INCONVENIENT YOUTH: A CRITICAL

EXPLORATION OF MARGINALIZED

ADOLESCENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF TRADITIONAL

HIGH SCHOOL

By

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Title of Study: *INCONVENIENT YOUTH:* A CRITICAL EXPLORATION OF
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Abstract: This qualitative study was designed to explore the dropout phenomenon through marginalized adolescents' retrospective perceptions and experiences of care and belonging, power and privilege within the traditional high school environment. In addition, this study examined the role these constructs may or may not have played in the participants' decision to leave the traditional high school prior to graduation. Critical theory provided the theoretical perspective for this study with the intent to add to the depths of emancipatory knowledge within the fields of dropout research and marginalized youth. This study authorized student perspectives and presented authentic voice uncovered in qualitative data through individual interview sessions. Along with the extensive use of quotations, I used the poetic representation of data by writing found poems with the goal of building an emotional bridge between the reader and the participants. Findings indicate that marginalized adolescents' success at school may be related to experiences of care, belonging, power, and privilege. In addition, findings reveal that early school leaving may be an act of resistance to school ideologies and hegemonic structures.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

According to the National Center for Education Statistics approximately 1.3 million

American high school students failed to graduate with their class in 2010 (NCES, 2010). This

statistic accounted for 30% of the eligible students who should have graduated that school

year, while the Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate (AFGR) indicated that 25% of all high

school freshmen never completed high school (NCES, 2010). In addition, the non-completion

rate varied by state and was reported to be as high as 49% in Nevada to as low as 10% in

Wisconsin (NCES, 2010). The basic profile of students who drop out of high school also

varied according to demographics, gender, and race. For example, across all reporting states,

males were more likely to drop out than females, and Blacks and Hispanics were less likely

to complete high school than were their White counterparts (NCES, 2010).

Researchers have found defining the extent of the "dropout" phenomenon difficult

because statistics have varied from state to state. This variance has been due to differences in

defining what constitutes a high school "dropout" as well as to differences in measurement

and reporting methods (NCES, 2010). The Common Core of Data (CCD) has categorized a

"dropout" as a student who was enrolled during a given school year, but did not graduate and

was not enrolled at the beginning of the following school year (NCES, 2010). Some states

have used the CCD definition, while other states have defined a "dropout" as anyone who left

school without a high school diploma or as any individual who earned some type of

alternative certification such as a GED.

In addition, the CCD currently measures and reports three types of "dropout" rates:

event, status, and cohort (NCES, 2010). The event rate describes the percentage of students

who drop out of school each year. It is the actual number of students who dropped out during

a given grade in school divided by the number of students who enrolled in that same grade at

the beginning of the school year. The status rate measures the percentage of 16 to 24–year-

olds who are not enrolled in school and who have not completed high school, while the

cohort rate measures the percentage of freshmen who have successfully graduated by the end

of their senior year (NCES, 2010).

Regardless of how "dropout" is defined, the reporting method, or the statistical

breakdown, the fact remains that an unacceptable number of adolescents are leaving school

each year without a high school diploma. This is a critical issue that can negatively affect an

individual's quality of life. Adolescents who leave school without a diploma face a number

of detrimental life outcomes including bearing the pejorative label of "dropout." As adults,

they often deal with issues of chronic unemployment and frequent job transitions. In

addition, the income gap between high school graduates and non-graduates continues to

widen as employers demand higher skills, jobs require increasingly higher levels of technical

training and outsourcing forces global competition for employment opportunities (Levin,

Belfield, Muennig, & Rouse, 2007; Rumberger, 2011; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). The income

gap between high school graduates and non-graduates, as of 2006, was estimated to be

approximately $10,000 per year (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2006). High school "dropouts"

also are prone to have poor health, including mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. They are also less likely to have health insurance and, therefore, lack access to adequate health care. They are more likely to live in poverty and to become incarcerated. They may require public assistance and, consequently, must negotiate the stigma attached to "being on welfare." In addition, as socially disenfranchised individuals, they are less likely to vote or to participate within their communities (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Levin, Belfield, Muennig, & Rouse, 2007; Rumberger, 2011).

Just as "dropout" statistical measurements and reporting methods have varied, so has the research into this phenomenon. From my review of the literature, I concluded that this research generally takes one of three approaches. The first approach focuses on the individual characteristics of the student such as personal background, academic history, and school behavioral history. This is often referred to as a "blame the victim" approach. Unfortunately, this approach marginalizes the already marginalized adolescent and is used to justify inequality by finding defects in the victims rather than by considering the role that inequitable social forces may play in shaping their circumstances and choices (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Deschenes, Cuban, & Tyack, 2001; Fine, 1991; Givens, 2007; Lee & Burkam, 2003; McInerney, 2006; Rumberger, 2001; Ryan, 1971; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). The second approach shifts the blame onto traditional school organizational characteristics such as size, location, resources, policies and practices (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Deschenes, Cuban, & Tyack, 2001; Lee & Burkam, 2003; McInerney, 2006; Rumberger, 2001; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). The third approach examines push factors (school characteristics), pull factors (individual characteristics), and the possible interaction between the two (Bergeson, 2006; Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; Darling-Hammond,

2006; Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008; Lan & Lathier, 2003; Jordan, Lara & McPartland, 1996; Rumberger, 2012; Stearns & Glennie, 2006, Wald & Losen, 2007).

