of low socioeconomic status and drug abuse. He stated he had few friends in or out of school when growing up.

Participant Two had never been held back in school. He said he had done well through 5th grade but had stopped trying in 6th grade. He said he had failed 6th grade, but the school had allowed him to move on after two weeks of summer school. Participant Two could not state why things had changed in 6th grade. He said, "I don't know. I just... I don't know what happened exactly. My body, or my mind rather, I should say--just gave up for some reason." He had changed schools after his 7th grade year, but had done no better in the new school. Again, he had taken summer classes to make up what he had failed, and again P2 had not been retained.

According to P2, when he had quit school during his sophomore year, he was working the late shift in a fast-food restaurant and had difficulty getting up for school or staying awake while in school. Participant Two described arguing with his mother about school and that she had been upset about getting calls from school. Finally, he had offered to pay a portion of the rent if

she would let him quit school. Participant Two stated, "...well, I remember what my exact words were 'Can I drop out of school if I pay you one third of the rent?' those words came back to bite me in the ass." When asked if he regretted that decision, P2 said,

> Oh yeah, cause I remember that when I look back like I said in there (points to his written questions) I regret it completely, and she did not help; she just didn't tell me to go back to school; she just yeah... I remember her face. She smiled a little bit, too.

Participant Two described his mother as a "crack-whore." He said she had abused a variety of drugs and had not cared for her children. Participant Two said she had been married several times, and that his father had not known about at least one of his mother's marriages for many years. Participant Two said his mother was controlled by drugs and incapable of caring for her children. Describing his home life while he had been in middle school, P2 said he had been allowed to sit up late with his mother and her boyfriend drinking beer and smoking cigarettes. He had been 13 at the time. Participant Two said he had often arrived at school too hung-over to work. He said he spent most of the first two periods dozing. When asked whether anyone at the school had acted upon the problem, P2 said that no one had shown concern about why he was so sleepy.

When asked whether his drinking had impacted his school, P2 said, "...oh yeah, definitely. I have no doubts about it. I mean Mr. ___, he used to yell at me daily in first hour." When I asked if this was because he had been sleeping, P2 replied, "No, it's because I was ..." I asked, "Hung over?" and P2 replied, "F------ was dead sitting there." Although P2 said he had been referred to a school counselor who had questioned him about his home, no action was ever taken that he knew of, and nothing had changed. Participant Two had never been in trouble in school or with the law.

Although P2 apparently had few legal problems as an adolescent, he described fighting in grade school because of the bullying he had suffered. Effortlessly, he recited the names of 11 people from his elementary years, people whom P2 still remembered with hatred. I pointed out to P2 that he apparently still held anger towards his former bullies, and he said, "Oh, well, I don't think about it all the time, I just can remember, I have a good memory when I want to use it." Recalling the bad times of his youth was apparently something P2 felt important enough to remember. Participant Two's father had chosen to send P2 to live with his mother to escape the bullying. Participant Two said his father had felt bad when P2 had quit school, but his father lived far away and was incapable of helping P2 with his life.

Since dropping out, P2 has worked at redirecting his life. He had a child with a girlfriend but did not marry her. He said he contributes financially to his child's upbringing and does see the child when he can, but P2 also said he does not get along with the mother's family and cannot see his child as often as he would like. Participant Two had a job in a local factory as a seasonal employee and had not yet found year-round employment at the time of the conversation.

When asked if he regretted dropping out, P2 said:

> Really major regret. I wish I would have just stayed, been capable of paying attention and just going through so I could go to college and get a specialization somewhere, get a degree, get a better job cause now if I lose this job, which pays fairly well, where am I gonna go? I don't know...

Participant Two talked about obtaining some form of further education because he understood well the financial implications of a poor education. However, he had not formulated any plans to pursue a GED or other form of education.

Participant Two's life was shaped by the failure of others: The failure of school authorities who had not ended the bullying against him in elementary school; the failure of an abusive, addicted mother incapable of positive parenting; the failure of a father who had not intervened when P2's life began deteriorating; and the failure of teachers who had not addressed P2's attention problems and had not noticed when P2 arrived at school in the mornings hung over and unable to apply himself to schoolwork. Although P2 took complete responsibility for the decision to drop out, the effect of his mother's behavior and her possible emotional instability recurred throughout the conversation. Participant Two stated it this way, "I'm telling you my mom is whoof, way out the window." Or:

> Back when I moved in with her, I had--nobody had ever told me that my mom was crazy or my mom used to beat my sister when she was 5--never told me anything like that, so when I moved in with her, eventually I started learning that something was up with her when I became about 14.

This reality of his mother's failings overshadowed much of what P2 said.

Like P1 and most dropouts, P2 had left school after gradually dissociating, a process that had begun in 6th grade and had accelerated into his sophomore year when he had dropped out with his mother's consent. His acceptance of responsibility for himself does not reduce the negative influences others had upon P2's life. Viewed from the perspective of social capital, P2 not only lacked someone to support and guide him, but rather the people most able to provide the social capital needed for success were actually causative factors in his failure to graduate.

Regarding my research questions, P1 definitely regretted dropping out and expressed a poignant desire to continue his education. Although he did not fault the school nor suggest ways the school could have served him better, I do feel the school should have noticed and addressed

P2's morning hangovers and the causes for them since this was a direct contributor to his eventual dissociation with school.

Participant Three (P3).

Participant Three was a White male aged 19 at the time of our conversation. He was a soft-spoken young man who said he did not socialize much with others. His demeanor was shy, and he did not look me in the eye very often. At the end of our conversation, P3 expressed surprise at how easily he had talked with me. The participant had quit school at the age of 18 when he was a sophomore. He had never known his father, and his mother had various husbands and boyfriends throughout P3's life. One of these boyfriends had been in prison for drinking and fighting, and had beaten P3 and his brother. Participant Three had spent his years between the ages of seven and eighteen in foster care and had received special services while in school. I had trouble understanding the details of his educational record because P3 could not clearly articulate details about his years in foster care, where he had attended school or what had happened in his life.

Participant Three had quit school at age 18 because he was still a sophomore and did not want to remain in school until he was 21. He said he did not like being older than the other students. He had been held back in kindergarten at his mother's request, but after that had not been retained until he was a sophomore. However, P3 said he was about 12 or 14 when he was placed in foster care while in 7th grade. The confusion about ages and grades was typical of the difficulty P3 had of giving a clear account of his life and was a characteristic of several participants in this study. According to P3, neither he nor his mother could remember exactly how old he had been when he had been taken out of the home. I suspect P3's confusion about facts resulted from an unsettled youth, from possibly possessing a low IQ, and from the possible

effects of drug abuse, which P3 admitted to. Although P3's story was unclear, a picture emerged of someone whose life had been damaged by forces beyond his control.

A theme of a disrupted life ran through our conversation. Although he could not clearly articulate the facts, P3 had been in seven or eight foster homes and at least two group homes or residential care facilities in a period of five or six years. During this time, he had spent over one or two years (he was not certain about this fact) with one foster family, so P3 apparently had moved often, creating a record of extreme disruption and instability, factors that can increase the chances that a student will drop out (Christenson and Thurlow, 2004). Participant Three spoke well of only one foster home, the one where he had spent more than one year. Participant Three said he had liked that foster father and had known he could count on him. Participant Three has remained in contact with that family. Participant Three claimed to have been in trouble often and said he was expelled from one group home for fighting. He said he would deliberately get himself removed from a foster home when he got tired of it. He said,

> To be honest, after the first time I got kicked out of foster--of one foster home--I started testing people, with like stealing their shit or something or another, and over the years I learned that every time I do that I'll get kicked out. So I just kept on doing it until my second to the last foster dad he never gave up so...

The foster dad who never gave up was the person P3 spoke well of.

Participant Three admitted to smoking marijuana and drinking beer. He said he had never used methamphetamine because he could never find it, but would have used it had he found it. One incident from P3's past stood out. Participant Three said he was removed from his mother's care after an incident involving a man in a mentoring program who had started P3 and other young boys drinking beer and smoking marijuana when P3 was seven years old. Participant

Three alluded to that man doing something bad to his brother. Participant Three said, "He decided to do something with my brother, and I'm not going to really mention all that because it's really not my place." One can only surmise what that bad thing might have been. According to P3, this man had given the boys marijuana laced with something that had a bad affect on P3's thinking. Participant Three said he had lost control and had grown violent. He said, "...and I ended up throwing knives at the cops and my old friends." After that, P3 had been taken from his mother's home and had never returned to it although he continued some contact with his mother.

Participant Three had difficulty explaining his school experience, partly because he had changed schools as often as he had changed foster homes. Although he did not clearly outline events, P3 mentioned a number of schools, some in small towns and some in larger communities in two different states. He had received special services throughout most of his school years and said school was hard for him because he could not stay awake. Participant Three attributed this problem to his difficulty sleeping; a condition he said had troubled him as long as he could remember. According to P3, his sleep problem may have resulted from depression. He said he had been diagnosed with depression in the 9th grade, but that medication had never worked for him. He talked about getting depressed and cutting himself. He said, "Actually at one point, I was planning to hang myself or cut my neck, or something like that."

Participant Three had been in trouble in school. He spoke of being bullied because he was not outgoing and because he had to wear old clothes since his foster families could not afford nice clothing for either him or their own children. He said his brother, whom he now avoids seeing, and the brother's friends had tormented him, and on one occasion P3 had been suspended from school because he had taken a knife to school for protection from bullies. In that case, P3

had been readmitted to school after his foster father had intervened. That was the foster father P3 liked.

Participant Three did not speak ill of schools or teachers. He mentioned he wished schools would use "...the S thing..." instead of grades, a possible allusion to his years in resource room settings where S for Satisfactory and U for Unsatisfactory often replace traditional letter grades. He also said he might have done better had schools started later in the day, a conclusion related to his inability to sleep at night. Participant thee did want to obtain a GED, and was scheduled to meet with someone at a local alternative school as soon as our conversation ended.

This participant embodied several of the risk factors associated with dropping out. He had a single mother; he had lived in low socio-economic conditions; he had difficulty learning; he had experimented with drugs and alcohol at an early age; he had changed schools often and had behavior problems, in and out of school, all factors typical of students at-risk of failure (AYPF, 2006; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007; Osher et al., 2003). However, several realities emerged from this conversation as powerful factors shaping P3's life. One was the impact of learning disability on school success, a factor found often in the literature (Osher et al., 2003). Another was the harmful effect of changing schools often, again a factor supported by the literature (Christenson and Thurlow, 2004). But, the overriding force shaping this young man's lifeworld is that of living without social capital, without the support and care of adults. Participant Three's life had been filled with unrelenting chaos. He had moved often and had been unable to make connections to significant adults who should have supported and cared for him, specifically his mother and his stepfathers. This problem was exacerbated by a mentor who had proven to be a danger to P3 rather than a supportive caregiver as such people should be.

My first research question seeks to learn why each participant quit school, in the participant's opinion. Participant Three responded that he did not want to remain in school until he was 21. One could see that as a weak reason for quitting, but when I consider the litany of failure and disruption that characterized P3's life, I conclude that it is a good reason. This young man's educational experience was filled with false starts separated by repeated setbacks. Like other participants, P3 did not blame the school, so he did not provide insight into what the school could have done differently, which is a major question guiding this research. However, the fractured, chaotic nature of P3's education certainly provided no support to help P3 navigate his unfortunate world.

Certainly, schools failed to provide needed human support, but it is difficult to imagine how any school could have provided support given the frequent moving, problems with depression, and the apparent lack of anyone to speak for this young man. Unfortunately, it is difficult to envision much in this P3's future. Although he hopes to earn a GED, that program is not easy (Cameron & Heckman, 1993), and the issue of the P3's depression remains unresolved. When I asked, "...and you are still feeling the depression?" the participant answered, "Every day." A learning disabled young person who has no support system and who suffers from untreated depression faces a bleak future made even worse without a high school diploma.

Participant Four (P4).

Participant Four was a White male aged 18 at the time of our conversation. He had quit school in the ninth grade when he was 16 years old. He was outgoing, assertive, and self-confident. He appeared comfortable with our conversation and spoke candidly about his lifeworld. Participant Four possessed several attributes associated with dropping out. He had frequently been in trouble with legal authorities because of his violent behavior; he had been in

special education classes; he had been in several alternative programs, including residential programs; he did not do well in traditional classrooms, and he had a family falling apart in a divorce, all factors shown to increase the chances of dropping out (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007; Osher et al., 2003; Rumberger, 2001).

