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# Dropping Out in Southeast Kansas: Why Students Leave School Early

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Dropping Out in Southeast Kansas: Why Students Leave School Early

Dropping Out in Southeast Kansas: Why Students Leave School Early

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

by

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study takes a deeper look into the lived experiences of students in southeast Kansas who have dropped out of high school. As a result, school and community leaders are better informed to create effective strategy, policy, and practice in dropout prevention.

Framed as a phenomenology, data was collected by conducting in-depth, face-to-face interviews with 12 participants and a focus-group interview with four participants. The researcher administered a survey/questionnaire to an additional 15 participants. Utilizing the *Streamlined Codes-To-Theory Model* (Saldana, 2009); organizational, structural, and elaborative coding techniques were implemented to reduce the data into categories, which led to the establishment of common themes and conclusions for the study.

The findings indicate the most common reasons participants share for their decision to drop out relates to negative school experiences, followed closely by life-events occurring outside of the school culture. Many participants stated that there was nothing anyone could have said or done to keep them in school; however, almost half said they might have been persuaded to stay in school if conditions were different. The overriding conclusion was that students who dropped out lacked the appropriate motivation to finish or complete the desired goal, to graduate. This was explained by applying the Expectancy-Value Theory of Achievement Motivation (Keller, 1987) to the study.

This study concludes that dropout can be reduced by increasing the value a student places in having an education or being connected to the school. Further, chances of completing the diploma requirements can be greatly enhanced by increasing students' confidence in their own ability to be successful.

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## DEDICATION

To Lorene Wire, “Mom”: You always told me, “You’re going to be my doctor.” We didn’t think it would take this long and I am pretty sure the Ed.D. was not what you had in mind. You are missed.

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## CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to delve beyond the statistics of the phenomenon in order to take a deeper look into the lived experiences of students in southeast Kansas who have dropped out. The study sought to examine the phenomenon of dropping out of high school as described by those who had experienced it and were willing to share a personal perspective. Purposeful sampling was employed in this process, as 12 individuals who dropped out of school and chose various educational and life paths were interviewed and an additional 15 participants completed a paper/pencil, short-answer survey/questionnaire. A greater understanding of the thoughts, actions, and decisions students make which eventually result in their early exit from high school allows educational practitioners to better address policy and strategy to meet the needs of at-risk students. With appropriate partnerships, interventions, and strategies in place, schools might curb the dropout problem in southeast Kansas, potentially improving the state and local economy, as well as the quality of living for many individuals.

This chapter established the context for the study by sharing a scenario that has become a common occurrence with dropouts in southeast Kansas. The scenario involves a process in which the parent must participate in a counseling session to gain information about the statistical effects that stem from dropping out. Having heard the information, the parent/guardian must decide whether to waive the state's requirement of compulsory attendance for his or her child. The counseling session and waiver process is a state requirement for anyone wishing to drop out of school after the age of 16 and prior to the age of 18.

The context and background are followed by a brief description of the problem, a purpose statement, and the research questions, which serve as the central focus of the study. In addition

is a discussion of the research approach, the personal perspective and assumptions taken by the researcher. Chapter one concludes with a brief examination of the rationale and significance of the study.

## **Background and Context**

### **Waiver for Compulsory Attendance**

In Kansas, a student may not drop out of high school without parental permission unless he or she is considered an adult, 18 years of age or older. Other states have similar prerequisites to dropping out of school. Kansas school personnel, typically guidance counselors, are required to inform parents of the potential implications for students who drop out. The counseling session is designed to discourage dropping out and includes disclosing to the parent/guardian a list of the academic skills the child has not yet attained. In addition to lacking the necessary skills and credentials that accompany a diploma, counselors also share that potential for lifetime earnings is likely to be limited because of such a decision. The informational session often includes a discussion of the economic, psychological, social, and emotional implications, which are indicated as common effects of dropping out. Despite acknowledging the potential for negative and long-lasting implications to individual quality of life, most parents proceed to sign the waiver, therefore granting permission for their student to drop out. This scenario is commonplace in southeast Kansas and throughout the state. The requisite counseling session, as described, is an ineffective deterrent to preventing drop out.

### **Social, Emotional, and Psychological Implications for Dropouts**

Predicting and understanding how dropping out of school will affect the well-being of students and families may be less scientific than identifying who they will be. Overall, dropouts have shown to experience more frequent and severe health problems than students who complete

high school (Plank, Deluca, & Estacion, 2008). However, as with predicting who will drop out and why, it is difficult to determine who will suffer ill effects from the decision. The effect and degree of impact vary from one student to another. It is also difficult to delineate the social, emotional, and psychological outcomes for students who drop out of school. Some evidence supports that young people experience difficulty accepting the impending consequences of their decision to drop out. Inversely, other sources indicate little difference in the mental health of a dropout as compared to a graduate. For example, one study found that a high school dropout's self-esteem is negatively impacted upon the realization that, due to a lack of preparation and skills they would have attained by staying in school, personal goals will not be reached ("Dropout Reduction," 2009). Another study claims that no measurable difference exists in the self-esteem of a graduate as compared to a dropout (Liem, Dillon, & Gore, 2001). In fact, the latter case claims that some individuals demonstrated increased self-esteem following their decision to leave high school. Improved self-concept, whether temporary or long lasting, results from an absence of worrying about school attendance and performance (Kaplan, Damphousse, & Kaplan, 1994). Increased self-esteem might also ensue in the absence of consistent confrontation with another peer, teacher, tormentor, or bully (Kaplan et al., 1994).

An important factor determining a student's ability to cope with the decision to drop out is the level of support provided by the family. An example of this effect emerged in studies of depression. Young people who drop out of high school are more likely to experience depression than students who graduate, yet when there is adequate support from the family to manage the outcomes of the decision, there is no significant difference in incidence of depression as experienced by dropouts or graduates (Liem et al., 2001).

However, according to the National Center for Disease Control, staying in school and



educational attainment increases a person's chances of living a healthy lifestyle. Further, "education is one of the strongest predictors of health; the more schooling people have, the better their health is likely to be" (Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007, p. 1).

### **Implications for Families**

Individuals who have close friends, siblings, or parents who have dropped out are at greater risk to fall into a dropout cycle, or the tendency in which a family experiences one or more events of dropping out. The cycle might exist between a parent and child, a child and his or her sibling, or a combination of closely-related individuals. The dropout cycle can have lasting effects and has proven difficult to reverse. When there are several individuals living within the household who do not value the diploma or the pursuit of learning, negative educational issues such as poor attendance and non-completion of homework are likely (Resmovits, 2012). Through time, negative or neutral behaviors about education compound and may ultimately cause the student to lag behind others in school, fail classes, and experience discipline problems. When students are allowed to stay home, chronically missing school, the dropout cycle is perpetuated; in fact, the most reliable predictor of student failure, which leads to dropping out, is high absenteeism (Resmovits, 2012). Families who fail to break the grips of the dropout cycle are substantially more likely to rely on public assistance and live below the poverty line ("Dropout Reduction," 2009, Plank et al., 2008).

Current trends imply that individuals and families will struggle overcoming the adversities that commonly accompany dropping out of school. Economic factors alone indicate that overcoming the odds of negative life-events linked to dropping out will be difficult. Few dropouts will have the earning potential to establish independent households, therefore, living with parents longer than their graduating counterparts (Sum, Khatiwada, & McLaughlin, 2009).

There is a strong correlation between the incidence of dropping out and living in poverty. Nearly 60 percent of high school non-completers will live in poverty (Sum et al., 2009) and may be subject to its repercussions.

### **Career and Vocational Implications**

Individuals who fail to complete high school are at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to competing for jobs. This has not always been the case. In the 1960's and 1970's, in an age of industry and manufacturing, individuals might expect to drop out of school and easily obtain a relatively high-paying job. But, earnings for young people who quit school have shown a steady decline for more than three decades, and the earning power for these individuals has decreased by 35 percent ("Dropout Reduction," 2009, Autor, Katz, & Kearney, 2005). In the current age of service and technology, specific-skill attainment through education and training tends to be the expectation, if not the rule. The distinct shift in the types of jobs available and the level of educational attainment expected as a condition for employment has greatly changed the career and vocational outlook for all workers, especially those without a high school diploma. Today, the likelihood for unemployment is largely increased in non-graduates as compared to graduates (Plank, Deluca, & Estacion, 2008); the gap becomes even greater when compared to peers who continue to add educational experience to their resumes (Sum et al., 2009).

Students who drop out today can expect greater difficulty finding employment as compared to their counterparts who complete higher levels of schooling; when one does secure employment, he or she may face considerable differences in lifetime earning power ("Education Pays," 2012). In the spring of 2012, the Bureau of Labor and Statistics released employment and income projections which showed that a high school completer's median earned income was about \$200 greater per week than that of a dropout, equating to \$800 more per month and \$9,600

more per year. Each additional level of educational attainment widens the earnings gap between the completer and the dropout ("Education Pays," 2012).

### **Legal and Ethical Implications**

It has been established that high school dropouts have a greater probability of living in poverty and will experience greater difficulty in attaining and maintaining employment as adults. The unfortunate reality is that many dropouts will turn to illegal or criminal means to support themselves (Plank et al., 2008). A 2009 study states that, "dropouts are 3.5 times more likely than high school graduates to be incarcerated during their lifetime...90 percent of youth in detention facilities have no more than a ninth grade education...these dropouts cost the U.S. more than \$260 billion in lost wages, tax revenue and productivity over their lifetimes" ("Dropout Reduction," 2009, p. 1). It is estimated that 78 percent of the prison population are high school dropouts, and, of those incarcerated who have a high school credential, 56 percent attained the General Education Development certificate (GED) while in lock up (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2007). A large percentage of dropouts facing legal and criminal charges are from ethnically diverse communities and populations. According to Heckman and LaFontaine (2007), the most dramatic of these statistics exists with African-American males, as "nearly one out of every ten black male high school dropouts between the age of 20 and 35 is now incarcerated" (p.10).

### **Implications for Diverse Populations**

When students make the decision to, or are allowed to drop out of school, their chances to be successful and contribute to their communities are greatly decreased ("Grad Nation Report," 2012). The literature indicates that these effects are even more pronounced in minority populations. A major contributor to this occurrence is the high concentration of dropouts found

in heavy minority high schools in urban areas (Orfield & Lee, 2005). These students live in areas with a high incidence of poverty and many attend schools known as dropout factories, schools where more than half of the school's incoming freshmen class fail to graduate by their senior year. Urban dropout factories have become a key target of school improvement projects across the United States; the Obama administration's Race to the Top being an example. Data shared via The Civil Rights Project (Orfield & Lee, 2005) support the need to focus on interventions and students attending such urban schools:

The nation's dropout problem is concentrated in segregated high poverty schools...half of the nation's African American and Latino students are dropping out of high school. ... Half of the majority-minority schools had dropout rates over 40 percent, as did two-thirds of the schools with less than a tenth white students (p. 6).

The race of a student and his or her family is commonly linked as a factor for non-completion of high school and, subsequently, unemployment. And while minorities are twice as likely as whites to obtain a GED certificate, at least 10 percent of GED recipients obtain the credential in prison (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2007). Dropping out of school has placed these students in a statistical predicament that is difficult to overcome, and the factors continue to compound. The unemployment rate for dropouts in the United States in 2009 reveals the critical importance of the problem as African-American dropouts shared a jobless rate of 69 percent, followed by Asians at 57 percent, whites at 54 percent and Hispanics at 47 percent (Sum et al., 2009).

### **Implications for Young Women**

Framing a context for the dropout problem would not be complete without studying the effect that education has on the pregnancy rate, specifically the rate found in single mothers. A brief look at the numbers reveals a cause for concern and a potential focus point for dropout

prevention interventions. Women who dropped out of high school are three times more likely to be single moms than other women age 16-24 (Sum et al., 2009). Many of these women and their families will end up living in poverty and will rely, at least in part, on public assistance (Sum et al., 2009).

### **Who Drops Out**

A great deal of attention has been given to answer questions related to why students drop out. In a 2006 white paper report created for the Carnegie Foundation, Craig Jerald shared:

Students who are poor, who are members of minority groups, who are male, who transferred among multiple elementary and middle schools, and who are over age for their grade are more likely to drop out of high school. Students who come from single parent families, have a mother who dropped out of high school, have parents who provide low support for learning, or have parents who do not know their friends' parents well also are placed at greater risk. Finally, studies have suggested that teenagers who take on adult responsibilities such as parenting, getting married and holding down a job are also more likely to leave school without a diploma (Jerald, 2006, p. 4)

Other factors also lead to students being at high risk such as: a student who has a sibling who has already dropped out (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1990), students who feel that no one in their school cares for them ("Kansas Commission on Graduation," 2010), and a student who feels that he or she is not connected or a part of the school (Sizer, 2004).

Identifying students who are at-risk for dropping out is problematic (Jerald, 2006) and knowing the risk factors may not adequately predict who will graduate (Gleason & Dynarski, 1998). Examples of this are found in countless numbers of students who experience the identified risk factors yet stay in school, graduate, and move on. In contrast, there are students

who fail to possess any of the identified risk factors yet ultimately quit high school. As these examples attest, tracking potential risk factors is not entirely reliable. However, using them as potential markers or indicators increases the likelihood of identifying students who are struggling in school and will benefit from the type of services provided by dropout-prevention programs. Risk factors do better than using no information at all and allow programs to determine who might be served (Gleason & Dynarski, 1998).

The state of Kansas has adopted an at-risk definition to enable school personnel and outside agencies to identify students who may have greater potential for dropping out of high school. An at-risk student in Kansas is one who meets one or more of the following criteria:

1) is not working on grade level in reading or mathematics, 2) is not meeting the requirements necessary for promotion to the next grade, 3) is failing multiple subjects or courses of study, 4) is not meeting the requirements necessary for graduation from high school, 5) has insufficient mastery of skills or is not meeting state standards (e.g., is below meeting standards on state assessments), 6) has been retained, 7) has a high rate of absenteeism, 8) has repeated suspensions or expulsions from school, 9) is homeless and/or migrant, or 10) is identified as an English language learner (At Risk Pupil Assistance Program, 2010, p. 1).

These definitions provide a statistical connection with characteristics of kids who typically drop out. Such indicators may provide focus targets for educators as they take on the dropout problem in their building or district.

### **Graduation and Dropout Rates**

While graduation and dropout rates are of prominent concern across the country, it is difficult to get a grasp on what constitutes each. For example, as an attempt to identify dropout

and graduation rates consistently from state to state, the United States Department of Education established four and five-year cohort graduation rates. Cohort graduation rates are determined by identifying a cohort of students who start their first year of high school, then tracking the number of those who complete the requirements for a diploma in either four or five consecutive years. Cohort rates were established to create consistency of reporting as required by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. Individual state departments of education report their dropout and graduation rates in compliance with this legislation. The only students counted as completers are those meeting the requirements for a high school diploma within four or five years of their first enrollment in high school. NCLB excludes students receiving General Education Development (GED) certificates from graduation calculations. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) determines graduation and dropout rates differently. The NCES equates the GED credential to the high school diploma and includes GED completers in its statistics. NCES does not quantify the calculation of dropout and graduation rates based on an entry time into high school but determines this by tracking completers and non-completers between the ages of 16 and 24. Using this method, an individual who did not complete high school or the equivalent (GED) would not be counted in dropout calculations until exceeding the age of 24. Despite discrepant methods of calculation as to the specifics and accuracy of graduation and dropout rates, sources generally agree that both have improved since 1972 when the status dropout rate was 14.6 percent, since then having improved nearly 7 percent (Chapman, 2011, table 7).

### **Problem Statement**

The Kansas dropout rate is of no major consequence on a national scale, typically ranking among the ten lowest in the United States (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES],

2012, table 7). Despite a low ranking in this category, Kansas is not exempt from the impending implications caused by dropping out. During the 2010-11 school year, Kansas contributed more than 3000 names to the national dropout statistics, equating to approximately eight students per day, one every three hours ("Kansas Commission on Graduation," 2010). Many of the 3000 students, those under the age of 18, were required to participate in the previously described counseling session in order to obtain a waiver of compulsory attendance. With parental permission and endorsement, these students, educated with the warnings of potential negative life outcomes, opted to drop out.

### **Statement of Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to delve beyond the statistics of the phenomenon in order to take a deeper look into the lived experiences of students in southeast Kansas who have dropped out. By accomplishing this, school and community leaders will be better informed to create effective strategy, policy, and practice in dropout prevention. Such strategies will encourage citizens to stay in school and attain the highest level of education possible. Many studies in the literature seek to explain why students drop out, and, there are several at-risk indicators available to educators. While such studies are abundant in some regions of the United States, no substantial, qualitative, phenomenological research on the topic as it relates to residents in rural Kansas has been accomplished in more than 30 years. This study provides context to the dropout problem as experienced by students in southeast Kansas, and although specific to this area, the research might also provide transferability to other rural communities and regions.

The study sought to answer four primary research questions:

- 1) What are the common/shared experiences and perceptions of individuals who have



- dropped out of school in southeast Kansas?
- 2) Are there actions or events occurring outside of school that contribute to students dropping out?
  - 3) Are there actions or events occurring inside the school culture that contribute to students dropping out?
  - 4) Are there identifiable actions, strategies, or interventions that might have kept students from dropping out?

Answering the research questions provides educators greater insight into the actions and decisions students make that eventually result in the decision to drop out of high school. Access to such information allows educators and community leaders in southeast Kansas to better address student needs and prevent dropout from occurring.

### **Research Approach**

The foundations for this phenomenological study were the personal experiences and perceptions of students who had dropped out of school in southeast Kansas. The data were obtained via a single focus-group interview and 12 in-depth, face-to-face interviews. Additional sampling came from participants completing the pencil/paper survey. Each interview was audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and prepared for phenomenological coding, reduction, and analysis. Survey data was prepared by accumulating and transcribing all of the responses to each question on a survey questionnaire data table, subsequently reduced in the same manner as the interviews. Additional information about steps for reduction and analysis follow in chapter three.

### **Assumptions**

There were three assumptions central to the foundation of this study. These assumptions

were based on more than 30 years of background experience as a Kansas educator and having participated in the aforementioned waiver of compulsory attendance counseling sessions for many of those years. First, few southeast Kansas schools provide well-designed, organized, and focused-interventions aimed at eliminating dropout, thus allowing the phenomenon to unfold as a circumstance of chance. Second, the dropout-prevention strategies that are utilized by schools in the region are largely focused on students at the high school level. Early warnings for dropouts exist throughout the educational process and need to be addressed much earlier when possible (Balfanz, 2007; "End the dropout crisis," 2010). Many students begin to mentally process the possibility of dropping out long before entering high school. Finally, the school-counseling session preempting the waiver of compulsory attendance is ineffective and has little if any bearing on the student's decision whether to stay in school or leave.

### **The Researcher**

The researcher is a long-time educator in southeast Kansas, having served as principal at Chanute High School for several years. The primary location for data collecting was through Neosho County Community College, also in Chanute, Kansas. There is potential that a number of the participants will know the interviewer. This relationship had potential to provide both benefit and challenge to accomplishing the goals of the proposed study. Having this relationship and experience as an educator in the area provided an important context and premise to the aforementioned assumptions. The researcher has participated in many state-required counseling sessions in which parents come to school to sign the waiver that allows their minor child exemption from compulsory attendance laws. Insight gained from such sessions played a role in providing the direction and assumptions for this proposal. However, it is acknowledged that the described motivation and experience might also have led to bias in the study. Because of this

potential, credibility was achieved via collection of data from multiple sources, maintaining a field-note journal to include evidence and reflection, and support through a continual review of the literature.

The focus of this study is of great personal concern to the researcher and was apt for a student completing the dissertation process in the University of Arkansas's Educational Leadership program. At the Doctoral Seminar in October, 2012, Dr. Ed Bengston (2012) presented the proposed signature pedagogy for the program, "Think like a leader, perform like a leader; do so morally and ethically." The desired goals and outcomes for this study are worthy benefits and appropriate response to the charge for students in this program.

### **Rationale and Significance**

The rationale for completing this study originated from a desire to identify effective school practices to deter the rate of dropout in southeast Kansas. The negative, life-long implications for students who eventually drop out have been documented in this chapter along with a short description of one current practice, the state required counseling session that must be conducted prior to signing the waiver of compulsory attendance (prior to dropping out). The session provides academic and economic counseling to the prospective dropout and his or her guardian on the day they come to school to officially exit. While no official study has been conducted to determine actual percentages of success, the researcher's personal, first-hand, experience indicates that the practice is ineffective as a deterrent to students who, in near 100 percent of the cases observed, have already decided to drop out.

Interventions and practice aimed at preventing dropout are left for individual school districts or buildings to determine. The state does not specifically specify or prescribe any specific intervention or activity. Due to the current lack of expectation and resources to address

the matter, preventive dropout practice in the area typically takes the form of a one-or- two-day freshman orientation conducted at the beginning of a student's high school experience.

Increased understanding of why southeast Kansas kids quit school will afford school leaders in the area a more refined focus as to what practices might be effective in deterring drop out. Identifying successful strategies, practices, and interventions; ones that encourage student attendance and engagement in school through the completion of the diploma, will serve a useful benefit to regional schools. By analyzing the actual shared experiences of students who have dropped out in southeast Kansas, perhaps a unique and specific context is provided to guide effective practice in local schools.

The study sought to provide significance to the topic with a southeast Kansas or rural perspective. No significant scholarly research on the topic of dropping out in rural Kansas has been published in more than thirty-five years. At that time, Kansas was primarily an agrarian state and a student could drop out of school with a reasonable expectation of finding a good job with a competitive wage (Glass, 2008). This is not the current reality in Kansas and other states as education and training are requisite to high-paying jobs (Glass, 2008).

## **CHAPTER TWO – REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

The Kansas dropout rate is of no major consequence on a national scale as it typically ranks among the 10 lowest in the United States (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2012, table 7). However, a low statistical ranking in this category does not mean that Kansas is exempt from dropout related issues plaguing other states. During the 2010-11 school year, Kansas contributed over 3000 names to the national dropout statistics equating to approximately eight students per day; one every three hours ("Kansas Commission on Graduation," 2010).

In Kansas, a student may not drop out of high school without parental permission unless he or she is considered an adult, 18 years of age or older. Kansas school personnel, typically guidance counselors, are required to meet with parents of students seeking to drop out. Meeting topics include the potential implications for their student if he or she drops out, a disclosure of the academic skills the child has not yet attained, and the potential that lifetime earnings will be limited should the student drop out. In addition to the academic and economic implications, counselors discuss psychological, social, and emotional implications, which may be experienced as well. Despite acknowledging the potential for negative and long-lasting implications, many parents sign the waiver, therefore granting permission to the student to drop out. This act is perplexing, leading one to assume that the student and parent had already determined to sign the waiver to drop out regardless of the impending difficulties facing the student. A critical review of the literature is warranted to adequately address the research questions and to fulfill the purpose of the study.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to delve beyond the statistics of the

phenomena in order to take a deeper look into the lived experiences of students in southeast Kansas who have dropped out. By accomplishing this, school and community leaders are informed to create effective strategy, policy, and practice in dropout prevention. Such strategies encourage citizens to stay in school and attain the highest level of education possible. Many studies in the literature seek to explain why students drop out, and, there are statistical indicators available to educators enabling identification of who is at risk of doing so. While such studies are abundant in some regions of the United States, no substantial, qualitative, phenomenological research on the topic as it relates to residents in rural Kansas has been accomplished in more than 30 years. This study provides context to the dropout problem as experienced by students in southeast Kansas, and although specific to this area, the research might provide transferability to other rural communities and regions. The study sought to answer four primary research questions:

- 1) What are the common/shared experiences and perceptions of individuals who have dropped out of school in southeast Kansas?
- 2) Are there actions or events occurring outside of school that contribute to students dropping out?
- 3) Are there actions or events occurring inside the school culture that contribute to students dropping out?
- 4) Are there identifiable actions, strategies, or interventions that might have kept students from dropping out?

Adequately addressing the research questions provides educators greater insight into the actions and decisions students make which eventually result in the decision to drop out of high school. Access to such information allows educators and community leaders in southeast Kansas

to purposefully address student needs, thus strengthening dropout intervention.

The goal of this chapter was to provide the reader with a critical review of the research relating to reasons kids dropout out of school, who and what influences their decision making, and what can schools do to intervene. The next section presents a description of the methodology utilized for selecting and determining what research was included in the chapter. A conceptual framework follows to provide a structure to the research study that linked the emerging themes from the literature review to the desired outcomes of the study. The chapter concludes with a review of the current state of the literature as it relates to the research questions and conceptual framework, a section on the gaps in the current literature, and a summary of the literature review and the implications for this study.

### **Methodology**

An in-depth review of the literature continued throughout the duration of the project. A critical and complete review of the current literature was necessary to conduct a comprehensive qualitative study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). The Google Scholar search engine as linked to the University of Arkansas libraries was utilized to locate relevant information. The process of linking Google Scholar to the university library greatly expanded the scope of the search by including the Ebsco Academic Search, ProQuest Research Library, JSTOR, ERIC, and the full online capabilities provided by the University of Arkansas Library. These services were utilized throughout the literature review to include selections that are considered scholarly, of high quality, of an empirical nature, and show relevance to the research questions (Guarino, Santibanez, & Daley, 2006).

The large number of studies dedicated to dropout greatly increased the difficulty in providing an exhaustive discourse on the topic. The compendium of information was found in

journal articles and reports, websites devoted to the topic, as well as descriptive, theoretical, and empirical studies. Search results were narrowed to focus on phenomenological studies relating to high school dropouts using key terms to include qualitative, empirical studies conducted and/or published between 2000 and 2013.

During the search of relevant topics for review, three themes began to emerge. These themes are presented in this review as piquing questions: 1) why do students leave school early, 2) what do schools do to prevent dropout, and 3) what are demographic and societal indicators for those at risk of dropping out? These topics served as indicators from which to narrow the scope of the literature review for this study, and, more specifically, as each addressed the primary research questions. Additionally, priority was given to articles that were qualitative in nature and/or approached the topic with a phenomenological assumption.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Studies on the topic of dropout are extensive. The conceptual framework for this study was designed to narrow the scope of the literature review and provide direction for research and data collection. The conceptual framework enabled efficient management of the literature by focusing specifically on topics and themes that may directly relate to answering the research questions (Maxwell, 2005).

Research question one sought to find if students from a variety of family situations, living in different households, shared common experiences in their pathway leading up to dropping out, and if so, what was their perception of the shared experiences? Articles chosen for this research question favored those by researchers who had applied methods of philosophical phenomenology (Giorgi, 1997; Moustakas, 1994). These contained data from which the researcher and participants constructed lived experiences, subsequently interpreted and analyzed via data



reduction, description, and a search for essence (Giorgi, 1997). Similarly, articles that included analysis via the collection and interpretation of textural and structural description to create essence (Moustakas, 1994) were included in the review of the literature.

*The Silent Epidemic* report (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006) which was the result of four focus-group and 467 face-to-face interviews conducted in 2005, provided phenomenological data relevant to why students decided to quit school. Similarly, the Kansas *DropINs* organization sponsored by the Kansas State Department of Education, conducted interviews and surveys with 172 participants in 2009. The *Kansas DropINs Youth Survey* ("Kansas Commission on Graduation," 2010) provided an assessment of the top five reasons students linked to their decision to leave school. This study utilized the analysis from these two empirical studies for comparison and contrast in the conceptual framework for research question one.

Research questions two and three sought to identify the reasons, decisions, and actions that resulted in the student's decision to quit school. The two questions were distinguished by describing the identified experiences that influenced their decision to drop out as initiated and propagated by in-school or out-of-school influences. To classify information related to answering these two questions, the literature review utilized prominent research describing the *four broad classes of dropouts* (Balfanz, 2007). Balfanz' premise is that all or most of the reasons students give for dropping out of high school can be categorized into one or more of four broad classes. Full descriptions of each broad class are as follows:

- 1) Life-events – students who drop out because of something that happens outside of school; they become pregnant, get arrested, or have to go to work to support members of the family.

- 2) Fade-outs - students who have generally been promoted on time from grade to grade and may even have above grade level skills, but at some point become frustrated or bored and stop seeing the reason for coming to school. Once they reach the legal dropout age they leave, convinced that they can find their way without a high school diploma or that a GED will serve them just as well.
- 3) Push-outs -students who are perceived to be difficult, dangerous or detrimental to the success of the school and are subtly or not so subtly encouraged to withdraw from the school, transfer to another school or are simply dropped from the rolls if they fail too many courses or miss too many days of school and are past (or in some cases not even past) the legal dropout age.
- 4) Failing-to-Succeed - students who fail to succeed in school and attend schools that fail to provide them with the environments and supports they need to succeed. For some, initial failure is the result of poor academic preparation, for others it is rooted in unmet social-emotional needs. Few students drop out after their initial experience with school failure. In fact, most persist for years, only dropping out after they fall so far behind that success seems impossible or they are worn down by repeated failure. In the meantime, they are literally waving their hands saying, “help” through poor attendance, acting out, and/or course failure. (Balfanz, 2007, p. 3).

A framework based on the four-broad classes of dropouts was implemented to enable a systematic review and classification of the literature as it related to resolving the reasons students offer for dropping out, originating at school or at home.

Finally, research question four centered on the role schools play in prevention and/or

intervention in the process of dropout. The literature maintains that there are practices and strategies that have proven to be effective in reducing the number of dropouts in Kansas and elsewhere. Having identified such strategies in the critical review, a dialogue with interviewees sought to determine, if in fact, said practices would have made a difference in their decision to leave school early.

The identified best practices utilized in the discussion involving research question four were grounded in current trends in the development of social and emotional learning (SEL) strategies that target student attitudes, behavior, and academic performance (Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). For use in this conceptual framework, the SEL strategies that schools should develop that may directly relate to dropout prevention were to:

- 1) Build partnerships between schools and families to encourage learning
- 2) Assure safe and orderly schools and classroom environments
- 3) Provide a framework which encourages the building of caring relationships between students and teachers
- 4) Provide engaged learning, cooperative learning and proactive classroom management that enhances career and college readiness
- 5) Ensure high academic expectations of youth from both adults and peers (Zins et al., 2004)

### **Current State of the Field of Literature**

The following describes the current state of the field of literature as related to this research study. Relationships among three elements, the primary themes that emerged from the initial review of the literature, the research questions, and the conceptual framework form a useful foundation for the literature review. Three primary themes emerged from the initial review of the literature: 1) why do students leave school early, 2) what do schools do to prevent

dropout, and 3) what are demographic and societal indicators for those at risk of dropping out?

For this study, the impact of the third theme, demographic and societal indicators, was not emphasized. While the impact of these indicators plays an important part of most every dropout study, they did not specifically address this study's research questions.

### **Nature of Shared Experiences of Dropouts**

The first research question sought to determine the nature of the shared experiences of individuals leading up to their decision to drop out of school. It brings with it an assumption; that individuals who have dropped out have experienced similar occurrences in their path leading up to and including the decision to quit school. If this is indeed the case, experiences as suggested in the question might be manifested in discussions with friends or family members who also dropped out; discussions about thoughts, comments, or advice as offered to them by a sibling, parent, aunt, or uncle. The research question sought to ascertain the nature of such discussion and to determine if such advice, comment, or input commonly supports or opposes the student's decisions about school.

Literature relevant to answering this question derived from phenomenological interviews, qualitative studies, or surveys in which students, and/or families shared details of how they experienced the decision and resulting act of dropping out. The literature contributing to the current review was supported by the conceptual framework for question one; that all reviews were from studies that used philosophical phenomenological methods to reduce data, provide description and to demonstrate the essence (Giorgi, 1997; Moustakas, 1994).

In the discourse of phenomenological interviews, many students described their life path leading to their eventual exit from school as one filled with negative experiences. A large percentage of students who quit school think they had the ability to graduate if conditions would

have been better at home or at school (Mangini, 2012). However, too many other factors weigh in, eventually leading to the discontinuation of high school. Former dropouts tell of death of family members, divorce, loss of friendships, and alcoholism (Zabloski, 2010) all playing a part in their decision to quit.