All three of these approaches provide valid insights to the phenomenon as well as adding significantly to the growing body of research. Furthermore, these approaches demonstrate the complexity of the processes involved in the non-completion of high school. McGregor and Mills (2013) concluded, "Early school-leaving may be the result of highly individualized circumstances, but research indicates that it is usually the consequence of a complex mix of factors" (p. 844). Rarely is only one factor involved. Instead, combinations of factors appear to shape the "dropout" process (Finn, 1989; Rumberger, 2011; Smyth, 2004; Smyth & Hattam, 2005; Te Riele, 2006). Much of this research, however, tends to focus on the fixed and tangible characteristics of individuals and of schools, while the possible relationship between dropping out and an alienating traditional school climate (defined here as the absence of student perceptions of care and belonging) merits further exploration (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Lee & Burkam, 2003; Pellerin, 2005; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986).

One proactive response to the "dropout" phenomenon has been the proliferation of alternative schools in the U.S. These schools have gained "increased acceptability and respectability" in spite of the fact that there is "little unanimity" as to what constitutes an alternative school (Aron & Zweig, 2003; Gable, Bullock & Evans, 2006, p. 6-7). The term "alternative" has been applied to every educational entity from charter schools, court schools, detention schools, magnet schools, day treatment centers, residential schools, alternative learning centers and second chance schools (Quinn & Rutherford, 1998; Fitzsimmons Hughes et al., 2006). In 2002, the U.S. Department of Education defined an alternative

education school as a "public elementary/secondary school that addresses needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school, provide nontraditional education, serves as an adjunct to regular school, or falls outside the categories of regular, special education, or vocational education" (U.S Department of Education, 2002, p. 55). In spite of this national effort to clarify what is meant by alternative education, the individual states continue to adopt their own definitions of alternative education (Quinn, 2006).

Although the field of alternative education has lacked a common definition, the tremendous growth in the availability of these diverse programs highlights the continuing and ongoing demand for alternative approaches to traditional education. In 1994, Raywid discussed three approaches to alternative education. The first approach involved the creation of an innovative school setting designed to be more responsive than a traditional school to the needs of individual students. The second approach was the voluntary placement of students to an alternative setting as a "last chance" opportunity prior to suspension or expulsion from school. The final approach encouraged mandatory placement in remedial schools for students in need of academic, emotional, and/or social rehabilitation. More recently, Fitzsimons Hughes et al. (2006) identified three types of alternative educational programs based on specific student characteristics. Type one settings were designed to serve gifted or advanced students, special education students, and students with substance abuse issues as well as those who were pregnant or had truancy problems. Type two settings were geared toward students who exhibited serious discipline problems and type three settings provided therapeutic environments for students with serious emotional or behavioral problems.

The Oklahoma State Department of Education and the Oklahoma State Legislature worked to develop alternative schools that were voluntary and non-punitive in nature. The Oklahoma Department of Alternative Education encouraged and rewarded school districts that developed and maintained a non-punitive, school of choice model. Currently, alternative schools in Oklahoma are encouraged to provide programs built on 17 research-based components (70 O.S. 1210-568). These components include the following:

- Small student-teacher ratio (15-1 recommended)
- Appropriate structure, curriculum, interaction, and reinforcement strategies for effective instruction
- Intake and screening process
- Highly qualified teachers
- Teachers with skills and experiences compatible for work with at-risk youth
- Collaboration with state and local agencies
- Curriculum aligned with state standards
- Individualized instruction
- Clear and measurable program goals
- On-site counseling and social service components
- Individual graduation plans
- Life skills instruction
- Opportunities for arts education
- Annual budget
- An evaluation component including self-evaluation

- Service to students grades 6-12 who are most at-risk of not completing high school

- Extra-curricular activity opportunities

The alternative program that is the focus and setting of the current study strictly adheres to this model and consistently receives exemplary markings in each of these 17 categories during the annual program evaluation process. Each of the adolescents who participated in this study left traditional school settings, attended this alternative high school and successfully earned their high school diplomas.

Formal Statement of the Problem

Each year within the last decade, approximately one-third of all American high school students failed to graduate from traditional high school. State departments of education, school districts, educators, researchers, business leaders, and policy makers continue to grapple with possible solutions to this problem. Typically, many of these educational and political leaders explain the "dropout" phenomenon by blaming individual risk factors (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Deschenes, Cuban, & Tyack, 2001; Lee & Burkam, 2003; McInerney, 2006; Rumberger, 2001; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986), by blaming the schools (Bryk & Thum,1989; Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Deschenes, Cuban, & Tyack, 2001; Lee & Burkam, 2003; McInerney, 2006; Rumberger, 2001; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986), or by blaming push/pull factors and/or the interaction between the two (Bergeson, 2006; Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; Lan & Lanthier, 2003; Jordan, Lara, & McPartland, 1996; Stearns & Glennie, 2006; Wald & Losen; 2007).

Recent research, however, suggests that school climate characteristics, such as student perceptions of care and belonging, power and privilege, may be related to marginalized adolescents leaving traditional school prior to graduation (Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Eccles et al., 1993; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010; Fine, 1991; Finn, 1989; Osterman, 2000; Pellerin, 2006; Rumberger, 2012). Some researchers suggest traditional high schools might increase their effectiveness if they were transformed into communities of care and support for all adolescents, but especially for marginalized youth (Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010; Hargreaves, Earl, & Ryan, 1996; Schaps, Battistich & Solomon, 1996; Solomon et al., 1996; Solomon, Battistich, Kim & Watson, 1997). Unfortunately, some traditional schools may neglect the affective needs of students (Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Deschenes, Cuban, & Tyack, 2001; Noddings, 1992; Osterman, 2000). Instead, the focus on individualism and competition within the traditional school setting may contribute to student experiences of "isolation, alienation, and polarization" (Osterman, 2000, p. 324). A critical lens is a promising framework to examine marginalized adolescents' perceptions of care and belonging, power and privilege within traditional high school.