When I asked why he quit, P4 had replied,

> You know--my parents were, you know, they had gotten divorced like two years prior to me going into high school, and I was supposed to join football to help, you know--you know--put away my anger and other problems. And I decided with all the stuff going on at home--parents still arguing, even though they divorced--and you know, they still find ways, that I'm not just going to do this cause I feel that I could actually really hurt someone in football and I would feel really bad about it. Ah--I quit school just cuz my motivation to get things done kind of took a dive for the worst. umm... I started arguing with teachers and--you know--everyone at school and getting in fights, and I figured, well, I'll just save myself the problem--and you know--drop out basically.

That lengthy reply contains several reasons for quitting school; however, two major themes emerge: one of having extreme anger management issues, and the other of his parents' divorce, something P4 referred to throughout our conversation. Dropping out was something P4 had anticipated for some time. He said, "I told everyone there's a 99.9 per cent chance when I hit sixteen I'm dropping out." That is exactly what he did.

Participant Four described a home life characterized by parental conflicts that culminated in divorce. He also spoke of living with his father, a man whom P4 did not respect. The participant said, "I don't particularly like my parents period, but I mean my dad and I we've had a rocky, really, really rocky relationship." He characterized his father as a man who uses others

for money although P4 also said his father was a good mechanic, something P4 wanted to become himself. Participant Four referred several times to ongoing conflicts between his parents and how that had affected him.

Another major characteristic of P4's life was his own anger and his potential for violence toward others. Participant Four mentioned an incident in the upper grades when he had beaten another student so badly that the other student was hospitalized. Also, P4 talked about truly enjoying football, but quitting because he feared losing his control and seriously hurting another player.

Participant Four had emotional problems. He mentioned depression as one reason for his behavioral problems. He also mentioned cutting and said it was a stupid thing, something you might find hard to explain to children once you became a parent. He said,

> I don't get it. I mean the one thing that always sticks in my head, that I've always heard, you have kids, they come up to you, 'mommy, daddy, what's that on your arm?' There's you know--what do you tell them? You know, that's the thing. You know I have some of my friends that you know, do this stuff, and I'm like 'what would you tell them?

I found this focus on cutting interesting, particularly since P4 raised the issue himself in an offhand manner. I wondered why.

On suicide, P4 said, "Oh there's times I've thought about jumping off a tall building, several times. It's like--then again, if things would be easy, then I'd be in a big frickin' mansion right about now." I cannot say whether P4 believed this or whether he was saying it to convince himself. I suspected his strong statement about the stupidity of cutting himself may have concealed a desire to cut or a history of cutting. I did not probe that issue because true discourse

is built upon respect for the other and on assuming the other is honestly saying what he or she wants you to know.

Participant Four admitted to having problems with juvenile authorities. Most of these problems had related to his anger and violence. He had spent time in the state youth correctional center twice, once for 19 months. Participant Four had also been in two out-of-state treatment centers because of his anger. He had attended a Job Corps program, but had been expelled for fighting. At the time of the conversation, P4 was proud that he had been in juvenile detention only two or three days in the last year and a half. For him, this was a stretch of good behavior and an indication of improvement.

Participant Four did not speak well of his school experience. He had been on an IEP throughout much of his education. He said he had trouble concentrating in rooms with too many people, but did not like to be alone either. He referred to his temper again and said he was always afraid of getting into fights when he was in a large group. Participant Four said he needed to learn with his hands. He talked of loving mechanical work and feeling best when he had grease beneath his fingernails and gasoline on his clothing. He had been close to completing a mechanics course at the correctional center but had been removed before he could finish the course, something that still irritated him. Participant Four said he was a fidgety person who needed to be constantly doing something with his hands. He said this had caused problems with some teachers who demanded that he be still. He said, “I always have to be fidgeting with something in class, and that can kind of get me in trouble at times. Whether it’s my keys or cell phone.” He said some teachers managed to understand this and just let it go.

Participant Four's description of his teachers was confusing to me. He would speak critically of teachers, but then would moderate his statement almost as if he felt it was the proper thing to do. For example, at one point he said,

> But--um, I mean they would sit down, but it wouldn't be for the longest time, so there was times I wouldn't understand it; and a lot of them, they would go into explanations, but they get--they get upset that I'm not getting it while everyone else is. Well, sorry, everyone just can't get something right off the bat. You have to learn it. And they just, they--I feel like some of them had given up but the majority of them have stuck, you know--there...

Although he said teachers stuck with him, the ambiguity of this statement indicated to me that P4 was not comfortable with regular classroom instruction. The statement, "Well sorry, everyone just can't get something right off the bat," is an expression of frustration and perhaps a plea for understanding, something P4 may not have found in all teachers. At one point, P4 said, "To me they have to win me over. They have to--I guess if they step out of their comfort zone first, then I'll--you know--ease into them more and get to know them and actually do good." When I asked if he approached teachers with a bit of suspicion to see how teachers acted before he committed to a class, he replied that he did. When I asked P4 if he liked it when teachers reached out to him, he replied that he did like it. But, when I asked whether enough teachers had reached out to him, P4 replied, "Some of them did. If they would have all done that, I'd probably be sitting in a four year college right now."

Participant Four had been retained in the grades. He said he had been held back only once, in the fifth grade. However, P4 mentioned also being retained in first grade. Participant Four's uncertainty about his record is similar to P3's vagueness about his record. Although this

seems strange to me, several participants showed the same characteristic, and it may not be an unusual trait of students whose educational experience was characterized by frustration and overshadowed by tumultuous personal lives. Interestingly, P4 did not mind being older than his classmates. He said it was sometimes good to be taller than others in the room. When he spoke of teachers asking him to reach things for them, he spoke with scorn for the teachers. He said, "I'd be like, I know you're vertically challenged but why do you have to come to me?" and, "... I'd say well get a stool."

Participant Four's life contained several factors making him at-risk of dropping out. He had a learning disability; his home-life was disrupted by an acrimonious divorce; he had juvenile legal problems, and he showed signs of emotional problems. He admitted to being depressed; he seemed overly concerned with cutting; he referred to a need to fidget, and he had severe anger management issues. These factors are often referred to in literature on high school dropouts (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007; Osher et al., 2003; Rumberger, 2001).

I was particularly struck by two factors, the divorce of P4's parents, and his own penchant for violence. Although I have no citations to support this, I felt the two were related. Participant Four spoke often about his parents' divorce and the problems he had with his father, a man whom P4 neither liked nor respected. He did speak much of his mother, but P4 repeatedly talked about his own anger and his own record of violence. Participant Four, like others in my study, had never forged positive bonds with adults who could have provided support and guidance. Despite years in treatment programs of some sort, he never mentioned anyone with whom he had connected. He did say he might have stayed in school had more teachers reached out to him.

I also find it important that P4 did not actually disengage from school over a long period of time, but rather quit school because he had long felt he would quit. It was not clear why he felt this, but he said he had planned to quit school even when he was in grade school. I asked if he was not highly motivated to go to school, and he replied, “No.”

I then asked whether that was always true, even when he was little, and P4 replied, “Always true.” At that point he made the statement about being sure he would drop out when he hit sixteen, and I asked P4 why he didn’t like school. He said:

> I don’t know. It just... to me it’s like one of those unspoken things that you can’t necessarily say or you can go into detail, but it’s just--it’s there. I don’t know. I just... people would say the work--the work sucks. It really does, but all I say is--some of the people you tend to encounter on a daily basis that you can never get along with- teachers or students...

Because P4 had decided he disliked school when he was small and had never changed his mind, his disengagement from school was less gradual than inevitable; however, I found this only for P4. I concluded that this dislike for school was the result of a web of factors that included a bad home, anger between his parents, P4’s personal emotional issues--which may reflect the anger within his home, and a learning disability. These factors interacted to the end result that P4 failed to find the support and guidance he needed to keep his life on track towards graduation.

My research questions explore how participants viewed the school’s influence in the decision to drop out. Participant Four did fault the school, but he also acknowledged his own problems and did not hide his early and steadfast determination to quit school.

Participant Five (P5).

This participant was a White male who had dropped out of school in his junior year at age 18 and was 19 years old at the time of our conversation. He was articulate and sounded intelligent. His story was strange, and I doubted it at first. However, as our conversation progressed, P5's account became logically unified with few apparent contradictions. Also, the director of the drop-in shelter where I met P5 corroborated the story. It is a sad one.

According to P5, his mother had died when he was very young. Participant Five's father had difficulty coping with the loss and had started drinking, so P5 had been raised by an aunt and uncle. Participant Five had not known they were not his parents until he was four or five years old. Participant Five had known his father, but had not realized that man was his biological father. Participant Five had lived with his aunt and uncle in a medium-sized community where his aunt worked as a Christian minister. Participant Five said he had never been retained in school, but had not attended one year when he should have been a 7th grader because he stayed home to help his uncle renovate their house. I pressed him on how the school had allowed this, but he had no explanation other than that the school did not care.

The following year, P5's aunt took a different pastoral position in a larger community, and the family moved. At that time, P5 had resumed school in the 7th grade. Later, around age 16, P5 had concluded that he was no longer a Christian and rejected religion and god. At that point, his aunt and uncle had told P5 that he could not live with them if he was not a Christian. Participant Five had then gone to live with his biological father in a different community. Participant Five's father had remarried and had several children with P5's stepmother. Participant Five said he had never gotten along with his stepmother. He also said that he had partied some, that he occasionally stayed out late, used marijuana and drank some. Participant

Five claimed that his partying had never impacted his schoolwork. He also said he had worked at three part-time jobs and that his work also had not negatively affected his studies. According to P5, his father had urged P5 to take a fourth part-time job to bring in more money, but P5 said he was not able to do that while maintaining good grades. He had planned to attend college and had applied to a local university while still in high school.

However, one night when he arrived home late after a party, P5 found his father and stepmother arguing about P5. Participant Five was unsure about the cause for the argument but assumed it related to his staying out late. Participant Five had turned 18 by that time, so later that night, P5's father had told P5 that he would have to move out. Participant Five's father had said that he was no longer legally responsible for P5, and that P5 was no longer welcome in the home. After that, although he had some part-time jobs, P5 was unable to pay for a place to live and had become homeless. He said that he stayed with friends when he could, but that he often simply walked the streets at night to stay warm and tried to find places to sleep during the day. Responding in writing to the question of why he had quit school, P5 wrote. "When I turned 18, Dad threw me out. I tired to continue in school. I went to alternative school, but I had bigger issues than school, i.e. surviving."

Participant Five said he had enjoyed school and had few problems other than one incident when he had assaulted a teacher for making racist remarks about students in the school. Participant Five said that school's student body was largely non-White and that most of his friends were Hispanic, so he was angered by the comment. Participant Five also said that teacher had later been fired for making racist statements in school. Participant Five said he had not found support among the teachers when he had become homeless. He said some teachers had suggested places he might live, but no teachers had been involved in helping him.

Describing his life and school experience, P5 said,

> I still don't really talk about my home life that much to teachers. I really wasn't a very complaining kid to teachers. I really didn't feel like I had anything abnormal. A lot of people have... with the exception of when I turned 18, my life was pretty okay. Except for the Christian stuff. But, I mean it was probably about it. I grew up in a small town. I had lots of friends. I didn't really think anything was wrong with my life. So…

Participant Five did refer to minor legal problems like parking tickets, and he referred to a therapist but did not explain why he had seen a therapist. Basically, P5 had quit school because he had no place to live and had to do what was necessary for staying alive. Finding food and shelter, especially in the winter, became priorities, and he simply could not live a normal life and stay in school. When I asked P5 how he had stayed alive, he said,

> If I needed food there were services that could get me food but you know I mean the shelter in _____, we only had one of them. And it costs $7 bucks a night and I wanted to keep as much money as I already had.