Others students shared of negative relationships, disrespectful behavior, anger problems, profanity, fighting at home, or at school which detracted from learning and led to them leaving school (Montgomery & Hirth, 2011). The lack of socially acceptable behavior among peers and adults, hamstrings a student's ability to be successful at school and in other settings. The culmination of several factors compounded through time, builds up, until the student disengages from school, stops attending, and ultimately quits (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001).

A 2005 research study conducted for the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation changed the previously accepted paradigms in dropout research and specifically addresses research question one. The empirical study conducted by Hart Research Associates (HRA) included four focus-group and 467 face-to-face interviews of 16-25 year-olds who had dropped out of public high schools in cities, suburbs, and small towns (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006). The study provided data giving direction to more than 30 states in the formation of policy to address the dropout problem. The study assimilated the top five reasons students attribute to dropout as shared in the following sections.

**Classes were not interesting.** Nearly half (47%) of the large sampling of participants in the HRA study stated that they left school because it was just too boring. Many of the former student responses in the study were very clearly focused on classroom motivation:

those with high GPAs and by those who were motivated to work hard... When the participants in our focus groups were asked in what areas their high school did not do

enough, their highest level of response was related to “not making school interesting”...high school was “boring, nothing I was interested in...the teacher just stood in the front of the room and just talked and didn’t really involve you”... “there wasn’t any learning going on”... “they make you take classes in school that you are never going to use in life”...many felt that there teachers were not even engaged in the classes... (Bridgeland et al., 2006, p. 4).

**Missed too many days of school.** Forty-three percent of the individuals in the HRA study agreed that they missed too many days of school and could not catch up. Few, if any indicators play a greater role in dropout than annual student attendance (Balfanz, 2007; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Kaplan, Damphousse, & Kaplan, 1994; Resmovits, 2012; Rumberger, 2001). These same studies attest that poor student attendance is a warning sign that the student is becoming disengaged from the school and learning process altogether. In fact, “absenteeism is the most common indicator of overall student engagement and a significant predictor of dropping out” (Rumberger, 2001, p. 8). Sometimes, poor attendance, as a symptom of disengagement, is already realized as early as elementary school, even by the end of the first grade (Alexander et al., 2001). Over 60 percent of the HRA study participants who quit school during grades 9-12 acknowledge that poor attendance was key in their decision to leave school early, 71 percent said they had completely lost interest in school during the 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> grade (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

**Spent too much time with people who were not interested in school.** 42 percent of the HRA study participants spent large amounts of time with other students who did not like, or had already dropped out of school (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Spending time with peers who shared a disinterest in school did not propagate a desire to complete homework or participate in classes that may already be considered *boring*. One respondent in the HRA study exclaims, “Like in the

middle of the year, I just started going with my friends, and I never went to school. It's like I forgot about it" (Bridgeland et al., 2006, p. 9).

**Had too much freedom and not enough structure in my life.** Freedom of choice at school comes with getting older and needing less supervision as a student moves from middle to high school. Freedom in life is granted by parents or guardians and comes with age. 38 percent of the HRA study participants agreed that they were given too much flexibility to make their own choices upon reaching high school. This notion was a common theme in both the face-to-face and focus-group interviews:

In our focus groups, participants talked again and again about waking up late for school, skipping classes, hanging out in the hallways with no consequences, and the lack of order or rules for them... One young man stated, "Once you get in high school, it's like you have more freedom. In middle school, you have to go to your next class or they are going to get you. In high school, if you don't go to class, there isn't anybody who is going to get you. You just do your own thing (Bridgeland et al., 2006, p. 8-9).

Of course, student attendance, cooperation, and participation are not the sole responsibility of the school as many participants in the HRA study imply. Parental involvement is key to success in school as mentioned elsewhere in this section. Students with parents who assert authority in insisting they attend and excel in school, drop out at a much lower rate than students with more freedom to make these decisions (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Rumberger, 2001). In the Bridgeland (2006) study, the majority of parents were unaware or only somewhat aware of how their child was doing in school, many only got involved when the student was on the verge of dropping out.

**Was failing in school.** For many, falling behind starts in elementary school and learning

problems compound as years pass. Students in the Bridgeland (2006) study acknowledge that upon reaching high school they could not keep up with the demands for learning. Combining the expectations of the school with other factors, such as poor attendance and disengagement, dropping out seems like the only decision to make.

**Kansas youth survey.** The 2009 Kansas DropINs youth survey represents a qualitative study which conducted face-to-face and/or group interviews and collected surveys from over 500 Kansans in eight regional locations in the state. Of the surveys collected, 172 were from individuals who did not complete high school. Although representative of a smaller sampling, qualitative information collected from this survey supports the data collected in the HRA study. The most common reasons for leaving school early as shared by Kansas dropouts were:

Personal or family problems (36.4%)

Got in trouble at school (24.5%)

Had to get a full time job (22.7%)

The school environment (21.5%)

Money problems (20.9%) ("Kansas Commission on Graduation," 2010, p. 14)

When compared with the *Silent Epidemic* survey, the Kansas study indicates that students leave school most often for events that take place outside of school walls.

### **Home and School Occurrences Contributing to Student Dropout**

The literature suggests there are predictable indicators contributing largely to the dropout epidemic in this country. Many of these emanate at home or in social settings outside of school, while others are attributed to occurrences taking place at school. However, a large problem in developing theories about what leads to student dropout has been an inability to show cause-and-effect between specific factors leading to drop out (Rumberger, 2001). Factors that some



dropouts attribute to their decision to quit school do not show similar effect in other individuals who went on to graduate, thus the difficulty in showing a causal relationship (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Rumberger, 2001). This section will examine some of these issues.

Studies contributing to this topic are labeled or categorized into one or more of the four broad classes of dropouts as described in the conceptual framework; these are life-events, push-outs, fade-outs, and failing to succeed at school.

**Life-events.** These provide many of the reasons students give for dropping out that are related to non-school inputs or factors. At-risk factors in the form of specific life-events are not firm indicators of who will or will not drop out (Rumberger, 2001). However, such indicators are better at predicting who will drop out than not having anything at all (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). People who have quit school attribute dropping out to a host of reasons connected to various life-events. Life-events stem from any of a variety of conditions that may distract kids from concentrating on, or making school a priority.

Many students attribute mobility to leaving school early. Family or “residential mobility (change of address) or school mobility (changing schools)” (Rumberger, 2001, p. 7) can be a specific determinant in whether or not a student stays in school, especially when he or she reaches high school. Students often feel loss associated with sudden change or moving from one place to another (Peterson, 2006; Orfield & Lee, 2005). Family mobility often puts kids in a position in which they are not comfortable, where they must make new friends and have to suffer the loss of old ones (Peterson, 2006). Friends and peer relationships are important to human beings. When positive friendships are lost, some individuals withdraw and do not seek new peer groups. Others however, replace old friends with new peers that may provide negative influences about respecting family and school. Many times this leads students to become

disengaged and disinterested in school (Stewart, 2007). When a family relocation or school change occurs in conjunction with the time when an individual is at or near the age the state allows a student to quit school, the chances for dropout drastically increase (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). The parent's role in the family has a lot to do with how students react and cope with such events. Appropriate use of parental authority and encouragement to maintain that attending school is not optional has a lasting effect on students and diminishes the occurrence of dropout (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Rumberger, 2001).

Moving from school-to-school often includes changing neighborhoods. New neighborhoods often mean new friends or peer groups. The behavior of a child's peers are important to a discussion about neighborhoods and school success (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). Some life-events stem from neighborhood conditions or the types of peers students hang out with. Research show that students living in neighborhoods whose residents are poor are more likely to drop out than those living in neighborhoods with wealth, even if the family moving into the area is not poor (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). The many dynamics of neighborhoods can have effects on the way its members act and behave, including the way they perceive the value of school (Vartanian & Gleason, 1999). Behaviors that typically cast negative shadows over neighborhoods are those exposing kids to negative attitudes about education as shared by friends or relatives and peer interaction or affiliation resulting in unacceptable, even illegal activity. Peer associations have shown to have an important effect on academic outcomes, whether negative or positive. Negative attitudes about school, when shared among friends in a neighborhood, leads to an increase in school dropout (Stewart, 2008).

Other life-events present problems for youth and sometimes block the path to graduation. Teens becoming parents often presents a significant hurdle in finishing school. Typically, when

teens become single parents, the student must work to support the impending or existing family. Some 26 percent of dropouts in 2005 left school to become a parent (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Students having to work long hours in high school increases the likelihood of dropping out (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999), students who work 20 or more hours per week or who take on adult responsibilities are much more likely to drop out than students without extra responsibilities (Bridgeland et al., 2006; "Kansas Commission on Graduation," 2010; D'Amico, 1984).

In a phenomenological study of eight dropouts in rural Georgia, participants identified pregnancy, drugs, and other personal, emotional strife as reasons to quit school. All cited living conditions at home as a contributing factor (Royal & Lamport, 2012). Students who become pregnant, single parents, are three times more likely to drop out of school and inherit the consequences associated with that decision (Sum, Khatiwada, & McLaughlin, 2009).

Finally, of importance to this category, is meeting the needs of a student's family, especially those coming from poverty. In the HRA study, "36 percent of young men and 28 percent of young women said they had to get a job and make money... 22 percent said they had to care for a family member" (Bridgeland et al., 2006, p. 6). Money is an important indicator as expressed by participants in several of the studies. Students, accepting the stresses of adult responsibility, often take on night jobs or care for younger siblings so that the parents can work, sacrificing school in the process (D'Amico, 1984; "Kansas Commission on Graduation," 2010).

**Fade-outs.** Students who have generally been promoted on time from grade to grade, who may even have above grade level skills, but at some point become frustrated or bored, and stop seeing the reason for coming to school, are referred to as fade-outs. Many reach the legal dropout age, then leave school, convinced that they can find their way without a high school

diploma or that a GED will serve them just as well.

Kids have an innate need to belong to social groups and need social acceptance; many covet strong relationships with teachers at their school (Audas & Willms, 2001). Of particular interest in this discussion of the literature is the role teacher-student relationships play in the dropout equation. Multiple studies find participants identifying the lack of a caring adult at school as a key determinant in why they quit attending (Gallagher, 2002; Royal & Lamport, 2012; Zabloski, 2010). Gallagher (2002) notes that, “few dropouts had relationships with any adult while in high school, thus interpreting the lack of relationship with lack of caring” (p. 23). The literature is consistent in displaying that student need for attention and relationships exists in almost all social and economic groups. In a phenomenological study of seven gifted students who dropped out of high school, all seven referenced teachers as being an important reason for their decision. Moreover, while they reported having relationships with teachers, each indicated a need for closer and more frequent contact with caring teachers (Zabloski, 2010). On the other end of the academic spectrum, at-risk students report a similar need to experience positive relationships with their teachers (Davis & Dupper, 2004; Montgomery & Hirth, 2011

There is an important relationship between a student’s academic performance and the level of engagement he or she has with the school (Stewart, 2007). This relationship suggests that students with high levels of involvement and commitment at school perform better academically. Inversely, students who perform better academically show greater levels of attachment to the school (Stewart, 2007). Studies indicate that students who are not connected to the school are more likely to become bored and disinterested. A 2006 study (Jerald) reports that, of student respondents who had ever considered dropping out, 76 percent list boredom as a reason they would quit. Many students who drop out, or are on the brink of doing so, claim they

are insufficiently challenged and bored at school (Jerald, 2006; Peterson, 2006; Zabloski, 2010; Montgomery & Hirth, 2011).

**Push-outs.** This broad-based category of why students leave early refers to students who are perceived to be difficult, dangerous, or detrimental to the success of the school. These students are often subtly, or not so subtly, encouraged to withdraw from the school, transfer to another school, or are simply dropped from the rolls. This often occurs if they fail too many courses, miss too many days of school, and are past the legal dropout age. Details of dropout factors in this category possess more crossover characteristics with the other three categories. For example, push-outs are defined as students who cause discipline issues at school or are considered dangerous; subsequently, pushed out or encouraged by school officials to leave. Often times, school discipline stems from lack of attendance due to topics such as those discussed in the other three categories. Poor attendance is largely attributed to impending disciplinary actions in most schools and is prevalent throughout all four categories of the conceptual framework.

The push-out category is related to the study of minorities in urban schools. Hispanic and black students who are truant and face school disciplinary issues, drop out in disproportionate numbers when compared to non-minority students (Bowditch, 1993; Davis & Dupper, 2004). School disciplinary actions can ultimately lead to a compendium of family and legal issues as often times, when kids are suspended from school, they have unsupervised time or “street time” in which to find more trouble (Skiba, 2000, p. 14).

During the past decade, school accountability has been paramount as every public school building in America strived to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). For some schools and districts, systematic removal of *troublemakers*, or truant students enabled one less failing score

on their progress report. This is not just a recent effort as schools have propagated the involuntary departure of *troublemakers* for decades (Bowditch, 1993).

**Failure to succeed at school.** Researchers consistently find that low student achievement and overall performance is highly related to dropping out (Rumberger, 2001). Many consider poor grades and scores on academic achievement tests to be one of, if not the best predictor of whether a student will stay in school (Balfanz, 2007; Pallas, Entwisle, Alexander, & Cadigan, 1987). The literature attests that a lack of success at school is often a result of years of gradual disengagement from school (Rumberger, 2001), and while dropout is often considered a high school problem, the *disconnect* often starts in the early years of educational attainment. Critical educational benchmarks or milestones of importance to this discussion indicate warning signs for dropout. Students failing to meet the identified grade and age level benchmarks are of significant risk for later dropout ("End the dropout crisis," 2010).

Of early importance is the transition of the child from home to school when entering kindergarten or first grade. By the end of first grade, a student has made the transition from being at home most of the day to being at school most of the day. The student attitude about school at this time needs to be positive (Alexander et al., 2001). Another critical benchmark is indicated by the necessity for children to be able to read at grade level by the end of third grade. Statistically, students failing to achieve this goal are at greater risk of not completing school (Miles & Stipek, 2006). This milestone is so critical, for it is at this time students should be “reading to learn” rather than “learning to read” (Hernandez, 2012, p. 5).

Transition to middle school brings additional educational milestones of importance. Poor academic performance in math and reading in grades 6-8 and above average absenteeism are identified as early warning predictors for dropout (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007; Gleason &

Dynarski, 2002). A landmark Philadelphia study found that sixth graders who failed either math or English, *or* had below 80 percent attendance for the school year, had as much as a 75 percent chance of dropping out within the next six years. Students who had more than one of these factors showed even greater risk (Balfanz, 2007; "End the dropout crisis," 2010).

Finally, promotion to high school indicates another difficult transition for some students. Classes are suddenly more difficult and many times students feel lost in the shuffle (Balfanz, 2007). Many high schools see larger numbers of freshmen students enrolled than tenth graders in the same cohort group a year later. This is due to ninth graders who do not adjust appropriately for the rigors of high school, subsequently failing to obtain the necessary credits to advance to the tenth grade (*National High School Center, 2007*).

Another category of literature for review in the broad class of *failing-to-succeed* is being over age for the appropriate grade level. This is usually a result of a student missing a year of school due to family issues or being held back by the school for poor academic performance. Empirical evidence strongly suggests that holding a student back increases his or her chance of dropping out by more than four times (Rumberger, 2001).

### **School Intervention and Prevention Measures**

Chapter one of this paper established impending implications attributed to the dropout problem as well as the need for an immediate and appropriate response. Such a response for schools is to inquire as to what can be done to proactively address the problem. The answer has proven to be elusive, difficult, and complex. One noted difficulty lies in identifying the students who need the services from identified interventions. Demographic and socio-economic indicators have been used to identify who needs served, but both have their flaws. A 2002 empirical study in dropout intervention came to the sobering conclusion that such factors and at-

risk identifiers, do not accurately predict who needs dropout intervention services:

Dropout prevention programs that identify at-risk students by using risk factors ... are unlikely to reduce the dropout rate substantially... Unless programs can efficiently identify and serve the students destined to drop out without intervention, they cannot prevent these students from dropping out (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002, p. iv).

A hurdle to effective dropout prevention support has been a nationwide lack of resources dedicated to the problem. Few comprehensive evaluations have been performed and most of them have been privately funded. The evaluations that have been completed do not promote confidence in any specific process or practice. For example, a federal department of education study reviewed 100 dropout prevention programs and found most failed to provide any measurable improvements in the dropout problem (Dynarski, 2004).

It is not for lack of trying, as schools do not lack a willingness to take on the problem. In fact, school, community, and religious based organizations may have several interventions taking place at the same time, focused at helping the same student or group of students. The average American school takes on a variety of programs, which directly or indirectly address dropout prevention (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2001). These include programs such as character education, anti-bullying, sex-respect, violence prevention, anti-substance use and abuse policies, just to name a few. It is suggested that, at times, schools take on too many interventions, backed by little research. The propensity of the school to provide interventions without appropriate evidence, preparation, and training can lead to programs failing to achieve their mission and a fragmentation of resources, ultimately resulting in failure (Elias, Zins, Graczyk, & Weissberg, 2003).

**At-school interventions.** Dropout prevention and intervention can be focused on either



*at-school* or *outside-school* factors. Both influence a student and help determine the pathway an individual will choose (Rumberger, 2001). Many experts believe that the best place to implement anti-dropout policy, practice, and intervention is through the school system. This is because schools can better control and predict the occurrences that take place within their walls (Balfanz, 2007; Jerald, 2006). It is commonly accepted that the school has great influence on students, whether student achievement or dropout rates (Rumberger, 2001).

Addressing non-school related issues can create logistical problems as they are often outside the parameters of school control. At-risk students often bring negative behaviors and emotions with them from home, some that do not support school and academic success (Jerald, 2006). Educators can better control the events and happenings that take place within the school walls. Research enables schools to be predictive of what students need to be monitored for at-risk indicators; attendance, reading and math grade/levels, credits earned, and associations at school, whether positive or negatively influenced.

**Characteristics of quality interventions.** Rumberger (2001) categorizes strategies for prevention as either programmatic or systemic (p. 21). Programmatic strategies provide potential dropouts with additional supports to help them stay in school, while systemic strategies are more general and relate to community type efforts to improve social outcomes (Rumberger, 2001). Traits for dropout prevention programs are not unlike those generally utilized in effective schools without sufficient dropout problems. Such traits most always include two tenets of effective schools: commitment and competency of the staff and the organizational structure of curriculum services (Newman, 1993; Purkey and Smith, 1985; as cited in Rumberger, 2001). These two critical features in place, there are other characteristics identified as ideal for dropout prevention. Effective schools enhance the development of positive relationships, behaviors, and

connection to the school (Stewart, 2008), create a safe, non-threatening environment for learning, share a caring and committed staff, take responsibility for student learning, encourages staff risk taking, and are committed to low staff to student ratios to encourage engaged learning (Stern, 1989; Wehlage, 1989; Dynarski and Gleason, 1998; as cited by Rumberger, 2001).

***Social and emotional learning.*** A developing trend in dropout prevention is the promotion of social and emotional learning (SEL). Social and emotional learning asserts that students benefit from prevention programs that strengthen the ability to manage emotions, set goals, increase confidence, competence, and manage stressful situations (Greenberg, Weissberg, O'Brien, Zins, Fredericks, Resnick, and Elias, 2003).

One theory of social and emotional learning is that if kids have positive attitudes about school and other students, they will adapt and orient more easily and appropriately. This is accomplished by focusing on a K-12 approach to improved social, emotional, and academic behavior (Zins et al., 2004). In social and emotional learning, there is no separation between at-school and at-home problems as they relate to academic dropout. SEL addresses the whole student and his or her behaviors broadly. This is supported by Rumberger's (2001) research suggesting that dropout intervention strategies need to positively influence all facets of student life. SEL helps students develop confidence and self-esteem in the approach they take to learning and attending school in general. Positive beliefs in self, confidence in one's ability, and motivation to succeed, strengthen a student's resolve to stay in school (Wigfield & Eccles, 2002).

Several general school approaches have emerged as effective SEL, best-practice strategies:

- 1) Form partnerships between school and families to encourage learning
- 2) Establish safe and orderly school and classroom environments

- 3) Ensure caring relationships between students and teachers
- 4) Provide engaged learning, cooperative learning, and proactive classroom management that enhances college and career readiness
- 5) Share high academic expectations for students (Zins et al., 2004; "Facing Dropout Dilemma," 2011).

***Successful strategies in practice.*** Other tried and tested strategies exist. A 2010 report released by **Jobs for the Future** examines the compulsory attendance and dropout policies for each state (Almeida, Steinberg, Santos, & Le, 2010). Additionally, the report, *Six Pillars of Effective Dropout Prevention and Recovery*, provides research based recommendations for policy development to prevent dropout. The “six pillars” offered in this report originate from a set of questions posed to researchers considered experts in the formation of dropout policy. Each question formed the foundation for the report and the subsequent recommendation for best practice (Table 2.1).

Table 2.1

*Six Pillars of Dropout Prevention Resulting from Six Research Questions*

---

Question 1: To what extent does each state send a clear signal to its districts, schools, and students of the importance of high school completion by reinforcing education entitlements and raising the compulsory attendance age?

Pillar 1: Reinforce the right to a public education

Question 2: How does each state count dropouts and students who are off track to graduation?

Pillar 2: Count and account for dropouts

Question 3: Does each state’s data inform a targeted strategy for student supports and high school redesign?

Pillar 3: Use graduation and on-track rates to trigger reform

Question 4: Do each state's policies enable the development of new models and/or the spread of existing or nationally recognized school models?

Pillar 4: Invent new models

Question 5: Does each state encourage the development of acceleration mechanisms for academic learning?

Pillar 5: Accelerate preparation for post-secondary success

Question 6: Are each state's dropout policies adequately funded to allow for significant reform and improvements in student outcomes? If so, how often is the funding level revisited?

Pillar 6: Provide stable funding for systemic reform

---

*Jobs for the Future (Almeida, Steinberg, Santos, & Le, 2010) p. 22-23.*

Not all of the pillars in the Jobs for the Future study apply to this particular research project, but many of these would apply to a school building or district setting. For example, schools can count and account for their dropouts and use early warning indicators (Jerald, 2006) to identify those who are unlikely to graduate. Schools can also use on-track (Allensworth & Easton, 2005) identifiers to target students who need additional attention and resources to make it through graduation. Given appropriate motivation and resources, building can also experiment with new models preparing students to graduate.

### **Gaps in the Literature**

Despite the hundreds of articles, reports, web sites, and studies devoted to information gathering and sharing on the topic of dropping out in the United States, many gaps in the literature exist. Two such gaps are examined in this section: 1) shortage of empirical research as conducted in, or of relevance to Kansas and/or southeast Kansas, and 2) few qualitative, phenomenological descriptions of the nature of how dropout was experienced by individuals.

### **Research in Kansas**

Using the search guidelines as described above in the Methodology section, yields nine studies conducted in Kansas during the last 20 years (1992-2012): three qualitative, one quantitative, and five descriptive. Seven of the eight studies were conducted in the greater Kansas City metro area and represent urban or suburban demographics. Studies reflecting southeast or rural Kansas demographics that are also associated with a topic reflecting on dropping out were not found.

Several dropout studies have been conducted in rural Kansas, many between 1950 and 1980. In those three decades the state economy was driven by agriculture. Since the times these studies took place, Kansas has undergone extreme economic and demographic change. Of note, are advancements in agrarian technology that greatly reduced the demand for rural laborers (Glass, 2008). This trend led to a major demographic shift of the population from rural to urban and suburban communities. Due to such changes, the earlier dropout studies conducted in rural counties were irrelevant to this discussion.

The Kansas Commission on Graduation conducted another study of note in 2009. This statewide study included quantitative and qualitative methods as gathered from eight regional areas and consisted of statistic gathering, surveys, focus-group, and face-to-face interviews. The study, which was more about dropping out than graduating, provided information to all Kansans about the dropout epidemic and potential interventions. However, the study fell short in providing specific finding as gathered from the regional interviews.

Unless research conducted in other states can be shown to have specific transferability to rural Kansas, a definitive gap exists in the literature. Certainly some crossover of what has been learned from national and university studies provides applicability in southeast Kansas, but such relevance is not definitive. Studies conducted in Kansas are mostly, if not uniquely, limited to

the greater Kansas City metro area. Until empirical studies are conducted in rural Kansas, questions as posed in the research proposal remain unresolved.

Southeast Kansas communities have a distinct small town culture, each city inherits its identity from a specialized business, manufacturing, or industrial influence. Examples of community/economic relationships subsist in every town; Chanute/cement, Coffeyville/petroleum, Fort Scott/insurance, Pittsburg/university, Parson/munitions, Independence/aviation, Iola/candy, Burlington/nuclear power, and one could compile such a list for just about every community in the region. However, after these business/industrial relationships are acknowledged, the next defining entity of the community's culture is the school system. Because of the succinct differences in community cultures, limitations to the methodology might exist. The transference of what is learned from the data collected in one southeast Kansas community may not translate in context to another; although close geographically, many of these small communities are demographically very different.

### **The Nature of Dropping Out in Southeast Kansas**

Few qualitative, phenomenological studies about dropping out have been conducted in Kansas. Of the three qualitative studies located in the review of the literature and conducted in Kansas, all occurred in urban and suburban communities. Two of the studies targeted explicit audiences: one, an urban study of black male students, the other, special needs students in an urban alternative school. Based on this review, phenomenological data collected in Kansas is insufficient. None of the studies constructs an essence of what students really experienced in their decision to drop out of school. Constructing an essence comes from thick, rich, description (Denzin, 1986 as cited in Creswell, 2007) and the details necessary to interpret the nature of the experience. Concerns with qualitative studies on dropouts have been noted in other literature as

well, “information about who these students (dropouts) are, is lacking...the vast literature about dropouts says very little about these students” (Menzer & Hampel, 2009, p. 660).

This gap, the necessity to construct meaning from the qualitative methodology, is important to the proposed study in identifying limitations. An expressed goal of the study is to identify and facilitate effective support systems or interventions that can be attributed to keeping students in school. Failing to interpret the essence of the phenomenon experienced by the interview participants puts the reliability of the findings at risk. A fair and accurate interpretation of participant meaning requires that the researcher learn more about the interviewee and his or her family, friends, and surroundings (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002).

### **CHAPTER THREE - METHODOLOGY**

When Kansas students drop out of school before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday they must have parental permission. Kansas state statutes require the minor student and the adult guardian to participate in an exit interview with school personnel. In the interview, school personnel are required to share statistics of the potential educational and economic ramifications of the decision they are about to make. Upon hearing the statistical information the parent must opt to either proceed with the dropout process or require the student to stay in school. If the parent allows the student to proceed with dropping out, a waiver must be signed attesting to the fact that he or she was aware of the potential risks prior to approving the action. The state does not track the number of waiver interviews that take place within the school year. The author has personally experienced more than 100 such interviews. Though armed with knowledge of a likelihood of negative consequences, vast majorities of parents sign the waiver allowing the student to drop out.

Young people who choose to drop out of high school put themselves, and the communities in which they live, at risk. The State Department of Education recently formed a working group to educate Kansans of the negative economic and social impacts caused by dropouts. The committee, known as Kansas Drop-ins, claims that 38,700 Kansas students have dropped out in the last 10 years. It substantiates that the social and economic cost of dropouts in the state manifests itself in 10 billion dollars of lost earnings, taxes, and productivity, as well as \$479 million in Medicaid and uninsured health costs. Kansans who drop out are more likely to face unemployment, become involved in criminal activity, and have greater potential for the need of government assistance ("Kansas Commission on Graduation," 2010).

#### **Purpose**



The purpose of this phenomenological study was to delve beyond the statistics of the phenomena, taking a deeper look into the lived experiences of students in southeast Kansas who have dropped out. By accomplishing this, school and community leaders will be better informed to create effective strategy, policy, and practice in dropout prevention. Such strategies will encourage citizens to stay in school and attain the highest level of education possible. Many studies in the literature seek to explain why students drop out, and there are statistical indicators available to educators enabling identification of who is at risk of doing so. While such studies are abundant in some regions of the United States, no substantial, qualitative, phenomenological research on the topic as it relates to residents in rural Kansas has been accomplished in more than 30 years. To that end, this study will provide context to the dropout problem as experienced by students in southeast Kansas, and, although specific to this area, the research might provide transferability to other rural communities and regions.

The study answers four primary research questions:

- 1) What are the common/shared experiences and perceptions of individuals who have dropped out of school in southeast Kansas?
- 2) Are there actions or events occurring outside of school that contribute to students dropping out?
- 3) Are there actions or events occurring inside the school culture that contribute to students dropping out?
- 4) Are there identifiable actions, strategies, or interventions that might have kept students from dropping out?

Answering the research questions provides educators greater insight into the actions and decisions students make that eventually result in the decision to drop out of high school. Access

to such information allows educators and community leaders in southeast Kansas to better address student needs and prevent the dropout process from occurring.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Much of the research conducted on the topic of high school dropouts is performed through a positivist lens. Positivist theory is structured on hypothesis testing, cause and effect relationships, and prediction and explanation (Charmaz, 2006). Positivist research on dropouts provides quantitative information about the demographics of key sub groups of persons who drop out of high school. Quantitative information tends to be impersonal, therefore lacking the thick, rich description, which presents “detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships” (Denzin, 1989, as cited in Creswell, 2007, pg 194) found in qualitative research.

The theoretical foundation for this study was constructivism. Constructivism is one foundational theory used in the practice of qualitative research (Creswell, 2007). The goal for researchers practicing constructivism is to attempt to see the phenomena through the eyes of the participants, allowing them to “construct the meaning of a situation” (Creswell, 2007, p. 21). Constructivist theory indicates that the researcher and research participant jointly contrive the interpretation of meaning. A constructivist “sees both data and analysis as created from shared experiences and relationships with participants” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 130).

The study also allied with Interpretive Theory. Interpretive Theory “calls for the imaginative understanding of the studied phenomenon...this type of theory assumes emergent, multiple realities” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 126). Interpretive theory does not seek explanation, but interpretation and greater understanding of the phenomenon (Ritzer & Goodman, 2004, as cited in Charmaz, 2006). The avenue to greater understanding and interpretation is the data harvested through study of the personal life experiences of participants (Polkinghorne, 2005).

This qualitative research proposal sought access to the personal thoughts and feelings of young people who had dropped out of high school. This research approach is relevant because the participants themselves provided meaning to the topic in their own words, through their own interpretations, and those of the researcher (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). The study was designed using four common components of qualitative methodology: 1) selecting appropriate sites and participants, 2) establishing relationships with participants, 3) determining what kinds of data to collect, and 4) determining how the data will be analyzed for interpretation (Maxwell, 2005). The foundations of this qualitative study were based on the individual, lived experiences of students who have dropped out of high school in southeast Kansas (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

A study that seeks to describe the meaning of several individuals and their lived experiences is a phenomenology (Creswell, 2007). Phenomenology seeks to obtain a look at the experience through the eyes of the participant, how he or she felt or perceived what was happening at that time. Talking to participants grants the researcher information and access to a point of view that might not be obtained elsewhere (Charmaz, 2006). All of the participants in study have experienced the phenomenon of dropping out of high school. By understanding the decisions students make in such a journey, educators might identify proactive measures to address appropriate intervention and prevention.