From a critical standpoint, public schools do not function in a vacuum. They are historical and social institutions and, as such, are not neutral environments, but rather microcosms of broader social and political forces (Apple; 2004; Arnowitz, 2009; Fine, 1991; Giroux, 2009; Kincheloe, 2006; Thomas, 2006; MacLeod, 2009; McLaren, 2007; Willis, 1977). School accountability and individual responsibility, the current neoliberal and neoconservative euphemisms for blaming public schools and blaming the individual, have become the new mantra for many educational policy makers in which schools and

adolescents are held accountable to keep up with the status quo or be left behind (Arnowitz, 2009; Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Giroux, 2009; Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008; Hursh, 2007; Kincheloe, 2006; McInerney, 2006; Noddings, 2004). The student who attends traditional high school pre-equipped with dominant social capital may be sufficiently agile, both academically and socially, to deal successfully with individual accountability demands. In addition, the academically and socially agile student may receive measures of care and belonging, power and privilege within the traditional high school context that assist him or her along the path to graduation. Whereas, marginalized adolescents, who come to school without dominant social capital, may struggle to navigate successfully through traditional high school. The traditional school establishment may view these youth as an "inconvenience" and deny them equal measures of care and belonging, power and privilege. As a result, these "inconvenient youth" may choose to leave high school prior to graduation. Furthermore, in so choosing, the marginalized adolescent may be expressing implicitly or explicitly a form of resistance to the reproduction of inequitable social relations within the traditional high school context (Fine, 1991; Ogbu, 2003, 2008).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to critically and retrospectively explore six marginalized adolescents' traditional high school experiences with and perceptions of care, belonging, power and privilege. This study examined what care and belonging looked like to these youth as students within a traditional high school and whether these two constructs were related to power and privilege. In addition, this study explored how power and privilege were reproduced within that traditional high school as well as the manner in which resistance and power related to the study participants' decision to leave that environment prior to

graduation. Patton (2002) concluded that "purpose guides analysis" (p. 434). Therefore, purpose is the "what" and the "why" of an investigation and should drive not only the collection of data, but also the analysis, the interpretation, and the final representation of the data. Kvale (1996) recommended that researchers "not ask how to analyze…before the answers to the "what" and the "why" of an investigation have been given" (p. 278). Consequently, in order to clarify the purpose and scope of my research, I defined the "what" of this study as the critical exploration of the constructs of care and belonging, power and privilege within a traditional high school context through the eyes of six marginalized former students. I defined the "why" of this study as giving voice to these marginalized youth through the representation of their traditional high school experiences.

Research Questions

Stake (2006) recommended organizing a multicase study, such as this one, around at least one research question with several other possible questions. He also proposed that with a multicase study, researchers should not organize the individual cases around the main research question(s), but rather should organize and study them separately. He referred to the research questions governing the individual cases as "issues" (p. 9). For the purposes of this multicase research study, I proposed one research question supported by four sub-questions or "issues" to guide the analysis for each individual case within this dissertation. I developed the central question at the heart of this study to be broad in scope with the intent of generating thick, rich descriptions from my study participants.

The sub-questions narrowed the focus of this inquiry, while still leaving the questioning process open. All of the research questions were open-ended without reference to

any particular theory or literature and a "what" and "how" format was used to "convey an open and emerging design" (Cresswell, 2009, p. 130). My goal as the researcher was to remain open to "the subtleties of unexpected influence" (Stake, 2006, p. 13). Stake (2006) emphasized that "too much emphasis on original research questions and contexts can distract researchers from recognizing new issues when they emerge" (p. 13). Adhering to Stake's advice, I tried to find a middle ground between "underanticipating" and "overanticipating" the perspectives of my six research participants (p. 13).

Research Question:

1. How were marginalized adolescents' perceptions of care and belonging, power and privilege within the traditional high school context related to their decision to leave that environment prior to graduation?

Sub-Questions:

1. What did care and belonging look like through marginalized adolescents' retrospective perceptions of the traditional high school environment?
2. How did marginalized adolescents' retrospective perceptions of care and belonging in traditional high school relate to power and privilege?
3. Based on marginalized adolescents' retrospective perceptions, how were constructs of power and privilege reproduced within the traditional high school context?
4. Based on marginalized adolescents' retrospective perceptions, how were resistance and power related to the decision to leave the traditional high school?

Theoretical Perspective

Crotty (1998) described epistemology as the theory of knowledge (how we know what we know) and theoretical perspective as the philosophical stance used to inform one's methodology. I chose *constructionism* as the epistemological foundation upon which I supported my theoretical perspective *critical theory*. Crotty (1998) defined constructionism as the belief "that all knowledge, and therefore, all meaningful reality…is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world" (p. 42). Critical theory, having evolved from the critical tradition, acknowledges the social construction of meanings, while at the same time remains deeply suspicious of culturally-derived meanings. Crotty (1998) noted that critical theory "emphasizes that particular sets of meanings, because they have come into being in and out of the give-and-take of social existence, exist to serve hegemonic interests" (p. 59). Hegemonic interests skew socially constructed meanings toward the support of particular power structures, toward the resistance of social justice, and toward promoting and maintaining oppression.