Eventually P5 was unable to keep his part time jobs because of his lack of stability. He said,

> I didn't have the ___ job anymore; I had already dropped that one. But I had the other jobs and you know--my work performance was dropping too. So, I was way tired, often times the only thing that kept me awake was food and caffeine. I had to eat a lot more just because of that. And uh... so I just worked when I could, and then, well--stuff just happens. Eventually I had to be let go out of one job and not long after came to me with. 'you're losing work performance, I guess you can't--you can barely stay awake. You're stumbling a lot.' You know, can't have workers like that.'

The lifeworld story of P5 reveals how drastically homelessness impacts the education of a young person. Although this story is different from others, two issues stand out. As with other participants, P5 was failed by adults who should have been his support. His aunt and uncle rejected him because of his views on religion; his father and stepmother rejected him because he caused problems in their marriage; and no one in the school seemed aware of his problem or willing to help him. Even if I assume P5 distorted the facts of his life, the underlying reality is that no one had effectively supported this young man.

The second reality is the devastating effect of homelessness on young people, a factor mentioned in the literature (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2009; Sum, et al., 2003). As P5 said, "...but I had bigger issues than school, i.e. surviving." Once rendered homeless, P5 lost the social support structure necessary for normal living but gained the problems of survival associated with homelessness. As his story illustrates, the human need for shelter and survival supplanted the need for education. Of course, P5's homelessness does not stand alone, but is directly related to the failure of significant people to provide essential support.

However, a third characteristic of P5 emerged as I reflected upon this conversation. That was his resilience. When our conversation began, P5 seemed reserved and too emotionless for someone who had his experiences. He told me that he was not a very colorful person and that he doubted I would learn much from his story. He seemed to believe his experiences were not peculiar. At that time, he was planning to complete his education and to pursue his goal of becoming a veterinarian. He was not sure how to proceed, but he had not given up. I spoke with him some weeks later, and he told me he had found a place to live at least temporarily and was attending classes in a local alternative high school. Since P5 claimed to have already accumulated 19.5 high school credits, completing a program in a short period of time would not

seem unreasonable. Given that P5 had already survived rejection and abandonment by his family without surrendering his dreams of college, it is possible his personal abilities, including persistence, will carry him forward to success.

Participant Six (P6).

Participant Six was an African American male who was 20 years old at the time of our conversation. He had quit high school in the 10th grade when he was 17 years old. He had attended high school in a large Midwestern city; he had been in special programs throughout his school years, and he had changed schools several times. Like other participants, P6 was unclear on exactly how many times he had changed schools. Although P6 was pleasant, cooperative, and willing to discuss his educational experience, he was the least communicative of the participants. I could not engage him in prolonged discussions; hence, much of our conversation became a matter of me asking questions to which P6 gave short answers. He may have felt shy, but he also said he had been in speech therapy throughout his school years and may have found it difficult to communicate orally. However, my conversation with this young man did reveal interesting themes that support the literature on poverty and on school dropouts.

When asked why he quit school, P6 stated that he had quit because of the violence in his school. Fights were common in the school. Once he and two others were suspended for being in a knife fight in which P6 had been cut. He said the school did nothing other than suspend the three students involved. The police were not involved. According to P6, most of his fights were caused by his refusal to join a gang. Although his brother was in a gang, P6 was not, so gang members harassed P6 regularly. Students in that school were mainly Black. Participant Six said the school had a few Hispanic kids, but no White students.

Participant Six had been raised by a single mother. His father had not been around, but his mother had a boyfriend, who periodically beat up P6 and his mother. Participant Six reported having juvenile legal problems, most for stealing. He said he and friends cut school often to hang out and steal from stores. He had once stolen a teacher's credit card and had received a community service sentence. Participant Six said he had been retained in school, but he was not sure in what grade he had been retained. He also said he had repeated 10th grade. I could not determine exactly how many grades P6 had repeated or what grades had been. Participant Six had received special services throughout his school years. He had received help with reading and math and at one point had attended a school focused on students needing speech therapy.

This participant's views on school were generally negative. He said teachers had not helped him much and had not seemed to care whether or not students learned. When asked why he did not think his educational needs had been met in school, P6 had replied, "Humm, like my teachers, a lot of stuff like--they wasn't helping me. They mostly clown around with the students." I then asked P6 if he thought the teachers had feared the students. His answer was, **"**No, they just didn't care about it." When I asked P6 how teachers could have helped him, he answered, " Like, learn. Things like basic. They just clown around, laughing." I asked P6 to describe his experience in school; he simply said, "Bad."

This participant said he had not often changed homes, but had changed schools every year or two within the same district. He recalled one school he had liked. In that school the teachers worked hard and cared about the students. Participant Six felt he had learned quite a bit there. The students in that school had been mainly White, but when I asked P6 if he had felt uncomfortable being a Black student in a predominantly White school, and he replied no. I asked

if he thought the school was a better school because it served a White constituency, and he said he thought that was true.

Participant Six said the violence in his school was one cause of his problems. He said he had been held back in the 9th grade mainly because he had rarely gone to school that year. Participant Six said his mother had known about his absences and had allowed him to skip because she knew gang members attended that school, and that P6 was not safe there. That was the year P6 said he had hung out and stolen stuff. According to P6, his brother had quit school and joined a gang. Participant Six said he had never wanted to be in a gang and as a result had felt vulnerable in school without friends to look out for him. He said, "Yah, like I had to keep watching my back and like, or just keep watching my back and stuff." And, "...No I didn't have nobody to look after me--I was just by myself in my school."

Participant Six did talk about returning to school. He had moved from his home city to live with his brother but now lived alone. Participant Six said he liked cooking and wrestling and might want to do something more with his life. He had been in a Job Corps program for several months after quitting school; however, he had been expelled from Job Corps for fighting. According to P6, a gay boy had harassed him until P6 had hit the boy. Near the end of our conversation, I asked P6 if he regretted quitting school. He said, "I don' know. I wish I'd have stayed but, if I stayed I'd have probably gotten more in trouble or locked up or dead."

I must note that I gave this young man a ride to his apartment house when our conversation ended. Although the building was in a pleasant part of town and appeared to be a clean complex, several days prior to our conversation another tenant of that building had been attacked and killed in a hallway there. This was not related to P6, but I was struck by the irony of

P6 leaving one city and school because of violence only to again living in a place marked by murder. This seemed very sad to me.

The lifeworld of P6 mirrors themes found throughout the literature on dropouts. He had been raised by a single mother and occasionally subject to abuse from that mother's various male companions. Participant Six had attended an inner-city school serving a predominantly poor, African American population, a school characterized by gangs, violence, and poor teachers, all factors common to at-risk students (Greene, 2001; Kozol, 2005; Mischel and Roy, 2006; Pallas et al., 1989; USDE, 2006). Participant Six had one good educational experience, which had occurred in a mainly White school.

I cannot really say that P6 had been failed by specific significant adults in his life such as teachers, counselors, his parents or others. Rather, P6 had been failed by everyone in his life. The possible exception might be his mother. Although she had allowed him to skip school, she had done so out of concern for his safety. As with P5, P6 had lived a life where needs other than education had controlled his life, the need for physical safety being paramount at times. However, no teachers had shown interest in him, nor had any one else as far as I could determine. Participant Six is typical of people described by Kozol's 2005 writings about poverty, racism, and the problems facing children who are forced to attend inferior, dangerous schools in neglected communities.

My research questions focus on how schools could help these young men graduate, For P6, like other participants, the answer seems to be that schools could have done very little. It is true that better schools would have helped P6, as his feelings about one good school demonstrate. However, P6 did not blame schools himself, and his life story says more about social disintegration and community failure than about schools in particular. The poor schools P6

had attended were part of a community gestalt of disintegration and failure within which those schools existed.

Participant Seven (P7).

Participant Seven was a young Native American. He had quit school at 17 while in the 11th grade and was 20 years old at the time of our conversation. His family life was badly damaged. He said his mother had borne him when she was very young and had not known how to raise a child. Mainly concerned with partying, she had neglected P7 and had provided little if any support, guidance, or supervision. Participant Seven's father was in a penitentiary at the time of our conversation, and P7 had been raised on a reservation by his paternal grandmother. He has several siblings, but he was raised alone because the siblings had different fathers, and his grandmother would only take the children of her son, P7's father. Participant Seven had been expelled from school for fighting during his junior year. Because that was his third fight of the year, P7 had been expelled for the remainder of the year. According to P7, one boy had been harassing P7 and his friends, so they agreed that whoever was pushed next would simply hit that boy. Participant Seven was pushed; he fought; he was expelled. However, P7 said that was just the final incident. He said he had begun to drop away during his freshman year in school. Up to that point, he had done well and had not been in much trouble. However, during the 9th grade year, P7 had begun to hang around with older boys and to smoke marijuana.

This young man spoke highly of his grandmother and expressed deep regret that he had been expelled because he had failed her. Participant Seven said his grandmother had catered to him in every way and had just asked that he graduate from high school. Participant Seven said he had hurt his grandmother when he left school and had since fallen away from her, something he seemed to regret.

Participant Seven said he would ask his grandmother for money to go to school games but then would use that money to party. He said he got away with that because his grandmother trusted him completely. Speaking of her indulgence, P7 said,

> My Grandma used to love me so much that she'd try and keep me happy, and that was the downfall right there. Cause for a while it was working, she'd try keep me happy, and I was doing good in school. But then I noticed my Grandma would do anything to keep me happy, so I started having my way.

I asked P7 what he would have done had his grandmother taken a firmer hand with him. He replied, "Nothing. I would've sat in the house and gone to school."

I said, "You would have?"

He replied, "Yeah, I would've had no choice. Once my grandma cracks down, she cracks down."

In high school, P7 had participated successfully in wrestling, but he had quit wrestling when the school began giving drug tests, and P7 knew those tests would reveal his marijuana use. He also said he had been in the gifted and talented program for art. Participant Seven said that he had gotten along well with his teachers, whom he called, "...cool," but that he had never felt close to any. He did comment that the teachers could have been harder on him and expected more from him.

Like most other participants in this study, P7 accepted responsibility for dropping out and blamed no one else. Although he felt his grandmother had been too lenient and trusting, he acknowledged that his own actions had caused his problems. Although P7 had not felt close relationships to any adults in his school, he did not blame the school for his problems. He

mentioned some resentment toward the school for not allowing him to reenter when he had been older. Participant Seven said,

> Yeah, school was good. School wasn't--it didn't have nothing to do with the school. I already know I dropped out because of me. School was good; school did everything they were supposed to. Maybe one thing they messed up on is they could'a gave me a second chance. Cause last I got expelled, that first time I didn't go back and then I tried going back when I turned 19. I remember I tried going back on the first day of school and the principal kicked me out right at the door. He was like, 'I don't even gotta deal with you this year.'

When I asked P7 if he regretted dropping out, he said,

> I think about it all the time, every time I see someone going to school. If I'm always hanging with younger cat someone like 16, 17--he's kicking it with us and he's like nahh, f--- school. I'm like you better go to school tomorrow. I always tell people that, if I could go to school I would. I'd go back to school any day, every day I wake up if I could go back to school I would. Cause that's all my Grandma wanted--the only thing she asked. My Grandma gave me everything, the only thing she asked was to graduate. Didn't even do it.

At the time of our conversation, P7 was working on a GED. He said he enjoyed the GED course because it gave him freedom to work at his own pace, to come and go as he wanted, to step outside for a cigarette if he wanted.

I asked P7 if he kept in touch with his grandmother, but he said no. He appeared uncomfortable with the question, and he said that he had betrayed his grandmother's trust for nothing more than good times and partying. Participant Seven said he did return to the

reservation occasionally to visit his grandfather, but P7's grandparents were separated, so P7 did not see his grandmother when he visited the reservation. Participant Seven said that when he had quit school and left the reservation, he had cut most of his ties with relatives on the reservation, and he did not want to return there. Concerning his feelings about the reservation, P7 said, "Went back got my Indian ID. But I ain't--I hate that place. I just hate it. I used to love it so much."

My conversation with P7 revealed several factors influencing his life. One was the reality that bad parenting can cause problems in school, particularly when a student gets older. This supports the literature about students dropping out once they reach a certain age (Finn, 1989). This conversation also revealed the negative impact drug use has upon at-risk students and the negative power of a peer group of dropouts who do not value education, other factors discussed in existing literature (Finn, 1989; Ream & Rumberger, 2008; Werner & Smith, 2001).