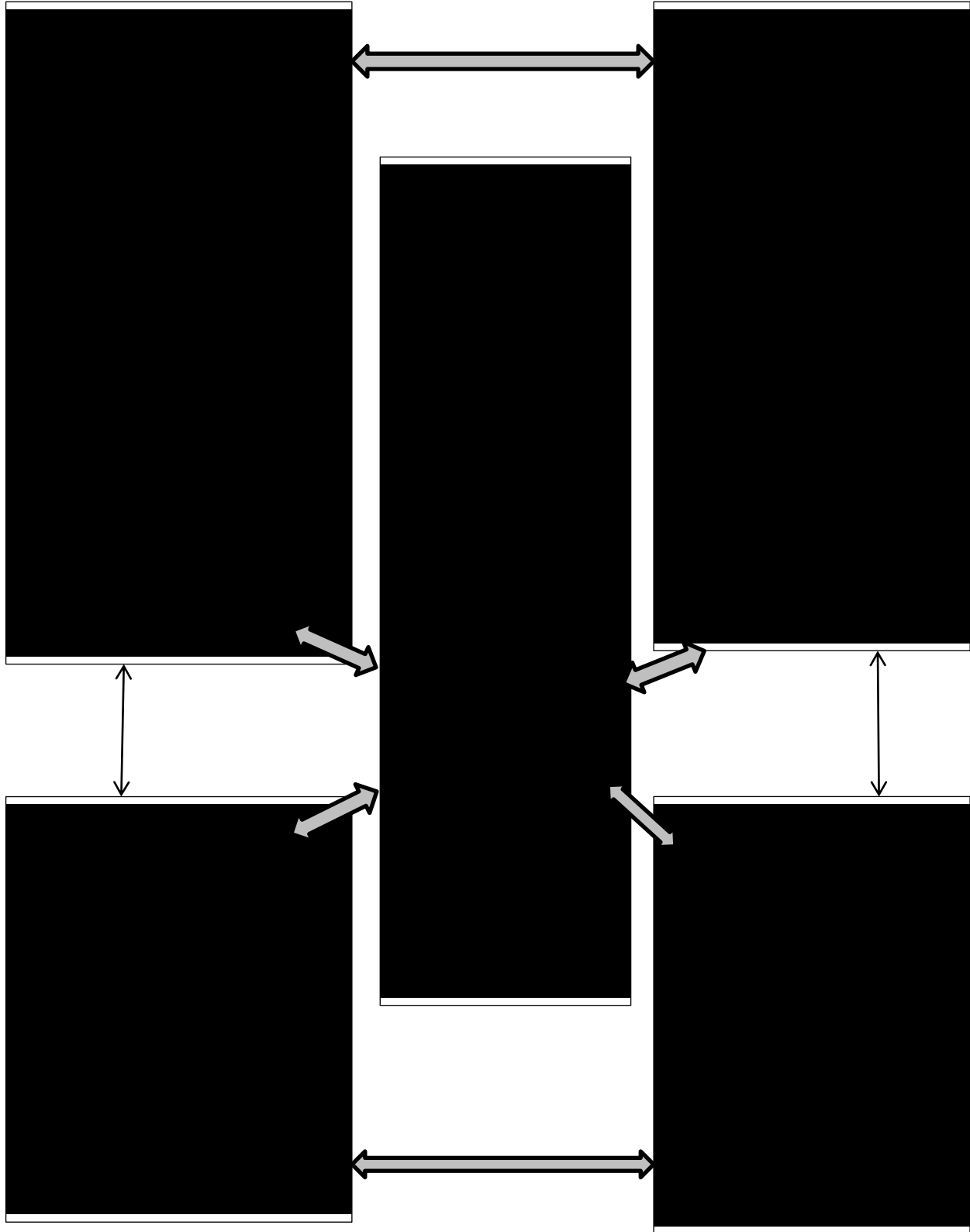
Certain assumptions are made when determining a course for qualitative research (Creswell, 2007). An ontological assumption fits well with constructivist and interpretive, qualitative theories because, “it seeks to find the nature of reality, the reality is subjective and multiple as seen by the participants in the study, and the researcher will use quotes and themes in the words of the participants” (Creswell, 2007, p. 17).

## Research Design

The central focus of this research was the relationship between the phenomenological study of the nature of the individual experiences of high school dropouts in southeast Kansas and the proposed research questions. Maxwell's (2005) Interactive Model of Research Design shown in Figure 3.1 provided an organizational and structural framework for the research proposal. This model is a visual representation of the relationship between the different components of a qualitative research study. The desired outcome of this study was to adequately address and answer the research questions in order to achieve the designated goals. This was achieved by conducting the study within a qualitative, phenomenological framework as described in the Introduction and Overview section of this chapter. While acknowledging the interrelationships of all phases of the qualitative study, Maxwell (2005) describes the organizational flow of a sound qualitative research design as a logical progression. Goals were determined and acknowledged as a foundation for other decisions pertaining to the study and its design. The conceptual framework relates closely to the goals of the study and helped to guide the researcher in determining the scope of the research questions (Maxwell, 2005). The interview and survey protocols for the study shared a strong relationship with the methods of data collection and analysis. Finally, the methods were supported by the validity section of this paper. Maxwell (2005) describes these five components as forming two units, strongly integrated together. These are represented in Figure 3.1.

The first such integrated unit, shows a relationship between the goals, the conceptual framework, and the research questions while the second integration affiliates the research questions, methods, and validity pieces. Purposeful attention was given to maintaining fidelity to the integration of the five described components throughout each phase of the study.

Figure 3.1 Interactive Research Design based on Maxwell (2005)



A draft of the structural design for this research study was created in the fall of 2011. During the spring of 2012, the design was peer reviewed by University of Arkansas doctoral students, updated, and edited. The editing and review process continued until the proposal was presented and approved by the doctoral dissertation committee in July of 2013. Having gained approval from the University of Arkansas Institutional Review Board, data collecting began in the 2013 and concluded in July, 2013.

The study addressed the research questions by collecting data via four methods:

- 1) face-to-face interviews (multiple) with students who dropped out of high school
- 2) focus-group interview with students in an area General Education Development (GED) program
- 3) written survey administered to GED students in the southeast Kansas Adult and Continuing Education consortium
- 4) field note journal of reflections, notes and observations, accumulated during all interviews and data-collecting activities throughout the course of the study.

Interviews were planned and scheduled as described in the Overview of Information section. As interviews were completed, each was transcribed word-for-word. Word-for-word transcribing prepares interview transcripts for first cycle coding (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008) and analysis. During the first cycle, organizational and structural coding were utilized to connect field research to the conceptual framework provided in chapter two as well as to more directly address the research questions (Saldana, 2009). During second cycle coding elaborative coding was conducted to further support a connection between the study and the literature. Memos were written, labeled, and identified throughout the entire research process. Code and memos were stored in an electronic file or electronic codebook.

### **Research Sample**

This phenomenological study sought to understand the essence of what young people in southeast Kansas experienced prior to, during, and after dropping out of high school. The sampling selection process was critical to this and any qualitative research project. Sampling decisions were justified using the pre-determined criteria for this qualitative, phenomenological research study (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

Purposeful, criterion sampling was appropriate for this study. Purposeful sampling was appropriate in order to fit the prescribed life experiences identified in the case, students who have experienced the phenomena of dropping out of high school. Purposeful selection is commonly supported for use in qualitative research projects (Creswell, 2007, Maxwell, 2005). This strategy is used when the desired information needs to come from a selection of persons or places that meet a set of pre-identified criteria. As implied by the term, purposeful sampling leads to the selection of participants who may provide direct insight into the phenomena being studied, so as to better inform research (Creswell, 2007). The use of criteria provided guidance as to who was selected to participate in the study, how many participants were needed, and what locations would serve the study most adequately (Creswell, 2007).

The sample size for face-to-face interviews was comprised of twelve individuals who attended secondary schools and currently reside in southeast Kansas. Individuals experiencing a phenomenon may not all share the same life-path. For example, every student who drops out of high school does not necessarily pursue additional education or training as received in the GED program. For that reason, the participant sample included interviews with participants who chose varying educational pathways: 1) individuals currently enrolled in a GED program in southeast Kansas, 2) individuals formerly enrolled in a GED program in southeast Kansas, but

did not complete the program, 3) individuals who completed a GED program, and 4) individuals who had not pursued an alternative education program since dropping out of high school until many years later.

Recruitment of and access to all participants was achieved via personal contacts with GED coordinators in the southeast Kansas area adult basic education centers.

### **Overview of Information Needed**

#### **Sources and Types of Information**

It was determined that four types of information were needed to answer the qualitative research questions: contextual, perceptual, demographic, and theoretical (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). This study incorporated all four types by collecting and incorporating information and data from each as shown in Table 3.1. Additionally, information was collected from each of the four types of data collection in the compendium (Creswell, 2007): observations, interviews, documents, and audiovisual materials.

Table 3.1

#### *Overview of Information Needed*

| Type of Information | What the Researcher Requires   | Method  |
|---------------------|--|---|
| Contextual          | Access to GED students<br>Access to students who dropped out who did not seek GED<br>Patrons and/or contacts | Focus-Group Interview(s)<br>Face-to-Face Interviews |
| Demographic         | Description of participants:<br>Who they are, where they live, what they do                                  | Surveys<br>Focus-Group and Face-to-Face Interviews  |
| Perceptual          | What led up to the ultimate decision to drop out? Who engaged in helping you make this decision? How has     | Focus-Group Interview(s)<br>Face-to-Face            |



|             |   |  |
|-------------|---|--|
|             | that affected your life since?<br>Describe the when and why of this<br>decision | Interviews                                   |
| Theoretical | What is known about this<br>phenomenon  | Review of the<br>Literature<br>Data Analysis |

### **Contextual Information**

Having attained permission to access GED student/participants in the southeast Kansas Adult and Continuing Education consortium, interviews were conducted and surveys collected. These locations were selected because students enrolled in adult, basic education GED programs are likely to have experienced the phenomena of dropping out of high school. These locations serve as a source of contextual information as they are reasonable examples of a cultural and environmental context in which to study the phenomenon (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008).

### **Demographic Information**

In 2012, Neosho County Community College was awarded a grant to promote adult education, which led to the establishment of the Southeast Kansas Adult Education Consortium. The consortium, headquartered at NCCC, provides oversight to the organization via its program director. The formation of this organization enhanced and strengthened the study because it provided access to GED programs in eight communities located within the defined southeast Kansas demographic (see Table 3.2).

Table 3.2

#### *Southeast Kansas Adult and Continuing Education Consortium*

| Institution                            | GED Program<br>Locations | County     |
|--|--------------------------|------------|
| Neosho County Community College        | Chanute, Kansas          | Neosho     |
| Neosho County Community College -North | Ottawa, Kansas           | Franklin   |
| Fort Scott Community College           | Fort Scott, Kansas       | Bourbon    |
| Independence Community College         | Independence, Kansas     | Montgomery |

|   |                     |            |
|---|---------------------|------------|
| Coffeyville Community College                     | Coffeyville, Kansas | Montgomery |
| Labette Community College                         | Parsons, Kansas     | Labette    |
| Southeast Kansas Area Vocational Technical School | Columbus, Kansas    | Cherokee   |
| Pittsburg State University                        | Pittsburg, Kansas   | Crawford   |

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Enrollees in the southeast Kansas Adult and Continuing Education GED programs represent a wide range of ages, experiences, and backgrounds. Identifying and collecting such data is important to this qualitative research project. Demographic information helps the researcher understand why individuals interpret and respond to experiences the way they do (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Demographic information was collected from participants during the data collection process prior to or at the conclusion of the focus-group and face-to-face interviews. Additionally, survey participants completed a demographics page. Demographic profile information included age, years of education completed, gender, ethnicity, employment status, work history, current educational status, and future educational goals. Sharing data from this process provides the reader detailed descriptions of the participants, a picture of who they are, and what they do.

### **Perceptual Information**

Perceptual information gathering was also accomplished via conducting interviews and collecting surveys. The Bloomberg & Volpe (2008) explanation of perceptual information is relevant to this project as it clearly articulated some of the same questions this study sought to answer:

Perceptual Information refers to participants' perceptions related to the particular subject of your inquiry...perceptual information is the most critical of the kinds of information needed...Perceptual information relies, to a great extent, on interviews to uncover

participants' descriptions of their experiences related to such things as: how experiences influenced the decisions they made, whether participants had a change of mind or a shift in attitude, whether they described more of a constancy of purpose, what elements relative to their objectives participants perceived as important, and to what extent those objectives were met (p. 70).

Therefore, the interview protocol was designed with attention given to establishing rapport with each participant, setting him or her at ease and promoting a high degree of comfort during the interview in hopes of gaining access to a greater degree of honesty and openness.

### **Theoretical Information**

There are many studies dedicated to determining who drops out of high school. The "who" refers to individuals being identified by age, race, residency, academic achievement levels, economic status, and other determinants. However, information about the process, meaning, and events that led up to making the decision to quit school are not as plentiful. School districts have attempted to address at school behaviors and indicators linked to students who discontinue formal education. Little has been accomplished to identify the thinking, rationale, and justification that lead to making this decision. This study added to the body of knowledge related to the topic by designing interview and survey protocols that addressed the research questions for this project. Multiple questions were posed to participants in the field studies, surveys, focus-group, and face-to-face interviews in order to concentrate the issues facing dropouts as perceived in southeast Kansas.

### **Data Collection**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to take a deeper look into the lived experiences of students in southeast Kansas who have dropped out. Access into the thoughts,

actions, and decisions students make, which eventually result in them dropping out of high school, may provide educational practitioners information about how to address the needs of students before they decide to drop out. The credibility of a study relies on the quality of the data collecting process (Charmaz, 2006). Collection for this study focused squarely on what was gleaned from personal interviews, written surveys, and observations.

The process for gaining access to institutions and participants was accomplished professionally and ethically. Institutional managers and supervisors, as well as participants, were treated respectfully with regard to the value of their time, space, and opinions. All interviews, as described below, were recorded and transcribed in order to be available for future analysis. Participants were given the researcher's contact information and notified that recordings, and or transcripts, would be available for their review. These assurances are discussed further in the Ethical Considerations section below.

### **Focus-Group Interview**

Marshall and Rossman (2011) describe focus-groups as including 4 to 12 participants, "who are unfamiliar with one another and have been selected because they share certain characteristics relevant to the study's questions" (p.149). Marshall and Rossman (2011) further support the use of focus-groups and furnish guidance for applying the practice as utilized in this study:

People often listen to others' opinions and understandings in forming their own...the trick is to promote the participants' expression of their views through the creation of a supportive environment...the strengths of focus-group interviews are that this method is socially oriented, studying participants in an atmosphere more natural than artificial experimental circumstances and more relaxed than a one-to-one interview (p. 149).

A focus-group interview was conducted in the early phases of data collecting and consisted of a small number of participants, all who shared the experience of having dropped out of high school. Using an interview protocol (see Appendix A) grounded in the research questions, the focus-group interview provided vital feedback to establishing a first step, a pilot interview or field test, to reinforce or refute the quality of the interview questions (Turner, 2010). Upon analysis and review of the focus-group interview transcription and field notes, it was determined that the protocol questions and other details were fitting for the data collection process.

### **Survey Questionnaire**

The administration of the survey questionnaire (see Appendix B) occurred in conjunction with the face-to-face interviews. Survey data follow the same lines of questioning as the interview protocols and were coded accordingly. Administration of the pencil/paper survey questionnaire in multiple GED centers increased the size of the sample for the study and provided additional response-set information serving to strengthen the findings (Granello & Wheaton, 2004).

### **In-Depth Face-to-Face Interviewing**

Face-to-face interviews were chosen as a primary source of data collection because they are considered vital to the process of gaining information, enabling the explanation of a phenomenon (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, Nunkoosing, 2005). Nunkoosing (2005) indicates that the best way to understand how people perceive a life experience is via the one-to-one interview process. He suggests, “We interview when we want to know something about what another person has to say about his or her experience of a defining event, person, idea, or thing” (p. 699). Marshall and Rossman (2007) identify interviewing as a form of “participatory action research”

which entails “a cycle of research, reflection, and action” (p. 23).

Using an interview protocol (see Appendix A) based on the research questions, the in-depth face-to-face interview process addressed the need to collect perceptual information. This type of interview provides insight into the lived experiences of the participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008) and help to explain how those experiences may have influenced their decision to drop out of high school. Face-to-face interviews provide an opportunity for the participant and the interviewer to “co-construct data together... within a constructionist perspective” (Roulston, 2010, p. 178).

Detail and attention was given to the preparation leading up to and including the actual implementation of interviews. When positive rapport and an atmosphere of respect exist, data is more appropriately represented and available for response (Marshall & Rossman, 2007).

### **Field Notes and Observations**

Throughout the data-collection process, field notes and reflections of observations were collected and maintained. The field notes documented data the audio recorder could not reproduce; data such as physical actions, reactions, and other unspoken observations that may contain meaning relevant to the analysis for this study (Maxwell, 2005). Any such actions, that were not included in the recorded transcriptions, were noted in the researcher’s log. Details from field notes may lead to the clarification, editing, adding, or deleting of semi-structured interview questions in order to enhance the quality of the interview and data collecting process.

The researcher’s log, an electronic file, provided a tool for writing reflective memos. Reflective memos were used as a tool for thinking or relating how the research might be communicated to the reader (Maxwell, 2005). Since written memos assisted in determining categories and themes for interpretation, attention was given to their design and future use

throughout the study.

### **Data Analysis**

The data for this phenomenological study was gathered from a focus-group interview, multiple in-depth face-to-face interviews, multiple responses from a survey questionnaire, and from a journal of field notes and observations. The purpose of analysis in this and other qualitative projects is to take raw data and transform them into something meaningful (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). There are many acceptable means of analyzing qualitative data and multiple variations within the differing approaches. However, some core elements of qualitative analysis are generally accepted as foundational. These are, “reducing the data into meaningful segments and assigning names for the segments, combining the codes into broader categories or themes, and displaying and making comparisons in the data graphs, tables, and charts” (Creswell, 2007,p.148). Maxwell (2005) supports these practices by emphasizing the importance of “reading and thinking about your interview transcripts and observation notes, writing memos, developing coding categories, and applying these to your data, and analyzing narrative structure and contextual relationships” (p. 96). Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) have identified four sequential phases for conducting analytical research: “organizing data, generating categories, identifying patterns and themes, and coding the data” (p. 96).

### **Preparing and Organizing Data**

The data from multiple interviews and surveys created a mass of textual data. In order to conduct a thorough analysis of the data, they had to be organized (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). An important step in the organization process was to transcribe the interviews. Soon after the completion of each interview, a professional transcriptionist completed a verbatim transcription. Each transcription was subsequently labeled with the date and time of the actual interview and

assigned an identification code.

A critical step in the data collection was to assure that journal entries, field notes, and observations were dated and labeled. An electronic file was employed by the researcher to organize, track, and catalog coding information. The code file is written and electronic record of the codes used in the study, along with the definition or basis for the code and the context for its use. Reflective memos and notes, which enabled the author to present the research clearly, were stored in the electronic *codebook* file.

### **Reducing Data into Meaningful Segments and Representing Data**

Once the data was prepared for analysis it was reduced. The purpose for reducing the data is to sort through large volumes of text to uncover meaning as it relates to the study. The reduction of text needs to progress systematically. Many qualitative studies follow the codes-to-theory model for analysis (Saldana, 2009). In this model, the researcher constructs a common theme or theory by dissecting text into codes, linking codes to form categories, and connecting categories, which evolve into themes, which may then transform into theory. Charmaz (2006) says that “coding generates the bones of your analysis...it shapes the analytical frame from which you build the analysis...through coding you define what is happening in the data and begin to grapple with what it means” (pp.45-46).

Reduction of data in this study was accomplished by employing organizational, structural, and elaborative coding. Organizational coding was used as a first cycle of coding and sought words and terms that had meaning and relationship toward answering the research questions. Structural coding allows researchers to work from large data sets and quickly access relevant data for analysis (Namey, Guest, Thairu, & Johnson, 2008 as cited in Saldana, 2009). This type of coding is well suited for analyzing interview transcripts and open ended survey



questionnaires and when working with pre-set goals, it enables the researcher to readily identify and harvest categories from the data (Saldana, 2009). Structural coding involves identifying major themes from the conceptual framework which, with the research questions will help focus the coding process. The structural method was also used as a first cycle of coding using substantive terms as identified in the conceptual framework. This will be discussed further I below.

It is at this time that relationships of the codes, categories, and meaning statements came together as themes to support a plausible theory. An analysis of the data is presented in charts, graphs, and tables. These graphic and narrative representations of the data analysis show connections, relationships, and patterns to support the conclusions of the study.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This research proposal warranted several ethical considerations; “issues of ethics focus on establishing safeguards that will protect the rights of participants and include informed consent, protecting participants from harm and ensuring confidentiality” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 76). The consent to participate form required that specific elements be included in order to provide assurance of these types of safeguards (Creswell, 2007). Each of these is represented in Appendix C.

A focus-group interview was conducted in the early stages of the research study. The focus-group interview provided additional ethical concerns. Due to the nature, scope, and relatively small size of community college programs, students knew one another. Marshall and Rossman (2011) identify focus groups as participants “who are unfamiliar with one another and have been selected because they share certain characteristics relevant to the study’s questions” (p.149). It was not possible to accumulate a focus group consisting of participants who did not

know one another.

### **Subjectivities**

While the consent to participate form addressed general, overarching issues and concerns of ethics, there were a few specific ethical considerations in this project. The researcher was acquainted with some of the participants in the Neosho County Community College GED program, one of the sites for the study. Many of the students attending the GED program at the college are former students of Chanute High School where the researcher serves as the principal. Consideration were taken to respect the members of the GED class and each person's decision to participate or abstain. Former Chanute High School students who are current members of the GED class were encouraged not to participate if they were uncomfortable doing so. According to Marshall and Rossman (2011), "Respect for persons captures the notion that we do not use the people who participate in our studies as a means to an end (often our own) and that we do respect their privacy, their anonymity, and their right to participate-or-not, which is freely consented to" (p.47).

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

The goal of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to provide greater understanding of the topic to administrators, parents, teachers, and educational policy makers. Through greater understanding of the decisions that students make in their journey leading to eventually dropping out of school, educators may identify proactive measures to address the issues and concerns, which may provide impetus for students to stay in school.

Trustworthiness in qualitative research seeks to answer questions such as how do I trust that this study is "believable, accurate, and plausible" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 78). The qualitative approach was appropriate in providing trustworthiness in such a study because

quantitative information tends to be impersonal and lacks the thick, rich, description representing the essence of the experiences described by the participants (Denzin, 1989, as cited in Creswell, 2007). However, studies from a qualitative paradigm are much more limited, even more so in relationship to the targeted region of southeast Kansas. This qualitative study on dropouts in the region sought to provide a body of evidence that is representative of the thoughts, feelings, and actions of its participants. Marshall and Rossman (2011) suggest that qualitative research for such a proposal is best, because it emphasizes “the promise of quality, depth, and richness in findings” (p. 11).

Quantitative researchers have the responsibility of providing reliability, validity, objectivity, and generalizability to their scientific inquiries. Likewise, qualitative researchers bear the responsibility of providing credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability to their study (Lincoln and Guba, 1985 as cited in Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Some authors believe that qualitative researchers have the same responsibility of determining reliability and validity as quantitative. Morse and Richards (2002, as cited in Marshall & Rossman, 2011) believe that a failure to provide reliability and validity “is to place the entire paradigm under suspicion” (p. 41). Qualitative interviewers bring credibility to their study by developing the types of relationships and asking the kinds of questions that illicit honest, open representation of the studies phenomena. The interviewees provided honest, unbiased, responses, that were interpreted with clarity and fidelity to the meaning given. To that end, trustworthiness existed in this study. Polkinghorne (2005) asserts, “The trustworthiness of the data depends on the integrity and honesty of the research” (p.144).

In this study, credibility was established by accurately representing the true nature of the participant’s thoughts as portrayed during the data-collection phase. Having served as a teacher,

coach, and administrator in southeast Kansas for 26 years, the researcher acknowledged the need to disengage personal opinions and feelings about the research topic in order to convey the message as presented by the participants. The potential for bias existed and self-*subjectiveness* needed to be monitored throughout the duration of the study. Flexibility and openness were maintained throughout the data collection/interview process. Every effort was made to put participants at ease, to create a comfort level, in order to propagate a natural interaction and response. Participant statements were often repeated, re-stated, or summarized during the interview in order to assure that the information was received as it was intended.

Triangulation of data through use of multiple sources was used to enhance the validity of the study (Maxwell, 2005). The design of this study relied on multiple sources as previously described: at least one focus-group interview, multiple fact-to-face interviews, collection of survey questionnaire information, and observations generated in a field note journal throughout the course of the study. Accessing multiple sources of data helps to create a webbing of support in and through the various sources. Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) refer to this process as a “corroboration of evidence” (p. 77) which will serve to strengthen the analysis and eventual findings of the study.

While the study sought to achieve a saturation of the data (Creswell, 2007), it also recognized discrepancies as they occurred during the data collection and analysis phases. Statements, thoughts, and actions, as expressed by interviewees, that did not flow or agree with the expressions of other participants, are acknowledged. Such data will be discussed and addressed with respect to the varying perspectives of participants.

To address the question of dependability, a field note journal and a coding book were employed to track each step and action of the research process, as well as to track the coding and

memo-recording decisions which were made. The field note journal provides a chronological record along with other emerging aspects of the study. An additional measure of dependability was the incorporation of inter-rater reliability created by asking another doctoral candidate to code several of the interview transcripts. This is commonly accepted as a means to reduce bias, which often exists in a single-researcher study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). The second reading and subsequent coding of such interviews will be included in the data analysis and findings section.

The inclusion of a second coder, an additional reviewer of the data, helps to address the issue of confirmability. A second reading and coding of the same transcripts, strengthens confirmability by supporting that the study was completed objectively and with fidelity to its purpose and goals.

Transferability in qualitative research is related to generalizability in quantitative research (Lincoln and Guba 1985 as cited in Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Transferability is important to help the practitioner determine whether the findings of the research are fitting or useful within their context or purpose (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). The author sees transferability of this study to be of importance because the research misses its purpose unless that measure is attained. Should the study accomplish the research goals, transferability of its findings will help educators identify proactive measures which may be used to convince students to stay in school.

Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) state that transferability is most readily assessed in qualitative research by “richness of the descriptions in the study... communicating to the reader a holistic and realistic picture...the amount of detailed information provided by the researcher regarding background and context...offering an element of shared experience” (p.87). In order to provide thick rich, description, the interviewer tried to dig into, delve into concepts and responses during

the interview phase, seeking the true essence of the participant's thoughts. A holistic representation of the experience to the reader was expressed through the use of field notes and detailed descriptions of the setting, time, location, and participants.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Limitations are conditions or characteristics that may weaken the results or outcomes of the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). There were perceivable and acknowledgeable limitations to the study.

First, the researcher was a long-time educator in southeast Kansas and has served as a principal at Chanute High School for 15 years. One of the primary locations for data collecting was Neosho County Community College in Chanute, Kansas. A sampling of the participants knew the interviewer. Because of a previous relationship, some of the participants may have failed to offer true, open responses to the interview questions. There was also the possibility for participants to opt out of the process altogether due to their comfort level with the interviewer. One potential participant initially agreed to an interview, but subsequently declined.

The researcher brought additional bias to the interview process. The common school culture shares an attitude that students who drop out are making a grave error in judgment. Many times, educators assess that parents who allow their students to drop out of school are lacking understanding of what that decision means that they do not care about their child, that they cannot control their child, or any of a number of other negative judgments. Having served as an educator for 32 years, 28 in southeast Kansas, a possibility for bias and/or *subjectiveness* is acknowledged. Also, as acknowledged in the trustworthiness section of this chapter, every effort was made to monitor this throughout the duration of the study.

It is unclear if the findings of the study in this specific area will transfer to contextual

settings elsewhere in southeast Kansas. While geographically close, communities in southeast Kansas display an array of cultures and ideas. Each community is specifically defined by its own economic and historical elements. One clearly defined purpose of the study was the hope that the findings would relate to communities throughout southeast Kansas.

There were certain delimitations for the study as well. The purpose of the study was to enhance the understanding of the thoughts, actions, and processes students experience when deciding to quit school in southeast Kansas. Some of the delimitations to the study were implied in the project title, questions, and goals. All of the research for the study was conducted in southeast Kansas via focus-group interviews; face-to-face, one-on-one interviews, or through the collection of data from paper-pencil survey questionnaires. All of the participants were students enrolled in General Education Development (GED) programs in the southeast Kansas. The decision to narrow the focus of the study to southeast Kansas fulfilled several needs: 1) to provide greater understanding of the topic in order to guide improved practice, 2) there is a limited amount of qualitative data available about dropouts in this region, and 3) the author's personal interest and desire to add to the body of information which might specifically benefit its residents.

### **Timeline**

Approval to perform research was obtained from the University of Arkansas Institutional Review Board (IRB) in the spring of 2013 (Appendix D,E). Having gained approval, the face-to-face, focus-group interviews, and survey questionnaire administration dates were scheduled. The data collection process concluded in the summer of 2013.

Preparation of the data was an ongoing process throughout the course of the study. Upon completion of survey administration, results were gathered and tabulated along with any relevant

and related field note entries. As interviews were completed, transcripts were prepared and first cycle-coding commenced. Finally, a current and up-to-date review of the literature was collected, maintained, and prepared for reporting at the conclusion of the study.

In the fall of 2013, a second reader/coder analyzed several interviews. A final analysis and report of findings were presented to the dissertation committee, subsequently defended, in the fall of 2013.

### **Chapter Three Summary**

This chapter provided a description of the methodology employed in the implementation of this study. The study was framed as a phenomenological qualitative research project and was conducted as a constructivist social study which sought to understand the behaviors and actions within a specific context (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). It was also shaped by an ontological assumption, that realities are multiple and subjective, as experienced by different persons (Creswell, 2007).

The chapter detailed the locations for conducting data collection and identified characteristics of its participants. In addition, a detailed overview of the specific types of information collected was provided. In this overview, specific examples of contextual, perceptual, demographic, and theoretical data were described, and rationale was given for the use of each. In order to gather each type of information, four methods of data collection were utilized: a focus-group interview, face-to-face in-depth interviews, pencil-paper survey questionnaires, and the use of detailed observations and field notes.

Interviewing and qualitative analysis are fundamental to all phenomenological studies and were central to the data collection and analysis in this study. Chapter 3 provided steps to assure for the adequate organization, preparation, and management of the data, which ultimately



led to increased confidence in areas of trustworthiness. The criteria for assessing trustworthiness in qualitative research were also addressed in this chapter, acknowledging the need for credibility, dependability, and transferability. Key to achieving this is the researcher's ability to find thick, rich description and meaning in the work, provide exemplary attention to details, and monitoring of personal bias and subjectivity.

Upon completion of the research activities described and detailed in chapter 3, the researcher compared and contrasted the findings and conclusions from the chapter with the information found in the review of the literature (chapter 2). Synthesis of the two chapters eventually led to interpretations and conclusions as reported in the findings of this study.

## CHAPTER FOUR – FINDINGS

### Purpose

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to delve beyond the statistics of the phenomena in order to take a deeper look into the lived experiences of students in southeast Kansas who have dropped out. By accomplishing this, school and community leaders will be better informed to create effective strategy, policy, and practice in dropout prevention. Such strategies will encourage citizens to stay in school and attain the highest level of education possible. Many studies in the literature seek to explain why students drop out, and, there are statistical indicators available to educators enabling identification of who is at risk of doing so. While such studies are abundant in some regions of the United States, no substantial, qualitative, phenomenological research on the topic as it relates to residents in rural Kansas had been accomplished in more than 30 years. This study provides context to the dropout problem as experienced by students in southeast Kansas, and although specific to this area, the research might provide transferability to other rural communities and regions. It is believed that adequately addressing the research questions will provide educators greater insight into the actions and decisions students make that eventually result in the decision to drop out of high school. Access to such information will allow educators and community leaders in southeast Kansas to purposefully address student needs, thus strengthening dropout intervention. The study answered four primary research questions:

- 1) What are the common/shared experiences and perceptions of individuals who have dropped out of school in southeast Kansas?
- 2) Are there actions or events occurring outside of school that contribute to students dropping out?

- 3) Are there actions or events occurring inside the school culture that contribute to students dropping out?
- 4) Are there identifiable actions, strategies, or interventions that might have kept students from dropping out?