Critical theory is a method of inquiry that actively challenges the status quo. It situates research in terms of conflict and oppression, celebrates voice, promotes liberation and strives to bring about consciousness-raising and social change. Most scholars credit Karl Marx with having "laid the foundation" for modern critical thought (Crotty, 1998, p. 115). Marx (1843) defined critical theory as "the self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age" (p. 209). This definition acknowledges that social movements and conflicts are products of the time periods in which they occur. Marx applied Hegel's dialectic (thesis, antithesis, synthesis) to class struggles in order to explain how social conflict inevitably leads to social and political change. This social and historical philosophy came to be known as

dialectical materialism. Within this philosophy, Marx proposed that realities are related through complex interactions with one another and that these interactions lead to a state of constant conflict. Conflict, in turn, leads to change.

When I examined the realities of the traditional high school environment featured in this study through a Marxian lens, I noted the complex interactions between school climate characteristics and the individual characteristics of marginalized students. Conflicts between the two abounded. In fact, the functional realities of many traditional high school environments such as the one studied may work in dialectical opposition to the care and belonging needs of marginalized youth. Furthermore, marginalized students, when excluded from power and privilege, may drop out of high school in an act of resistance toward unequal, contextual power relations.

I aligned my epistemology, theoretical perspective, and methodology in order to achieve conceptual fit in research design (Koro-Ljungberg, 2009). I drew on Patton's (2002) definition of orientational qualitative inquiry in which "the ideological orientation or perspective of the researcher determines the focus of inquiry" (p. 129). Critical theory oriented the focus of this dissertation as case study research that is fundamentally political and focused on effecting change. My hope is that this dissertation will contribute to the depths of emancipatory knowledge within the fields of dropout research and marginalized youth, as well as to social justice discourses, by documenting the voices and experiences of marginalized students through the context of a traditional high school (Madison, 2012). . Ultimately, my goal was not "to revise, and amend, and repair deficient children" (Ryan, 1971, p. 61). Instead, my intent was to illuminate the atmosphere and operations of a traditional high school through a critical lens in order to explore the possibility that perhaps

the true deficiency lies in the manner in which marginalized youth are treated at school and not in the youth themselves.

Methodology

This is a qualitative, multi-case study with six individual cases representing each of the participants. My data collection process consisted of one interview session with each participant. My process of data analysis and interpretation was highly conceptual and involved interview transcription, immersion within the data, sufficient time, and a systematic approach as I sorted and coded the data within the orienting themes of care, belonging, power, and privilege. After writing each participant's story in case study form, I created multiple poetic representations of my data using creative analytical practices and performative writing strategies (Conquergood, 1985; Denzin, 2003; Madison, 2012; Richardson, 1992, 1994). Denzin (2003) proposed that performative writing enacts as it describes. Madison (2012) wrote, "Performative writing constitutes enactment because it is a braiding of poetry and reportage, imagination and actuality, critical analysis and literary pleasure" (p. 223). My goal was to braid my data in such an evocative way as to build an emotional bridge between the reader and the marginalized participants of this research study so the reader feels an intimate connection to the participants as "human beings" and clearly hears their distinct and individual voices.

Significance of Study

This study is significant in several ways. First, the dropout rate is a critical and timely issue that currently is undergoing intense scrutiny by state education officials, school districts, school administrators, business leaders, policy makers, and researchers. Adolescents

who fail to finish high school face numerous negative life outcomes. I believe that understanding and addressing why students leave traditional high school prior to graduation is the key to dropout prevention, intervention, and recovery efforts. Secondly, my intent was to fill gaps within the research fields of qualitative inquiry and critical inquiry in this particular topic area. Smith (2000) proposed that more critical and qualitative research is needed in order "to explore how the educational system may be implicated in reproducing marginalized youths' academic failure" (p. 293). Furthermore, according to Apple (2004), additional critical perspectives may help to revitalize and reinvigorate the field of educational research. Currently, much of the dropout research uses quantitative methodologies with a frequent reliance on survey data administered to small numbers of students (Balfanz, Herzog, & MacIver, 2007; Wehlage & Rutter, 1989). In addition, Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2010) pointed out, "Qualitative studies examining student voice, especially those that focus on student belonging and care in the high school environment, are not very prominent in secondary education research" (p. 396). Therefore, qualitative methodologies, in particular those authorizing students perspectives, could add significantly to the exploration of the "dropout" phenomenon.

My third objective was for this study to add significantly to the body of literature concerning issues of care and belonging within the traditional school context. Student care and belonging needs within the school context are a critical research topic in education. These affective needs represent a construct quite different from most school failure research that primarily focuses on risk factors (Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Goodenow, 1991). Most of the research concerning teacher-student relations has been conducted at the primary school level with few studies examining the importance of bonds between secondary teachers and

their students (Barber, 2002). In addition, as Ma (2003) noted, "little research evidence exists concerning the manner in which school context and climate may affect students' sense of belonging" (p. 342). Finally, my hope is that my research will make a meaningful, valid, and reliable contribution to the existing body of research concerning high school dropouts in an effort to assist policy makers, school boards, school administrators, and school districts in making future decisions that are responsive to the affective needs of marginalized youth.