One strength of phenomenology is that allows a researcher to seek essential differences in individuals' lifeworlds as well as themes common to all. The outstanding essence of P7's life was the sadness of betraying a person whom he respected and valued. This sadness lay beneath our entire conversation and created an essence unique to P7. This personal failure surpassed topics addressed by the research questions, which focused on the failure of schools or specific actions of individuals. Participant Seven's feeling of failure extended to his feeling of failing another person who had dedicated herself to his success.

I felt a personal connection to many of the young men who shared their lifeworlds with me, and for P7 I felt great sadness because of the intensely personal nature of his failure. Participant Seven saw dropping out not as only a mistake that could adversely affect his physical world, but also as a wrong that had separated him from a person he loved and valued.

Participant Eight (P8).

All participants were interesting people with fascinating stories of different lifeworlds and unique experiences. This study sought the commonalities that may have lain beneath individual differences. These commonalities, if they could be found, are the themes sought by hermeneutic phenomenology. A quantitative study might find participant eight a problem; however, qualitative research seeks intangibles hidden within tangible facts. This young man may have exaggerated and distorted facts. However, if he did, that deception becomes relevant to this study, which seeks to make tangible that which is intangible. In short, P8's deception, if indeed it was deception, may reveal truths about P8's lifeworld and as such are part of the picture painted in this study.

Participant Eight was a Native-American who had attended school on a reservation. At 25, he was the oldest participant in this study. On his written description, P8 stated he had quit school as a junior when he was 16. However, our conversation indicated that he had been 18 when he quit, and that he quit a few months prior to his scheduled graduation date. This was one of the inconsistencies in our conversation.

Participant Eight had been raised by a mother and stepfather and had spent his earliest years upon a reservation. As a child, P8 had moved to a metropolitan area where he had attended school until he was in the 8th grade. That year his mother moved the family back to a reservation, so P8 had attended high school on the reservation. According to P8, his mother had been too young to start a family when P8 had been born, and she did not do well as a mother when he was young. He said his mother had abused a variety of drugs, including alcohol and crack until she returned to the reservation, matured, and quit using drugs. Participant Eight said his mother had

never tried to make him get up for school, and that his little sister had forced him to go to school. He spoke highly of the sister, but about his mother, P8 said:

> And it was just like, where my mom--like I had no rules, zero rules growing up. I didn't have nothing, nobody to answer to, nobody to talk to. If I got in trouble with the cops, my mom would sign for me just like that. She didn't deal with everything else. If they had a choice to keep me I'd have to stay but, it was always my mom signing me out and being there for me--I guess. Not being there for me like the way I needed to be--or the way she needed to be, but she was there for me to keep me out of...

Participant Eight spoke highly of his stepfather. Participant Eight said he had not known the stepfather was not his biological father until P8 was in his late teens. Participant Eight described his stepfather as a highly skilled welder who had taught P8 to weld and had taught P8 the value of hard work and responsibility. Although P8's mother had parted from this stepfather, P8 remains in contact with the man.

Participant Eight said he had been a good student and a good athlete. He had wrestled in high school and continued to participate in mixed-martial-arts competitions. Participant Eight said he had won a state title in wrestling, that he was good in art, and that he had played both the saxophone and the trumpet. Participant Eight also said he had abused drugs in school and is a recovering alcoholic who has been clean for some time. Participant Eight exuded confidence to the point of cockiness. Describing himself in school, P8 said:

> I just tried to show everybody that I wasn't gonna take no shit from nobody. Even though I was like, the smartest kid in class. You know, I didn't sit up in front. I sat more towards the back. I'd get all my tests, 98s most of the time. I was in GT, gifted and talented. I was in sports. I just wanted to set that persona to be the smart bad boy, in front of everybody.

It's a small town. It's your last name and you gotta live up by it. I went by _____ and there was mostly _____s and they were mostly like the fighting type around there. So I had to prove myself around there, so it was more of a non-choice kind of thing. But I didn't mind it. I like having the--you know, I go sit in the commons area in high school, and I'm sitting there throwing my leg up and got nothing but girls standing around me. I was a wrestler, one of the top toughest wrestlers there. I went and took state.

According to P8, he was popular with the girls. He presented himself as a real player, saying:

My mom was a big partier. And I'd watch them--what girls liked out of their guys, and so I was like--they called me a womanizer in high school. I was like Austin Powers, and all the girls liked me. Cause I just knew what to say, what they liked. I knew how to talk to them. Some of them liked the bad boys, so they liked that badass type. Some of them liked the good boys, so they liked that good boy type. And I could play all them types that they need. You know….

Participant Eight told me he had once had an affair with an older woman who was his drug counselor at the time. He also said he had fathered five children and had put his name on the birth certificate of a sixth because he was living with the child's mother. Participant Eight said he was 15 when his first child was born. Initially, P8 said he was paying child support for three of the children, but not for two of them. Then P8 corrected himself and said he was paying support for four children. He said he gets along with the children's mothers and sees his children but does not plan to marry any of the mothers.

The story of P8's dropping out of school was unique. According to P8, the reservation on which he lived was a corrupt place where tribal politics related to familial connections, and

where people in power used their power against opposing groups. He spoke at length about his own violence as a boy and about meeting others after school just to fight. In one fight, P8 had severely injured a boy who had to be transferred to a hospital off the reservation. Unfortunately for P8, that boy's father was the local chief of police, and had given P8's mother a choice: She could withdraw P8 from school so he would not again encounter the policeman's son, or she could keep P8 in school, but he would then be charged with a felony and would be tried in adult court. Participant Eight said he was 18 at the time and knew he would receive time in an adult penitentiary, so his mother had withdrawn him from school. Participant Eight said he then started GED courses, took all the tests in a few months, and walked across the stage as a GED recipient along with his fellow classmates. The timeline of ages and years P8 stated in our conversation differed from the timeline he had written in his questionnaire, and it seems unlikely (but not impossible) that he had completed all the GED requirements within one or two months. However, the scenario of fighting rings true, and P8's contention that he had graduated with his class could be true. An intelligent, highly motivated person might pass all GED tests in a relative short time, and many schools would allow a GED recipient to participate in the commencement ceremony. The story of the violence and corruption is plausible.

Overall, the story of P8's life is a story of violence. He spoke of an uncle who had broken P8's arm when P8 had drunk the uncle's last liter of vodka. (Participant Eight had been in the 8th grade at the time.) Participant Eight also spoke of his godfather and said his godfather had looked after him on the reservation and would do anything for him. However, his godfather was a violent criminal. At the time of my conversation with P8, he said his godfather was serving time in a penitentiary for shooting someone in the face during an armed robbery. I found it

interesting that P8 could casually discuss his personal experiences with violence as other people might discuss the weather or reading a book.

Participant Eight said he had no major problems with his school. He said several relatives worked at the school and had looked after him. He did not blame the schools he had attended, and he said, "No, they give you all the help. Every school I went to ever only encourages kids to the best for themselves and tells them all the right things, and some kids just don't comprehend it fast enough." Participant Eight described his school this way: "The school was perfect. They sent me to anger classes and everything I needed; told me how to function myself." My research questions probe whether participants felt their schools had failed them, and P8 did not feel the school was to blame. He did not accept total blame himself, but he directed feelings of blame toward the community and the legal system on the reservation rather than the schools he had attended.

Much of our conversation focused on P8's accomplishments, and my doubts about P8's honesty focus on statements about those accomplishments. Participant Eight said he was a highly skilled welder and had attended college for drafting as well. He claimed to work intermittently for a friend who hires P8 to check blueprints and to supervise construction projects and to do complicated welding when others cannot. Participant Eight spoke of receiving high payments of cash that he did not report for taxes. He said some of those payments were in excess of $70,000. Participant Eight said he plans to become a lawyer to work on Native-American issues to help his people get what they have been promised.

This conversation took many twists and floated in and out of credibility. However, I can neither verify nor disprove any of P8's statements. Such attempts to verify would be inappropriate for phenomenology based upon true discourse since the basis of true discourse is

mutual trust. So, the question remains of whether themes essential to P8's lifeworld emerge from our discourse. The answer is yes.

One theme would be violence. Participant Eight grew up among violent people, lived in communities characterized by violence, and sees violence as normal behavior. Participant Eight does not blame the school for his dropping out. Instead, he referred to the corruption of the community and how his own violent behavior had caused his failure to graduate. Not coincidentally, this theme also emerged from conversations with other participants who had lived upon reservations and had attended schools on those reservations.

Together with violence, the abuse of drugs and alcohol had impacted P8's life. His mother had failed to provide adequate parenting because of her drug abuse. Various people in P8's life, including the stepfather whom he admired, were plagued by problems with chemicals. Participant Eight was a recovering addict. He had spent most his life, before and after moving to the reservation in an environment where the routine misuse of alcohol and other drugs was the norm. As with the violence, P8 did not seem to find this unusual; in his life, it was not.

Another theme that emerged was P8's overweening pride. He bragged about his academic skills, his athletic skills, and his vocational skills. Participant Eight emphasized his sexual prowess and appeal to women. I am not a psychologist, but at times I felt that P8 sounded like a little boy building himself up in every way possible. He also sounded like someone trying to impress a researcher. But, if this is the case, it is an important theme. Participant Eight came from a background of violence and deprivation but does appear to be intelligent and talented. Participant Eight needs to be more, and he aspires to be more. The sadness of this participant's lifeworld is the sense of talent wasted and potential good remaining undone. However, P8 also possesses resilience. He knows his own abilities and revels in them. It is difficult to separate

braggadocio from optimism, and P8 possesses ample amounts of both, but these attributes might help P8 realize his potential and do well with his life.

Participant Nine (P9).

Participant Nine was a White male age 21 at the time of our conversation. He had quit school at the age of 16 when he was in the 11th grade. Unlike the previous participant, P9 was not brash or self-promoting. On the contrary, he was quiet and difficult to lead into lengthy conversation.

Participant Nine had quit school because his girlfriend got pregnant, and he had seen no choice but to quit school and get a job. He did not want to quit school before graduating, but he could not find work that would pay well enough to support his family while he continued with school. His girlfriend was a year older than P9 and did graduate from high school with her class. Initially, it appeared that P9 was unique from other participants. However, as the conversation progressed, elements of P9's lifeworld emerged that were characteristic of high school dropouts in general.

When I asked P9 whether his parents had supported him when his girlfriend had become pregnant, he said his parents had separated when he was in the 8th grade and were involved in a divorce during his sophomore year. Participant Nine described parents who cared in the abstract, but who were immersed in their own problems and paid little attention to P9. His father had a managerial job that required him to go to work at 4:00AM and to return home late in the evening when he had neither the time nor the energy to devote to P9. Although P9 divided residence between his parents, his mother had not been involved in P9's life either. Participant Nine said he had no rules and could do what he wanted. He said,

Right, I--when my parents started getting divorced, I was 14 years old; I had just got my license. I lived with my dad and he worked; he works 4:00 in the morning 'til pretty much 5:00 or 6:00 at night. So I had pretty much free rein.

...well…I shouldn't say they forgot, they just—they were tired up in what they were doing.

Participant Nine said he had used neither drugs nor alcohol, but he had felt depressed during that time of his life. When I asked whether he had any support from school personnel, P9 said he got along with school staff and liked one teacher in particular, but P9 said he generally lived beneath the radar. He was not in trouble at school and had few friends in his class. He said, "Oh--high school--I think the reason I was under the radar is because I could be. I didn't have people at home telling me, 'you have to do this; you have to do that.'" Participant Nine said most of his friends were older than he. He had not been involved in any activities but said he might have tried some activities had his parents encouraged him.

Participant Nine had completed his junior year of school but had not returned as a senior. He said no one from the school had contacted him to find out why he was not in school or to encourage him to return. Participant Nine said he would have stayed in school had there been any programs to allow him to work and take classes; however, no alternative programs had existed in his area at that time. Participant Nine had completed a GED program and had attended a career-technical college, but P9 gad not completed a program at that college because he had difficulty completing one internship experience required for his program. Participant Nine did speak critically of the job-site boss at that internship, saying that boss had treated him badly. As a result, P9 needed to retake the internship to officially complete the program. This was the only

time that P9 placed blame for anything on anyone other than himself. Because he had a good job and a promising future, P9 was not seriously considering completing the program.