### **Overview**

This chapter presents the major findings obtained from 27 participants via 12 face-to-face interviews and 15 surveys. A focus-group interview was also conducted with four of the written survey participants. The chapter begins with a short description of the research participants and the interview and survey administration locations. The demographics description is followed by a summary of the data analysis procedures. This summary will include a look at the coding guide and structures used in this project. Each finding is then presented sharing response and incidence information as appropriate. Each finding is also supported with qualitative, phenomenological data in the form of shared actions, opinion statements, and feelings as reported by the participants. An exhaustive report of the findings is followed by a short summation leading into the analysis and interpretation section of the study.

### **Summary of Participants**

Purposeful sampling was employed to gather data from 27 participants; 14 males and 13 females (see Table 4.1), who were current or former students in the Southeast Kansas Adult Basic Education Consortium (see Table 3.2). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 59. The majority of the participants (22 of 27 [82%]) were white, which is a fair representation of the demographic in Kansas which, according to the 2010 Census (United States Census Bureau, 2010), is 87% white.

In the initial stages of preparation for this study, the sampling plan was to seek three to

four face-to-face interview participants from each of the following educational pathways: 1) individuals currently enrolled in a GED program in southeast Kansas, 2) individuals formerly

Table 4.1

*Sampling Demographics Chart*

| Participant Code | Pseudonym | Diploma Status      | Gender | Age | Ethnicity          |
|------------------|-----------|---------------------|--------|-----|--------------------|
| I-1              | Nancy     | Has GED             | F      | 51  | White              |
| I-2              | Tara      | Has GED             | F      | 25  | White              |
| I-3              | Justin    | Has GED             | M      | 20  | Hispanic           |
| I-4              | Jessie    | In GED &<br>Dropped | F      | 35  | White              |
| I-5              | Chuck     | In GED &<br>Dropped | M      | 30  | White              |
| I-6              | Matty     | In GED              | M      | 24  | Hispanic           |
| I-7              | Brenda    | In GED              | F      | 47  | White              |
| I-8              | Joe       | In GED              | M      | 18  | Native<br>American |
| I-9              | Aubrey    | In GED &<br>Dropped | M      | 30  | White              |
| I-10             | David     | In GED              | M      | 57  | White              |
| I-11             | Brandy    | In GED &<br>Dropped | F      | 30  | White              |
| I-12             | Stephanie | In GED              | F      | 25  | White              |
| S-1              | Henry     | In GED              | M      | 55  | White              |
| S-2              | Bobby     | In GED              | M      | 18  | White              |
| S-3              | Sheena    | In GED              | F      | 20  | White              |
| S-4              | Catherine | In GED              | F      | 58  | African/Amer       |
| S-5              | Brian     | In GED              | M      | 40  | White              |
| S-6              | RoseMarie | In GED              | F      | 53  | White              |
| S-7              | LaDonna   | In GED              | F      | NR  | White              |
| S-8              | Nathan    | In GED              | M      | 25  | White              |
| S-9              | Ashton    | In GED              | F      | 18  | Hispanic           |
| S-10             | Travis    | In GED              | M      | 18  | White              |
| S-11             | Ceara     | In GED              | F      | 20  | White              |
| S-12             | Turner    | In GED              | M      | 19  | White              |
| S-13             | Tracy     | In GED              | M      | 39  | White              |
| S-14             | Misty     | In GED              | F      | 33  | White              |
| S-15             | Matth     | In GED              | M      | 22  | White              |

Total N = 27 F = 13 (48%) M = 14 (52%)

enrolled in a GED program in southeast Kansas who did not complete the program, 3)

individuals who completed a GED program, and 4) individuals who have not pursued an

alternative education program since dropping out of high school. The actual interview sample was comprised of 12 interview participants, 9 which were currently enrolled in a GED program and 3 which had completed a GED program. The 9 participants who were enrolled in a GED at the time of the interview represent the proposed sample as follows: 3 of the participants were fairly recent high school dropouts who were enrolled in the GED for the first time, 4 of the participants had prior enrollment(s) in a GED education plan and did not complete the program, and 2 of the participants never enrolled in an educational program until now, 20 or more years after dropping out of high school.

### **Summary of Data Analysis Process**

The data for this phenomenological study were gathered from a focus-group interview, in-depth face-to-face interviews, responses from a survey questionnaire (see Appendix B) and from an electronic journal of field notes and observations. The aforementioned data sources were all sorted, dated, named, and organized for analysis as per the research design described in chapter three. As the data were organized for analysis, reduction of the text systematically progressed using the *Streamlined Codes-To-Theory Model* (Saldana, 2009, p.12). Utilizing this model, organizational, structural, and elaborative codes were determined (see Table 4.2).

Organizational coding (Saldana, 2009) enabled data-sorting and reduction of the interview transcripts, field notes, and survey questionnaires. The organizational codes were derived from two general sources; raw data and components drawn from the research questions. Information drawn via organizational coding was subsequently linked to one or more of the structural categories as supported by the context in which the information was provided (Table 4.2).

Structural coding was selected as an additional method of first cycle coding. Structural

coding allows expedited access for sorting the data. According to Saldana (2009), structural coding is well suited for analyzing interview transcripts and open ended survey questionnaires when working with pre-set goals such as those directed by the research questions in this study. Structural coding was accomplished by pre-identifying four substantive categories as indicated within the text of the interview questions. These categories were, 1) the common or shared experiences of students who quit school early, 2) non-school related and 3) school related factors that led to the decision to quit, and 4) school actions taken prior to and during the process which lead to eventually dropping out (Table 4.2).

Elaborative, or “top-down” coding (Saldana, 2009, p.168) was utilized as a second cycle coding process. The purpose of elaborative coding is to compare data from “two different yet related studies – one completed and one in progress” (Saldana, 2009, p. 168). In this cycle the interview transcripts and survey questionnaires were coded using pre-set indicators determined by three primary literature sources from the conceptual framework: *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High school Dropouts* (Bridgeland et al., 2006), *What Your Community Can Do To End Its Drop-out Crisis: Learnings From Research and Practice* (Balfanz, 2007), and *Facing the School Dropout Dilemma* (2011) (see Table 4.2). This cycle of coding is important to determine if information indicated in these major studies is significant to demographics in southeast Kansas.

Several cycles of coding were completed and data were combined to formulate the four major findings for the study. Further analysis, interpretation, and synthesis will follow in chapter five.

Table 4.2

*Coding Structure and Guide*

| Organizational/Structural Code      | Structural Category                        |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| Nothing Mattered/<br>Stay in school | Structural – Common/Shared Experiences     |
| Stress/relieved/other emotion       | Structural – Common/Shared Experiences     |
| Work/Job                            | Structural – Common/Shared Experiences     |
| Marriage                            | Structural – Non – School Factors          |
| Drugs/alcohol/party                 | Structural – Non – School Factors          |
| Pregnancy                           | Structural – Non – School Factors          |
| Money/Needs                         | Structural - Non-School Factors            |
| Attendance/Fade Out/Bored           | Structural – School or Non-School Factors  |
| Threats/Bullied                     | Structural – School Factors                |
| Grades/Ability/Failing to Succeed   | Structural – School Factors                |
| Pushed Out/Expelled/Suspended       | Structural – School Factors                |
| Teachers caring                     | Structural – School Factors/School Actions |
| Parent Relationship to School       | Structural – School Factors/School Actions |
| Safe/Orderly School                 | Structural – School Factors/School Actions |
| Meaningful Curriculum               | Structural – School Factors/School Actions |
| High Expectations                   | Structural – School Factors/School Actions |

## Elaborative Code and Conceptual Basis

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Stem - Why I quit, In my words   |   |
| Classes Were Not<br>Interesting<br>Lack of Motivation and<br>Expectation<br>Personal Matters Not From School<br>Failing in School - Couldn't Keep<br>Up<br>Failing in School - Poorly Prepared<br>Failing in School - Credits/Held<br>Back | Silent Epidemic (Bridgeland, Dilulio, Morison, 2006)<br>Kansas Youth Survey (2009)  |
| Stem - 4 Broad-based Reasons<br>Students Give for Dropping Out of<br>School  | What Your Community Can Do To End the Dropout<br>Crisis: Every 1Graduates, Center for Social<br>Organization of Schools at Johns Hopkins (Balfanz,<br>2007) |
| Life Events<br>Fade Outs<br>Push Outs<br>Failing to Succeed in School  |   |



|  |  |
|--|--|
| Stem - 5 Tenets of Effective Schools (that keep students from dropping out)  | Research on Effective Schools and Social Emotional Learning (Zins et al, 2004; Facing the Dropout Dilemma, 2011) |
| School to Home Connection/Partnership<br>Safe and Orderly Environment<br>Positive Relationships with Teachers<br>Meaningful Curriculum/Transferability<br>High Expectations for Students/Staff |  |

### **Findings**

The analysis of the data led to four major findings:

1. The majority of the participants shared that they should have stayed in school, that it was a mistake to leave school early.
2. The majority of the participants indicated that negative school experiences played an important role in their decision to drop out.
3. Many participants attribute occurrences of negative “life-events” leading to their decision to drop out.
4. The majority of the participants indicated that they were going to leave school regardless of any actions or gestures friends, family, or school could make as an attempt to keep them from dropping out.

Following is a discussion which includes clarifying and supporting information to further explain each of the four findings. Participant quotations and responses are taken directly from the interview transcripts and survey questionnaires in an attempt to represent the individual and his or her perception of how the phenomenon was experienced.

**Finding 1: The majority of the participants (21 of 27 [78%]) shared that they should have stayed in school, that it was a mistake to leave school early**

An overriding finding of the study is the participants' opinion that they should have stayed in school. However, as this sentiment is commonly shared, there is a disconnection between how the problem is viewed now as an adult and how it was perceived earlier in life. At the time data was collected, only a few of the participants (2 of 27 [7%]) were uncertain about how to answer questions as to whether or not they should have stayed in school. The other participants (21 of 27 [78%]) had a clear opinion, and the most common expression was that, while they did not think so at the time, it was a mistake to quit school.

Many of the participants shared their current feelings about why they should have stayed in school. Commonly expressed were feelings about missed opportunities, the difficulties in meeting personal and family obligations, and the hamstrung possibility of landing a good job. Some participants believed that the decision to drop out of school was not within their power or authority to make. For these few, the decision to quit school early was made by a parent, relative, or guardian. Representative thoughts, feelings, and expressions follow.

**Missed opportunities.** Several participants reflected on what they view as missed experiences and opportunities due to leaving high school early. Jessie shares her perception of missed time with friends and social opportunities she might have enjoyed if she had stayed in school:

I could have did it. It is so much easier, would have been so much better. I didn't get to... graduate with all my friends. I didn't get to walk... and I look back and I talked to... my friends that graduated and stuff, and they all have good jobs and they are making good money... and it makes me sad... They are all going to the reunions and stuff like that and I am just like...it just makes me sad. (Jessie)

Justin recently graduated with an associate's degree from an area community college.

Although he was able to attain his GED in a very short time, he laments the decision to leave high school:

I was supposed to be like this star football player that was going to turn the team around on defense, but before the season started I started out with a pretty bad lower sprained ab, so I had to stay out about four or five weeks and that really killed my momentum going in to football season... whenever football season got here I wasn't in shape at all and, you know... I think that that was a way for them to kind of look at me and say, "All right, you're out of here. You're gone..." High school is something that everybody should experience. You know, high school is really, it' (pause), it can be a really good thing. But, you know, it all depends on you. At the end of the day it's, it's your choice and it's your decision. But I would rather stay in high school...

Joe's experience was similar:

I felt kind of free but, and then in another fashion, I felt like I was kind of losing part of my teenage years, you know. Not being able to have all the high school friends and everything. But, now I really do kind of regret dropping out because I miss high school, but just cause of the social life and now I really don't have a social life, very much. I mean, I have a couple of friends but that's only from GED class... I have probably four or five friends and that's it.

**Trouble finding employment and meeting obligations.** Participants believed that their current job or career status would be more satisfying had he or she stayed in school. A majority of the participants (17 of 27 [63%]) cite difficulty in the job market, finding satisfactory work, or obtaining any job at all, as an effect of dropping out or having less education.

It's just, it seems... really difficult for me to be able to get a job. But I don't know why it's so hard, 'cause maybe, I've only had that one job and it just seems hard, really hard for me to get one tied down. You know? I knew it would be a little more difficult, but I guess in a way, I did think it would be a little easier than being in high school. But it's really not... I miss high school already. (Joe)

I always thought that, there is always a job for everyone, even without an education. That's not the case. It's hard to find a job even with education. I thought as long as you were a hard worker you could get a job anywhere. That isn't the case. (Matt)

A sentiment of frustration in finding satisfactory employment permeated the interview transcripts and was consistently shared in the written surveys. "There isn't a lot of job opportunity out there", stated Bobby, "I figured I could get a job anywhere when I turned 18." "I

was let-down” Cearra agrees, “There are not many places that will take you. Without a diploma you don’t have many opportunities. It is much harder to get a job without a diploma.”

Many of the older participants in the study noted how the job market and the ability to gain satisfactory employment has changed since the time they dropped out. Brandy said, “It was definitely a lot easier twelve years ago to get a job without a GED or a high school diploma. Twelve years, I mean it’s changed dramatically.” “There are no jobs out there. When I quit school it was easy to get a job without a diploma. Now, it’s harder” stated Catherine.

In addition to the struggles of finding meaningful employment without educational credentials, the more experienced participants from the study discussed the nature of the types of job they were able to secure. Jobs in which there were few benefits, poor hours, and a lot of physical labor:

I was taught to work hard and climb the ladder. The work climate has changed to where education is more important than hard work. You will be the black sheep when it comes to getting a job with no diploma. All I can do is get jobs where I have to use my body for labor type jobs. I have had hardships since day one. Now I wake up with body pains and no money. (Brian)

There were plenty of jobs (when I dropped out). It was more of a physical kind of labor job, I mean than it was more educational. And, I think a lot of that in the 70's and in the 80's, working in the oil fields was good money, railroad was good money; all that was more labor oriented than it was educational. (David)

Nancy, who attained her GED in the 1970’s and subsequently completed an associate’s and bachelor’s degree program, now teaches adult basic education to students pursuing a high school equivalent:

At that time (when I dropped out) jobs were plentiful, but I knew I was going to have to work hard in whatever, you know, it was one of those that (pause) it would have to be physical. You know? Those types of jobs are not easy... you work in the hot and you work in the cold, you work wherever you are told to go work and do what you had to do.

Where now, as being an educator, I like working in the air-conditioned building (laughs)...

... but I was still in that mind frame set of being a high school dropout, because when I went (to apply for jobs), even though I had my Bachelor's degree. I got my Associate's here, got my Bachelor's degree at (omitted). When I went and applied at the schools, I applied to work in the cafeteria. You're still in that mindset of, "Well, I was a high school dropout." It takes a long time for you to realize that, "I am not a high school dropout anymore. I have my Bachelor's degree." I was a college graduate. And it is still one of those things that you don't...you know, you're still in that mind frame.

**Increased difficulties in meeting personal and family obligations.** Many participants shared experiencing difficulty in achieving or maintaining the standard and quality of life they sought for their families and themselves. Jessie's reflection is comparable and representative of the thoughts of many:

I should have stayed in school, made a better life for myself and for my kids. You know I'm doing it now (GED) and, I am 35, and I just feel like it's kind of embarrassing. In my opinion... because there's young kids in here and I'm just like, oh my gosh, I'm 35! I am like the oldest one in here [laugh]. Sometimes that is how I feel. I know that what I am doing will better me and that makes me happy. You know? And better my kids. It will show my kids... I had problems... I dropped out. But, I went back to school and it makes me feel like if... they see that then they will want to stay in school and they will want to... thrive and get good jobs and do something for their life...

**It really wasn't my decision.** While some participants lament their decision to drop out of school, others believed that dropping out was the only decision they could have made at the time. For some, it was not their decision at all. One participant supports the importance of staying in school, but at age 13 was taken out of school by a parent.

I wish I could have stayed in school because now I struggle, have two kids, work very hard, long hours, with little pay. I am a recovering addict and I would have a chance at life if my mom would have allowed me to go to school instead of teaching me a bad way to live. Never give up, fight hard and when you're at your last straw, give it 200% because life is hard and unfair, especially if you don't finish school (Misty)

Henry, a 59-year-old GED student, shared that he liked school but was not allowed the

opportunity to continue attending. He said, to him, the reasons are unknown, “I really wanted to stay in school. The foster care system forced me out. I was in a group home and when they moved me they never re-enrolled me in school.”

**Emotions when I dropped out.** Participants shared the emotions they experienced at the time they dropped out of school. Interview and survey protocol questions asked participants to share the feelings they experienced at the time the decision to drop out was final. Many participants shared expressions of happiness, relief, excitement and freedom. But, these positive emotions were often tempered by feelings of worry, fear, anger, and confusion.

The most common feelings indicated by participants were of relief, worry, and fear. Relief was often cited with worry and/or fear by the same participant. Clashing or conflicting emotions were experienced by many. Tracy said, “I was excited and scared. I was glad to get away from staff, a couple of them. But excited to go to work and make money. I was scared to death, yet confident at the same time.” “I was relieved and worried” said Matt, “I was relieved that I wouldn’t have to see some of the teachers again. Worried ‘bout career choices and how to be an adult.”

Joe was tired of school and relieved to finally quit, but there was also regret:

Well, when I first quit, it was just relief because, I mean, when I was in school I liked it, but at the same time, I would get fed up. You know? After a while I'd get fed up just with being in... class all day... it would get overwhelming sometimes... But, now I really do kind of regret dropping out because I miss high school.

Another sentiment shared by some of the participants related to an individual sense of self-worth. “I felt bad and embarrassed about quitting school” said Sheena. Ashton shared, “I was relieved for a while, then I started to feel like a failure.” “Travis bemoaned, “I let myself down. I only needed two credits to graduate.” Aubrey was emphatic, “I was angry. I had no

self-worth, no self-esteem. Right after you drop outta' school you ain't doing nothing, so...you don't have any self-value.”

Justin's description of this event provides a vivid description of his experience and the emotional toll it took on him.

I was really sick to my stomach because I knew I was leaving my football team behind... I knew that there was a lot of kids on that team that was really looking up to me and for them to see that happen to me, I knew that it was not a good thing. I thought that my life was pretty much over. I felt like I was at a dead end, and I didn't know where I was going to go. I didn't know if I was going to work in a factory the rest of my life or what. Because, I mean, around here that's what you do. If you don't have any education or anything you go work at a factory...

I felt really abandoned. It was just me. Every day it was just like solitary confinement to my room or on the farm working or something. Because everybody was... nobody wanted to talk to me. They thought I was a failure. They thought I was a complete failure. They thought I wasn't going to do anything with my life.

**Finding 2: The majority of the participants (16 of 27 [60%]) indicated that negative school experiences played an important part in their decision to drop out**

Participants were asked to determine whether their dropout decision was due to factors that took place within the school culture, outside of school, or at home. Of the 27 participants in the study, 13 (48%) relate that school experiences solely led to their eventual decision to quit. Life-events occurring at home or away from school were cited by 10 participants (37%) as the primary reason for leaving school early. Of the remaining participants, 3 (11%) share that there were determining events taking place at home and school alike, and an additional participant could not determine the reason he decided to quit.

**Teacher-caring.** While the reasons students use to explain dropping out are many and varied, the most prevalent answer in this study related to teacher/student relationships or teacher-caring. Thirty percent of the participants relate negative experiences with teachers as their

reason for leaving school.

Nancy believed that a teacher had a pre-disposition about her because of her ethnicity:

A friend talked me in to taking freshman algebra because, in them days you didn't have to take algebra until the tenth grade...She talked me in to it because I was in the upper math and I had good grades; talked me in to taking algebra with her. I helped her with her math and got better scores than her on her tests...I was failing and she was passing the class...He told me that I wouldn't pass his class...Because I was half Hispanic and I think there was some prejudice there...Because I had an older sibling that had been in his class, and my mom had warned me prior, and I was like, "Oh, you know, that won't happen to me" type of thing, but it did. And I did fail his class. It was the first F on my transcript...But it changed me completely as far as how my attitude towards school. Because from there...I mean that was my freshman year and my sophomore year I was hell bent on making every teacher's life miserable.

For some participants the issues were related to classroom decorum and their comfort level in approaching or being approached by the teacher:

Some of the teachers didn't care. They just didn't. Like I would ask for help and he would get mad at me, but that was mostly in, I want to say ninth grade. It was math, and he would get mad because I couldn't comprehend what he was trying to teach...So he just like just told me to go sit down...Waved his hand at me like, you know, whatever. It made me frustrated and ...it hurt my feelings because, then, I was a really shy person...For me to even go up and to ask him was hard enough. (Jessie)

Others believed that the teacher or teachers did not care for or have respect for them. Turner stated, "The teachers picked on me because I wasn't a sports kinda' person." "I left school because of teachers and the way they looked at me," said Matt. Brian opined, "Most teachers were just there for the paycheck and didn't care about you." "I have had teachers sit there and say...I ain't never gonna be worth nothing...So I kind of got red in the face over that and...snapped right at them," said Aubrey. Another participant shared of extreme emotions related to negative experiences with teachers:

Some of the teachers told a lot of us that we might as well drop out because we won't make anything of ourselves anyway. A couple of teachers called us dumb asses or stupid. My dad said if they say that again, to punch them in the mouth,



then call him. I was glad to get away from staff, a couple of them, but excited to go to work and make money. I was just tired of school and knew I could make something of myself and prove the teachers wrong (Tracy)

Tara experienced different levels of caring from teachers,

I mean it's good that they cared, and I think that...being a small school it could help more...They really wanted you to do good...Some teachers are better than others. Some of them care if you pass, you know? They want you to. And others, if you're failing, you're failing! Like, they just kind of blame it on you.

Not all participants experienced negative feelings or emotions about school and teachers:

I had several good relationships with a couple of my teachers and I still talk to them to this day. There's even this one teacher that was an assistant football coach and every time I see him we still talk and everything. (Justin)

I had another teacher, I can't think of his name right now, but I can see him...He really tried his hardest. I want to say he was my drama teacher. I will never forget him because he tried his hardest to get me to do right...Because he knew, you know, "you're goofing up, you're messing around..." He was my favorite teacher. (Jessie)

**Bullying.** While not an overriding occurrence in this study, bullying was cited by several of the participants (3 of 27 [11%]) as a reason for dropping out. "I was threatened by a student...harassed by a student, and teachers did not help" said Ceara. Charles described the feeling of being alone at school, "There was.. like, the whole group thing. Like, you got the cheerleaders, football players, your socially weird, and I was just all to myself. I never talked to anybody or anything; I just went to my classes."

Aubrey provided multiple reasons for leaving school early. In the following excerpt from his interview, he attributes being bullied at school to teachers' lack of caring and/or failing to perform their duties:

...my teachers, I don't think they were there for the right reasons. They were supposed to want to help people not try to push 'em out the door, ya' know? (laughing) I said that because they don't care... if somebody's bullying, they don't care about that. They don't care, if they see, like someone being pushed around. They are just going to let that

student be pushed around...I've had some of them physically fighting and some of them would sit there and just say...say things like eight hours a day just... every hour of the day trying to get me to fight 'em. And then there would be other dudes who were even more disturbed... a few of them would sit there and pull out their (unin) and throw it on my desk... Their...ya' know [points to crotch] their hair.

**Finding 3: Many participants (13 of 27 [48%]) attribute occurrences of negative “life-events” leading to their decision to drop out**

As in finding 3, participants were asked to determine whether their dropout decision was due to factors that took place within the school culture, outside of school, or at home. Just under half of the participants (13 of 27 [48%]) relate the decision to quit school to experiences or events that took place outside of school. Life-events occurring at home or away from school were cited by 10 participants (37%) as the primary reason for leaving school early. Of the remaining participants, 3 (11%) share that there were determining events taking place at home and school alike.

No specific life-event overwhelmed another with regard to significance or occurrence in this study as: 11% of the participants (3 of 27) cited teen pregnancy, 11% of the participants (3 of 27) spoke of financial problems, 11% of the participants(3 of 27) said they left school due to multiple negative events in their lives, 7% of the participants (2 of 27) were overcome by drug addiction, 7% of the participants (2 of 27) relate that state appointed foster care programs placed them in families who did not value or attend to their educational needs, and 4% of the participants (1 of 27) had to drop out because of hardships associated with the death of a close family member.

**Teen pregnancy.** The data shows that 11% of the participants (3 of 27) cited pregnancy as the primary reason for dropping out of high school. However, 19% of the participants (5 of 27) shared that they became pregnant during high school. Teen pregnancy had differing effects

on participants in the study. Some experienced different levels of home and school support; all experienced at least some adversity as a result of dealing with being single and pregnant.

There were several girls in my school that were having babies and a couple of them stayed in school... I had a couple friends that ended up dropping out closer to their senior year...but it is challenging...I think my grades were kind of slipping because I had been missing so much school from the pregnancy... We kind of discussed if I was going to be able to catch up... and graduate with my class...it was a very slim chance, so...Yea, my friends didn't want me to leave, just told me, "Oh you'll be fine. You can do it." But there are a lot more factors like paying for daycare... (Tara)

At that time well, you know, I became a mother young. I just stayed with family. It was one of those things that you think all your friends are still around, but then... your eyes open quickly...that all you've got to rely on is family. Your friends are still in school. They were still going to prom and graduation...but that's not the road for everyone...I was up all night with a crying baby and teething and...my friends...they thought it was cool to say, "Ooh, you got your baby." But, yeah, it wasn't so cool when it was time to go out and do fun stuff. (Nancy)

One focus-group interview participant, Catherine, a 58-year-old African-American, shared of her experience with teen pregnancy and how the school dealt with her situation. Her age and race is shared here because she said it was significant in the manner in which she had to deal with school personnel and policy at the time she was in high school. During the focus-group interview, Catherine shared that she loved and never missed school. But, when she became pregnant in ninth grade the school's attitude toward her changed. "I was put out of school because I was pregnant" said Catherine, "I didn't want to quit school and I thought about how unfair it was that the boy that got me pregnant got to stay in school."

**Money and financial hardship.** Another group of participants (3 of 27 [11%]) attributed stress at home because of money or financial matters as the reason for leaving school. School was, or seemed to be, a barrier between them and an opportunity to make money or help out at home. David shared, "My parents had a tough time...they didn't have any money to give me ... my mom didn't work...and I had other kids around me and all that." Additionally, David

expressed that he really never had any interest in school and wanted “things” that his parents would never be able to provide. Consequently, he dropped out to go to work in order to provide for himself.

Another participant, Joe, shared a story about his family’s constant mobility and money issues:

I moved from Norman (OK) and then I went to Bartlesville (OK) schools...and then from Bartlesville I went to Cherryvale (KS) and then I just...I told my uncle...I can't do it...I was in the 11th grade when I dropped out...they put me in 10th and wanted to classify me as a 9th grader. I said, it's just best that I go ahead and get my GED instead... I just didn't want to go back into another high school because I'd moved from three or four different high schools. You know? And it was just too much for me...I was getting overwhelmed... The main factor was just because ... my mom. She just didn't have the money to get a house, a three bedroom house... and I couldn't live in a room with my sister, too, so...”

**Drugs, alcohol, and substance abuse.** One of the interview and survey questions of the study asked, “When you dropped out, what did you do with the time once occupied by school?” Interviewees offered the following answers: played video games, went fishing, reading, sleeping, hanging out with other dropouts, spending time with family, helping out at home, going to ball games, riding horses, hunting, looking for jobs, raising kids, skateboarding, parties, drugs, and alcohol. Several participants (6 of 27 [22%]) shared that drugs, alcohol, and partying were issues that played a role in their decision to quit school. A few participants (2 of 27 [7%]) cited drugs as the primary reason for leaving school altogether.

Misty responded to the question, “What filled your time?”:

When I was out of school I filled my time with parties, drugs, alcohol; a lot of bad behavior. I was lost and didn’t know any other way. I had to work to help my mom pay rent. Those were (also) the things she did.

Brandy described a culture in which a large group of students in her school dropped out. She attributes the epidemic in her school to drug use. She shared the following dialogue with the

researcher:

Interviewer: Did a lot of your friends quit at the same time you did or did you find each other after you quit?

Brandy: I think it was like in between... I was getting ready to quit... some of them had already quit... quit after I quit... it's kind of like a mixture of all.

Interviewer: Was the key the fun, the freedom or the drugs? Is there any connection that would be stronger than another one?

Brandy: Um, the drugs were one of the big things.

Interviewer: Would you say they were more recreational or ...did they get into more hard kinds of things...was there a progression or anything like that?

Brandy: It definitely progressed... it started with what I thought was, you know, minimal, which was the marijuana. And then it went up to doing mushrooms to cocaine.

Aubrey also attributed part of his departure from school to drug use and other issues. He says his drug use stemmed from both family and peer influence. He shared that it eventually led to his imprisonment:

Aubrey: You know I was... a drug addict. I wasn't caring about nothing but doing drugs. But I do blame peer pressure, I blame teachers for not noticing that their students were high, you know what I mean? My family... I also blame myself most of all now, but...

Interviewer: Why do you blame your family?

Aubrey: 'Cause they... encouraged the drug use.

Interviewer: So there were users in your family too, not just you?

Aubrey: Yeah, I mean, their use didn't go as far as I did with what I use or what I used but...I didn't just do marijuana...whatever I could get a hold of... They were bad influences...they sit there and tell me, "it (school) ain't worth my time"... and then they had me smoke weed. Well, my dad would verbally abuse me and my mom... That put me farther towards the drugs and basically the whole thing is, "do drugs." I mean if you get down to a single (pause)

Interviewer: Why do you think you got into drugs?

Aubrey: Well I got into drugs first 'cause it was... recreational. But then it...got out of control...You know what I mean? Then it started controlling me. (laughing) So I

became an addict. At first, I was like, saying for everyone else to try this marijuana, it's not addictive. It ain't going to do nothin'. It is perfectly safe. But then I got involved with other drugs and they took hold of me for real.

Interviewer: So, what did you end up going to prison for?

Aubrey: Not drugs but when I was trying to buy drugs...he tried to rob me, pulled his knife and we fought and I ended up getting his knife...he tried to get it back... so I got him in his chest. He was alive... we ran two opposite directions ... I watched the news in the morning, and the dude, they found his body so I turned myself in.

Matt said that the primary reason he dropped out was due to the loss of a close family member. But, he also attributed drug use to his eventual decision to drop out:

I found drugs and liked them. I didn't like doing what I was told (so) teachers didn't care much for me. I felt that dropping out was the right thing to do because my mom passed away and she was my biggest push. I should have got over my mom passing and finished school.

**Declining attendance: a home and school factor.** A majority of the participants (15 of 27 {56%}) cited poor and/or declining attendance as a barrier to completing a diploma.

Participants in the study reported excellent attendance up to and including the sixth grade (14 of 27 {52%}). However, by high school only a few participants maintained they had a high standard for excellent attendance (5 of 27 {19%}). This finding is placed in this location of the chapter because of statements made by former students who dropped out. Some participants reported that declining attendance was a result of events which took place at home. Others reported that poor attendance was due to school factors causing them to not want to attend. Finally, others shared that both home and school factors played a role in the resulting poor attendance.

In her interview, Jessie attributed her declining attendance to factors existing at home and school.

Jessie: Up to the fifth grade it (attendance) was good. The fifth grade I wanted to stay

home a lot. I was dealing with issues with my dad passing and having an abusive stepfather. So, I just wanted to stay home a lot. And then in middle school, sixth and seventh grade, I went all the time. Except, you know, if I was sick. But I always, I was always there pretty much. Eighth grade I would skip school a lot. That's when the skipping school started, like on Friday, me and my sister would...I'd go get her out of class because I had gym and then we would scoot out the back. Then in high school, uh, ninth grade I went. Tenth grade I started skipping a lot and then eleventh grade a lot more. So...

Interviewer: What would your mother say when you skipped school?

Jessie: Well, my mom dropped out of school I think when she was in the eighth grade; eighth or ninth grade. And she worked, you know, her whole life. But, I think just having one adult in the household, like I could slack off more and my mom was more, you know, she went by our word... if we said yes, we did...we didn't do something then she would take our word, you know? It's just, I think it was easier to persuade my mom to let us do whatever we wanted.