Assumptions

Critical theorists, Kincheloe and McLaren (1994) defined a set of basic assumptions for researchers who engage in social criticism. I paraphrased these assumptions as a guide to my research and also provided an explanation of each assumption within the context of my research:

- All thought is mediated by socially and historically constituted power relations:
  - The labor-power construct mediates power relations within the school context by ascribing value to students based on their ability to become laborers, consumers, and tax payers. Noddings (2005) wrote, "It is a form of civic mindedness to think of children as precious resources. We teach them math and science so as not to waste our resources and endanger our competitive edge in the world market" (p. 13).
- Facts cannot be separated from values or ideology:
  - The high school graduation rate cannot be separated from the value or lack of value this nation places on a high school diploma, on education in general, or on marginalized youth. The graduation rate cannot be separated from

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neoconservative and neoliberal ideologies that have forced institutional

accountability on the public education system and personal accountability on

public education students. Noddings (2005) argued, "In the real world, children

are too often valued only for their achievement. They become resources" (p. 13).

She continued, "A child's place in our hearts and lives should not depend on his

or her academic prowess" (p. 13).

- The relationship between concepts and objects is unstable and may be mediated by

the capitalist relations between consumption and production:

  o The relationship between schools and students is unstable and is mediated by

  labor-power relations through the production of students as laborers and

  consumers. Ryan (1971) wrote that this instability will persist until society

  changes the nature of this relationship. He proposed that "to continue to define the

  difficulty as inherent in the raw material—the children—is plainly to blame the

  victim and to acquiesce in the continuation of educational inequality in America"

  (Ryan, 1971, p. 62).

- Language is key to the formation of subjective thought:

  o The pejorative language used to describe marginalized youth defines them as

  Other and reproduces social systems of oppression. MacLeod (2009) provided

  examples of labels used to describe "offending students" such as "slow, learning

  impaired, unmotivated, troubled, high risk, and emotionally disturbed" (p. 264). I

  added "disengaged," "lazy," "at-risk," "bad kids," and "those kids". The language

  used to label "educational misfits" is both prescriptive and explanatory revealing

"how embedded categorizations and constructions of difference are" within the school context (Deschenes, Cuban, & Tyack, 2001).

- Within any society, certain groups will be privileged over others creating an oppression that involves subordinates embracing as natural their social condition:
  - Academically and socially agile youth acquire power and privilege at school through the social capital they bring with them, while marginalized youth who lack adequate social capital, may be viewed as "inconvenient," and often accept the absence of power and privilege at school as a natural condition. MacLeod (2009) referred to this process as "school-mediated exclusion" wherein marginalized youth are schooled into viewing themselves as the "causal agents" of their own marginalization (p. 16).
- Oppression takes many forms with one being no more important than another:
  - Systems of oppression within public schools mirror those found within society and are of equal importance. When schools devalue a certain segment of the student population this serves to reproduce the social devaluation of certain segments of the general population. Noddings (2005) concluded that when students claim that school personnel "don't care," it is because "they suspect that we want their success for our own purposes, to advance our own records, and too often they are right" (p. 13).
- Mainstream research often unknowingly reproduces the social systems of oppression:
  - Dropout research that takes only a "blame the victim" approach or a "blame the school" approach to the problem only serves to reinforce and reproduce social systems of oppression within our public schools.

Definition of Terms

Affective Needs: This refers to the emotional and psychological needs of an individual such as the need to feel cared for and the need to experience a sense of belonging within a social group or organization.

Alternative Education: A system of non-traditional schools that offer marginalized youth a second chance at a high school diploma. In Oklahoma, these programs offer small classes, individualized instruction, on-site support and counseling services, and most importantly, positive, supportive relationships with caring adults.

At-Risk Youth: This category refers to adolescents who have a high probability of one or more negative life outcomes such as dropping out of high school. The burden of blame with this designation is placed on the individual.

Attention Deficit Disorder/Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder: This is condition that affects children and adolescents and for some can continue into adulthood. Symptoms are usually grouped into three categories: inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsiveness. These symptoms can occur alone or together. Individuals with ADD/ADHD generally have problems paying attention or concentrating. They may be easily bored and have trouble following directions. They may feel the urge to move constantly and not think before acting. These behaviors can interfere with a child's ability to function at school.

Belonging: This term refers to feelings of acceptance and/or membership within a social group or organization. Within the school context belonging is often associated with engagement, bonding, connectedness, and attachment (Libbey, 2004).

Care: This is an affective need and refers to a state of attention, interest, or concern for someone else. Cassidy and Bates (2005) portrayed caring as "both a perspective and a practice" that serves as "a powerful catalyst for positive social, emotional, and academic development" (p. 68). Noddings (2005) defined care from relational perspective. She emphasized that "an ethic of care embodies a relational view of caring" in that both the carer and the cared-for contribute to the relationship (p. xv).

Culture: The practices, values, and beliefs of different social groups (McLaren, 2007).

Cultural Capital: The ability of individuals to express their culture is dependent upon the power they wield as a social group within the broader social context. The more powerful the social group, the more cultural capital they possess (McLaren, 2007).

Dominant Capital: This refers to the cultural capital wielded by the "social class in control of the material and symbolic wealth of society" (McLaren, 2007, p. 201).

Hegemony: McLaren (2007) defines hegemony as the maintenance of domination with the consent of the dominated through consensual social practices, forms, and structures. He wrote that "hegemony is a struggle in which the powerful win the consent of those who are oppressed, with the oppressed unknowingly participating in their own oppression" (McLaren, 2007, p. 203).

Marginalized Youth: This concept identifies individuals through their relationship with schooling rather than labeling them as at-risk youth and in so doing perpetuating the blame the victim approach. It also recognizes that marginalization is a consequence of societal patterns of injustice and oppression. It is "a product of the institutions, systems, and culture(s) we create and sustain" (Smyth et al., 2000, p. 4). Giroux (2009) believed that

marginalized youth currently are viewed by society as disposable youth: "An excess to be contained or burden to be expelled" (p. xiii).