Participant Nine had taken auto body repair and said he liked helping his uncle with bodywork. Participant Nine said he liked working on cars and wished he could have taken auto-mechanics in high school. This is interesting, because I know the school P9 had attended offered an auto-mechanics program while P9 had attended. His unawareness of the program may indicate that P9 had not communicated well with school personnel or that his self-described low profile had resulted in school staff never devoting much time to P9's educational program.

At the time of our conversation, P9 was still married to his child's mother. She was completing a college program, and they had a second child. Participant Nine stated that he did not like the events in his life that had caused him to drop out of school, but that life had turned out to be wonderful. He was certain on this point. He nine said that he would go through the bad times again if he knew the end would be so good. He was very optimistic and resilient and expressed no rancor toward either the school or his parents.

Although this participant has moved ahead successfully with his life, and although his lifeworld seems less typical of dropping out than most of the participants with whom I spoke, issues did emerge that connect P9 to other dropouts. The most obvious is the failure of adults to recognize P9's problems and to support him at a crucial point in his life. His parents were absorbed in a divorce and lost sight of their son's problems. This factor of divorce and its impact on students is a common thread. Eleven of the 13 participants I talked with came from either divorced homes or single-parent homes. Another element in P9's story was that adults in the school had not provided support P9 had needed. He was interested in auto-mechanics but did not know his school had such a program. If P9 never explored his options, school personnel cannot

be faulted too seriously. However, P9 attended a high school that enrolled fewer than 400 students, so it seems strange that no school staff ever explored P9's program or plans. I also found it interesting that no school personnel had contacted P9 when he had not returned for his senior year. I saw a picture of educators overlooking a student because he easily overlooked. He was not involved in activities, was not a troublemaker, was not an outstanding student, and had not sought help when he needed it. Participant Nine shared this characteristic with P2, the young man who came to school drunk but attracted no attention from school personnel.

Participant Nine did not blame the school for his decision to quit, and he did take responsibility for quitting. Regarding the research question about regretting dropping out, P9 did wish he could have stayed in school, but his overall view of his life since quitting did not include regret about his life. As he said, it would have been better to graduate, but he had a good life and would not trade what he had now for a more normal educational experience.

Summarizing participant nine, the characteristics that emerge are: parents involved in an acrimonious divorce and ignoring their son; P9's girlfriend's pregnancy and the resulting need for P9 assume responsibility for a family at a young age; P9's own lack of involvement in activities or even in the academic elements of his education, and the lack of social agencies that could have enabled P9 to continue his education and care for a family.

As with other participants, P9 had been impacted by a social group. He said his friends had all been older, and this helped explain why he was not involved in school activities. Although P9's decision to withdraw had been precipitated by becoming a father, it seems he had already begun the process of disengaging from school. This probably occurred because P9's parents were absorbed by their personal conflict and failed to notice their son was gradually moving away from normal school activities.

Another element that P9 presented well was resilience. Although his parents and other adults had not provided social capital during P9's time of trouble, he had persevered because he had made good decisions, stayed with his plans, dedicated himself to his paternal responsibilities, completed an education, found and stayed with a good job, and learned to value his wife and children. Participant Nine was a good example of someone using personal capital to compensate for the lack of social capital. His story is quietly inspirational.

Participant Ten (P10).

Participant Ten was an African American who was 20 years old at the time of our conversation. He had dropped out of high school as a senior at the age of 17. He had grown up without his father in the home. During high school, P10 had spent much time away from home. He had stayed with friends and had eventually moved in with a girl and her parents. Although P10 said he and the girl had not been romantically involved at first, eventually P10 fathered a child with that girl. Participant Ten has not married his child's mother.

In his written response to the question about why he had quit school, P10 wrote, "I Never had much. or Some one to talk to about life. So i [*sic*] left school to live with some girl to fill like i [*sic*] belong." I asked P10 to explain what he meant by that statement, and he said that usually he had left his mother's home on Friday and had not returned until Monday. Participant Ten said he did this because he realized his mother was poor and would save money by not feeding him during the weekends. I asked P10 whether his mother was concerned about him, and he said, "No, she wouldn't know if I was alive or dead. But I would always--she gave me a cell phone from when I would--say 16 or 17--and she could always get a hold of me."

However, P10 spoke well of his mother. He seemed fond of her and close to her. His tone and demeanor indicated he felt somewhat protective of her, perhaps because his father had

abandoned the family, something that had impacted P10 very powerfully. Participant Ten did not find it unusual that his mother had not cared when he spent weekends away from home. He said she had not cared where he went, and he described his mother this way:

> Yah, she had it tough, you know, my mom is like wonder woman. She was like mom and dad you know. Like, whatever I needed it was there. My mom was religious for a while and then she stopped. When I needed it I should say. I was a teenager, and you know teens like to be rebellious--smoke cigarettes, kind of like bend the rules a little bit.

Participant Ten spoke fondly of his own son and said that he spends as much time as possible with the child. Participant Ten repeatedly spoke of his own father not being part of the family, and P10 seemed anxious to be part of his child's life. I asked P10 if he spent time with his son, and P10 replied,

> Yah, I try to anyway. Like, during the weeks I get to go see him. But, since I don't live with him, I can't really--like--spend too much time with him. But, he knows exactly who I am the moment he sees me. He yells out 'Dada' and he sits on my lap. Watches me play with my phone. He's a really good kid...

Participant Ten had been in special education throughout his school years, and his family had moved often. He said he had never spent two consecutive years in the same school although he had spent a number of years in the same district and had attended the same school more than once. He said he had been in trouble with the law when he was younger, mainly for alcohol and marijuana use. Participant Ten had spent time in a state rehab program and spoke well of the program and the people in it. He said, "It was really good. I think that's the moment of my life where I changed, mentally and emotionally." According to P10, he had spent considerable time in juvenile detention and had also been in a treatment center for young adults.

Throughout our conversation, P10 returned often to the importance of his missing father. Participant Ten had not seen his father since the family had moved from a major urban center to the community where P10 currently lived. For at least part of this time P10's father had been in a penitentiary. I asked P10 if he cared where his father was, and P10 replied, "No, not really. I mean--I went through so long you know, with life without him. I don't see why--what would make the difference if I knew one more person in life?"

However, despite P10's stated indifference toward his father, the importance of his father's absence arose repeatedly. When I asked P10 if he would quit school again if he could live life over, his reply was, "If I had it to do all over again I think I would try to track my dad down when it counted the most." When I asked why this would have helped, P10 replied:

> But I think at that point in my life it would've been perfect to have someone to talk to at that point. Instead of just going and doing something else, you know? It would've been really good to say, 'my day is going really crappy right now' and for him to say 'life is shitty make the best of it.' You know?

I asked P10 how he thought his life would have been different with a father in it, and P10 replied:

> I think it would have been more work ethic, I mean--I would've noticed the things that I know now. Like, the alpha male present, who brings the food home who protects the home when it's dark. Stuff like that, and who keeps the motivation going.

The father theme also arose when P10 explained why he had liked an out-of-state rehab program he had attended. He said:

> Oh it was a really good experience. I was surrounded by all boys, which was pretty cool. A lot of them had dads and a lot of them had--you know--really good intentions to live

> the rest of their life. There was like some male figures that were staff there that I looked up to, too.

Participant Ten repeatedly stated the importance about being a good father to his own son and of never having had a father to teach him the value of work. Participant Ten said, "I never really had a dad who said. 'Look what you can get when you work this hard'--I never really saw, you know?"

At one point, P10 talked about a man who had been in his life while P10 was in high school. He described this man as someone in the neighborhood who was cool and treated P10 well. Participant Ten said he had often gone to that man's house to hand out on days when his mother thought he was in school. Participant Ten said the man was around 40 years old and just let kids hang out around his house during the day. They would watch television or play computer games until the school day ended, and then they would go home. Participant Ten said his mother had not known this. Describing this situation, P10 said:

> I'm saying when I was 15 I knew this guy named _____ and he was about 40 years old. He had a lot of cool stuff in house and he'd just let me chill there and watch movies all day. Bring my girlfriend… He was a really cool person. He was the type of person who'd been there, done that, and trying to get it off of his record.

I asked P10 if he meant that _____ was trying to get straight, and P10 replied, "Yah, he was really trying to live a straight life. It kinda bit him in the butt in the end by the people he let in his house. But he was really good guy in general." Participant Ten did not explain how the man had been "...bit in the butt in the end..." I can envision a number of scenarios where the man would have gotten in trouble for allowing minors to waste their days at his home. I see P10's involvement with this adult as another expression of P10's need for a father.

Participant Ten did not express rancor towards the many schools he had attended. He spoke well of a male science teacher in one school because, "...he looked out for everyone." I asked P10 if he thought that teacher had cared for him, and P10 answered, "Yah, I felt he cared about everyone. It didn't matter if you were bad news or good news. I could see in his face he thought that--this kid's young, he's got a lot to view and learn you know?" Participant Ten also spoke well of a resource-room teacher he had in one school. He described her as caring about him and understanding him. However, P10 had transferred out of that school, as he had so often done.

Participant Ten said his biggest problem in school was attendance. He said he missed school often, and his mother assumed he went to school, but she had not checked to see whether he was actually in school. Participant Ten talked about his mother raising four children (P10's has three half-siblings) and taking classes to become a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA), so I can understand the difficulty she had in supervising P10's behavior. He said he had never been in gangs or violent in school, just that he had attendance problems.

Participant Ten said he had difficulty reading and spelling, but that he was good at math. However, he said that he would transfer into one school and be placed in an advanced math class, but then he would move to another school and be put in algebra one or basic math. Participant Ten also talked about being depressed. He said he had not been treated for it, but that he believed depression ran in his mother's family. He explained his use of marijuana as self-medicating for depression, and as a way to deal with his absent father. At one point, P10 said:

> Weed was kind of like the cope drug when I was thinking like--where's my dad right now? Maybe I should just blow up the world, or I don't know where I belong. I would just smoke some weed and relax… and just chill. I mean I deserved it for being that

> depressed and that stressed out. I mean I coulda seeked [*sic*] for an answer, but I think I woulda dug so deep that at a point I woulda just stopped, and I coulda gone crazy and do something that totally wasn't me. Just cause I didn't know how to deal with that emotion. You know? Maybe I could've been medicated at that age, but I really didn't believe in medication.

That statement covers many issues and might indicate serious emotional problems. However, I am not a psychologist, nor am I conducting psychological analysis. However, that statement reveals important truths related to P10's lifeworld. It indicates he suffered from depression and could have felt intense anger in some form. When he said, "Maybe I should just blow up the world..." or, "...and I coulda gone crazy and do something that totally wasn't me." I felt undercurrents of anger, perhaps directed toward the absent father; perhaps directed toward the world in general.

Participant Ten seemed optimistic, especially when he spoke of his son. Participant Ten was anxious to be a good father and wanted to provide for his son. However, P10 did not seem interested in completing formal education, mainly because he was determined to work and to meet his child support payments if possible. When I asked P10 if there was anything else he wanted to tell me about his school or life, he answered, "No, I don't think so. I'm just kind of still lost in my own brain, you know?"

This young man's lifeworld held several elements that had brought him to dropping out, one being the lack of a father and P10's viewing much of the world through the lens of that lack. This had obviously left P10 to be raised by a single mother, something also conducive to dropping out. Despite the pressured nature of her life, P10's mother failed to adequately monitor his whereabouts and activities. I suspect the school had attempted to contact his mother about

P10's absences, so she should have known. I also question the judgment of a mother who allows her son to spend entire weekends away from home without knowing his whereabouts. In participating in these conversations, I tried to remain nonjudgmental, but at times, such as this, I found it difficult not to judge someone's actions.

Participant Ten definitely progressed through gradual disengagement from both the family and the school. Rather than attend school, P10 spent time with his girlfriend at the house of the mysterious older guy who allowed kids to hang out there. That is also an example of the negative impact of others. Although that man cannot be seen as a peer, he was an outsider whose influence did not encourage P10 to succeed in school. Thus, P10 appears as a young man whose father abandoned him, whose mother failed to supervise him, whose friends distracted him from school, and who never benefited from the intervention of anyone who cared and could have directed P10 in more positive directions.

Participant Eleven (P11).