Tara's attendance declined in high school. She believed that the school did not hold her accountable and made it too easy to miss school:

I think they (school) should be harder on the kids. Like, whenever you are that age...you kind of make your decision on if you're really sick that day...if they would have been like, "Well, we are going to pick you up every day", or you know, "you're going to have these consequences if you don't come to school." Instead they were threatening my mom.

Another participant, Joe, shared that no other members of his family had graduated from high school. He said that education was not emphasized at home and that culture made it easy for him to miss school.

When I went from middle to high school, that's when it (attendance) started changing. I started...slacking off a little bit. And I would ...stay home...pretend sick...you know, play hooky. And then I... started slacking off really bad when I got up in high school. ... it was my mom's decision... sometimes they would just let me stay...They were really lenient with me. And when I hit 11th grade, I started missing a whole bunch and they seemed like they, they kinda' let it slide. They let it slide way more than they should have, that's true.

**Finding 4: The majority of the participants (13 of 25 [52%]) indicated that they were going to leave school regardless of any actions or gestures friends, family, or school could**

**make as an attempt to keep them from dropping out**

Participants were asked, “Was there anything anyone could have said or done to keep you in school?” The majority of participants reported that it did not matter what anyone said or did to try to keep them in school at the time the decision was made to drop out. He or she had made up his or her mind and nothing could change it.

**Most had made up their mind.**

I was very firm on what I felt I should have done at the time, you know...my mother didn't finish high school, I mean she did try to turn herself around. She ended up working for Southwestern Bell for 35 years and, you know, supported us girls, so. I mean she did turn herself around. She tried...she tried to get me to stay in school, but I was just stubborn, very stubborn (Jesse)

At the time when I quit, no! I was just stubborn and thought I knew it all and thought I could do without having to go to school. Like most kids do... Well, I thought I knew enough by the time I quit that I could go out; I wanted to work, I wanted to have a family from the time I was a little girl, all I wanted was a husband ... children, a family... my family is very family oriented and ... close... I thought that I was old enough to do this. Matter of fact, when I left school, I thought I was pregnant. I wasn't. Matter of fact, after I got married, it was 13 months later, you know, so... it was just I thought I was grown up enough that I didn't need school anymore and I wanted to go to work and be a grownup. (Brenda)

...I was, you know, active in school. It wasn't as though I wasn't a good student, it was just that he (assistant principal) didn't like the group I was with and he knew that... he was trying to influence me and I didn't want to be influenced. I didn't want him telling me what I could and could not do. So... and I think that's a typical high school, you know, attitude (Nancy)

**Though, some might have stayed.** While just over half of the participants shared that they were going to drop out of school regardless of other's opinions or any consequences, many of the participants (12 of 27 [44%]) said that there were actions that could have been taken to keep them in school. This is significant to this study because one of its primary goals is to determine what schools might do differently in order to keep students in school until the completion of a diploma program.



Aubrey had strong opinions and suggestions for schools:

I think that the public school system has got it backwards. See they help these students that are already excelling at their work and here is this person that's struggling. That's the person who's going to fall through the cracks, because all their attention's focused on these kids that don't need no help with their school work and academics. These guys are falling through cracks constantly because teachers ain't helping people who actually need the help. You know what I mean? Like let's say there's a Glee Club. I mean, that person that's leading that Glee Club should be out there trying to get students to go in there... Or you have an art class or music class. That teacher should be out there trying to get students to come into their class... But I didn't have any of those opportunities other than that one art teacher. Because she, and I wasn't going to join any classes for real, I was just going to (pause)... but she caught me in the hallway cause she heard I could draw... got me involved in art which kept me there for longer then I would've been for real.

Another participant said she might have stayed under different circumstances:

Just the teachers maybe having better relationships with their students. You know, caring. Like, if I was a teacher I would want to know I did a good job by knowing my kids are passing... And if they are not passing, ways that I could help them pass... (Tara)

**Effective school practices that deter dropout.** The survey and interview protocol asked each participant to rate their high school on five practices of effective schools using a 1 to 5 Likert scale instrument; 1 being a very low rating, 5 being an exceptional rating. These practices were identified in the literature review (chapter two) as effective in aiding schools in dropout prevention and in promoting social, emotional, learning (SEL).

***Form partnerships between school and families to encourage learning.*** Study participants have particularly low opinions of their high school's ability or resolve to provide service in this area. Of the five effective indicators chosen for this study, forming home-to-school partnerships was rated the lowest as 18 of 27 participants (67%) rated their school as a "1" or "2" at providing this service.

"They really didn't (communicate)" said Justin, "the only time they really communicated with my parents was sending something home to get signed. They really didn't even bother to

build a relationship... even... talk about college with them or anything like that.” Tara added, “I don’t think they really communicated a lot with my mom.” “I mean the only time my school called my house was if I got suspended or in a fight” said Brian. Nancy thinks that ineffective school to home communications or the forming of partnerships is a high school problem. She alluded that a possible reason for this was that the high school student does not want their parent involved at school.

See, not at high school level. Elementary, middle school (yes), but not at high school level. Once they hit puberty I think they become, it’s like they want to be their own adult... they don’t want the parents... doing all the things in the schools.

Participants in the focus-group felt that there is a need for positive and frequent school-to-home communication.

Catherine: Well, in some grades, like the fourth grade, my teacher and my mom was close, so, there would be good in it.

Interviewer: So that matters? Does it matter?

Catherine: It matters.

Interviewer: You think it matters if the school keeps in contact with the house?

Brian: It can.

Catherine: It matters ‘cause that way they can get more, the parents can talk it over with the teachers and see what’s really going on.

Brian: Yea, the parents can learn what the kids need.

Catherine: With their children, it matters a whole lot. Kids will just, say, “I don’t know.” They don’t talk to you about it. They just go along with whatever, teachers and stuff. If you get involved with your children and stuff, it works out better.

Brian: And it helps to have a, what you’d call a praise-reward type thing. Then parents would get involved.

***Safe and orderly schools.*** Providing a safe and orderly learning environment was the

only effective school indicator that received overall positive feedback from participants. While some of the participants rated their school low, a 1 or 2 (6 of 27 [22%]), a majority (19 of 27 [70%]) of participants rated their school as a 4 or 5 and indicated that their school did a good job in making students feel safe. Overt actions, such as installing surveillance and conducting locker sweeps, were identified as school actions that make students feel safe. “They made sure, you know, everybody was safe at school. I know for a fact they have cameras all over the place” said Justin. Another response typifies the input regarding safe and orderly schools.

There were a lot of times that they, you know, went through your lockers and, you know, they had policies, you know, with the weapons and stuff, but there wasn't a lot of that going on when I was in high school. There wasn't a lot of threat. (Tara)

While a large majority of the study participants expressed an overall sense of safety at school, one participant partially attributed his departure from school to what he felt were unsafe conditions.

It's kinda hard to be safe in a school where the students, or a particular student, for example, outweighs the teacher 3 to 1, in weight, height... Where their... own life is being threatened by a student. I think that the school should have active security instead of the illusion of security. What I mean by that, is, uh, metal detectors. In the main hall? Ok!... But what about fire exits? What about... the other exits? ... more cameras. More physically able security guards... (Brian)

***Teachers build effective relationships with students.*** Many participants (12 of 27 [44%]) rated their high school as “1” or “2” in teacher-caring and establishing positive relationships with students. Five participants (19%) reported that teachers in their school did not even try to establish relationships with students. Another seven (26%) indicated that teachers in their high school made little, if any, effort to establish meaningful relationships with students. While seven participants (26%) gave their school a rating of “3”, only eight participants (30%) rated their school “4” or “5”. A discussion under Finding 3 shared detailed thoughts and

experiences from participants about the topic of teacher-caring.

***Provide engaged learning, cooperative learning, and proactive classroom management that enhances college and career readiness.*** The tenets of effective schools and social, emotional learning view this heading as instructional practice that enables students to be prepared better for college and career. The sentiment from many of the participants (14 of 27 [52%]) is that most high school classes are not relevant for this purpose. Most of the participants thought that the high school curriculum could and should have been more meaningful and rapt with real world application. Only six participants (22%) related that they felt instruction at their school prepared them for college and career.

Honestly I thought school was boring...I guess, I just didn't see the purpose of learning the things that they were teaching. I told them... that they were a waste of my time. I didn't see the purpose in being there... what they were teaching me, I didn't think I would be using in my future. (Brandy)

My opinion is, elementary you learn two plus two, four times four, blah, blah, blah. And it just, it felt to me that it was repetitive. Once you got out of elementary, you went to middle school; two plus two, four plus four, four times four, blah, blah, blah. I just can't... You're already teaching stuff that you taught me last year. It's not that it's not going to stick in there but you don't have to go over it and over it. All I remember then is, "pull out your book, turn to page, pull out your book, turn to page." I felt like I was smarter than the school, actually. Because I already knew most of that stuff and (pause, shrug). (Charles)

Not all of the feedback about the relevancy of high school curriculum was negative. "I'm using the skills that I learned in high school now," said Tara "...taking notes and just trying to be prepared and... using a planner to keep all your assignments and due dates... I learned that in high school."

***The school had high expectations for students.*** Of the five effective school strategies selected for this research study, this one showed the most diversity among opinions. Just over half of the participants (14 of 27 [52%]) think that their high school had high expectations for

student performance and success. Many (10 of 27 [37%]) felt that the school had high or very high expectations for them. However, in contrast, almost as many felt that their school held no or low expectations for them (13 of 27 [48%]).

Nancy, who dropped out of school as an underclassman, responded “Not that I saw, but then I think they gear that towards juniors and seniors. They don’t think of it as, you know, for the freshmen and sophomores.” David felt that the school’s expectations were conditional, “Well, you know I think that...they did if you were a good student. I think if you were a good student with an interest at graduating from high school, yes. But if you were a mediocre student probably not so much.” Tara interpreted high expectations as whether the school shared an expectancy and preparation for college. She stated, “No, I don’t even think I really thought about college my sophomore year... when you are a sophomore you should probably be considering what you are going to do after... But I don’t think that they have even really talked to us about schools.”

#### **Chapter Four Summary**

This chapter presented four findings from an interview and survey protocol which was based upon the research questions. Participants shared their thoughts, feelings, reflections, and perceptions as to how they experienced the phenomenon of dropping out of high school. Personal expressions were shared in the form of quotations throughout the findings section. Such quotations were gleaned during the data collection phase of the study, many deriving from face-to-face interviews or written quotes from short answer survey questions. All of the participants dropped out of high school and were current or former GED students in the southeast Kansas Adult Basic Education Consortium. The consortium included students from all of the primary southeast Kansas GED centers except Pittsburg. These include: Fort Scott,

Coffeyville, Parsons, Independence, and Chanute (see Table 3.2). Each participant was invited to participate in the project and did so between January and June of 2013.

The first finding of this study connected to research question one, “What are the common/shared experiences and perceptions of individuals who have dropped out in southeast Kansas?” The primary finding is that the overwhelming majority of participants view dropping out of school as a mistake. This view was shared repeatedly as 78% of the participants said they should have stayed in school. This conviction was typically followed by a discussion of struggles experienced in securing satisfactory employment and dealing with personal financial difficulties.

The second finding was that 60% of the participants connect negative school experiences with their decision to drop out of high school. This finding addresses research questions two and three as the researcher seeks to find out whether the decision to leave school stemmed from culminating factors at school or elsewhere. Participants who attribute negative school experiences to the decision to dropout most commonly identified a negative experience with a teacher or teachers. The resonating opinion of participants was that teachers did not care.

The third finding was that 48% of the participants attribute occurrences of negative “life-events” as leading to their decision to drop out. Life-events were experiences such as teen pregnancy, marriage, financial hardships, and substance use and abuse.

The fourth finding was that the majority of participants (52%) said they were going to leave school regardless of any actions or gestures friends, family, or school could make as an attempt to keep them from dropping out.

## **CHAPTER FIVE - ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATION, AND SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS**

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to delve beyond the statistics of the phenomena in order to take a deeper look into the lived experiences of students in southeast Kansas who have dropped out. By accomplishing this, school and community leaders might be better-informed to create effective strategy, policy, and practice in dropout prevention. Such strategies will encourage citizens to stay in school and attain the highest level of education possible. Many studies in the literature seek to explain why students drop out and there are statistical indicators available to educators enabling identification of who is at risk of doing so. While such studies are abundant in some regions of the United States, no substantial, qualitative, phenomenological research on the topic as it relates to residents in rural Kansas had been accomplished in more than 30 years. It is hoped that this study will provide context to the dropout problem as experienced by students in southeast Kansas, and although specific to this area, the research might provide transferability to rural communities elsewhere. It is believed that adequately addressing the research questions will provide educators greater insight into the actions and decisions students make which eventually result in the decision to drop out of high school. Access to such information will allow educators and community leaders in southeast Kansas to purposefully address student needs, thus strengthening dropout intervention. The primary research questions are:

- 1) What are the common/shared experiences and perceptions of individuals who have dropped out of school in southeast Kansas?
- 2) Are there actions or events occurring outside of school that contribute to students dropping out?

- 3) Are there actions or events occurring inside the school culture that contribute to students dropping out?
- 4) Are there identifiable actions, strategies, or interventions that might have kept students from dropping out?

### **Overview**

This chapter attempts to interpret and detail what seems to be taking place with individuals as they experience dropping out in southeast Kansas. An ability to understand common and shared experiences from the participant's perspective allows the researcher to develop a deeper understanding about the phenomenon, moreover, an ability to create practice and policy adequate to the specific context (Creswell, 2007). This task will be accomplished by integrating the interpretation of the findings with literature, research, and practice (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). This differs from the discussion of the findings in chapter four, which present a narrative of the stories participants shared--stories shared without analytical interpretation or remark. The chapter provides an analysis, interpretation, and synthesis of the findings utilizing the following elements as prescribed by Bloomberg and Volpe (2008): "(a) connective threads among participant experiences, (b) ways participants understand and explain these connections, (c) unexpected as well as anticipated relationships and connections, (d) consistency or inconsistency with the literature, and (e) ways in which the data go beyond the literature" (p.139).

An in-depth discussion of the findings is provided via the analysis, interpretation, and synthesis of the data according to four analytical categories:

- 1) Participant perceptions about the decision to drop out of high school, its relationship to where they are in life and where they thought they would be (research question 1).

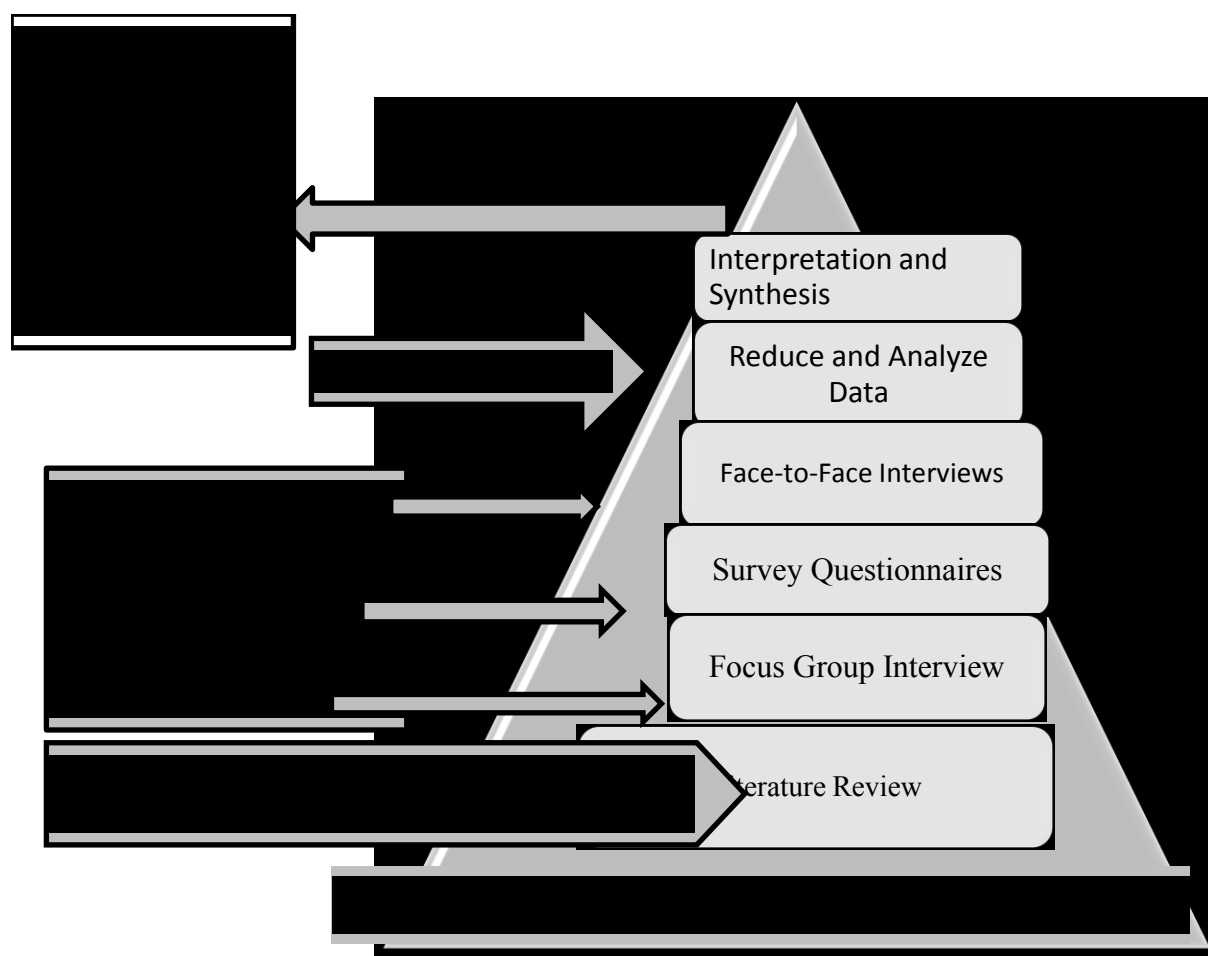


- 2) Participant perceptions about school experiences and their relationship to a student's decision to drop out (research questions 1 and 3).
- 3) Participant perceptions about non-school experiences (life-events) and their relationship to a student's decision to drop out (research questions 1 and 2).
- 4) Participant perceptions about any strategies, interventions, or practices that might have kept them in school (research questions 1 and 4).

Following a detailed discussion of each analytical category, the assumptions for the study, as identified in chapter one, will be revisited and reviewed. The chapter concludes by summarizing the interpretation of the findings and by providing a plausible explanation as to why this is happening.

### **Review of Data Analysis and Research Design**

Four analytical categories derived from a detailed analytical and research design process (see Figure 5.1). The research questions, aligned with the literature review from chapter two, provided a foundation for the research protocol instruments: the survey questionnaire, the face-to-face interview questions, and the focus-group interview questions. Integrated together, these components provided the source for multiple levels of coding which led to the development of the analytical categories identified for further analysis and interpretation in this chapter. This was accomplished by applying the *Streamlined Codes-To-Theory Model* (Saldana, 2009) (see Figure 5.2). In this model, the researcher constructs a plausible theory by dissecting text into codes, subsequently linking related codes to form categories. Categories were discussed with attention given to description and linkage to the literature review. After working through this process in each category, information was synthesized and conclusions drawn.



*Figure 5.1.* Flowchart of Research Design (adapted from Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 194)

### **Coding Scheme**

The data were organized and reduced according to organizational, structural, and elaborative coding methods. Organizational and structural methods were simultaneously applied during the first cycle of coding. The organizational method was utilized for open coding and sought to identify key words, terms, and phrases used by participants that would connect to answering the research questions. The structural coding method was applied as focused coding which sought data showing a relationship to the research questions.

A second cycle of focused coding was conducted utilizing the elaborative coding method.

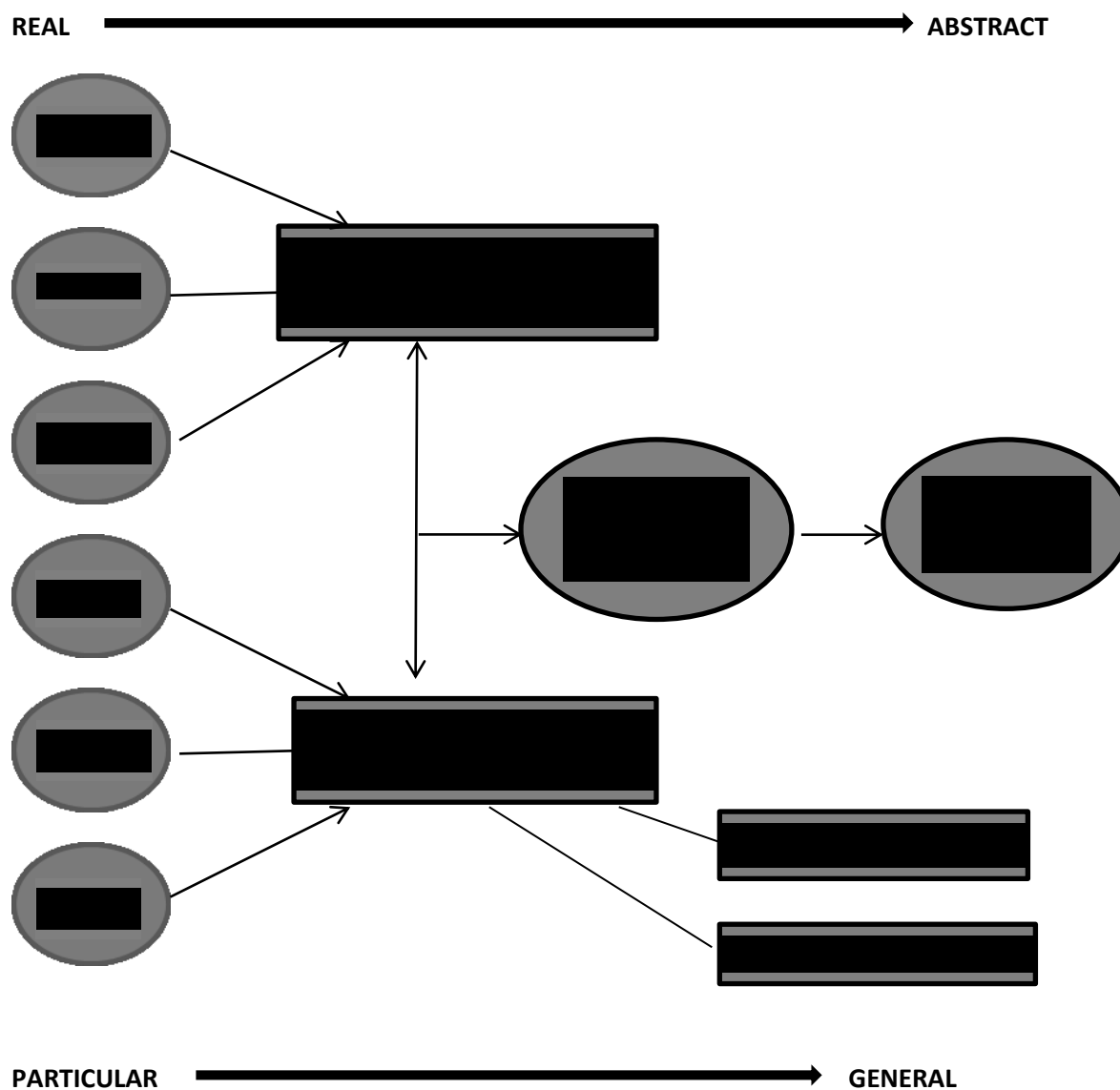


Figure 5.2. "Streamlined codes-to-theory" model for qualitative inquiry (Saldana, 2009, pg. 12)

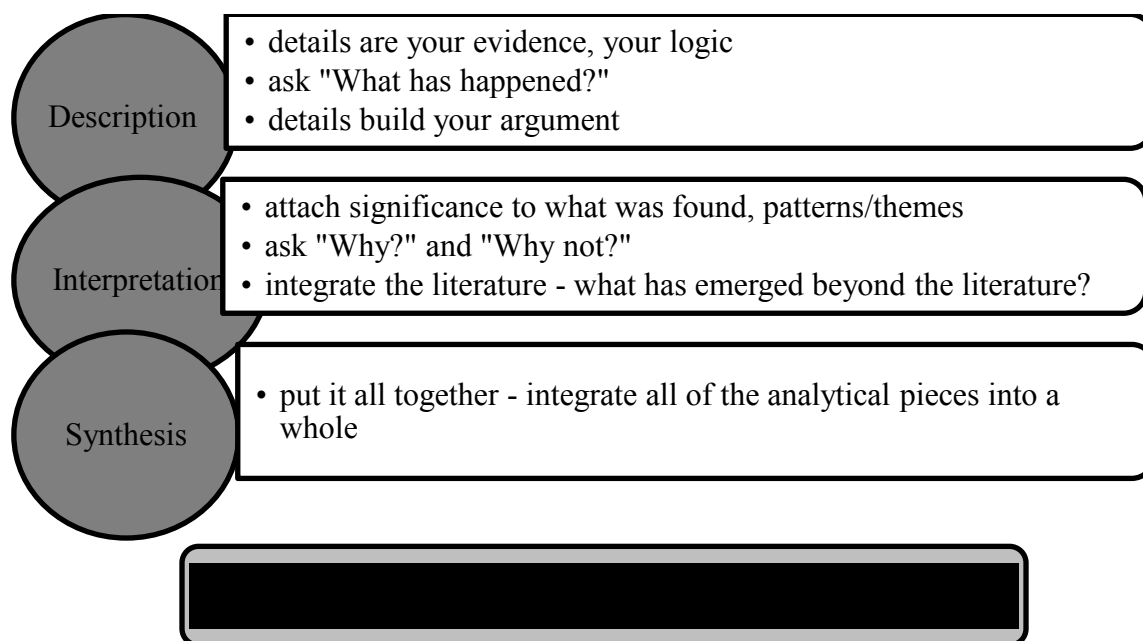
Elaborative codes were pre-determined based on findings from three major studies critical to the conceptual framework of this study: *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts* (Bridgeland et al., 2006), *What Your Community Can Do To End Its Drop-out Crisis: Learnings From Research and Practice* (Balfanz, 2007), and *Facing the School Dropout Dilemma* (2011). This type of coding was selected to determine if these studies, conducted on a national scale,

were relevant to this work conducted in southeast Kansas.

The aforementioned scheme failed to reveal any emergent codes as all of the codes used for analysis were pre-conceived as part of the conceptual framework or taken from the research questions. Layder (1998, as cited in Saldana, 2009) justifies this approach stating that “pre-established sociological theories can inform, if not drive, the initial coding. The development of an original theory is not always a necessary outcome for qualitative inquiry” (p.11).

### **Process of Analysis**

Application of this simple coding scheme ultimately led to the findings and its four analytical categories. Having identified the prior analytical categories, the researcher sought to find connections, patterns, and relationships within the categories to support these themes (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Themes were developed by comparing and contrasting the descriptions of participant experiences in this study with the literature from other



*Figure 5.3.* Analytical considerations for this study as adapted by the researcher from Bloomberg & Volpe (2008).

phenomenological studies on dropout. Information from participant descriptions and the literature review were subsequently interpreted and integrated into a holistic description of the essence or meaning of how this phenomenon was experienced in southeast Kansas. Making these connections via inductive reasoning was an important step in the analysis and interpretation of the study (Maxwell, 2005).

For the purpose of the following discussion it is important to distinguish between “reasons” and “indicators” as applicable to descriptions provided in this analysis. “Reasons” were as perceived and provided through the words and opinions of the research participants, while “indicators” were identifiable characteristics and were present whether noted by the participant or not. Such indicators are characteristics; markers generally accepted as warning signs for dropout: poor attendance, difficulty in reading and math, and disengagement from school.

### **Category 1: Participant Perceptions about the Decision to Drop Out of High School and What It Means to Them Now (research question 1)**

A discussion of this analytical category addressed the shared or common experiences of individuals who dropped out of high school in southeast Kansas. Examples of such experiences were evident in each of the four analytical categories. For this reason, data relevant to this question was threaded throughout the discussion of each category; however, the discussion for this category will focus on the participant's shared experiences about dropping out and what that has meant to them.

#### **Dropping Out Was a Mistake; I Should Have Stayed in School**

There was a contrast between how participants currently viewed their decision to drop out versus when the decision was made. The interview and survey protocols asked participants: "At the time, did you think dropping out was the right thing for you?" and, "At the present time, do you think it was the right thing to do?" Most participants thought that when they dropped out of school, it was the right thing to do. In fact, over half of participants said that there was nothing anyone could have said or done to keep them in school. Conversely, seventy-four percent said that they should have stayed in school. This is consistent with the findings of Bridgeland et al. (2006).

Participants in this study shared a ranged variety of life-events experienced after high school. One participant had only been out of high school for a month before sharing his story. He dropped out of high school and almost immediately enrolled in the GED program. In contrast, another participant waited almost 40 years to do so. Despite the wide range of time away from school and differing life experiences, almost all of the participants said that, in retrospect, dropping out was the wrong thing to do. Brenda said, "I wish I would have graduated

and already had my GED or diploma so I could have went and done something...I could have been doing something else.” Another participant, David regrettably said, “I think everything I did and accomplished would have been done easier with more education.”

In fact, regret was a common emotion expressed among participants throughout the study with much of the anguish centered on their personal employment and economic situations.

Evidence of this was manifested by statements like:

I thought it would be easy to find a good job. I thought there would be more options. I thought I could at least work in an office, somewhere along that line...But the only choice I have is fast food. I just felt, even though I didn't have a high school education I would find a good job because I learn quick and work hard (Misty).

Such statements represent a depressing reality for high school dropouts as the chances for unemployment increase dramatically for individuals without high school credentials (Plank et al., 2008) and the earning potential for high school dropouts has steadily declined for over 30 years and has decreased by about 35% ("Dropout Reduction," 2009; Autor, Katz, & Kearney, 2005). The state of Kansas has made an effort to inform students of such likelihood as the current state law requires schools to share employment and wage information statistics to potential dropouts prior to their parents allowing them to quit school. Such information and statistics-sharing comes in the form of a counseling session as described in chapter one of this study. Data from interview transcripts and surveys for this study suggest that this practice is ineffective. Few participants could remember conversation which occurred from the counseling session and none were persuaded to stay in school as a result. The perceived ineffectiveness of the counseling session aside, the statistics are very telling. In 2012, the national unemployment rate for adults without a high school diploma was 12.4% as opposed to 8.3% for persons with a diploma and 6.8% for all workers (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). The reality is that the chances of being

unemployed are significantly decreased with each additional degree or certification of educational attainment. Educational attainment has a similar relationship to weekly earnings. In 2012, the median weekly income for workers without a high school diploma was \$471 as compared to \$652 for workers with a diploma and \$815 for all workers (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012).

### **So Why Do They Leave Early?**

Students who leave school early in southeast Kansas do not do so blindly. This is revealed to some extent in the expression of emotions felt at the time dropout occurred. Students who drop out are armed with the knowledge of the greater potential for negative outcomes. This is particularly true of more recent dropouts who were subjected to the waiver counseling session. As aforementioned, the waiver counseling session informs the student and his or her parent that the student most likely lacks the necessary skills to be college and career ready. Additionally, it informs them that the decision to drop out could have lifelong implications on employment and earning opportunities.

While schools take the time to inform students of the potential for negative outcomes, there is a sense that participants already knew the road might not be an easy one. It has been reported that 30% of the participants in this study felt dropping out was the wrong thing for them to do; they acknowledged this from the start. Though the perception of another 60% was that dropping out was the right thing to do at the time. Additional data from the study seems to contradict such a high level of confidence in the decision; for example, participants were asked to share the emotion they felt upon deciding to quit school (see Appendix H). As discussed in the Findings section, of the 26 respondents, only five tendered positive feelings that were not otherwise countered with hesitation or opposing emotions such as fear, worry, anxiety, and



doubt. Participant responses, at least to some extent, demonstrated an awareness of the potential for personal challenges resulting from their decision. It appears they were not as confident in the decision as expressed.