Neoconservatism: Apple (2001) defines neoconservative ideology as the desire to restore the dominant culture of the western, white, middle-class male through control over the nation's knowledge, morals, and values.

Neoliberalism: Giroux defines this ideology as free-market fundamentalism (2009). It is often a critical term referring to the belief in the preeminence of capitalist relations and the application of competition in all areas of economic and social life including the public school system. Neoliberals tie educational policy to the needs of the global market (Apple, 2001).

Power: Social groups hold power through the domination of social ideological practices and through ownership of the material and symbolic wealth of society.

Privilege: Benefits, entitlements, and power held by individuals and social groups through the acquisition and use of dominant cultural capital. Walsh (2006) stated, "Schooling rewards those who already possess dominant forms of cultural capital" and privilege erases race and class "through the four myths of equal opportunity, meritocracy, equality as conformity, and power neutrality" (p. 232). Privilege affords individuals and social groups the power to maintain their privileged status and vice versa. Power and privilege are inextricably linked within a reciprocal framework.

Resistance: This is an act that rejects social systems of reproduction and oppression. A critical exploration of resistance poses the question as to whether or not student oppositional behavior is a struggle against marginalization or is a manifestation and continuation of the

student's own oppression (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009, Fine, 1991; Ogbu, 2003, 2008).

Social Reproduction: The perpetuation of social relationships and attitudes needed to sustain and reinforce "the existing dominant economic and class relations of the larger society" (McLaren, 2007, p. 215). In other words, this term refers to the perpetuation of social class from one generation to another.

Traditional High School: This is a standard 9-12 grade public high school in the United States.

Voice: Voice is the method and the manner in which students can make themselves "heard" and seen as "active participants in the world" (McLaren, 2007, p. 244). McLaren wrote that student voice is the "constitutive force that both mediates and shapes reality within historically constructed practices and relationships shaped by capital (p. 244).

<u>Summary and Organization of Study</u>

This dissertation explored marginalized adolescents' retrospective perceptions of their traditional high school experiences through a critical lens with the intent of developing a deeper and more personal understanding of the care and belonging, power and privilege needs of alienated and disenfranchised youth within the school context. The participants, drawn from a pool of former traditional high school students, were encouraged to share their retrospective opinions, experiences, and thoughts through the use of open-ended questions during personal interview sessions. This is a multi-case study organized into ten chapters. The first chapter provides a comprehensive introduction into the high school dropout phenomenon including pertinent background information, the significance of the study, my

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purpose, an overview of my theoretical perspective, methodology, and procedures, as well as a critical view of my assumptions. Critical theory was the lens through which I viewed this research. The data was collected and findings are presented in case study form using data-driven, performative and ethnographic writing strategies.

Chapter II presents a review of the literature into dropout research specifically addressing studies that have focused on individual characteristics, traditional school characteristics, and the interaction between the two, the critical concepts of reproduction, resistance, and power as well as research into the importance of the building of climates of care and belonging within our traditional public schools. Chapter III focuses exclusively on an in-depth examination of my methodology. Chapters IV, V, VI present the individual case studies of each participant. Chapters VII, VIII, IX provide a layered analysis of participant perceptions of care, belonging, power and privilege respectively. Chapter X presents a study summary, findings, unexpected findings, and conclusions followed by implications, recommendations for future research and a personal reflection.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

<u>Introduction</u>

Social scientists in a number of fields continue to investigate the high school dropout phenomenon. They conduct research, administer surveys, and write articles and books, yet seem to be no closer to a solution. This issue is increasing in scope as the middle class shrinks, as the need for low skill jobs continues to decline, and as income disparities widen. Researchers use both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to test theories, to predict outcomes, to pinpoint contributing factors, to develop models, to examine processes, and to attempt to construct a portrait of the dropout as a young man or young woman (Lee & Burkam, 2003; Bryk & Thum, 1989; Fine, 1991, Finn, 1991, Rumberger, 2012).

In spite of best efforts, however, this portrait remains incomplete. The dropout phenomenon is too complex to be explained only by risk factors and too embedded in educational policy to be solved solely by apportioning blame to individuals or to schools. Therefore, my research looked beyond student and school accountability models to the role that inequitable social and economic forces may play in reproducing and exacerbating the marginalization of disadvantaged youth within the school context. I explored the possibility that these inequalities actively work against the care and belonging, power and privilege needs of marginalized youth. Perhaps students who do not feel cared for or experience a

sense of belonging, power, or privilege at school are more like to drop out than are those whose affective needs are met.

Much of the research into traditional high school "dropouts" focuses on risk factors that blame individual characteristics, school characteristics, or push/pull factors for failure to graduate. The first section of this literature review, titled *Dropout Research: The Blame Game,* provides a critical overview of blame-driven dropout research. In the second section, *Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and Landscapes of Condemnation,* I examine critical literature that addresses the manner in which neoliberal and neoconservative policies may create landscapes of blame and condemnation within America's traditional high schools, thereby increasing the marginalization of already marginalized youth (Polakow, 2007, p. 56). In the third section, I discuss critical theory literature that examines the constructs of reproduction, resistance, and power within the traditional school context. The fourth section, *Care and Belonging at Club High School,* likens traditional high school to a social club in which students who hold dominant social capital gain easy membership, while social capital deficits exclude marginalized youth from membership. This section also presents research supporting the need for creating communities of care and belonging within our traditional public schools to support marginalized youth who lack social and academic agility due to dominant social capital deficiencies.