Participant Eleven was a young man who was half Native American and half Hispanic. He had quit school at age 18 when he was in the 12th grade and was 20 years old at the time of our conversation. He was soft-spoken and said he had been in special education throughout his years in school. As with several other participants, I had difficulty gaining a clear timeline of the sequence of events in P11's lifeworld.

In his questionnaire, when asked to write why he had quit school, P11 wrote, "People don't really take the time to get to know a person or understand them. They just expect you to meet their request." Participant Eleven was generally negative toward schools and school personnel. His mother is a Native American who is a registered tribal member, as is P11;

however, P11's mother was adopted into a White family as a child, so neither P11 nor his mother have any contact with their Native American roots.

This participant's lifeworld was unsettled. Up to age 15, P11 had lived in Florida where he had attended a private school. He also said that he lived with his biological father until he had returned with his mother to her home state. Participant Eleven has several younger half-siblings. He described his father as a violent man who used drugs and abused family members. Participant Eleven said he no longer has contact with either his father or mother and that his mother drinks heavily. At the time of our conversation, P11 said he had no contact with any family members. He mentioned that his maternal grandfather is a Christian minister, but that neither P11 nor his mother has any contact with her adoptive family because he and his mother are the only dark-skinned people in the family. Participant Eleven implied that the family rejected his mother and him, but he offered no anecdotal evidence to support this.

According to P11, his mother and stepfather had thrown him out of their home when they found a marijuana pipe in his room. He said he had come home one day to find a few clothes in a box at the end of the driveway. Participant Eleven said it was not the first time his mother had discovered he had drug paraphernalia, and he had not believed she would care because other people in the family either drank or used drugs. Apparently, his mother had been adamant about throwing him out; she had refused to bail him out of jail when he had been arrested for shoplifting food. When I asked P11 how he felt about losing touch with his family, he said, "Truth be told I don't even think they care."

Participant Eleven told of connecting with a bad crowd when he was young. He said:

Yah when I was younger I did a lot of stuff--grew up quickly I guess. I mean people who

showed me in life yah, they were--I call ‘em G units, wannabe gangsters. So they lived that hard aspect of life and they kinda taught me real quick.

Participant Eleven’s lifeworld had been a continuous story of rejection by people, and when I asked why had had hung around with the wannabe gang bangers, he said, “I guess the reason why is cause they were more understanding.”

Participant Eleven had experienced frustration in school as well as at home. According to him he had Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and had been in special education throughout his years in school. He said his biggest problem was reading. He said:

> Well, I do have ADD and it is very hard to focus on things that are very difficult--or not difficult but I guess I don’t have a keen sense for. Like, reading…never read a book in my life. I can’t; I stink. I hate it.

Participant Eleven said he had been on various medications for ADD, but that the medication caused him problems. He said one medication had ruined his appetite and made him lethargic. Participant Eleven said that particular medication made him act like a meth head. Another medication had made P10’s heart race, so he had quit using that medication as well. Because of his learning problems, school had been difficult for P11. He said he was good in art, but that his art teacher had insisted he work on certain things when he had wanted to work on his own projects. Participant Eleven said he was good in sports, that he could run a complete marathon without training. He said he did that because his mother was a good runner and he wanted to run like she had. However, P11 had been unable to compete in school sports because his academic problems had rendered him ineligible.

After returning with his parents to his mother’s home state, P11 had enrolled in the local school district. However, the structure of that district’s facilities program necessitated that

students change schools often. Participant Eleven had attended 7th grade in one building, 8th grade in another, 9th grade back at the building where he had attended 7th grade, and grades 10-12 in a fourth facility. Literature on dropouts notes the potentially harmful impact of changing schools even when students remain in the same district (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004). Participant Eleven had quit school after the school had placed him in a regular language arts class as a senior. Participant Eleven said he had never taken language arts out of a resource-room setting. Participant Eleven said his special education teacher did not understand why his placement had been changed, and that he simply could not do the work required in a regular language arts class. He said:

> I had never taken a normal English class. I was always at a different reading level. I don't remember which one it was. But my last year they moved me up. And it was like the hardest thing ever. She made you read all the time--I don't know, nothing was ever good enough for her. Or me--at least, I couldn't take notes the way she expected it--I don't know. If you weren't really a prep or a jock in school, people just don't really pay attention.
>
> The thing is--I wasn't a bad student at all. I wouldn't talk to anyone; I'd just mind my own business. And she told me to do something, I'd do it. But just her expectations--I can't do it. I mean she wouldn't--if I ask her for help she would explain it really quick and just I wouldn't get it. Then she would expect me to do it. So then I'd always have to leave class, go to my resource teacher and I'd have to make her explain this to me. That's with all assignments. And having to do that with all classes, having shit explained to you takes a lot of time. So you're gonna naturally run behind homework.

This participant felt his teachers had not understood his learning problems. He said, "They don't know what it's like to have ADD I guess. How hard it is to focus." However, P11 had connected with one resource-room teacher. He spoke well of her understanding and concern for students. He described her this way:

> Yah, she was a really understanding person. She actually just went to school just to teach special needs students, and she couldn't go into further studying it cause she'd have to quite because she'd be too high educated. So she quit and just stayed there. I mean that just shows you she really loved helping people.

Participant Eleven said he quit school as a senior after an incident with his language arts teacher. He said she had lied about something, and that had angered him. He had thrown a book at the wall and walked out. The school then suspended him, and he never went back because he knew he could not pass the language arts class and would not graduate without it.

When I asked P11 how he felt about quitting school, he said that nothing had really changed. When I pressed him to explain that, he laughed and said, "….parents still don't care. I think the only thing that changed is that I have to look for a job. And that I'm here instead of at my house." (Here being the drop-in facility for homeless youth where we held our conversation.) Participant Eleven said he would like to get a GED and attend "...some tech school." But, at the time of our conversation, P11 said he was mainly concerned with living and food. He said he thought no one really cared about him except the staff at the youth center where we talked. He liked those staff people and believed that they cared about him.

Several themes emerged from my conversation with this young man. One was the familiar theme of students with learning disabilities dropping out, a theme reinforced often in the literature (Osher et al., 2003). The decision to move P11 from language arts in a resource room

to the regular language arts program had precipitated his choice to drop out of high school without graduating. It would be good to know why the school had made this change. I have no reason to disbelieve P11's statement that neither he nor his resource room teacher could understand that move.

Participant Eleven's family situation also had impacted the course of his life. His parents were not together; he lived with a stepfather and stepsiblings; his parents abused alcohol and other drugs; and ultimately, P11's mother had thrown him out of the home for using marijuana. Also, being a non-White person in an all-White extended family had impacted P11, or at least it prevented him finding social capital in family members. Whether this is true I cannot say. But it is true that P11 believes this, and that belief is a factor shaping his life.

Overall, the theme of alienation and lack of positive human support stood out in this conversation. I found P11's comment that he had hung around with bad people and drug dealers because they were more understanding than his family or teachers a sadly poignant commentary on how people had failed to provide P11 with the support one needs to succeed in life.

Participant Twelve (P12).

Participant Twelve was a Native American male who had quit school in the 9th grade at age 16. He was 19 at the time of our conversation. He was attending a Job Corps center; he plans to join the army and then become a nurse. Participant Twelve had become a father at age 15 and had quit school at age 16 because he had started drinking. His lifeworld had been shaped by alcoholism, his and his mother's, and by a disruptive event in his life.

Participant Twelve's life had been disrupted by a change in his living situation. According to P12, he had lived with his mother until he was five when a social service agency had taken him from his mother because of her drinking. His father, who did not live with P12's

mother, took P12 and raised him until P12 was 16. At that time, P12's father had sent P12 to live with his mother, which meant that P12 had moved from one reservation to another, a change P12 felt had been bad for him. Participant Twelve was not certain why he had been sent to live with his mother. He thought the move possibly happened because his father had remarried. Participant Twelve does wonder why his father sent him away, especially since the move adversely impacted P12's life.

Participant Twelve said he had attended a total of six or seven schools before he dropped out. He had spent four years at one school, a boarding school for Native American middle school students. He said he had enjoyed his years at the boarding school because the teachers there had truly cared about him. Participant Twelve said was never in trouble with the law and did well in school until he went to live with his mother. He mentioned being in special education because of reading difficulties; however, at one point he had gained over two grade levels in one year and had been removed from special education. According to P12, he had done well in school until he moved to his mother's reservation. He said the culture of his mother's reservation was different from that of his father's reservation. In his new home, P12 started hanging around with a bad crowd, began partying, and stopped doing well in school. About his drinking, P12 said,

> I got into it cause my friends were doing it so I decided to do it, too. I starting drinking, going like partying out late and never having time to go to school or get up in the mornings. I had nobody else. I didn't know anybody--so I might as well just be stupid and join in.

I asked P12 if that was when he began to do poorly in school, and he replied:

> Yah, I had been like, I missed a lot of days of school and I got--ah--suspended and I court--or not court, but they were saying if I don't go to school the court is gonna get

involved and stuff like that cause I've been missing too much days.

According to P12, at that time his mother had told him he was old enough to be emancipated and to make his own choices about school. So, in P12's words, "I just quit and dropped out." When I asked whether his mother had been angry when he quit school, P12 said she had not cared. In fact, he said things got better because his mother received no more calls from the school, which pleased her. Participant Twelve said his mother was too busy drinking to care about his schooling. He also said that his mother did not care when he got a girl pregnant because his mother was too involved with her drinking.

Participant Twelve talked of his life on his mother's reservation as a life of drinking and fighting. I asked if he had been in a gang, but he said there had been no gangs, just guys who hung around, drank, and fought with other guys. Participant Twelve returned often to the theme of his mother's drinking and how he had changed once he began living with her. He said he had no real choice of social groups or opportunity to be involved in school activities, that it was drink and party or do nothing. Participant Twelve expressed aversion to reservation life and said he would never live there again. He said that he does return occasionally to the reservation to visit his grandmother, but that he will never again live on the reservation.

At the time of our conversation, P12 had left his Job Corps site because of problems with a son. Participant Twelve had two sons but was not married to either of the children's mothers. He described one mother as a good mother, but said the other was not. Participant Twelve had come to this community hoping to get custody of the son who lived with the bad mother. Participant Twelve then hoped to return to a Job Corps site that would allow students to have their children with them. Participant Twelve had realistic plans for his future. At the time of our conversation, he was studying facilities management and hoped to continue at Job Corps to

become a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA). After completing training at Job Corps, P12 planned to enlist in the army for several years, and then to pursue a career as a nurse. Participant Twelve was emphatic that his decision to quit school had been a mistake, and he blamed no one else for it. However, throughout the conversation, P12 repeatedly mentioned his mother's drinking and how moving to her reservation had caused many of his problems. Even though P12 never directly blamed his father, he did indicate he felt his father had made a bad decision, and P12 was mystified about why his father had sent him away.

Although he never stated it directly, this feeling of having been betrayed by his father colored much P12's conversation with me. Participant Twelve may not have verbalized anger or resentment, but negative feelings toward his father emerged often in our conversation. Basically, the theme connecting the various threads of P12's lifeworld had been his move to his mother's home and how that had directed his life into drinking and toward failure. As with other participants, I found that this young man had been failed by others. Significant adults in P12's life had made bad decisions that had harmed P12 and had led him to drop out. If social capital is important, as various sources indicate (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004; Coleman, 1988; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Ream & Rumberger, 2008; Werner & Smith, 2001), then the lack of social capital was apparent in P12's decision to quit school. His father could have provided that capital, but instead the father chose to remarry and to send P12 to a different reservation. Participant Twelve did speak of his grandparents, who could have provided social capital, but he said his grandfather was a medicine man who traveled to reservations teaching traditional culture and conducting special ceremonies. When I asked P12 whether his grandparents had tried to help him, he said they had been too busy traveling and doing their traditional ceremonies.

In the life of P12, the impact of negative peer pressure combined with the impact of insufficient social capital, and the two factors intertwined in P12's lifeworld. Drinking, neglect, no adult support--all combined to create for P12 a lifeworld where academic success became unimportant. However, another factor of P12's life emerged from his story, that of optimism and resilience. Participant Twelve was trying to be a responsible father and to prevent a son from living the same life P12 had lived. His plans for the future were positive and realistic. Participant Twelve was adamant that he did not want to live on a reservation again. He clearly understood that dropping out had been a mistake, and that his failure was connected to his mother's alcoholism and to the environment into which he had been flung. Participant Twelve wants to escape that environment and to keep his child out of it.