### **Interpretation of Category 1**

The prior discussion embodies the nature of shared experiences of participants who dropped out in southeast Kansas. Participant expressions in this study were not unlike those from *The Silent Epidemic*. It seems that dropouts in southeast Kansas and elsewhere experience many of the same emotions and challenges. It seems that most of the participants were aware of the challenges facing them if they dropped out - most made the decision armed with the knowledge of the impending consequences of such a decision, but, as in this study, a large percentage say that they were going to leave school regardless of what anyone said or did. In retrospect, participants lamented that decision as emanated through the most common statement, “I should have stayed in school” or in the form of advice to others, “Stay in school”.

### **Category 2: Participant Perceptions about Negative School Experiences and Their Relationship to a Student’s Decision to Drop Out (research questions 1 and 3)**

A discussion of this analytical category revealed information to answer research questions 1 and 3. The first research question sought to discern the shared or common experiences of individuals who dropped out of school in southeast Kansas. Research question three asked if there were negative school experiences that influenced the participant’s decision to drop out of high school. Participants related several school-time experiences to their decision to drop out of high school including issues with teachers, boredom with school, poor grades, bullying from peers and/or teachers, and school rules that were difficult to follow. Of the four broad-based classes (Balfanz, 2007), three have a relationship to this analytical category: fade-

outs, push-outs, and failing-to-succeed at school.

The most common reason participants provided for dropping out of school related to issues with teachers. The overriding perception of many who dropped out was that teachers just do not care. Various survey participants shared, “teachers didn’t like me,” “I had problems with teachers,” “I was actually threatened by a teacher,” “teachers didn’t care; they were just there for the money.” Having served 32 years as a Kansas educator, the researcher has listened to countless teens express similar concerns about teachers. Moreover, having known and worked with hundreds of teachers, it is perplexing to see that some are described to be rather rude, thoughtless, and careless. It has long been the researcher’s opinion that there are few teachers who lack an acceptable level of compassion and concern for kids. However, a 2011 study (Wilcox & Angelis, 2011) contrasting effective schools with ineffective schools supports what many of the participants felt, that teachers neither held high expectations for them nor encouraged them to overcome challenges and limitations. It appears that teacher words and actions are powerful and persuasive to students and support a “perception is reality” philosophy.

Participants who cited teacher-caring as a primary reason for dropping out often shared about other issues that were going on in their lives. It seemed that participants felt teachers knew, or were supposed to know, what was going on in their lives away from school - what was going on at home. The absence of teacher comment or other expressions of concern was perceived as a lack of caring. Aubrey disclosed, “If they would have showed some compassion towards the issues I had and tried to make a difference...I would have stayed. If I thought any of those teachers cared whether I stayed or left, I would have probably stayed.”

One of the early questions in the interview and survey protocols asked participants to identify the primary reasons they attribute to drop out. As pertinent to the discussion in this

section, many identified a lack of teacher-caring. At the end of the interview/survey protocol, a Lickert-scale (Appendix L) was used to ask participants to rate the reason they left school that most closely related to one of the four broad-based categories for dropout. Many of the same participants who designated teacher-caring as the primary reason for leaving school identified life-events as the reason they dropped out; such responses typify the complexity of the phenomenon and difficulty in predicting and/or preventing its occurrence. It seems likely that not one, but a combination of factors often leads to a student making the difficult choice to quit school early. Whether a result of poor teacher-relationships or a multitude of factors, it is evident that students benefit from supportive actions from teachers. Justin shared, “some of the teachers didn’t care, they just didn’t...It made me frustrated...it hurt my feelings.”

Classifying teacher-caring in one of the four broad classes of reasons students drop out appears to be a matter of perception. The researcher would assert that students who identify teacher issues as their reason for dropping out should be classified as fade-outs. This is a matter of school personalization; the school is not a comfortable place for some students, some do not feel that they belong or are a part of any of the school’s culture or sub-cultures. It has already been noted that such a connection is vital to student success (Sizer, 2004). Without such personalization or connectedness, the student may decide to take a different pathway and drop out. Participants saw teacher-caring differently. Lickert-scale responses from the data collection reflect that most participants who identified teacher-caring as a primary reason to drop out would classify themselves as a push-out, someone who was unwelcome at school. One argument might be that if students do not perceive they are welcome in class by teachers or others, they are in effect pushed out.

In addition to asking participants the overall reason they had for dropping out of school,

they were asked to share about the first time they ever thought about it. Further, each was asked to elaborate as to why they were having such thoughts. Answers to this question revealed that being bored with school was as prevalent as having issues with teachers, poor grades, and pregnancy. Jessie shared, "I just didn't want to be there. It was boring to me... I didn't take it seriously." Brandy stated, "Honestly, I thought school was boring. I guess I just didn't see the purpose of learning the things they were teaching." Similar thoughts were echoed in the *Silent Epidemic* (Bridgeland et al., 2006) as nearly half of the 467 persons interviewed cited boredom as a reason for dropping out of high school:

Again and again, participants recounted how high school was 'boring...the teacher just stood in front of the room and just talked and didn't really like involve you...and another complained, 'they make you take classes in school that you're never going to use in life' (p. 4).

Recent school reform efforts, as organized by the National Association of Secondary School Principals, focus on issues like forming positive student-teacher relationships and counteracting boredom at school in order to reduce dropout (Sizer, 2004). Such reform stresses the importance of making each student feel as though he or she is integral to the school. These efforts focus on connecting students through increased engagement in their own learning and through inclusion of all students in various types of activities. Other reform efforts have targeted transitional experiences from middle to high school to include encouragement to, and in some cases, requirement to participate in school activities. Participation in school activities can strengthen this connection and promote a greater sense of teacher-caring as students are exposed to teacher personalities outside of the instructional climate ("Support Activities," 1996).

Participants who identified boredom with school were consistent in their assertion on the Lickert-scale rating identifying fade-out as the broad based reason for dropping out of school.

As was evidenced in this study, declining or poor attendance was a primary indicator of fade-out. Almost one-hundred percent of the participants shared about having excellent school attendance (as per the protocol, fewer than 10 days absent per year) in elementary and middle school (junior high). This sharply contrasted with reports of high school attendance, where over half of the participants shared they had poor attendance (as per the protocol, absent 15 or more days of school per year), and only five still claiming to be excellent. “When I went from middle to high school, that's when it started changing,” shared Joe, “I would stay home...I would pretend to be sick, play hooky... I just started slacking off really bad when I got up in high school.” Brandy adds, “They (classes) were a waste of my time. I didn’t see the purpose in being there and what they were teaching me, I didn’t think I would be using it in my future.”

Boredom with school, in combination with increased freedom to make adult choices, is not a recipe for success in teenagers. Participants shared that as they made the transition from middle school to high school they were given the freedom to make more individual choices, including whether to attend school or not. Many believe that giving students such choices is a mistake that enhances the probability of dropout (Bridgeland et al., 2006). An example of increased freedom for high school students even exists at the state level as some governance allows students the choice to drop out before they become adults. Furthermore, some schools neither require students to adhere to attendance and participation policies nor do they report to parents when students are absent. Participants in this study readily acknowledge that, in retrospect, they should not have been given such freedom.

Failing to succeed (Appendix L), an accumulation of academic failures or inability to pass classes, is a common indicator of dropout in southeast Kansas and elsewhere. Researchers consistently find that low student achievement and overall performance is highly related to

dropping out (Rumberger, 2001). Many consider poor grades and scores on academic achievement tests to be one of the best predictors of whether a student will stay in school (Balfanz, 2007; Pallas, Entwisle, Alexander, & Cadigan, 1987). One-fourth of the participants on the Lickert-scale survey indicated that failing-to-succeed in school played a major role in their early departure from high school. Relative to this, just over one-fourth of the participants reported receiving unacceptable grades (grades of D and F) in reading and math beginning in elementary school, continuing up to and through the time they dropped out. Throughout the interviews it seemed apparent that some participants lacked what might be deemed as academic confidence, an uncertainty, perhaps a frustration in whether or not they could finish the GED program. This would seem justifiable for some as academic successes may not have been routinely experienced:

“The first time I ever thought about it (dropping out) was in 10<sup>th</sup> grade...it was just my grades...not being able to make them better...I was getting frustrated with even trying...in some subjects, I just couldn't get it,” said Brenda. Jessie stated, “through the years I had different teachers...I remember going up and talking to him...he would explain it to me, but one minute I would get it and the next minute it would not be there...it just really confused me.”

Another indication of dropout was from bullying. Bullying is prevalent at all levels of schooling and can affect a student's academic performance (Schneider, O'Donnell, Stueve, & Coulter, 2012). Bullying in schools is manifested as, but not limited to, verbal harassment, physical aggression, and online or cyber bullying. In 2011, approximately one-fourth of teenage respondents in a national survey indicated being bullied at school within the past school year (Zhang, Truman, Snyder, Robers, & American Institutes for Research, 2012). Some participants shared that they were bullied by peers; one alleged being harassed by a school staff member, a

teacher. Aubrey said, “There was a lot of bullying...I just didn’t get along with nobody.” The researcher asked participants if anything could have been said or done that might have kept them in school. One male respondent simply said, “Yes, stop the bully!” A participant in the *Kansas Youth Survey* (2009) offered a similar perception, “The principal should have listened to me...and he could have tried to stop the bullying, because I know that I wasn’t the only one to have been bullied.”

Bullying is not specifically included in any of the four broad classes for dropout discussed in the conceptual framework; however, all of the participants who indicated they were bullied in school rated push-out as their greatest personal indicator for dropout. Many perceived that the school had knowledge of them being bullied and either condoned the action or ignored that it was happening. Every indication from participants is that they would have stayed in school if the bullying had ceased. In the absence of satisfactory school actions, it appears that victims chose to remove themselves from the situation.

The final indication for dropout in this category was “problems with following school rules.” The most common characteristic noted by participants was how they experienced difficulties in following attendance policies and procedures. Over half of the participants identified difficulties in either making it to school or getting to school on time. One participant identified expulsion as his main reason for leaving high school:

I was in a Christian school and they kicked me out for getting in trouble with police, even though I did nothing wrong in school...I asked them how they could be a Christian school and just kick me out because I got in trouble. I felt like a failure and was confused as to why they kicked me out. I would never have dropped out if I had an option to stay in school. (Ashton)

While only two participants shared being expelled from school, 10 individuals indicated that the main reason they left school was because of being pushed out. In fact, four participants

reported that they left school because they simply were not welcome. Of course, students do not have to be expelled to perceive being pushed out of school. Two of the participants in the study were pregnant while in high school, yet shared that they viewed themselves as being pushed out of school. One indicated that had she received any amount of support from a teacher she would have stayed in school. Other participants perceiving themselves to be pushed out did so due to having issues with teachers as discussed prior.

### **Interpretation of Category 2**

The literature review provided support to conclude that negative school experiences are the most common influence on dropout (Alexander et al., 2001). This proved to be the case for many of the participants in this study who made the decision to leave school early. Contributing school-time issues involved negative teacher relationships, boredom with school which led to poor attendance, bad grades and the resulting lack of credit, and perceived bullying. Central to almost every negative school-time factor was the presence and authority of the teacher. It seems that teacher words serve as a powerful force in the adolescent mind. Many participants insisted that teachers neither cared for them nor made an effort to make them feel comfortable at school. Many who cited issues such as boredom, grades, and bullying thought the teacher could do more to help them. While it seems unlikely that teachers directly sought to push students out of school, it is keenly apparent that teacher actions and words hold great power to influence young people.

School-time factors often influence a student's decision to stay in school or dropout. Given the evidence, it is interesting to note that some students who experience similar school circumstances deal with them differently; some drop out and some graduate. There are multiple and complex explanations for this which will be discussed further in the Synthesis section of this



chapter.

**Category 3: Participant Perceptions about Life-Events and Their Relationship to a Student's Decision to Drop Out (research questions 1 and 2)**

Life-events provide many of the reasons students offer for leaving school. Life-events can be attributed to any of a number of occurrences that distract kids from concentrating on, or making school a priority (Alexander et al., 2001). Studies on dropout have attempted to identify certain life-events as markers for schools to focus interventions toward. While such markers are better than not having any identifiers (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002), they are not firm indicators of who will or will not drop out (Rumberger, 2001).

The research protocols pressed participants to prioritize and identify indicators that played the greatest role in their decision to quit school. Most participants cite an accumulation of multiple problems weighing on their decision to leave early. Just under half of the participants selected life-events. These participants include those who experienced teen pregnancy, those who had to quit school to help support themselves and/or their family, others who suffered addictions to chemical substances, and those who were placed into state custody with homes that did not require or allow them to attend school.

About 26% of the female participants identified pregnancy, marriage, or becoming a parent as an important factor in their decision to leave school early. Statistics from the *Silent Epidemic* are very similar as 26% of the women in their survey also said that becoming a parent was a key in their decision to drop out. Respondents from both studies shared that the additional responsibilities, along with school, were just too much to handle. One southeast Kansas participant's story fits what has become a familiar pattern in teens that drop out due to pregnancy. This pattern is a gradual separation from school resulting in declining school

attendance (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012), soon followed by failing grades, loss of credit, and ultimately, dropping out of school. A 58-year-old participant, Catherine, reported that she was not allowed to return to school when the principal learned that she was pregnant. She became pregnant in the ninth grade at age 15. “It was a different time,” she said, “girls weren’t welcome in school when they got pregnant...but the boy was allowed to stay in school and graduate.” Catherine reported excellent attendance and good grades up to the time she was no longer allowed to attend. She also enjoyed positive parental support and shared that her mother would have kept the baby and encouraged her to attend school if school rules would have allowed her to do so. In fact, all but one of the participants who became pregnant during high school reported positive support from parents and implied that dropping out was not necessary.

Money and problems at home were also noted by participants as primary, non-school related reasons for dropping out. One participant had to live with relatives and was constantly moving from one school to another because his mother could not afford to pay rent. Others shared of caring for siblings or an elderly relative at home while the parents were at work. Another shared that her mother made her quit school and get a job to help pay for food, utilities, and rent.

There was also a strong relationship between drugs and substance use and dropout. In fact, drug use was noted more frequently than money problems. Drugs, alcohol, and substances have proven to be a social issue in southeast Kansas. Sixteen percent of the respondents from the southeast region in the Kansas Youth Survey (2009) listed substance abuse as the primary reason they left high school and another 19% stated that substances were part of the reason they quit.

### **Interpretation of Category 3**

Life-events are important factors in the discussion of dropout in Kansas and elsewhere.

Life-events are second only to at-school factors in determining who will stay in school and who will not. At times it appears that significant life-events lead students to believe that dropping out is the best, or only, choice they have. Pregnancy, marriage, money, drugs, and alcohol problems have colossal effects on adults; one can only surmise the challenges these events place on teenagers. It can be concluded that such events severely thwart a student's ability to concentrate on school, thereby leading to greater incidence of dropout.

**Category 4: Participant Perceptions about Strategies, Interventions, or Practices That Might Have Kept Them in School (research questions 1 and 4)**

The research protocol sought to find whether there was anything anyone could have said or done to keep students from dropping out. This specifically relates to research question 4, which sought to determine if there were effective school strategies, interventions, or practices that might have influenced students who were otherwise thinking about dropping out, to stay. Just over half of the participants indicated that staying in school was not a possibility. Jessie said, "Probably not at the time. I was very firm on what I should have done," while Joe asserted, "No, I had my mind made up." Another participant, David emphasized, "No, I was ready to go out and make some money." Brenda expounded:

If they could have made me believe today is what it is; as hard as it is to get a job without a diploma? Yeah... but at the time I was just one track minded and I didn't listen to nobody...sometimes I still get told that I'm that way. I try not to be. The older I get, I try to listen and understand and make sense of things... back then I didn't make sense of anything. I was young.. I had my whole life ahead of me... got time to do whatever I want to do, when I want to do it and how I want to do it... that's not the case. You don't know how much time you have in life.

But, almost half of the participants indicated that staying in school could have been a possibility if certain actions had been initiated by the school: "If they could have put me as a junior instead of a sophomore, I would have stayed" said Charles. Charles experienced many

transitions from school to school due to moving around in foster care. He said that schools lost track of his credits which eventually kept him from moving to the next grade. Turner shared, “If that teacher would have left (the one that threatened me), I would have stayed in school.” Stephanie’s response to the question was emphatic, “Yes, just take care of the bully!” Matty added, “If someone would have talked to me I might have stayed.” Likewise, Brenda responded, “If someone would have told me how hard this is.” While the goal of the study is to offer strategies to reduce all occurrences of dropout, that is not very realistic. Schools, principals, and teachers should focus intently on the statements of participants who say that they could have been influenced to stay in school.

### **Do Effective School Practices Deter Dropout?**

Participants in this study were asked to provide feedback as to whether or not their school adequately provided support in effective school practices that have shown to produce positive benefit in reducing the dropout rate. As stated prior, these practices were: 1) the school forms partnerships and develops strong communications with parents, 2) the school creates a safe and orderly environment, 3) the school encourages strong teacher-to-student relationships, 4) the school provides lessons encouraging student engagement that are relevant to future, career, and college, and 5) the school shared high expectations for students. Feedback was collected by having participants rate their school on each of these effective practices using a Lickert-scale rating. Responses reflected an overall perspective by participants that schools were average at best, mediocre in the development of most of these practices. Only one of the identified school practices received a strong response; schools provide a safe and orderly environment. Strong negative responses were noted in two of the identified practices: the

school forms partnerships and develops strong communications with parents and the school provides lessons encouraging student engagement that are relevant to future, career, and college.

Reflection of protocol questions over effective school practices elicited a few thoughts that were not shared elsewhere in the interviews. One participant, Brandy, thought that improved school to home communications might have led to greater accountability for her to be at school. She said that there was absolutely no communication shared between the school and her parents when she was absent:

I would go (to school) in the mornings, get dropped off, never even see the inside of a classroom...just walk right out of the school...I actually almost missed the entire year of ninth grade without my parents knowing so, (laughter). I did that quite frequently.

Another practice, establishing positive teacher relationships, was discussed in-depth in an earlier portion of this chapter and proved to be very important to participants. Nancy became pregnant (a life-event) in high school, but on the Lickert-scale rating of the four broad-based classes of why you quit school, she rated push-out higher than life-events:

I don't feel like I had any teacher support. I mean... you look back and I was in seven classes and I couldn't tell you any teachers that actually came and said, "Maybe you should try this or, you know, why don't you just (pause)?" ...my daughter was born in January, so it wouldn't have been a problem to have gone on to school... I don't feel like I had any... Not even at the end of the year when they knew that I had planned to quit... I would think that the staff, at least the teachers that knew me... would have said, "Maybe you ought to stay in school. You know it's possible you can be in school and have a child." But there wasn't any of that. (Nancy)

Participants also felt like schools did not do enough to provide interactive learning opportunities to enhance college and career readiness. Over half felt that the curriculum was neither engaging nor relevant to their future. Participants protested of boredom at school and did not understand what the curriculum had to do with their future success. Four participants stated

that the first time they ever thought about dropping out of high school was because they were bored and did not see the point of being there. Similarly, over half of the participants in another survey ("Kansas youth survey," 2009) said they would have stayed in school if they felt their education provided them an opportunity to be prepared for college or work. Likewise, a similar percentage of participants in the *Silent Epidemic* said they were bored with school and spent their time with people who shared their opinion of school. Many said they only attended high school because they were told to do so.

Finally, participants in the study gave differing accounts of whether their school ensured high expectations for achievement and success. Just over half shared that the school did, at least in some way, provide confidence and motivation in the form of high expectations. Joe said, "Yes, they wanted that for sure, especially attendance." Brenda also shared a positive report, "I would rate this five, my high school was good; they're good schools." Brandy gave her school a lot of credit and accepted responsibility for her own actions, "Oh, definitely five (Lickert rating)...I wasn't upset with the school. I think I was more upset with myself after it was all said and done...it wasn't the school that was pushing me away, it was me...I guess I didn't respect everything that I was being taught back then, where I respect it a lot more now." Many expressed that the school demonstrated high expectations for students who academically excelled but not for them. "I think they did if you were a good student...but if you were a mediocre student, not so much," David shared. In response to the question of whether the school held high expectations, Nancy simply said, "for others." Justin disclosed his perception:

Down there at (high school) I never saw any potential as a student...there was one teacher...my sophomore year, I was taking Algebra 2, and she wouldn't help me at all. Every time I went to her for help, she wouldn't help me...I remember one day in class she told me, "college just aint meant for some people"... I was just like, "man that's heartless to even say to a kid in high school.

#### **Interpretation of Category 4**

Participant attitudes about whether or not anything could have kept them in school were varied. Some consider that staying in school might have been a possibility where others emphatically aver; nothing could have changed their life course at that particular time. However, almost half of the participants in the study stated that something could have been done to keep them in school; it is of key importance for schools to establish policy surrounding effective school practices in order to better serve students and families. Participants agreed that school actions supporting the identified five effective school practices might have made a difference: a call to their parents, a safer place to learn, a caring teacher who genuinely helped them succeed, a teacher delivering a lesson that engaged and interested them, and believing in them and insisting that they perform to the greatest of their ability. Moreover, this is not just a school issue, but a community one as well. Communities must provide appropriate attention and resources to support families and schools in addressing the near 50% of dropouts who say they might have stayed in school. Even some of the 50% who stated they were leaving school no matter what, might have had a different perception of school importance if effective and appropriate interventions were in place.

#### **Synthesis**

Discussion of the four analytical categories led to an interpretation of why students in southeast Kansas dropout. Most of the reasons discussed follow a pattern that in some cases could have been predicted according to at-risk factors. And, while risk factors and indicators of dropout are readily available, it is important to note that identifying specific students who will drop out has proven to be problematic (Jerald, 2006). In addition, knowing the risk factors for dropout has not adequately served as a reliable predictor for who will graduate and who will not

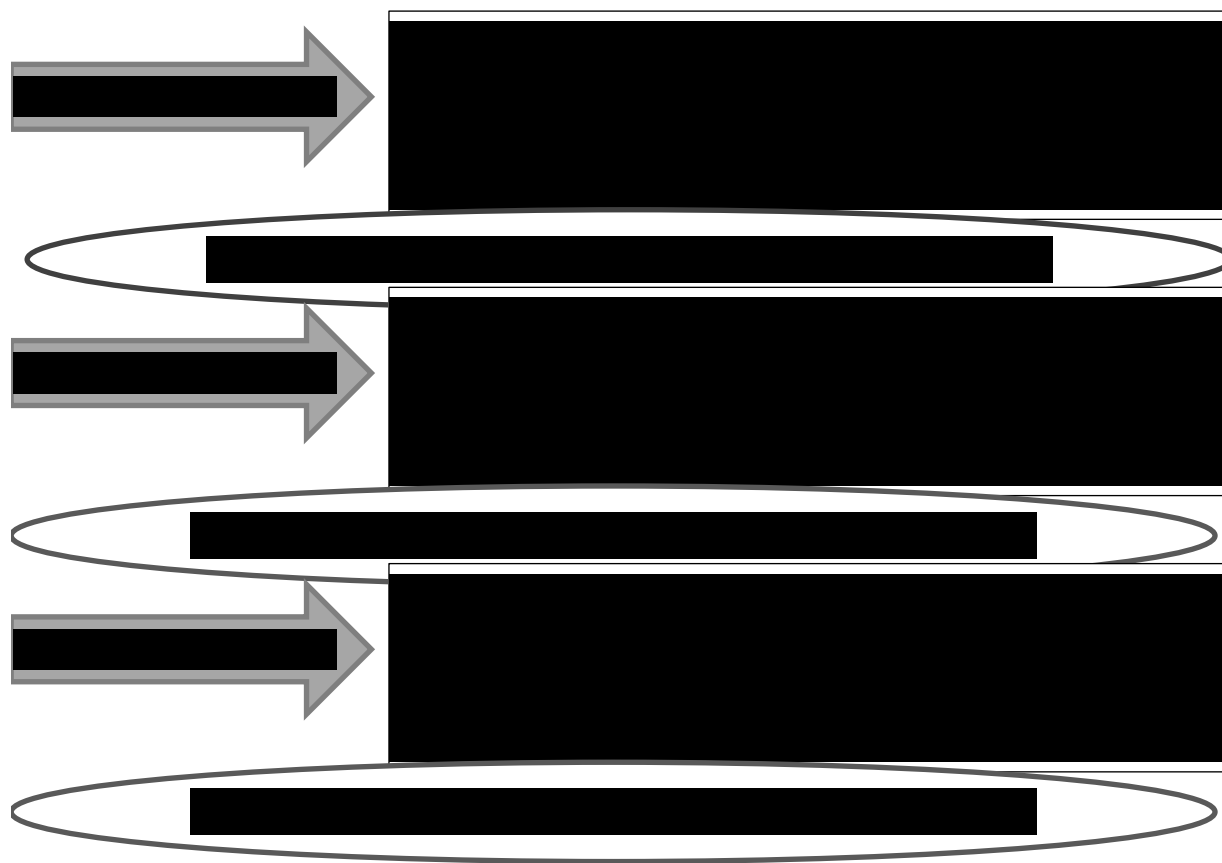
(Gleason & Dynarski, 1998, 2002). The primary problem in using at-risk factors is that so many exceptions exist, as each year countless students having one or multiple risk factors, graduate, and move on to college or career. This might lead one to ask: “Why do some stay and some drop out?” This section will attempt to provide an explanation to this question.

The consistency in this and other studies delving into the phenomenon of dropout is a pattern of inconsistency. For instance, take two students with similar circumstances, whether life-event or school factors, one sustains in order to graduate and another drops out. This pattern is reflected repeatedly in studies of dropout: one pregnant teen drops out of school, another graduates from school, one student suffers the loss of a parent yet overcomes to graduate, another with the similar circumstance drops out. Examples for each of the reasons for dropout hold true. While this discussion does not intend to suggest that such decisions are made equally in a 50-50 pattern, it intends to illustrate the recurring nature of the phenomenon. Furthermore, the researcher seeks to show a pattern, or relationship, between the dropout phenomenon and specific social theories that will strengthen the reliability of the conclusions for this study. Recurring patterns do not have to be consistent to provide reliability: “The reliability criterion for qualitative research focuses on identifying and documenting recurrent accurate and consistent homogenous) or inconsistent (heterogeneous) features as patterns, themes, world views, and any other phenomena under study in similar or different human contexts” (Labuschagne, 2003, p. 103).

To explain what is happening here, the researcher refers to the Expectancy-Value Theory of Achievement Motivation (Keller, 1987). In this theory, the motivation of an individual to complete a task is determined by a formulation of the “value” a person places on the reward or accomplishment for completing a goal, multiplied times the expectancy the individual has to



whether or not he or she can successfully attain the goal or complete the task. First, Keller (1979) says that value “refers to a person’s preferences for particular outcomes from among those that are potentially available” (p. 28). Secondly, he describes “expectancy” as a “subjective probability of success...to the extent to which a person is convinced that he or she would be able to accomplish a particular goal if he or she were to try” (p. 28). A graphic of the Expectancy-Value Theory (Figure 5.4) illustrates how multiplicative values are placed on the two motives as symbols of effort provided. This illustration assigns numerical values (0-10) to the two indicators leading to a motivational score: 0 being the lowest value an individual can display and 10 being the maximum value possible. For illustration, if an individual sees no personal value or



*Figure 5.4* Expectancy-Value Theory of Achievement Motivation

gain as a result of completing a task or goal, the value would be 0. If an individual sees great personal value in completing the task or goal, the score would be 10. Similarly, numerical values are given with regard to an individual's personal expectancy of whether or not he or she could complete a task or goal.

Students 1, 2, and 3 (Figure 5.4) represent imaginary high school students. In each of the samples the identified goal or task for each student is to graduate from high school. In the illustration, Student 1 gives no value to being able to say he is a high school graduate. It is not important to him and for whatever reasons, he does not care. However, he is a very capable student and possesses the academic skills to complete high school. Using the Value X Expectancy = Motivation formula, it appears this young man will lack the motivation to complete the task and graduate.

Student 2 really wants to graduate. She values education, likes her teachers, and wants to please her parents. However, in this illustration, Student 2 thinks she lacks the academic skills to obtain enough credits to graduate from high school. Her transcript is riddled with "F" grades and she has given up because she thinks she will never meet the school's graduation requirements. Using the Value X Expectancy = Motivation formula, it appears this student will lack the motivation to complete the task and graduate.

Finally, Student 3 likes school most of the time. He sees that some of the information he learns will be valuable to him in the future. Although he does not think about the future all of the time, sometimes he does. The same student has never failed a class in school; he knows he has the ability to graduate if he wants to do so. Using the Value X Expectancy = Motivation formula, it appears this student possesses the motivation to complete the task and graduate.

Figure 5.5 illustrates the Expectancy – Value Theory as applied to the interview

participants in this study. The researcher assigned multiplicative/numerical values to known risk indicators for dropout as they were disclosed in the interview process. The numerical values were subjectively assigned and were based on qualitative statements and observations gathered during data collecting. Indicators from the data were assigned as negative (-), positive (+), or neutral (o). If this theory was being utilized to predict whether or not a student was going to graduate, numerical values would be assigned based on an assessment of the data. Negative indicators would be assigned ratings of 0 to 3 which would lead to a low value or expectancy rating. Conversely, positive indicators would be assigned ratings of 7 to 10 which would lead to a higher value or expectancy rating. Neutral ratings would be assessed a 4 to 6 indicating a medium effect on value or expectancy.

Factors affecting value were based on a subjective assessment of how participants demonstrated a personal value on having an education and how this was influenced. For example, if a participant indicated that family and friends were supportive of his or her decision to drop out, this was marked as a negative indicator, lowering the motivation score. If attendance, as rated by the participant, was poor, it would demonstrate a low value of schooling as determined by the participant, parents, or both. This rating was also marked low if the participant disclosed that he or she left school as a “fade-out” as has been described previously. Another indicator of a participant’s value on education was determined by the number of times he or she enrolled in an alternative diploma program such as a GED without finishing. This was perhaps the most telling example concerning the importance a participant placed on education, some students having enrolled four or five times in a GED program, yet not having completed a program.

| P    | Factors Affecting Value  |                       |                    |                 | Factors Affecting Expectancy |                               |                           |                      |
|------|--------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|-----------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------|
|      | Influences               | Attendance Fade-Out   | Dropped out of GED | Estimated Value | Life-Event                   | other hinder expectancy       | grades or fail to succeed | Estimated Expectancy |
| I-1  | family support to stay + | attendance +          | no +               | High            | pregnancy -                  | teacher issues -              | grades +                  | Low                  |
| I-2  | family +                 | attendance -          | enrolled 3 times - | Low             | pregnancy -                  | self doubt complete w child - | grades o                  | Low                  |
| I-3  |                          |                       |                    |                 |                              |                               |                           |                      |
| I-4  | friends -                | attendance -          | enrolled 4 times - | Low             | o                            | can't get past math -         | grades -                  | Low                  |
| I-5  | family -                 | fade out -            | enrolled 2 times - | Low             | foster care -                | held back -                   | grades -                  | Low                  |
| I-6  | friends/gang -           | attendance fade out - | enrolled 2 times - | Low             | held back -                  | teacher issues -              | grades -                  | Low                  |
| I-7  | husband boyfriend -      | attendance fade out - | enrolled 2 times - | Low             | marriage -                   | learning difficulties -       | grades -                  | Low                  |
| I-8  | family o                 | attendance -          | no +               | Med             | moving a lot -               | credit deficiency -           | grades o                  | Low                  |
| I-9  | family/friends -         | attendance +          | no +               | Med             | drugs -                      | percieved bullying -          | grades -                  | Low                  |
| I-10 | family o                 | attendance fade out - | enrolled 2 times - | Low             | needed money o               | couldn't focus -              | grades -                  | Low                  |
| I-11 | friends -                | attendance fade out - | enrolled 5 times - | Low             | drugs -                      | none +                        | grades +                  | Med                  |
| I-12 | family o                 | attendance fade out - | no +               | Med             | pregnancy -                  | percieved bullying -          | grades o                  | Low                  |

- = negative multiplicative (0-3), o = medium multiplicative (4-6) + = positive multiplicative (8-10)  
P = Participant

*Figure 5.5* Expectancy – Value Theory of Achievement Motivation Applied to Participants in Southeast Kansas.