Dropout Research: The Blame Game

The term "dropout" is not a new term and was first coined in the early 1900s when only 10 % of males graduated from high school (Dorn, 1993, 1996). The dropout rate fell below 50% during the post-war years of the 1950 as jobs began to demand higher skill levels

requiring higher educational attainments (Dorn, 1993, 1996; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). In addition, not until the 1960s did being a high school dropout take on pejorative connotations as psychologists began to associate dropping out with deviancy and juvenile delinquency (Bergeson, 2006; Dorn, 1993, 1996). By the mid-1980s, concerned with the individual and social cost of dropping out, Wehlage and Rutter (1986) concluded that being a high school dropout was increasingly "tantamount to a denial of employment" (p. 375). The association between unemployment and high school dropouts continues as the labor market struggles to absorb individuals who lack a high school diploma (Levin, Belfield, Muennig, & Rouse, 2007; Rumberger, 2001).

Wehlage and Rutter (1986) concluded that much of the "research on high school dropouts has been based on the desire to find the causes, correlates, or motives underlying the actions of dropouts" (p. 375). Unfortunately, the exclusive focus on these causes, correlates, and motives, commonly labeled *risk factors*, can place the blame for disadvantage on "to the individual subjectivities of young people and their families (McInerney, 2006, p.5). A preponderance of dropout research focuses on these risk factors (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Deschenes, Cuban, & Tyack, 2001; 1989; Lee & Burkam, 2003; McInerney, 2006; McLaren, 2007; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). Risk factors generally include characteristics of the student's social background (race, gender, socioeconomic status, family dynamics) (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Coleman, 1966; Ekstrom et al., 1986; Rumberger, 1995), the student's academic performance (grades, test scores, retentions, credit deficiencies) (Ekstrom et al., 1986; Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999: Rumberger, 1995; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986), and/or the student's attitudes, beliefs, and behavior at school (attendance, disciplinary history, suspensions, expulsions) (Deschenes, Cuban, & Tyack, 2001; Finn,

1989; Smith, 1991; Rumberger, 2001; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). The need for researchers to understand the individual characteristics of dropouts in order to effectively target prevention and intervention resources is implicit in risk factor research (Bryk & Thum, 1989). Nevertheless, this focus on student risk characteristics and actions as the motivating factor(s) behind the decision to drop out of traditional high school takes a "blame the victim" approach (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Deschenes, Cuban, & Tyack, 2001; Fine, 1991; Givens, 2007; Lee & Burkam, 2003, p. 358; McInerney, 2006; Rumberger, 2001; Ryan, 1971; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986).

Fine (1991) criticized dropout literature for obsessing on the "characteristics of individual students who flee rather than on attributes of the schools from which they flee" (p. 22). Furthermore, she discovered an overwhelming and disturbing societal portrait of the dropout as a "hopeless and helpless loser" (Fine, 1991, p. 4). Stereotypes of this kind serve to stigmatize students by portraying them as either academically or socially deficient, and therefore, responsible for their own marginalization. At-risk terminology perpetuates the "loser" stereotype and indicates "a locus of control within the student, the student's family and the student's environment" that is as damning as it is misplaced (Givens, 2007, p. 158). Meanwhile, blaming the student effectively absolves current ideologies and policies of any blame or responsibility for the dropout phenomenon. Fine (1991) came to the conclusion that asking "individual questions about individual students" is futile and that what is needed is a critique of the school organization itself (p. 6).

Dropout research moved beyond individual risk factors when some researchers shifted the blame for student dropouts onto school organizational characteristics such as size, location, resources, and policies and practices (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Cassidy & Bates, 2005;

Deschenes, Cuban, & Tyack, 2001; Lee & Burkam; 2003; McInerney, 2006; Rumberger, 2001; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). Bryk and Thum (1989) explored the effect that structural aspects of school organizations have on students' decisions to drop out. They hypothesized that structural differentiation such as school size, faculty quality, and curriculum quality alongside weak normative environments contribute to problems of dropping out. Findings from Bryk and Thum's study indicated that school structural characteristics are predictors of dropping out of school. Subsequently, Lee and Burkam (2003) examined three school structural elements. These elements included school size, type of school (public or private), curriculum, and social relations. They concluded students are less likely to drop out of schools that have strong curriculums and student populations of fewer than 1,500 students.

Some researchers label individual risk factors as pull-out factors, while other researchers label school risk factors as push-out factors. The theory supporting pull-out factors presumes that students make a choice based on "a cost-benefit analysis of their economic interest to remain in or leave school" (Stearns & Glennie, 2006, p. 31). Family crises such as financial hardship, a sick parent or sibling, pregnancy and parenting also may pull a student out of school. Theoretically, pull-out factors can consist of any personal problem or individual characteristic that interfere with a student's commitment to school (Bergeson, 2006; Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; Lan & Lathier, 2003; Jordan, Lara, & McPartland, 1996; Stearns & Glennie, 2006; Wald & Losen, 2007). On the other hand, push-out factors often refer to school policies responsible for discharging students from school such as attendance and discipline procedures (Bergeson, 2006; Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2006, 2008; Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008; Lan & Lathier, 2003; Jordan, Lara, & McPartland, 2008; Noddings, 2004; Stearns & Glennie, 2006; Wald &

Losen, 2007). Darling-Hammond (2008) concluded that current high stakes testing and school accountability policies create conditions that broaden "the means for pushing students out" ranging from "enforcing zero-tolerance discipline policies, especially on low-achieving students, to expelling students for attendance problems, to counseling them out by encouraging them to enroll in GED programs" (p. 99). Some researchers proposed that push-out factors frequently interact with pull-out factors causing students to drop out (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; Lan & Lathier, 2003; Jordan, Lara, & McPartland, 2008; Fine, 1991; Rumberger, 2012; Stearns & Glennie, 2006, p. 31).