Participant Thirteen (P13).

Participant Thirteen was a 21-year old male who had quit school at age 17. He stated that he had been considered a senior when he dropped out, but he also said that his credits made him a sophomore and that he would not have graduated for at least two years, which was one reason why he quit. This ambiguity about grade placement, credits, and such details characterized several of the young men with whom I conversed. It seemed that many were either unsure of such routine administrative details or that such information was irrelevant to them.

Participant Thirteen spoke with me while his fiancé and infant daughter waited in the common area of the center where we met. He seemed very proud of his daughter and filled with great expectations for a better life once he married the child's mother and moved to a small town in Texas that he had once visited. His story about school was unique in some ways, but in other ways it was familiar.

According to P13, he had quit school when a girlfriend of the time began telling others that he had raped her. Although no charges were ever filed and P13 said the story was completely false, P13 said he had been questioned by his friends and had decided to quit school just to avoid encountering the girl. Later in our conversation, P13 also said that he had really loved that girl and could not bear to think of seeing her in school with another boy. Participant Thirteen claimed to be a sensitive, emotional person who just could not deal with the stress of the accusation and the ramifications it had for his ability to be accepted within his social group. To me, except for the extreme element of rape, this story sounded like a middle-school student's angst over the latest romance gone awry, and P13 showed other indications of social immaturity, especially in his plans. Although P13 may have quit school in response to student talk, the lifeworld he described contained other factors characteristic of dropouts, factors that undoubtedly contributed to his decision to quit school.

Participant Thirteen said his family had moved to this community from North Carolina. Later, he mentioned the family had lived in California as well and had decided to move here in search of a better life. Again, P13 showed a confusion about details that follows patterns noted by Payne (1996). His family's socioeconomic status placed the family among America's working poor; his father worked as an apartment complex maintenance person, and his mother was a cleaning person in a local hotel. The family lived in a trailer house together with at least one other son and numerous dogs.

According to P13, his father drank heavily. Participant Thirteen spoke of his father going to bars to play darts almost every night and of using his income on liquor while the family wore clothes from local second-hand stores. Participant Thirteen said his mother had tried to make the father stop drinking in the past, but then had come to encourage his drinking because the father

could become belligerent when drunk, and P13's mother preferred to have the man out of the house at night.

About his father's drinking, P13 said:

> So it was a time consuming thing, so more or less we didn't get along because, a hundred bucks a night when you don't barely have enough money to live in the mobile home you're living in. At an early age, I caught on. I had a little resentment on that part.

Participant Thirteen was one of four sons in his family. Neither of P13's parents had graduated from high school, nor had his brothers. Participant Thirteen said he had hoped to be the first of his family to graduate from high school and expressed regret at not achieving that goal. He said, "Neither of my parents graduated from high school. Nobody had graduated. So I actually would have been priding myself on being the first in my immediate family to graduate high school."

Participant Thirteen said he had begun drinking around age ten with the consent of his mother. Participant Thirteen said his mother did not really approve of his drinking at that age, but she had assumed he would do it anyway, so she allowed him to drink at home. She also allowed him to have others over, and P13 said he had provided the parties for his friends. When I asked whether his mother had ever gotten busted for this, P13 said the law had never intervened. He said he started smoking around age nine, and that his mother had found out when he was 15. After that, they had shared cigarettes and bought them for each other.

Participant Thirteen said his parents had tried to keep him home at night by making him sleep with the loudest dog in his room, in hope that the dog would bark if P13 tried to sneak out. Participant Thirteen said this had not worked, and he had routinely crawled out through his

bedroom window to party with friends. He said he began doing this around age 15. Also around that age, P13 lost his taste for alcohol and switched to marijuana. He said:

> But, funny thing is--drinking was actually my second choice. I could care less about drinking at first. When I turned 15, 16, I was like, ew…I don't feel like waking up in front of the toilet anymore. So I got out of that drinking situation--but my friends all loved it. So they'd be like, 'c'mon man, spend your money on a bottle.' I actually, personally enjoyed marijuana. That was my choice. You know.

When I asked P13 if he used drugs such as methamphetamines or cocaine, he said, "Bah, hate the stuff eecchh." Participant Thirteen said he had not gotten into trouble with the law until after he turned 18, and then it was for alcohol related offenses even though he no longer drank much himself.

This participant said he had enjoyed school and had found it a good place to be, better than sitting at home. When I asked if he disliked school, P13 replied, "Oh, no that was the best part of my day--well, not the getting up part." He also said about school, "It was an escape." And, "School was great." He described himself as a "...nerdy," sort of student. Participant Thirteen claimed to have been a good student. He said, "I mean my test scores were 90 something. I would get As and Bs. I'd get ridiculous standardized scores. I would get top 5% in the nation in my reading." According to P13, when he had been young, he had begged his older brothers to let him do their homework for him. Participant Thirteen was articulate and spoke with intelligence and wit, and I believed that he had done well in school.

However, P13 was far below grade level when he had quit. I asked P13 how that had happened, and he said the school district had policy mandating that a student could not pass any class if that student had undone assignments for the term. He said teachers reported unfinished

work, and the school gave students an incomplete for those classes. Participant Thirteen said he had trouble getting his work done, probably as a result of his nighttime activities, and that he began falling behind once he hit high school. Eventually, even though the school classified P13 as a senior, he lacked the credits needed to graduate.

Participant Thirteen said he had attended a number of schools as his family had moved around the country. He said he had attended only one elementary school, but had attended three different middle schools and four different high schools. Participant Thirteen said he had attended the four high schools all during his freshman year in high school because his family had moved that often in one year before settling in the community where they now lived and where P13 had spent the remainder of his high school years. With some pride, P13 asserted a middle school he had once attended was considered the nation's most violent middle school at the time.

Participant Thirteen described his recent life, and it was a life I would not want to live. However, he seemed happy about it. He said he and his fiancé had lived in a tent in her parents' yard until the weather became cold, and then they had moved the tent into her parents' garage. At the time of our conversation, P13 and his fiancé lived in an apartment provided through some rent support program, but even with financial assistance they were over a thousand dollars behind in the rent. That did not seem to trouble P13. He spoke about getting a new apartment for twenty dollars a month and using his fiancé's tax returns to pay off the rent, pay for their upcoming wedding, and set something aside for their child. He anticipated receiving about three thousand in refund. While explaining this, P13 spoke with assurance and appeared to be well organized and goal oriented. However, his concept of how far three thousand dollars would go was suspect in my opinion. In this regard, P13 again seemed immature, as when he had talked about his girlfriend problems in high school.

Despite the many obstacles I foresee, P13 is resilient and optimistic about his life and his future. He plans to get married, to obtain a GED, and then to study networking and get a technology job. He said, "Actually my plans are, I got a small taste of a high-end college course of computer networking at the _____ center." However, he then said, "I didn't pass it either, but I got a small taste of it though. Also, a computer programming class in high school. Both of them seem just- wow!" I found it interesting that he spoke so avidly of the class and how it had inspired him even though he had not passed the class.

Participant Thirteen's optimism was the motivating force in his life at the time of our conversation. He planned to move his family to a small Texas town that he had visited once when he and a friend had simply driven off for a week to drive to Texas. (Another indication of immaturity--in my opinion.) He spoke in glowing terms of the life he would have. He said, "Oh yeah--just imagining myself sitting by this--like at the age of about 40-50 years old with my little one and my wife. You know? Well…not any more little one, little ones."

I hope he achieves his dream.

APPENDIX B. ADULT CONSENT FORM EXPLAINING STUDY

North Dakota State University
School of Education Main office - FLC 210
PO Box 6050, Dept. 2625
Fargo, ND 58108-6050
701-231-7921

Title of Research Study: Lives at-risk: The educational leader's role in preventing high school dropouts
IRB Protocol Number: HE11130

This study is being conducted by Bruce Schumacher, doctoral student at North Dakota State University, Fargo, ND; and Dr. Ron Stammen, professor, School of Education, NDSU. Mr. Schumacher may be contacted at: 701-474-5875; email: bruce.r.schumacher.1@ndsu.edu and Dr. Stammen may be contacted at 701-293-1959; email: Ronald.Stammen@ndsu.edu.

The researchers hope to learn why people leave high school before graduation and to learn this in the words of these people themselves. You are being asked to participate because you left high school without graduating. We want to learn why you believe you dropped out, what you believe the school could have done to keep you in school, and what you think you could have done differently to graduate. If you are not 18 years of age or older, you cannot participate in this study.

This study has two parts. First, you will be asked to complete a brief survey about yourself. This information will be used to describe in general terms the participants in this study. Individuals will not be identified or described. Next, we will have a conversation about your experiences in school. We will begin with some specific questions and will discuss these questions in greater detail. We might discuss other things you have to say about high school. You can say as much or as little as you want to say. The conversation will be audiotaped so the researcher can review it and study it.

We will meet at a time and place convenient and comfortable for you. We will meet in a private room. No one else will be present, unless you want someone else there. The entire process should take around two hours. It will be scheduled at a time that works well for you.

There is very little risk of harm or discomfort to you. You might find it difficult to discuss some events from your educational years, but you should be honest and can trust the interviewer to be respect your privacy. You don’t have to talk about anything that makes you feel uncomfortable.

You will not get any direct benefit from being in this study. However, if we can learn more about high school dropouts, particularly about the role schools play in pushing people out of school or in keeping students in school, it is possible that others may find it possible to remain in school and to graduate from high school. All participants who complete the interview process will receive a gift coupon worth $10.00 from a local restaurant. This is not intended as payment, only as a gesture of appreciation for participating.

Appendix B: Adult Consent Form continued

Your participation in this research is your choice. If you decide to participate in the study, you may change your mind and stop participating at any time without any penalties or cost to you.

We will keep private all research records that identify you. Your information will be combined with information from other people taking part in the study. When we write about the study, we will write about the combined information that we have gathered. We may publish the results of the study; however, we will keep your name and other identifying information private.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information, or what that information is. Your name will be kept separate from your research records and these two things will be stored in different places under lock and key. This study involves the NDSU School of Education and does not involve any other organizations or agencies. Your identity will not be disclosed to any other organization or agency. Conclusions of this study that do not identify you or any other specific individuals may be made available to interested organizations or agencies.

You should know, however, that there are some circumstances in which we may have to show your information to other people. For example the law may require us to show your information to authorities or to tell authorities if we believe you have abused a child, or if you pose a danger to yourself or someone else.

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the research study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have any questions about the study, you can contact the researcher, Bruce Schumacher at 701-474-5875 or bruce.r.schumacher.1@my.ndsu.edu or Ron Stammen at 701-293-1959, or: ronald.stammen@ndsu.edu

You have rights as a participant in research. If you have questions about your rights, or complaints about this research you may talk to the researcher or contact the NDSU Human Research Protection Program by:

- Telephone: 701.231.8908
- Email: ndsu.irb@ndsu.edu
- Mail: NDSU HRPP Office, NDSU Dept. 4000, PO Box 6050, Fargo, ND 58108-6050.

The role of the Human Research Protection Program is to see that your rights are protected in this research; more information about your rights can be found at: www.ndsu.edu/research/irb

You are freely making a decision whether to be in this research study. Signing this form means that

1. you have read and understood this consent form;
2. you have had your questions answered, and
3. you have decided to be in the study.

Appendix B: Adult Consent Form continued

You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

Your signature	Date
Your printed name	
Signature of researcher explaining study	Date
Printed name of researcher explaining study	

APPENDIX C. LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS INTRODUCING STUDY

North Dakota State University, School of Education Main office - FLC 210
PO Box 6050, Dept. 2625, Fargo, ND 58108-6050
701-231-7921
IRB Protocol Number: HE11130

Participant:

We are trying to learn why people quit high school. We are asking you to be part of this study because you did not complete high school. We hope you will participate, and we believe you could help change high schools and make them better places for people to learn and achieve.

This study hopes to learn whether schools could have done anything to help you graduate. If we can identify anything that could have been done to keep students in school, future students may avoid leaving school.

You will not be personally identified. Your answers will remain confidential. Only you and the people doing this study know who you are. The final report will only use numbers. Your name will not be released; your identity will remain confidential.