Factors affecting expectancy were assessed similarly. Life-events that occurred during high school could be viewed through a teenager's eyes as a potential block or hurdle to completing school. Teen pregnancy, marriage, money, and addiction issues were determined to be potential factors diminishing an individual's confidence that he or she could finish school.

More obvious indicators playing a role in diminishing individual expectancy are being low in graduation credits as compared to other students similar in age and struggling with learning and making passing grades. Participants who disclosed that their grades were poor through school and/or who designated failing-to-succeed as their reason for dropping out were assessed with a low multiplicative, thus lowering their motivation to reach the goal.

Finally, it is important to note the researcher's belief that the subjective multiplicatives for value on education and expectancy to succeed can change through time, experience, and intervention. One participant epitomized a change in how she valued education in the form of a diploma:

I guess I didn't realize what a diploma would do for me...going through those four years and finishing school...you're more reliable, more responsible, and now they look at you without one (diploma) and it's like, "oh, well you can't finish school so how are you going to be able to maintain a job.

### **Revisit Assumptions from Chapter One**

In chapter one the researcher made three assumptions based on experience as an educator in southeast Kansas: 1) few southeast Kansas schools provide well-designed, organized, and focused-interventions aimed at eliminating dropout, thus allowing the phenomenon to unfold as a circumstance of chance, 2) dropout-prevention strategies utilized by schools in the region are largely focused on students at the high school level, and 3) the school-counseling session preempting the waiver of compulsory attendance is ineffective and has little if any bearing on the student's decision whether to stay in school or leave.

Overall, students do not see the high school they attended as strong in providing effective practices to reduce dropout. This was thoroughly discussed in chapter four and addressed again in this chapter. A generalized summary of participant opinions about effective practices

indicates that schools in the area do a very good job of providing safe and orderly learning environments. Participants rated all of the other effective practices discussed in this paper; school to home communication, positive teacher/student relationships, engaging learning, and having high expectations, as average or below average.

The researcher assumed that dropout intervention programs needed to be focused on students at a younger age. The assumption was that most intervention practices were focused on high school students, particularly transition programs dedicated to improving the ninth grade experience. Of the 27 participants, only four divulged thoughts of dropping out prior to high school. Most of the participants first thought about dropping out in the ninth grade (9) and they were followed closely by grade ten (6). However, if Expectancy-Value for Achievement Motivation Theory is a viable explanation for many of the occurrences of dropout, pre-high school interventions must still occur. Such interventions must be focused at building a capacity to improve how individual students view and value the importance of education. Interventions must also focus on improving self-concept in students so they may see themselves competent and capable of completing the high school diploma requirements and more.

Finally, the school-counseling session preempting the waiver of compulsory attendance is an ineffective deterrent for dropout and has little effect on changing a student's decision to leave school early. Just over half of the participants (14) took part in a counseling session designed to discourage them from dropping out. Each of these participants said that the session had no bearing on their decision. Of the remaining participants (13) seven were already 18 years old when they dropped out and were not required to take part in such an interview.

### **Chapter Five Summary**

This chapter sought to understand why some individuals in southeast Kansas high schools

made the decision to leave school early, to drop out. The analysis of the data began by applying organizational, structural, and elaborative coding techniques to the interview transcripts. This enabled the researcher to assert, whether in southeast Kansas or elsewhere, dropout is experienced in similar fashion. This was evidenced by remarkably similar statements made by participants and the statistical comparisons of the data in this study as compared to the *Silent Epidemic*. Further comparisons were drawn between this study and an analysis of how participants fit into the four broad-based reasons for dropout. When given the opportunity to identify with any or all of the indicators from the four categories, most participants offered high ratings in multiple areas. Such ratings exemplify and support the complexity in identifying adequate and appropriate practices for intervention; however, discerning “the what, the how, and the why” does not necessarily lead to knowledge of how to approach interventions (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). Of importance to the discussion was the fact that among individuals possessing identified risk factors for dropout, many stay in school and graduate. This left the researcher with the piquing question: “Why?”

In order to effectively address the research questions it was necessary to approach this problem. The researcher offered the Expectancy-Value Theory of Achievement Motivation (Keller, 1987) to explain this phenomenon. Via subjective assessment of the data, the researcher placed numerical representations of an assessment of each participant’s value toward achieving an education and his or her ability to complete the task. Application of this theory explained why individuals with similar risk factors of dropout have different outcomes. Expectancy-Value Theory has the potential to provide a viable foundation for dropout prevention and intervention as will be discussed in Chapter Six.

## **CHAPTER SIX – CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to delve beyond the statistics of the phenomena in order to take a deeper look into the lived experiences of students in southeast Kansas who have dropped out. By accomplishing this, school and community leaders might be better-informed to create effective strategy, policy, and practice in dropout prevention. The conclusions from this study serve to address the findings and analysis as driven by the proposed research questions:

- 1) What are the common/shared experiences and perceptions of individuals who have dropped out of school in southeast Kansas?
- 2) Are there actions or events occurring outside of school that contribute to students dropping out?
- 3) Are there actions or events occurring inside the school culture that contribute to students dropping out?
- 4) Are there identifiable actions, strategies, or interventions that might have kept students from dropping out?

Following is a discussion of the major findings and conclusions drawn from this research. First, is a short discussion of each of the findings and subsequent conclusions as each relates to all or some of the research questions. Second, an overriding conclusion is discussed as it is relevant to each of the findings and the research questions. This will be followed by the researcher's recommendations for practice and research, and a final summary of the project.

### **Conclusions**

The first major finding discussed was that the majority of the participants shared they



should have stayed in school, that it was a mistake to leave school early. Topics from this discussion largely addressed research question 1, but the discussion, description, interpretation, and analysis of all of the major findings was relevant to answering this question. Participant descriptions of common or shared experiences were threaded throughout each of the discussions and have a relationship to answering each of the research questions. “I should have stayed in school” was a sentiment repeatedly expressed as participants shared of economic and personal struggles along the way to where they are now. One conclusion to be drawn from this finding is that many of the participants believe such struggles would have been fewer, even avoided, if they had furthered their education and stayed in school. While a few reflected upon their decision to leave school and believed that dropping out was the right choice for them, most experienced regret over that decision. Key to this discussion was the difficulty in finding meaningful and satisfactory employment in the region. Participants from other studies examined in the literature experienced dropout similarly as they also reported regret and high dissatisfaction with their current employment situation.

The researcher suggests that participants did not place an appropriate personal valuation on receiving their education or lacked a level of expectancy that they had the ability or resources to complete the requirements for a diploma. Of interest to this finding was that more than half of the participants thought they were doing the right thing at the time they dropped out. After being out of school and experiencing life as an adult for varying amounts of time, a large majority acknowledged that leaving school was a mistake. They now see why so many warned them not to quit school. Many who did not see the value of having an education see it clearly now.

The second finding in the discussion was that the majority of the participants indicated that negative school experiences played an important role in their decision to drop out of high

school. This discussion enabled the researcher to effectively address research questions 1 and 3. Participants shared of school experiences that they believed had an impact on their decision to leave school early. Such shared experiences included having problems in getting along with teachers, being bored with school, having difficulties in passing classes and maintaining credits, being bullied, and having difficulty following school rules and policies. Many of the participants in this category largely believed that schools could have taken action to make school a better experience; moreover, they should have done so. Many shared that teachers needed to care more about students and take greater interest in ensuring a positive experience for them. Another conclusion, as the interview and survey protocols attest, is that teacher words and actions are powerful and impactful - a key focus for dropout prevention and intervention strategies.

Some participants thought that schools could have been more proactive in dealing with bullies and bullying behavior. One participant insisted that the school simply turned a blind eye toward her bully. Other participants discussed that school lacked any meaning to them; they could not see the relevance of most of their classes or how they would ever use what they were learning to benefit their future. For some this simply led to disengaging themselves from school altogether. For others this led to discipline problems and difficulty in following school rules. Finally, a number of students in this category could not handle the academic expectations of high school. An inability to maintain the pace with regard to homework and grades eventually led to failing or losing credits toward graduation.

Expectancy-Value Theory had a strong relationship to this category as well. As teenagers, many of the participants viewed negative school factors as a hindrance to their graduation pathway, in effect, lowering their expectancy to finish school. Some could not get beyond a teacher they thought was rude or overbearing. Others had trouble staying awake in

class. Still others repeatedly struggled to gain credit in classes that their classmates were passing. Each of these examples leads to a lowered expectancy of reaching the goal, to graduate. Moreover, if students do not enjoy being in, or around a specific atmosphere, it stands to reason they would place a low personal value on that experience and remove themselves if they could. It seems this would apply in cases where a student is constantly at odds with a teacher or teachers, other students, or administrators.

As some students attributed leaving school early to negative school factors, others claimed that negative life-events demanded their time and attention and eventually led to dropout. Participants spoke of dealing with teenage pregnancy and marriage, having to share money and financial burdens at home, and dealing with substance abuse and addictions. Some participants persevered for a while but poor grades and declining attendance were manifested as an effect of dealing with such life-events; the accumulation of multiple factors eventually taking their toll and leading to dropout. For students in this category it was common for one or more parents to have experienced similar struggles in school. Parents who place a low value on school and education tend to pass this on to their children in the form of allowing them to stay home and miss a lot of school (Resmovits, 2012). Through time, an indifference or negative behavior toward school can cause a student to fall behind, fail classes, and perpetuate the non-attendance cycle, which is a fairly reliable predictor of dropout (Resmovits, 2012). When that is the case, a student is much more likely to place a lower value on education, thus diminishing his or her chances to graduate. Family history, attitudes, and influence also play a major role in the self-expectancy a student has toward graduation. In some households dropping out has been the norm for generations, giving a teenage member of the family a diminished outlook of attaining a diploma.

The fourth finding disclosed that students said they were going to drop out regardless of any action or gesture made by the school or others. This finding is of interest due to the relationship it might have with school and community efforts to provide dropout prevention and intervention strategies. This is because of the accepted school perception that dropout interventions through best school practices can make a difference ("Dropout Reduction," 2009;"Evidence Based Practices," 2006; Sizer, 2004). Participants performed Lickert-scale ratings of their school on the effectiveness of five promising school practices identified to deter dropout. Of the five practices identified in the study, only one, 'my school provided a safe and orderly learning environment', received an overall participant rating as above average. The four remaining best practices received an overall participant rating as average or below. Since an overwhelming majority of the participants said that their school was average or below in providing effective school practices it is difficult to discern whether any of the strategies may have kept them in school.

The overriding conclusion as introduced in the Synthesis section of Chapter Five was that students who dropped out lacked the appropriate motivation to finish or complete the desired goal, to graduate. This was explained by applying the Expectancy-Value Theory of Achievement Motivation (Keller, 1987) to the study. This application was generalized by assigning numerical representations to an assessment of how much an individual valued having a high school diploma and how the individual perceived his or her ability or "expectancy" to attain such status. Typically, students must personalize an appropriate value on the importance of attaining an education and have a reasonable expectancy that they have the skill, ability, and resources to do so. The theory suggests that an absence or low assessment of either, places a student at great risk for dropout. Expectancy-Value theory was applied to the study because it

helped to explain the inconsistencies of why some students with high risk for dropout stayed in school and some did not.

### **Recommendations**

Students need to be appropriately motivated to progress through the educational system on pace with their peers. It is recommended that community and school resources be committed to positively influencing the way students see themselves and how they value education. Such interventions should be practiced before students are old enough to entrench themselves into the notion that they do not need, or cannot succeed, in school (Jimerson, Reschly, & Hess, 2008). Five promising practices for effective schools have been identified as Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) strategies and have been discussed throughout the study ("Facing Dropout Dilemma," 2011; Zins et al., 2004; CASEL, 2003). The researcher recommends that school districts take a pre-K to 12 approach in establishing these or similar strategies while focusing on two essential components of expectancy – value theory: 1) increase a student's personal value on the importance of having an education and 2) increase a student's self confidence in his or her ability to perform academically [expectancy].

Much can be done to increase a student's value of achieving an education. It has been determined that the dropout phenomenon occurs as a developmental process and not from a single life-event (Jimerson, Anderson, & Whipple, 2002). Such information indicates time and opportunity for families, communities, and schools to induct positive interventions toward improving a child's self-perception regarding education. Recommendations for adding value to a child's educational experience come from the data collection, literature, and personal observations from the researcher (Table 6.1). Such actions start at home where family members display favor toward schools and make supporting comments about the importance of education.

Parents require excellent school attendance for their child and prioritize homework and school projects over recreational and leisure activities. The home to school transition occurring at the beginning of pre-school or kindergarten is a critical time in the development of how a child will view education (Alexander et al., 2001; Belfield, Nores, Barnett, & Schweinhart, 2007). If this transition is positive it can positively impact the child's capacity for valuing an education

Educational value is enhanced by making school interesting, fun, challenging, and engaging. Value is added when students feel that class content is meaningful and relevant to their future. Connections to clubs, activities, and athletics lead to higher levels of commitment and a sense of belonging. Finally, relationships throughout the study proved to be important to participants. Schools must encourage positive student-to-student interaction as well as monitor teacher effectiveness through an ability to initiate and sustain meaningful relationships.

It is also possible to develop a capacity of expectancy for success (Table 6.1). This happens when children learn the importance of effort and commitment and are able to experience varying degrees of success. An internal capacity for expectancy is also increased when a child develops a positive self-concept and can portray confidence in academic and social settings. Expectancy can also be improved via external factors in the form of resources provided by school systems or programs to address early warning systems, learning deficiencies. An example of an external support for expectancy is how the Kansas Department of Education adapted the state graduate requirements for kids who had endured difficulties through negative life-events. While the minimal requirement for graduation in Kansas is 21 credits, individual school districts in Kansas have set local policies requiring students to have from 21 to 30 ("Kansas Commission on Graduation," 2010). State law (Education Regulations, 2005/2011) now requires school districts to allow children who have been placed into state custody or foster

care to graduate with 21 credits, the state minimum. It also allows and encourages superintendents to implement this practice in cases where students have experienced high mobility, teen pregnancy, long-term or family illness, academic difficulties and legal issues. Policies such as these proactively address the needs of students who are experiencing hardship and have the capacity to increase expectancy for completing the goal, to graduate.

Table 6.1

| <b>Add Value by...</b>   | <b>Indicator of Value</b>  | <b>Who</b>                   |
|--|--|------------------------------|
| Talking about importance of school                                     | Child begins to think education is imperative                                      | Families, schools, community |
| Support teachers and administrators                                    | Student respects teachers  | Parents/families             |
| Homework has priority over leisure                                     | Child sees education as more important than other activities                       | Parents/families             |
| Requiring child to have excellent attendance                           | Child sees education as more important than other activities and learns discipline | Parents/families             |
| School is challenging  | Student is challenged  | Teachers/school              |
| School is engaging   | Student is engaged   | Teachers/school              |
| School is fun  | Student is entertained   | Teachers/school              |
| Lessons are relevant to the student's future                           | Student sees school as important to his/her future                                 | Teachers/school              |
| Participation in clubs, activities, and athletics                      | Greater sense of belonging or connection   | Teachers/school              |
| Encouraging positive student-to-student interaction                    | Positive relationships enhance sense of belonging                                  | Teachers/school              |
| Monitor teacher behavior toward building teacher-student relationships | Student feels that teacher cares about his/her success                             | Administration               |
| Demonstrate positive student-teacher relationships                     | Student feels that teacher cares about his/her success                             | Teachers                     |
| Career and technical education opportunities                           | Relevance to college and career  | Schools                      |
| <b>Increase Expectancy by...</b>                                       | <b>Indicator of Expectancy</b>   | <b>Who</b>                   |

|   |   |                                  |
|---|---|----------------------------------|
| Statements supporting child's effort                      | Child's belief that effort can lead to success                  | Families, school, communities    |
| Pre-K educational opportunities                           | Child's positive experience with learning                       | Families, school, communities    |
| Warm, inviting classroom climate                          | Comfortable learning atmosphere established                     | Teachers/school                  |
| Teaching students social skills                           | Student ability to handle situations, coping                    | Teachers/school/family community |
| Early warning signs for academic difficulties             | Address deficiencies while student is young                     | Teachers/school/family           |
| Tutoring, small class, small group academic interventions | Student gets help when needed to overcome academic difficulties | Teachers/school                  |
| Jump start early opportunities to gain high school credit | Student can see a real possibility of completing high school    | School                           |
| Participation in clubs, activities, athletics             | Team/group membership leads to sense of belonging               | Teachers/school                  |

*Note:* Recommended activities and actions to develop greater capacity for valuing education and improving expectancy for academic success

Parents and teachers are integral to the potential success of the recommended practice. When parents and schools partner together it strengthens a child's personal value of having an education (Eagle, 1994 as cited in Bridgeland et al., 2006). A 2006 teen and self-image survey (University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning as cited in Sprick, 2013) asked students who had the most influence on the personal decisions they made. Respondents indicated the top three influences were parents, teacher, and other kids: 96%, 80%, and 78% respectively. However, when the same students were asked to indicate who understood them the most, friends were first with 42 percent, parents second with 28 percent, and teachers were seventh garnering only one percent. Teenagers' acknowledging that teachers provide one of the more powerful influences in their lives further strengthens the importance for teachers to seek greater understanding and awareness of student needs. Teacher actions and attitudes can and do make a



difference in a student's outlook on education (Wilcox & Angelis, 2011).

### **Chapter Six Summary**

The researcher found the individual stories of students who dropped out of school in southeast Kansas remarkably similar to those from other studies conducted outside of the state. This seemed significant since no major phenomenological study had been conducted in the state for more than 30 years. And though the individual stories of how the phenomenon was experienced are similar, there remains an inconsistency in the ability to predict who is going to drop out and who is going to stay in school (Jerald, 2006; Gleason & Dynarski, 1998, 2002). The complexity of the phenomenon is demonstrated in almost any high school, regardless of the year. There are students with many risk factors who drop out, students with many risk factors who overcome and stay in school, and students with no apparent risk factors who drop out. The researcher fully accepts and appreciates the description and detail participants provided in explanation of why each dropped out; however, seeking to provide an explanation for the discrepancy in such occurrences, the researcher proposed an application of the Expectancy-Value Theory of Achievement Motivation. Application of the theory asserts that there may be more behind the decision to quit school than meets the eye. Expectancy-Value Theory enables the researcher to address a primary goal of the study, to determine what schools might do differently in order to keep students in school. Recommendations in response to the Expectancy-Value explanation have the potential to positively impact the problem.

Hopefully, schools see that part of their mission is to build an appreciation for learning and enhance the value a student places on having an education. Good teachers and good schools ensure that children have opportunities to improve self-image, build confidence, and increase their expectancy for personal success. But, the school cannot assume that this will happen

without proactive planning and oversight. Current and future students deserve the very best effort schools and communities can deliver in order to be prepared for 21<sup>st</sup>-century employment and challenges. Former students, those who graciously provided their personal stories for this study, deserved this effort as well. Schools can overcome the dropout dilemma.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A - Focus-Group and Face-to-Face Interview Protocol

Interviewer: IR

Interviewee: IE

Name of Interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

*Preliminary Script: Hello, my name is XXX. Today's date is [DATE]. It is [TIME] and I am at [LOCATION] with [INTERVIEWEE], [Participant Status i.e. Student]. [Participant Name], I want to thank you for agreeing to take the time to visit with me today about my research project. I respect the value of your time and really want to express my appreciation for your participation. The purpose of this interview will be to gather information for my project titled, **Dropping Out in Southeast Kansas: Why Students Leave School Early.***

*I will be audio recording our interview so that I do not miss any of your comments. Additionally, I will be taking notes which may help me recall points made during the interview.*

*I want to thank you once again and remind you that all of your answers will be confidential as described in the Informed Consent form.*

Participant Age – Optional \_\_\_\_\_

- 1) How long have you been in the Adult Education program here? \_\_\_\_\_
- 2) Is this your first enrollment in a GED program? \_\_\_\_\_
- 3) After you left high school, were how long were you out of school before enrolling in the GED? \_\_\_\_\_
- 4) Have you held a job since leaving school? Please list all below:

| Job(s) Place | Type of Work | Wage | How Long There? |
|--------------|--------------|------|-----------------|
|--------------|--------------|------|-----------------|

- 5) Now that you are back in school are you continuing to work? YES/NO
- 6) If yes, what is your approximate salary?  
\$ per hour \_\_\_\_\_ take home per week? \_\_\_\_\_
- 7) Is the job market what you thought it would be? YES/NO (Circle One) If you answered "NO", explain how it was different than you expected.
- 8) Are the opportunities what you expected? YES/NO (Circle One) If you answered "NO", explain how it was different than you expected.

- 9) If you answered “NO” to #7 or #8, please explain why the situation was not what you expected
- 10) When you were out of school, what activities filled the time that you used to spend at school?

**Please think back to a time when you were still in middle school or high school:**

- 11) What grade were you in when you first thought about dropping out of school? Grade \_\_\_\_\_
- 12) How old were you then? \_\_\_\_\_
- 13) Can you remember why you wanted to drop out at that time? YES/NO (CIRCLE ONE)  
If yes, please explain:
- 14) What were some of the reasons you had for wanting to drop out?
- 15) What grade were you in when you eventually dropped out of school? Grade \_\_\_\_\_
- 16) How old were you when you dropped out? \_\_\_\_\_
- 17) If under age 18, did you attend an “exit interview” at your school? (where the principal and/or counselor visited with you about the skills you may not learn if you did not complete high school; where the school shared statistics about lifetime earnings of dropouts compared to graduates etc) (Circle One) YES/NO
- 18) If yes, what relative signed the permission form for you to quit school?  
Example: Mom, Dad, Grandma, Guardian etc.. \_\_\_\_\_
- 19) Can you remember any comments made by the school personnel? If so, please share:
- 20) Can you remember comments you made during this interview? If so, please share:
- 21) Can you remember any comments your parent/guardian made at this time?

- 22) Describe your state of mind or general feeling when you quit school. How did you feel, what went through your mind?
- 23) At the time, did you think it was the right thing to do? (Circle One) YES/NO  
Please explain:
- 24) At the present time, do you think it was the right thing to do? (Circle One) YES/NO  
Please explain
- 25) Can you remember the reason(s) that you had for quitting school (Circle One) YES/NO

**Please be thinking of the reasons you had for leaving school:**

- 26) Were there factors at school? (Circle One) YES/NO  
If so, what would you say they were?
- 27) Were there factors at home? (Circle One) YES/NO  
If so, what would you say they were?
- 28) Were there others who gave you advice during the times you were considering quitting school? If so, who were some of these individuals? (Names not necessary, for example, use “my uncle” or “my friend” etc.)
- 29) What kinds of advice did you receive?
- 30) Who encouraged you to stay in school?
- 31) Who supported your decision to quit school? (if anyone)
- 32) What person(s) were most influential in helping you make your decision?
- 33) What person(s) was most opposed to you quitting school?
- 34) What person(s) was most favorable to you quitting school?
- 35) Describe how you felt when you quit school. For example, were you worried or were you relieved?
- 36) Looking back on your decision to drop out of school, do you think you made the right decision? (Circle One) YES/NO  
Please share Why:
- 37) Was there anything that someone could have said or done that might have convinced you to stay in school? (Circle One) YES/NO If yes, please share:

- 38) Looking back on your experience since quitting school, is there anything that you might do differently if you could do so? If so, please explain
- 39) What advice (if any) would you give to a student in your city who is giving consideration to quitting school
- 40) Can you remember your grades in middle school and high school?
- English and/or Reading? Grade 6,8,Other
  - Math? Grade 6,8,Other
  - Was there a time when you felt you were a strong/weak student?
- 41) How was your attendance in:
- Elementary school
  - Middle school
  - High school
  - Approximately how many days of school did you miss in 8<sup>th</sup> grade? Other?

**Research classifies the reasons students drop out into four categories: Life Events, Fade Outs, Push Outs, and Failure to Succeed at School. Please rank these in each scale below the description, based on your experience.**

- If it does not describe why you quit school, mark it low (1 is the lowest)
- If it does describe you, mark it high (5 is the highest)
- Rate all of the items, more than one item can be high or low

**Life events** – student who drop out because of something that happens outside of school; they become pregnant, get arrested, or have to go to work to support members of the family.

42) Not why I quit school: 1    2    3    4    5    Describes why I quit school

**Fade outs** - students who have generally been promoted on time from grade to grade and may even have above grade level skills, but at some point become frustrated or bored and stop seeing the reason for coming to school. Once they reach the legal dropout age they leave, convinced that they can find their way without a high school diploma or that a GED will serve them just as well.

43) Not why I quit school: 1    2    3    4    5    Describes why I quit school

**Push outs** -students who are perceived to be difficult, dangerous or detrimental to the success of the school and are subtly or not so subtly encouraged to withdraw from the school, transfer to another school or are simply dropped from the rolls if they fail too many courses or miss too many days of school and are past (or in some cases not even past) the legal dropout age.

44) Not why I quit school: 1 2 3 4 5 Describes why I quit school  
**Failing to Succeed in school** - students who fail to succeed in school and attend schools that fail to provide them with the environments and supports they need to succeed. For some, initial failure is the result of poor academic preparation, for others it is rooted in unmet social-emotional needs. Few students drop out after their initial experience with school failure. In fact, most persist for years, only dropping out after they fall so far behind that success seems impossible or they are worn down by repeated failure. In the meantime, they are literally waving their hands saying, “help” through poor attendance, acting out, and/or course failure.

45) Not why I quit school: 1 2 3 4 5 Describes why I quit school

**Schools practice some of the following activities to try and keep students in school. Did your school do any of the below? Please rank your high school on the five items below, based on your experience.**

**If your high school did a very good job of the described activities, mark them high (5) If they did not, mark them low (1).**

The school built partnerships between school and home to encourage me in my learning

46) Did not occur: 1 2 3 4 5 School worked hard at this

The school assured a safe, orderly school and classroom environment for me and others

47) Did not occur: 1 2 3 4 5 School worked hard at this

The school encouraged and built caring relationships between students and teachers

48) Did not occur: 1 2 3 4 5 School worked hard at this

The school provided active lessons, engaging me in my own learning for careers and college

49) Did not occur: 1 2 3 4 5 School worked hard at this

The school had high expectations for me and others

50) Did not occur: 1 2 3 4 5 School worked hard at this

Thank you for participating in this interview. Is there anything else you would like to add to this



transcript?

## Appendix B – Survey Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my project titled, ***Dropping Out in Southeast Kansas: Why Students Leave School Early***. I respect and value your time and want to express my appreciation for your participation. I want to thank you once again and remind you that all answers on the survey will be confidential as described in the consent form.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Adult Education Center/Location: \_\_\_\_\_

- 1) How long have you been in the Adult Education program here? \_\_\_\_\_
- 2) Is this your first enrollment in a GED program? \_\_\_\_\_
- 3) After you left high school, were how long were you out of school before enrolling in the GED? \_\_\_\_\_
- 4) Have you held a job since leaving school? Please list all below:

| Job(s) Place | Type of Work | Wage | How Long There? |
|--------------|--------------|------|-----------------|
|--------------|--------------|------|-----------------|

- 5) Now that you are back in school are you continuing to work? YES/NO
- 6) If yes, what is your approximate salary?  
\$ per hour \_\_\_\_\_ take home per week? \_\_\_\_\_
- 7) Is the job market what you thought it would be? YES/NO (Circle One) If you answered “NO”, explain how it was different than you expected.
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**Please think back to a time when you were still in middle school or high school:**

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- 12) How old were you then? \_\_\_\_\_
- 13) Can you remember why you wanted to drop out at that time? YES/NO (CIRCLE ONE)  
If yes, please explain:
- 14) What were some of the reasons you had for wanting to drop out?
- 15) What grade were you in when you eventually dropped out of school? Grade \_\_\_\_\_
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- 17) If under age 18, did you attend an “exit interview” at your school? (where the principal and/or counselor visited with you about the skills you may not learn if you did not complete high school; where the school shared statistics about lifetime earnings of dropouts compared to graduates etc.) (Circle One) YES/NO
- 18) If yes, what relative signed the permission form for you to quit school?  
Example: Mom, Dad, Grandma, Guardian etc.. \_\_\_\_\_
- 19) Can you remember any comments made by the school personnel? If so, please share:
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- 22) Describe your state of mind or general feeling when you quit school. How did you feel, what went through your mind?
- 23) At the time, did you think it was the right thing to do? (Circle One) YES/NO  
Please explain:

24) At the present time, do you think it was the right thing to do? (Circle One) YES/NO  
Please explain

25) Can you remember the reason(s) that you had for quitting school (Circle One) YES/NO

**Please be thinking of the reasons you had for leaving school:**

26) Were there factors at school? (Circle One) YES/NO  
If so, what would you say they were?

27) Were there factors at home? (Circle One) YES/NO  
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29) What kinds of advice did you receive?

30) Who encouraged you to stay in school?

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32) What person(s) were most influential in helping you make your decision?

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Please share Why:

37) Was there anything that someone could have said or done that might have convinced you

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38) Looking back on your experience since quitting school, is there anything that you might do differently if you could do so? If so, please explain

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- a. English and/or Reading? Grade 6,8,Other
- b. Math? Grade 6,8,Other
- c. Was there a time when you felt you were a strong/weak student?

41) How was your attendance in:

- a. Elementary school
- b. Middle school
- c. High school
- d. Approximately how many days of school did you miss in 8<sup>th</sup> grade? Other?

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**Schools practice some of the following activities to try and keep students in school. Did your school do any of the below? Please rank your high school on the five items below, based on your experience.**

- **If your high school did a very good job of the described activities, mark them high (5) If they did not, mark them low (1).**

The school built partnerships between school and home to encourage me in my learning

46) Did not occur: 1 2 3 4 5 School worked hard at this

The school assured a safe, orderly school and classroom environment for me and others

47) Did not occur: 1 2 3 4 5 School worked hard at this

The school encouraged and built caring relationships between students and teachers

48) Did not occur: 1 2 3 4 5 School worked hard at this

The school provided active lessons, engaging me in my own learning for careers and college

49) Did not occur: 1 2 3 4 5 School worked hard at this

The school had high expectations for me and others

50) Did not occur: 1 2 3 4 5 School worked hard at this

## Appendix C - Consent to Participate

### Consent to Participate in Research Project: Dropping Out in Southeast Kansas: Why Students Leave School Early

**Principal Researcher:**     XXX

**Faculty Advisor:**         XXX

#### **INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE**

You are invited to participate in a research study about the experiences of people living in southeast Kansas who have made the decision to drop out of high school. You are being asked to participate in this study because at some point in your educational history, you dropped out of high school.

#### **WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE RESEARCH STUDY**

##### *Who is the Principal Researcher?*

(Removed)

##### *Who is the Faculty Advisor?*

(Removed)

##### *What is the purpose of this research study?*

The purpose of the study is to gain a better understanding of the actions and events that precede and follow the decision of high school students who quit school. This research may provide school district leaders, teachers, and parents practical information to enable informed decisions about how to encourage and motivate students to stay in school and receive their high school diploma.

##### *Who will participate in this study?*

The researcher seeks to interview 20-50 individuals who are attending, or who have attended or completed General Education Development (GED) programs in southeast Kansas. The researcher will present the research proposal at multiple GED Centers in the Southeast Kansas Adult Basic Education Consortium and seek volunteers for participation.

##### *What am I being asked to do?*

Participants will take part in providing data to the researcher in 1 or more of 3 methods:

- a. Participate in a group interview (focus group interview) (Maximum 60-90 minutes)
- b. Participate in completing paper/pencil survey questionnaire (15 – 30 minutes)
- c. Participate in a one-on-one face-to-face interview with the researcher (45-60 minutes)

***Will I receive compensation for my time and inconvenience if I choose to participate in this study?***

There will be no compensation for participation in this study.