We ask only a small amount of your time. There are three parts to this process. In each part, we only want your honest answers. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. All we need is information you want to share with us.

Thank you for your time and participation.

Bruce R. Schumacher

Dr. Ronald Stammen

APPENDIX D. POSTER SEEKING PARTICIPANTS

Volunteers Needed

Earn $10 gift certificate at local restaurant

Just participate in a study of high school dropouts being conducted through the North Dakota State University Education Department.

Participants must be:

1. Male
2. Over 18 and under 26
3. A high school dropout

(May have a GED or be working to get a GED)

****

Participation is easy. We spend one to two hours talking about your experiences in school and why you chose not to complete school.

- We can meet at a time and place that is convenient to you.
- The process is confidential. No one will know who you are except you and the researcher.

If you can help, contact: _____

OR, call: 701.899.1624.

This study is conducted by Bruce Schumacher, according to the guidelines of the NDSU Institutional Review Board.

- Telephone: 701.231.8908
- Email: ndsu.irb@ndsu.edu
- Mail: NDSU HRPP Office, NDSU Dept. 4000, PO Box 6050, Fargo, ND 58108-6050.
- **IRB Protocol Number:** HE11130

APPENDIX E. QUESTIONS ASKED OF PARTICIPANTS SEEKING THEIR INTERPRETATIONS OF FACTORS THAT CAUSED PARTICIPANTS TO DROP OUT OF HIGH SCHOOL PRIOR TO GRADUATION.

Part one: Please answer these questions.

- Write in your own words
- Be as clear as possible. Two or three word answers are as good as long answers.
- But, be accurate and complete, too. Write as much as you need to write.

1. The main reason I quit school was:

2. I do not believe that all of my educational needs were being met in my school.

True or False (circle one)

A. If you circled TRUE, (your needs were NOT being met in school) please explain what educational needs your school did not meet:

3. I might have stayed stay in school and graduated if the school had done more for me. Things the school could have done were:

4. I know I could have done things myself to stay in school and graduate.

True or False (circle one)

A. If you circled True, please explain what you think you could have done differently to stay in school and graduate.

5. Looking back, how do you feel now about your decision to quit school?

APPENDIX F. QUESTIONS SEEKING DEMOGRAPHIC AND EDUCATIONAL INFORMATION ABOUT EACH PARTICIPANT

1. What grade were you in on the day you quit school? (circle one) 7 8 9 10 11 12

2. What was your age the day you quit school? (circle one) 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20

3. Had you repeated any grades from Kindergarten on up? Yes ____ No ____

4. If you did repeat any grade, what grade did you repeat? Grade: _____

5. Which of these groups do you identify with? If you identify with more than one, circle all that apply.

Native American African American White Hispanic White (not Hispanic)

Alaskan Native Asian American South Sea Islander

Other _____

6. What language do your parents speak most at home? _____

7. Did you move to America after you were born? Yes ____ No ____

8. When you quit school, did your two biological parents live in your home?

Yes ____ No ____

9. Did either of the parents or other adults you lived with complete high school?

Yes ____ No ____

10. Do you have brothers or sisters who completed school? Yes ____ No ____

11. Do you have brothers or sisters who also did not graduate? Yes ____ No ____

12. Do you plan to finish high school or get a GED in the future? Yes ____ No ____

APPENDIX G. EMAIL CORRESPONDENCE WITH JOHN CRESWELL

CONCERNING PHENOMENOLOGY METHOD

Bruce, In my opinion, Habermas is more philosophy than method. For phenomenology, we use here Giogi, Van Manen, and Moustakas. All three provide some guidance about methods. John

On 9/21/10 8:10 AM, "Bruce R. Schumacher" <schumacher@rrt.net> wrote:

Dr. Creswell,

I apologize for intruding on your time, but I need information about research. Since your writings form a major portion of our reading on qualitative research here at NDSU, I am hoping you can help me with a problem I have.

I am doing a doctoral dissertation in education at NDSU. I am studying at-risk students and why they drop out. I am focusing specifically on what schools could do to keep students in school. I have chosen to do a phenomenological study wherein I interview a number of dropouts seeking their own views on dropping out. My advisor wants me to do a phenomenology following the precepts of Jurgen Habermas. I have found many articles about Habermas and his theory about communicative action. I find articles claiming to follow Habermas in doing phenomenologies, but I cannot find any information about a methodology or technique for conducting or analyzing data as per Habermas.

Is there such a technique? If so, could you point me in the right direction to learn more about it?

I thank you in advance.

Bruce Schumacher

APPENDIX H. EMAIL CORRESPONDENCE WITH MAX VAN MANEN

CONCERNING PHENOMENOLOGY METHOD

Hello Bruce

Actually I do not think that one can justify picking a methodology to fit a differently oriented project. Each methodology has its own telos, questions and inquiry. You cannot just mix and match.

Habermas' critical theory of communicative action is committed to more rationalistic and analytic criteria than most forms of phenomenology. As well, Habermas writes at an epistemological meta-level while a critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire would be more grounded in cultural and empirical concerns like you seem to do.

Drop-outs in Dakota may have very different school experiences than drop-outs among Canadian native youths, or than inner city children in rural China. So you are dealing with ethnographic contexts and issues.

At any rate, your question is not really a phenomenological one--I think you will understand that if you explore the tradition of phenomenology more deeply. Of course, it is true that some scholars develop some sort of political phenomenology. You may want to read the work of Bernard Stiegler and see if it speaks to you. It is probably more in tune with contemporary issues of youth than the work of Habermas.

See:

Taking Care of Youth and the Generations (Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics) by Bernard Stiegler (Paperback - Mar 30, 2010)

Regards

Max van Manen

APPENDIX I: FACTORS CHARACTERIZING PARTICIPANTS' LIFEWORLDS

Factor	Manifestation
Poor parenting	
Participant 2	drank with his mother at age 13
Participant 3	had no father in his life
	mother's boyfriends were abusive
	mother did not know about mentor who provided alcohol and drugs
Participant 4	parents involved in divorce and ignored participant
	father used family members for money
Participant 5	because of religious views rejected by aunt and uncle who had raised him
	upon turning 18, was thrown out by real father and became homeless
Participant 6	had no father in the home
	mother's boyfriends abused him and his mother
Participant 7	mother immature when participant had been born
	father in penitentiary
	grandmother indulged him too much
Participant 8	mother partied and used drugs
	mother never tried to supervise or discipline him
Participant 9	parents absorbed by their divorce
	parents allowed him total freedom
	parents not involved in participant's education or personal life
Participant 10	father had abandoned the family
	mother allowed participant to spend weekends at other kids' homes
	mother did not monitor whether he attended school
Participant 11	mother drank and used drugs
	father also used drugs and was abusive
Participant 12	mother drank heavily and did not care what participant did
	mother allowed him to drink and to cut school
Participant 13	mother allowed participant to smoke and drink at home at age 10
	father was an alcoholic
	father spent money on liquor rather than family needs
Emotional problems	
Participant 2	self-reported depression
Participant 3	depression and suicidal tendencies
	chronic difficulty sleeping
Participant 4	anger management problems
	suicidal tendencies
	socialization problems
Participant 9	was depressed when he quit school because his girlfriend got pregnant
Participant 10	self-reported, untreated depression while still in school

Factor	Manifestation
Learning problems	
Participant 1	self-reported Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) undiagnosed
Participant 3	reading problems
Participant 4	in special programs throughout school years
Participant 6	in modified classes throughout school
	difficulties with reading, math
	received help with speech problems
Participant 10	in special programs throughout school years
Participant 11	diagnosed ADD
	in special programs throughout school years
Participant 12	had received help for reading, but help stopped due to improvement
School erred	
Participant 1	courses college preparatory; not enough hands-on learning
Participant 2	bullied in elementary school without school intervention
	teachers never connected participant's sleeping to alcohol abuse
Participant 4	school had not solved his anger problem
Participant 5	school had allowed participant not to attend 7th grade
	no school personnel had addressed his homelessness
Participant 6	poor quality of education in inner city school
	poor teachers who seemed not to care about student learning
	school impacted by violence caused by gang members in school
Participant 7	attended reservation school that had not addressed his performance
Participant 9	not counseled at registration, unaware of auto-mechanics
	school did not contact participant about not returning for the senior year
Participant 11	unable to participate in sports because of low grades
	moved out of resource room and into regular English classroom
Drugs/Alcohol	
Participant 2	drank with mother and her boyfriends
	used marijuana
Participant 3	had used drugs and alcohol while in high school
	had used drugs and alcohol while in high school
Participant 4	did some drinking in high school
Participant 5	had used drugs and alcohol while in high school
Participant 7	had used drugs and alcohol while in high school
Participant 8	claimed to be a recovering addict
	had used drugs and alcohol while in high school
Participant 10	had used drugs and alcohol while in high school
Participant 11	used marijuana while in school
	his mother drinks heavily

Factor	Manifestation
Drugs/Alcohol continued	
Participant 12	after moving to mother's home began to drink and party heavily
	his mother drinks heavily
Participant 13	began drinking with mother's consent at age 10
	hosted alcohol parties for others throughout middle and high school
	quit drinking to use marijuana
Invisible	
Participant 2	teachers failed to notice that he was hung over in mornings
	never caused discipline problems in school
Participant 5	district allowed him to stay home one entire school year
	when he became homeless, no one had stepped forward to help
Participant 6	reported attending a school where no teachers cared about teacher
	was never noticed by teachers
Participant 8	highly visible within the school
	his mother ignored his fighting and drinking
Participant 9	never caused problems in school
	was not in any activities
	ignored by his parents who were involved in their divorce
Participant 10	left home every weekend; mother did not know his whereaboouts
	mother did not care where he was
Participant 12	drank, partied, fought; school never addressed his problems
Participant 13	failed to hand in work
	often came to school drunk, but school staff never addressed this

APPENDIX J. INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

NDSU NORTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY

Institutional Review Board
Office of the Vice President for Research, Creative Activities and Technology Transfer
NDSU Dept. 4000
1735 NDSU Research Park Drive
Research 1, P.O. Box 6050
Fargo, ND 58108-6050

701.231.8995
Fax: 701.232.8098

Federalwide Assurance #FWA00002439
Expires April 24, 2011

December 22, 2010

Kathy Enger
School of Education
FLC 210D

IRB Expedited Review of: "**Lives at-risk: The educational leader's role in preventing high school dropouts**", Protocol #**HE11130**
Co-investigator(s) and research team: **Bruce Schumacher**

Research site(s): **varied** Funding: **n/a**

The protocol referenced above was reviewed under the expedited review process (category # 7) on **12/14/2010**, and the IRB voted for: ☐ approval ☒ approval, contingent on minor modifications. These modifications have now been accepted. IRB approval is based on the original submission, with revised: protocol (received 12/17/2010) and consent form (dated 12/20/2010).

Approval expires: 12/13/2011 **Continuing Review Report Due: 11/1/2011**

Please note your responsibilities in this research:

- All changes to the protocol require approval from the IRB prior to implementation, unless the change is necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazard to participants. Submit proposed changes using the *Protocol Amendment Request Form*.
- All research-related injuries, adverse events, or other unanticipated problems involving risks to participants or others must be reported in writing to the IRB Office within 72 hours of knowledge of the occurrence. All significant new findings that may affect risks to participation should be reported in writing to subjects and the IRB.
- If the project will continue beyond the approval period, a continuing review report must be submitted by the due date indicated above in order to allow time for IRB review and approval prior to the expiration date. The IRB Office will typically send a reminder letter approximately one month before the report due date; however, timely submission of the report is your responsibility. Should IRB approval for the project lapse, recruitment of subjects and data collection must stop.
- When the project is complete, a final project report is required so that IRB records can be inactivated. Federal regulations require that IRB records on a protocol be retained for three years following project completion. Both the continuing review report and the final report should be submitted according to instructions on the *Continuing Review/Completion Report Form*.
- Research records may be subject to a random or directed audit at any time to verify compliance with IRB regulations.

Thank you for cooperating with NDSU IRB policies, and best wishes for a successful study.

Sincerely,
Kristy Shirley
Kristy Shirley, CIP, Research Compliance Administrator

Last printed 12/22/2010 11:29:00 AM

NDSU is an equal opportunity institution.