***What are the possible risks, discomforts of benefits?***

There are no known risks or benefits to participants who choose to aid the researcher in this study. However, in a research project such as this, it is acknowledged that there is potential that some of the research questions might make participants uncomfortable. Participants are encouraged to skip any question(s) they do not feel comfortable answering. The researcher is hopeful that participants will benefit from sharing their story about the actions and events they relate to their decision to quit high school.

***Will I have to pay for anything?***

There is no cost associated with participating in this study

***What are the options if I do not want to be in the study?***

Participation in this research study is voluntary. Participants may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time. Participation in the project will have no effect on your standing in the current GED program.

***How will my confidentiality be protected?***

Anonymity, privacy, and confidentiality are safeguards I seek to ensure. All information will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law and University of Arkansas policy. No identifying information will be used in any report or publication resulting from this study.

**Interviews:** Face-to-Face and Focus-Group Interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed. Audio recordings and transcripts of the interviews will be held and secured in a password-protected file on the researcher's personal computer and will only be used as designated in this form.

Participant names will not be identified in the study. Audio-recordings and transcripts will henceforth be referred to using a pseudonym such as: Interview1, Interview2, etc.

**Surveys:** Participant names will not be identified in the study. Participants are not required to put their name on the survey. However, participants may include their name and/or e-mail contact information if they would like to be contacted for any questions or clarification of responses. Data collected from the survey will be referred to as Survey #1, #2 etc. Responses to each item will be placed into a spreadsheet or other data base identifying the question number and the survey participant number.



***Will I know the results of the study?***

At the conclusion of the study you will have the right to request feedback about the results. You may contact the **faculty advisor or principal researcher** listed in this document (below) in order to request a copy of the results of the study.

***What do I do if I have questions about the research study?***

Participants in the study are encouraged to ask questions at any point during the course of the research study. If at any time during the study a participant has questions or concerns about the research or participation, he/she may contact the principal researcher or faculty advisor listed in this document (below).

**Principal Researcher:**

Omit

**Faculty Advisor:**

Omit

You may also contact the University of Arkansas Research Compliance office listed below if you have questions about your rights as a participant, or to discuss any concerns about, or problems with the research:

(Removed)

By signing below, I understand and acknowledge the information contained in this consent form and agree to participate in this research project. By signing below, I acknowledge that all of my questions about participation in the project have been answered to my satisfaction. I also understand that I may ask additional questions at any time. . I understand that participation is voluntary. I understand that significant new findings developed during this research will be shared with the participant. I understand that no rights have been waived by signing the consent form. I have been given a copy of the consent form.

Participant Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_/\_\_\_/\_\_\_  
Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

The researcher, XXX, will adhere to the practices and purpose of the research project and the contents of this consent to participate form.

Researcher Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_/\_\_\_/\_\_\_  
Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D – Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval

March 18, 2013

### MEMORANDUM

TO: Garon Kent Wire  
John Pijanowski

FROM: Ro Windwalker  
IRB Coordinator

RE: New Protocol Approval

IRB Protocol #: 13-02-526

Protocol Title: *Dropping Out in Southeast Kansas: Why Students Leave School Early*

Review Type:  EXEMPT  EXPEDITED  FULL IRB

Approved Project Period: Start Date: 03/18/2013 Expiration Date: 03/04/2014

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Your protocol has been approved by the IRB. Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. If you wish to continue the project past the approved project period (see above), you must submit a request, using the form *Continuing Review for IRB Approved Projects*, prior to the expiration date. This form is available from the IRB Coordinator or on the Research Compliance website (<http://vpred.uark.edu/210.php>). As a courtesy, you will be sent a reminder two months in advance of that date. However, failure to receive a reminder does not negate your obligation to make the request in sufficient time for review and approval. Federal regulations prohibit retroactive approval of continuation. Failure to receive approval to continue the project prior to the expiration date will result in Termination of the protocol approval. The IRB Coordinator can give you guidance on submission times.

**This protocol has been approved for 50 participants.** If you wish to make *any* modifications in the approved protocol, including enrolling more than this number, you must seek approval *prior to* implementing those changes. All modifications should be requested in writing (email is acceptable) and must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have questions or need any assistance from the IRB, *omitted*

## Appendix E – Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval (modified)

April 1, 2013

### MEMORANDUM

TO: Garon Kent Wire  
John Pijanowski

FROM: Ro Windwalker  
IRB Coordinator

RE: PROJECT MODIFICATION

IRB Protocol #: 13-02-526

Protocol Title: *Dropping Out in Southeast Kansas: Why Students Leave School Early*

Review Type:  EXEMPT  EXPEDITED  FULL IRB

Approved Project Period: Start Date: 03/29/2013 Expiration Date: 03/04/2014

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Your request to modify the referenced protocol has been approved by the IRB. **This protocol is currently approved for 100 total participants.** If you wish to make any further modifications in the approved protocol, including enrolling more than this number, you must seek approval *prior to* implementing those changes. All modifications should be requested in writing (email is acceptable) and must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

Please note that this approval does not extend the Approved Project Period. Should you wish to extend your project beyond the current expiration date, you must submit a request for continuation using the UAF IRB form “Continuing Review for IRB Approved Projects.” The request should be sent to the IRB Coordinator, 210 Administration.

For protocols requiring FULL IRB review, please submit your request at least one month prior to the current expiration date. (High-risk protocols may require even more time for approval.) For protocols requiring an EXPEDITED or EXEMPT review, submit your request at least two weeks prior to the current expiration date. Failure to obtain approval for a continuation *on or prior to* the currently approved expiration date will result in termination of the protocol and you will be required to submit a new protocol to the IRB before continuing the project. Data collected past the protocol expiration date may need to be eliminated from the dataset should you wish to publish. Only data collected under a currently approved protocol can be certified by the IRB for any purpose.

If you have questions or need any assistance from the IRB, omitted

### Appendix F – Data Summary Tables: Demographics, School, Employment Data

#### Survey Findings: Demographics, School, Employment Data

| Sample ID | Age | Time in GED Program | Time Not in School | Employed at any time after leaving high school | Number of Jobs | Continue employment while in GED | Job Market what was expected | Activity that filled what used to be school time |
|-----------|-----|---------------------|--------------------|--|----------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------|--|
| LCC-I-1   | 51  | 2 days              | 2 mo               | Yes  | 1              | NA                               | Yes                          | Work/Mom   |
| LCC-I-2   | 25  | 1 mo                | 1 mo               | Yes  | 1              | No                               | Unsure                       | Work   |
| LCC-I-3   | 20  | 1 mo                | 1 mo               | Yes  | 3              | Yes                              | Unsure                       | Work   |
| LCC-I-4   | 35  | 1 mo                | 1wk                | Yes  | 3              | No                               | No                           | Work/sleep                                       |
| ICC-I-5   | 30  | 2 mo                | 9 yrs              | Yes  | 5              | Yes                              | Yes                          | Work/TV  |
| ICC-I-6   | 24  | 2 mo                | 7 yrs              | Yes  | 1              | No                               | No                           | Work   |
| ICC-I-7   | 47  | 2 mo                | 5 yrs              | Yes  | 3              | Yes                              | No                           | Work   |
| ICC-I-8   | 18  | 5 mo                | 4 mo               | Yes  | 1              | Yes                              | No                           | Hanging out                                      |
| FCC-I-9   | 30  | 1.5 yr              | 12 yrs             | No   | 0              | NA                               | Disabled                     | drugs  |
| FCC10     | 57  | 1 mo                | 35 yrs             | Yes  | 3              | No                               | Yes                          | Work   |
| FCC11     | 30  | 12 yrs              | 6 yrs              | Yes  | 4              | No                               | No                           | Hanging Mom                                      |
| FCC12     | 25  | 6 mo                | 9 yrs              | No   | 0              | No                               | No                           | Raise Fam.                                       |
| S-1       | 55  | 4 mo                | 40 yrs             | Yes  | 4              | No                               | No                           | Fishing, Camping                                 |
| S-2       | 18  | 6 wks               | 2 yrs              | Yes  | 5              | No                               | No                           | work or try to work                              |
| S-3       | 20  | 2 wks               | 2 yrs              | Yes  | 1              | No                               | Yes                          | parenting  |
| S-4       | 58  | 5 mo                | 43 yrs             | Yes  | 1              | Yes                              | No                           | raise family work,                               |
| S-5       | 40  | 3 wks               | 23 yrs             | Yes  | 4              | No                               | Yes                          | family, reading                                  |

|      |    |        |        |     |   |     |     |  |
|------|----|--------|--------|-----|---|-----|-----|--|
| S-6  | 53 | NR     | NR     | Yes | 3 | Yes | No  | go to<br>games,<br>horses                  |
| S-7  | 30 | 2 mo   | 2 yrs  | Yes | 4 | Yes | No  | games,<br>working,<br>sleeping,<br>reading |
| S-8  | 25 | 2 wks  | 7 yrs  | Yes | 1 | Yes | No  | hunt/fish,<br>games, job<br>hunt           |
| S-9  | 18 | 2 yrs  | 3 mo   | No  | 0 | No  | No  | reading,<br>family                         |
| S-10 | 18 | 2 mo   | 1 mo   | Yes | 1 | Yes | Yes | work                                       |
| S-11 | 20 | 5 mo   | NR     | Yes | 1 | No  | No  | work, kids                                 |
| S-12 | 19 | 2 yrs  | 1 yr   | Yes | 2 | Yes | Yes | work, play                                 |
| S-13 | 39 | 10 mo  | 21 yrs | Yes | 3 | Yes | Yes | working                                    |
| S-14 | 33 | 13 yrs | 7 yrs  | Yes | 1 | Yes | No  | party,<br>drugs, help<br>support<br>family |
| S-15 | 22 | 1 mo   | 1 yr   | Yes | 6 | Yes | No  | Drugs                                      |

### Appendix G – Data Summary Tables: Dropout Decisions/Ages/Reasons

#### *Survey Findings: Dropout Decisions- Age and Reasons*

| 1st thought of quitting school/when actually quit |       |       |   |         |       |                          |
|---|-------|-------|---|---------|-------|--------------------------|
| Sample ID   | Grade | Age   | Main Reason                                   | Grade   | Age   | Main Reason              |
| I-1   | 9     | 14    | Teacher disrespect                            | 10      | 16    | pregnant                 |
| I-2   | 10    | 16    | pregnant                                      | 10      | 16    | pregnant                 |
| I-3   | 11    | 16    | boring, didn't want to be there               | 11      | 16    | same                     |
| I-4   | 8     | 13-14 | bored, repeated curriculum                    | 10      | 18    | too far behind           |
| I-5   | 10    | 16    | school hard, teachers, friends                | 10      | 16    | hang w friends           |
| I-6   | 10    | 16    | grad, difficult                               | 11      | 17    | behind at school         |
| I-7   | 11    | 17    | credits, behind                               | 11      | 17    | credits                  |
| I-8   | 7     | 16    | bullying, drugs                               | 9       | 19    | too old, principal drugs |
| I-9   | 8     | 14    | wanted to make money                          | 10      | 16    | wanted to make money     |
| I-10  | 9     | 15    | boring, no purpose                            | still 9 | 17    | boring, friends, drugs   |
| I-11  | 9     | 14    | bullying, people problems                     | 10      | 15-16 | bullying                 |
| S-1   | NR    | 15    | foster care                                   | NR      | 15    | foster care              |
| S-2   | 10    | 16    | bored   | 10      | 16    | bored                    |
| S-3   | 12    | 18    | pregnant                                      | 12      | 18    | pregnant and ashamed     |
| S-4   | 9     | 15    | pregnant, school wouldn't let pg girls attend | 9       | 15    | pregnant                 |
| S-5   | 6     | 12    | family money probs, bad grades                | 9       | 17    | same                     |
| S-6   | 9     | 18    | married, pregnant                             | NR      | 18    | same                     |

|          |       |      |   |       |     |                                     |
|----------|-------|------|---|-------|-----|-------------------------------------|
| S-7      | 12    | 18   | thought knew more than parents                            | 12    | 18  | same                                |
| S-8      | 9     | 16   | work,move on  | 11    | 18  | same                                |
| S-9      | 9     | 17   | expelled  | 9     | 17  | same                                |
| S-10     | 10    | 16   | bad grades, detention                                     | 12    | 18  | low credits                         |
| S-11     | 10    | 17   | bullied/threatened  | 10    | 17  | no help from bullying               |
| S-12     | 9     | 16   | teacher picked on me, not in sports, was threated by tchr | 10    | 17  | waste of time, wanted to skateboard |
| S-13     | 11    | 17   | teacher problem   | 11    | 17  | not supported at school             |
| S-14     | 9     | 14   | mom made me   | 9     | 14  | mom needed money                    |
| S-15     | 8     | 13   | drugs, teachers didn't like me                            | 10    | 16  | same                                |
|          | Grade | Age  |   | Grade | Age |                                     |
| mean     | 8.8   | 15.5 |   | 10    | 17  |                                     |
|          | Grade | Age  |   | Grade | Age |                                     |
| median   | 9     | 16   |   | 10    | 16  |                                     |
|          | Grade | Age  |   | Grade | Age |                                     |
| mode     | 9     | 16   |   | 10    | 16  |                                     |
|          | Grade | Age  |   | Grade | Age |                                     |
| youngest | 6     | 12   |   | 7     | 14  |                                     |

### Appendix H – Data Summary Tables: Exit Process and Emotions

*Survey Findings: Dropout Decisions- Age and Reasons*

| Sample ID | School Exit Interview? | Who signed you out | Emotions Experienced                         | Right Decision? Then? Now? |
|-----------|------------------------|--------------------|--|----------------------------|
| I-1       | Yes                    | mom                | relief                                       | Yes/Uncertain              |
| I-2       | No                     | mom                | scared                                       | Yes/Yes                    |
| I-3       | Yes                    | mom                | happy  | Yes/No                     |
| I-4       | No                     | NA                 | angry at school for holding me back again    | Yes/No                     |
| I-5       | No                     | NA                 | confusion, worry                             | Yes/No                     |
| I-6       | Yes                    | mom                | glad, scared, anxious                        | No/No                      |
| I-7       | Yes                    | uncle              | free, but felt like lost teenage years       | Yes, No                    |
| I-8       | No                     | self               | anger, no self worth                         | No, No                     |
| I-9       | No                     | NA                 | NR   | Yes/No                     |
| I-10      | Yes                    | father             | excited but scared                           | Yes/No                     |
| I-11      | Yes                    | mom                | relieved, worried                            | Yes/No                     |
| S-1       | No                     | NR                 | sad, upset                                   | NR                         |
| S-2       | Yes                    | dad                | relieved, shocked, worried                   | unsure no                  |
| S-3       | Yes                    | NA                 | embarrassed ashamed                          | No/No                      |
| S-4       | No                     | NA                 | angry because wouldn't let me come to school | No/No                      |
| S-5       | Yes                    | self               | relieved                                     | Yes/No                     |
| S-6       | No                     | NR                 | regret/worry                                 | No/NR                      |
| S-7       | No                     | NA                 | free, worried                                | Yes/No                     |
| S-8       | Yes                    | mom/dad            | guilty                                       | NR/No                      |
| S-9       | No                     | NA                 | failure, confused why expelled               | No/Yes                     |
| S-10      | Yes                    | mom                | let self down, worried                       | yes/yes                    |



|          |        |         |                                       |                     |
|----------|--------|---------|---------------------------------------|---------------------|
| S-11     | Yes    | mom     | relief                                | yes/yes             |
| S-12     | No     | NA      | felt good, hated school               | Yes/No              |
| S-13     | No     | NA      | excited but scared                    | Yes/No              |
| S-14     | Yes    | mom     | sad, upset, scared, had to go to work | No/No               |
| S-15     | No     | NA      | let myself down, but relieved/worried | Yes/No              |
| mean     | Yes 14 | mom 15  |                                       | Right Then = 16     |
| median   | No 13  | dad 3   |                                       | Not Then = 8        |
| mode     | NR 1   | self 2  |                                       | Unsure Then = 2     |
| youngest |        | other 1 |                                       | Right thing now = 4 |
|          |        |         |                                       | Wrong Now = 20      |
|          |        |         |                                       | NR = 1              |

### Appendix I – Data Summary Tables: Home or School Factors in Dropout

*Survey Findings: Home or School Factors in Student Decision*

| Sample ID | Factors at School |                                  | Factors at Home |                                      |
|-----------|-------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------|--------------------------------------|
|           | Yes/No            | Example                          | Yes/No          | Example                              |
| I-1       | Yes               | no teacher support               | No              | NA                                   |
| I-2       | No                | NA                               | No              | NA                                   |
| I-3       | Yes               | teacher comments                 | No              | NA                                   |
| I-4       | Yes               | a teacher, gangs                 | No              | NA                                   |
| I-5       | Yes               | low on credits, not connected    | Yes             | foster care, brother was bad         |
| I-6       | Yes               | cliques at school                | No              | NA                                   |
| I-7       | No                | it was me                        | No              | it was me                            |
| I-8       | No                | NA                               | Yes             | family moved - 4 high schools        |
| I-9       | No                | NA                               | Yes             | drugs, family abuse                  |
| I-10      | Yes               | classes didn't matter            | Yes             | wanted to make money                 |
| I-11      | No                | NA                               | Yes             | friends, drugs                       |
| I-12      | Yes               | bullying                         | No              | NA                                   |
| S-1       | No                | NA                               | Yes             | Group home did not care about school |
| S-2       | NR                | NR                               | NR              | NR                                   |
| S-3       | No                | NA                               | Yes             | pregnant                             |
| S-4       | Yes               | School Rules about preg girls    | Yes             | pregnant                             |
| S-5       | Yes               | Teachers were just there for pay | Yes             | family needed money                  |
| S-6       | No                | NR                               | Yes             | pregnant/married                     |
| S-7       | No                | NR                               | No              | NR                                   |

|      |     |                            |     |                        |
|------|-----|----------------------------|-----|------------------------|
| S-8  | Yes | Truancy                    | Yes | Need to work           |
| S-9  | Yes | Expelled                   | No  | NA                     |
| S-10 | Yes | bad grades                 | No  | NA                     |
| S-11 | Yes | bullying                   | No  | NA                     |
| S-12 | Yes | threatened by<br>teacher   | No  | NA                     |
| S-13 | Yes | Teacher problems           | No  | NA                     |
| S-14 | No  | NA                         | Yes | drug abuse in the home |
| S-15 | Yes | teachers didn't like<br>me | Yes | mom passed away        |

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|  |   |                         |  |
|--|---|-------------------------|--|
| School<br>Factors<br>Yes =<br>16<br>No =<br>10<br>NR = 1 | Teacher Issues = 8<br><br>Bullying = 2<br><br>Grades = 2<br><br>Rules 3 | Home<br>Factors<br>= 13 | Drug Use = 2<br><br>Death in Family = 1<br><br>Pregnant = 3<br><br>Money = 3<br><br>Foster Care = 2, Other 3 |
|--|---|-------------------------|--|

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### Appendix J – Data Summary Tables: Advice/Advisors/Influence

#### *Survey Findings: Home or School Factors in Student Decision*

| Sample ID | Advisors/Influence      |                      | Type  | Would Anything have kept you in school?             | Anything you would do differently?  |
|-----------|-------------------------|----------------------|-------|---|-------------------------------------|
|           | Advice                  | Who?                 | +/-   |   |                                     |
| I-1       | A lot                   | siblings, mom, dad   | neg   | No  | don't think so                      |
| I-2       | Yes                     | uncle, grandma       | neg   | No  | tough it out                        |
| I-3       | Yes                     | mom                  | pos   | Yes   | Yes, choose friends                 |
| I-4       | Yes                     | mom, drama tchr      | neg/o | No  | stay in school                      |
| I-5       | No                      | I turned 18 and left | NA    | If school moved me to next grade                    | stay in school                      |
| I-6       | Yes                     | mom/sister           | neg   | if someone would have talked to me                  | stay in school                      |
| I-7       | Yes                     | 4 siblings           | neg   | If someone would have convinced me how hard this is | think long and hard before you quit |
| I-8       | Yes                     | family members       | both  | No  | stay in school                      |
| I-9       | No                      | NA                   | none  | Any encouragement from school                       | stay out of trouble, stay in school |
| I-10      | Yes                     | Dad                  | neg   | No  | stay in school                      |
| I-11      | Yes                     | Many relatives       | neg   | No  | bite the bullet, stay               |
| I-12      | Yes                     | mom/dad              | both  | yes, take care of the bully                         | NA                                  |
| S-1       | No                      | NA                   | NA    | Yes   | wasn't my choice                    |
| S-2       | some said stay, some go | friends              | both  | Yes, needed to know about military                  | Stay in school                      |
| S-3       | stay in school          | Parents              | both  | No  | not sure                            |
| S-4       | NR                      | NR                   | NR    | No  | Stay in school                      |
| S-5       | stay in school          | 1 teacher father     | pos   | Yes, multiple possibilities                         | go back to school sooner            |
| S-6       | NR                      | NR                   | NR    | NR  | don't quit                          |

|      |  |                                  |           |                      |          |  |
|------|--|----------------------------------|-----------|----------------------|----------|--|
| S-7  | stay in school                                 | parents,<br>grandparents         | neg       |                      | NR       | Stay in school                             |
| S-8  | get a job                                      | family                           | neg       |                      | No       | everything                                 |
| S-9  | Yes  | aunt/uncle                       | pos       |                      | Yes      | NA   |
| S-10 | don't drop                                     | friend                           | neg       |                      | No       | do my<br>homework, pay<br>attn.            |
| S-11 | don't drop                                     | counselors,<br>mom/dad           | neg       |                      | No       | Stay in school                             |
| S-12 | none   | none                             | NA        | if that teacher left |          | Stay in school                             |
| S-13 | don't drop                                     | FB coach, some<br>tchrs, mom/dad | neg       |                      | No       | Stay in school,<br>it's tough out<br>there |
| S-14 | run away<br>from home<br>and leave<br>your mom | my aunt                          | neg       |                      | Yes      | never give up on<br>yourself               |
| S-15 | don't drop                                     | family                           | neg       |                      | No       | don't quit, it is<br>for your own<br>good  |
|      |  |                                  | pos 4     |                      | Yes = 12 | Stay in School =<br>21                     |
|      |  |                                  | neg 14    |                      | No = 13  | No = 1                                     |
|      |  |                                  | NA =<br>6 |                      | NR = 2   | Unsure or NR =<br>5                        |
|      |  |                                  | Both 3    |                      |          |  |

### Appendix K – Data Summary Tables: School Performance and Attendance

#### Survey Findings: School Grades and Attendance

| sample ID | Math Est. By Grade |       |       | Reading Est. by Grade |       |       | Attendance Est. by Grade |         |       |
|-----------|--------------------|-------|-------|-----------------------|-------|-------|--------------------------|---------|-------|
|           | 6th                | 8th   | HS    | 6th                   | 8th   | HS    | Elem                     | Middle  | HS    |
| I-1       | A                  | A     | A     | B                     | B     | C     | great                    | great   | great |
| I-2       | D                  | D     | D     | A                     | A     | A     | great                    | good    | good  |
| I-3       | good               | good  | D/F   | good                  | good  | good  | great                    | great   | great |
| I-4       | C                  | C/D   | C/D   | B-                    | C     | C-/D  | good                     | fair    | poor  |
| I-5       | B/C                | B/C   | B/C   | C/D                   | C/D   | C/D   | great                    | great   | poor  |
| I-6       | D                  | D     | D     | B                     | C     | C     | great                    | good    | poor  |
| I-7       | ok                 | ok    | bad   | ok                    | ok    | bad   | NR                       | good    | poor  |
| I-8       | B/C                | D/F   | D/F   | B/C                   | B/C   | B/C   | great                    | great   | poor  |
| I-9       | D/F                | D/F   | D/F   | D/F                   | D/F   | D/F   | great                    | poor    | poor  |
| I-10      | C/D                | C/D   | C/D   | C/D                   | C/D   | C/D   | great                    | poor    | poor  |
| I-11      | A                  | B     | B/C   | A                     | A     | A     | great                    | great   | poor  |
| I-12      | B/C                | B/C   | B/C   | B                     | B     | B     | good                     | good    | poor  |
| S-1       | A/B                | A/B   | A/B   | A/B                   | A/B   | C     | good                     | good    | good  |
| S-2       | C                  | C     | C     | C                     | C     | C     | good                     | good    | fair  |
| S-3       | A/B                | A/B   | A/B   | A/B                   | A/B   | A/B   | good                     | good    | fair  |
| S-4       | good               | good  | good  | fair                  | fair  | fair  | good                     | good    | NR    |
| S-5       | NR                 | NR    | NR    | C                     | C     | C     | great                    | great   | great |
| S-6       | NR                 | NR    | NR    | NR                    | NR    | NR    | good                     | good    | poor  |
| S-7       | A/B/C              | A/B/C | A/B/C | A/B/C                 | A/B/C | A/B/C | great                    | great   | great |
| S-8       | A                  | A     | A     | C-D                   | C-D   | C-D   | good                     | fair    | poor  |
| S-9       | C                  | C     | C     | B/C                   | B/C   | B/C   | great                    | great   | great |
| S-10      | NR                 | NR    | NR    | NR                    | NR    | NR    | good                     | fair    | poor  |
| S-11      | NR                 | NR    | NR    | NR                    | NR    | NR    | good                     | good    | good  |
| S-12      | B                  | B     | B     | B/C                   | B/C   | B/C   | poor                     | great   | poor  |
| S-13      | A/B/C              | A/B/C | A/B/C | A/B/C                 | A/B/C | A/B/C | perfect                  | perfect | good  |
| S-14      | B/C                | B/C   | B/C   | B                     | B     | B     | good                     | good    | poor  |
| S-15      | F                  | F     | F     | D/F                   | D/F   | D/F   | great                    | good    | poor  |

|       |        |        |        |        |        |       |               |    |    |
|-------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|---------------|----|----|
| A =3  | A =2   | A = 2  | A = 2  | A = 2  | A = 2  | A = 2 | Great = 14    | 10 | 5  |
| B =4  | B = 5  | B = 4  | 19     | B = 7  | B = 6  |       | Good = 11     | 14 | 6  |
| C =9  | C = 4  | C = 6  | C = 4  | C = 4  | C = 8  |       | Poor = 1      | 2  | 15 |
| D = 5 | D = 4  | D = 4  | D = 3  | D = 2  | D = 4  |       | NR = 1        | 1  | 1  |
| F = 2 | F = 3  | F = 3  | F = 2  | F = 4  | F = 2  |       | Fair=Good     |    |    |
| NR =8 | NR = 8 | NR = 6 | NR = 7 | NR = 7 | NR = 7 |       | Perfect=Great |    |    |

### Appendix L – Data Summary Tables: Response to Four Broad Based Reasons for Dropout

| Participant Rating of 4 Broad Based Reasons |             |           |           |                    |
|---|-------------|-----------|-----------|--------------------|
| Sample ID                                   | Life Events | Fade Outs | Push Outs | Failing to Succeed |
| I-1   | 3           | 1         | 4         | 1                  |
| I-2   | 5           | 4         | 1         | 1                  |
| I-3   | 1           | 1         | 4.5       | 1                  |
| I-4   | 1           | 5         | 1         | 5                  |
| I-5   | 1           | 5         | 1         | 1                  |
| I-6   | 2           | 5         | 4         | 5                  |
| I-7   | 3           | 4         | 1         | 4.5                |
| I-8   | 5           | 2         | 1         | 2                  |
| I-9   | 3           | 1         | 4         | 4                  |
| I-10  | 1           | 5         | 1         | 2                  |
| I-11  | 5           | 5         | 1         | 1                  |
| I-12  | 5           | 4         | 1         | 1                  |
| S-1   | 1           | 1         | 4         | 2                  |
| S-2   | 1           | 3         | 1         | 2                  |
| S-3   | 5           | 1         | 1         | 1                  |
| S-4   | 5           | 2         | 4         | 2                  |
| S-5   | 4           | 3         | 5         | 5                  |
| S-6   | 5           | 3         | 2         | 2                  |
| S-7   | 1           | 1         | 1         | 1                  |
| S-8   | 5           | 5         | 5         | 3                  |
| S-9   | 5           | 2.5       | 1         | 1.5                |
| S-10  | 3           | 1         | 2         | 2                  |
| S-11  | 1           | 1         | 3         | 2                  |
| S-12  | 1           | 3         | 5         | 1                  |
| S-13  | 3           | 1         | 1         | 1                  |
| S-14  | 5           | 1         | 1         | 1                  |
| S-15  | 3           | 1         | 4         | 5                  |
| Incidence of Self Rating                    |             |           |           |                    |
| 1's   | 9           | 11        | 14        | 11                 |
| 2's   | 1           | 2         | 2         | 9                  |
| 3's   | 6           | 5         | 1         | 1                  |
| 4's   | 1           | 3         | 6         | 1                  |
| 5's   | 10          | 6         | 4         | 5                  |

### Appendix M – Data Summary Tables: Response to School Actions

| Participant Rating of School Effort in 5 Interventions |                            |                          |                              |                                    |                                |
|--|----------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Sample ID  | Home to School Partnership | Safe and Orderly Climate | Teachers Build Relationships | Lessons convert to work or college | High Expectations for Students |
| I-1  | 1                          | 5                        | 1                            | 1                                  | 2                              |
| I-2  | 3                          | 5                        | 3                            | 4                                  | 3                              |
| I-3  | 2                          | 4                        | 5                            | 1                                  | 3.5                            |
| I-4  | 1                          | 5                        | 2                            | 1                                  | 2                              |
| I-5  | 1                          | 5                        | 4                            | 2                                  | 4                              |
| I-6  | 1                          | 5                        | 3                            | 3                                  | 5                              |
| I-7  | 3.5                        | 5                        | 3                            | 3                                  | 5                              |
| I-8  | 2                          | 4                        | 5                            | 3                                  | 5                              |
| I-9  | 1                          | 2                        | 1                            | 2                                  | 1                              |
| I-10   | 1                          | 5                        | 3                            | 1                                  | 3                              |
| I-11   | 4                          | 5                        | 5                            | 3                                  | 5                              |
| I-12   | 1                          | 1                        | 2                            | 1                                  | 2                              |
| S-1  | 5                          | 5                        | 5                            | 5                                  | 5                              |
| S-2  | 1                          | 3                        | 2                            | 1                                  | 2                              |
| S-3  | 4                          | 5                        | 5                            | 4                                  | 4                              |
| S-4  | 1                          | 1                        | 1                            | 1                                  | 1                              |
| S-5  | 2                          | 2                        | 2                            | 2                                  | 2                              |
| S-6  | 3                          | 4                        | 5                            | 1                                  | 2                              |
| S-7  | 3                          | 4                        | 3                            | 3                                  | 3                              |
| S-8  | 3                          | 1                        | 3                            | 3                                  | 3                              |
| S-9  | 2                          | 4                        | 2                            | 2                                  | 5                              |
| S-10   | 1                          | 4                        | 3                            | 4                                  | 2                              |
| S-11   | 2                          | 1                        | 1                            | 3                                  | 2                              |
| S-12   | 1                          | 5                        | 2                            | 1                                  | 1                              |
| S-13   | 3                          | 5                        | 2                            | 5                                  | 1                              |
| S-14   | 1                          | 5                        | 5                            | 5                                  | 5                              |
| S-15   | 1                          | 3                        | 1                            | 1                                  | 2                              |
| Rating   |                            |                          |                              |                                    |                                |
| 1's  | 13                         | 4                        | 5                            | 10                                 | 4                              |
| 2's  | 5                          | 2                        | 7                            | 4                                  | 9                              |
| 3's  | 5                          | 2                        | 7                            | 7                                  | 4                              |
| 4's  | 3                          | 6                        | 1                            | 3                                  | 3                              |
| 5's  | 1                          | 13                       | 7                            | 3                                  | 7                              |