Bryk and Thum (1989) determined that some marginalized youth do benefit from small schools with supportive environments. Lee and Burkam (2003) found students appear less-likely to drop out of traditional high schools in which teacher-student relationships are consistently caring and supportive. Research needs to explore the way in which traditional school climate characteristics may affect the marginalized student (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Fine, 1991; Lee & Burkam, 2003; Rumberger, 2012; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). Rumberger emphasized the need for a "more comprehensive, causal model of the dropout process" in order to understand better the possible effect of school processes on a student's decision to drop out (Rumberger, 1987, p. 111).

School characteristics, however, should not be limited to structural aspects such as size, location, and financial resources, but also should include climate issues such as the extent to which students experience care and belonging at school (Furlong et al., 2003). Leone and Mayer (2004) defined school climate as the quality of interpersonal relationships, "the way in which and degree to which respect and consideration are woven into the daily fabric of school life, and the overall level of structure, meaningful order, and supportiveness

of the school" (p. 4). School climate, however, is usually defined in terms of the physical and

regulatory environment, and not in terms of a student's need for membership in a caring,

supportive, and accepting school community (Furlong et al., 2003) Therefore, I propose the

value of more research focused on the importance of meeting adolescent care and belonging

needs within our traditional public schools.

Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism and Landscapes of Condemnation

The "blame the victim" and "blame the school" approaches to dropout research fall in

line with neoliberal and neoconservative ideologies that hold individuals accountable for

their own disadvantage and schools accountable for student failure. Some schools may

reproduce these blame-driven ideologies creating conditions ripe for student alienation and

turning some classrooms and hallways into "landscapes of condemnation" devoid of care and

belonging for marginalized youth (Polakow, 2007, p. 56). Current reform efforts appear to

have abandoned the social democratic ideology that schools should serve democracy and

respect "the humanity of all children," for a neoliberal agenda that promotes unfettered

capitalism while blaming America's schools for "failing our businesses and our economy"

(Thomas, 2006, p.109). McLaren (2007) argued "neoconservatives reject the view that

schools should be sites for social transformation and emancipation," while neoliberals seem

more concerned with the production of a labor force and consumers to prop up their free-

market fundamentalist ideology (p. 189).

Many Americans increasingly view poverty and poor achievement in school as

aberrations in spite of that fact that they are both "integral products of the organization of

economic, cultural, and social life as we know it" (Apple, 2001, p. 31). In particular, the

aberrations viewpoint is a construct of the neoliberal and neoconservative mindset geared toward personal responsibility and accountability. Apple (2001) defined neoliberals as "economic modernizers" who tie educational policy to "the global capitalist market, and the labor needs and processes of such a market" (p. ii). He portrayed neoconservatives as primarily interested in a "cultural restoration" that would establish "tighter mechanisms of control over knowledge, morals, and values" through national standards and high stakes testing (Apple, 2001, p. ii). Giroux theorized that neoliberal and neoconservative policies are responsible for creating "the conditions that enable young people to become either commodified, criminalized, or made disposable" (Giroux, 2009, p. xii). Within this condemning landscape, society increasingly views troubled adolescents as inconvenient and portrays them as "kids as trouble, kids as problems, and kids as threatening" (Grossberg, 2005, p. 16).

The ideologies of neoliberals and neoconservatives have merged as both groups promote national standards and high stakes testing based on a common culture they view as requisite to the production of an adequate labor force. Apple (2004) defined this common culture as those western values upheld as sacrosanct by the dominant group of white, male conservatives who currently have a stranglehold on the formation and the implementation of educational reform policies. According to Apple, this dominant culture of neoliberal, free-market fundamentalism props up "an economic system in which profit counts more than people's lives and an educational system that…still alienates millions of children for whom schooling could mean so much" (p. xxv). The unrelenting conservative focus on rigor, standards, and accountability serves only to exacerbate the gap between the rich and the poor and the white and the nonwhite in American society (Kincheloe, 2006). Meanwhile,

neoliberal and neoconservative ideologues continue to blame the achievement gap on its victims: the poor, the disadvantaged, and students of color, as well as on the schools that serve the poor, the disadvantaged, and students of color. Yet, nowhere in the school reform argument is the case made for addressing the causes of disadvantage or the unequal funding and resources that separate schools, school districts, and neighborhoods.

The *Coleman Report* granted legitimacy to the "blame the victim" approach to dropout research. This research study explored the achievement gap post *Brown vs. Board of Education* and involved a two-year study of American schools predicated on the assumption that family background was directly and solely correlated to individual student achievement (Coleman, 1966). Coleman found variations in school quality and school resources had little to do with gaps in achievement, whereas social and economic variations did. He wrote "Differences in school facilities and curriculum, which are the major variables by which attempts are made to improve schools, are…little related to differences in achievement level of students" (p. 316). Discounting possible school effects, Coleman placed the blame for student failure squarely on family background (Coleman, 1966; Rumberger, 1995; Ryan, 1971). Ryan (1971) strongly criticized the *Coleman Report* for a number of perceived flaws including Coleman's failure to address school climate, the attitudes, expectations, and prejudices of teachers, as well as the quality and nature of teacher-student interactions and relationships.

Some researchers point to The National Commission on Excellence in Education report, *A Nation at Risk* (1983), as having laid the groundwork for the blame the school approach to dropout research and school reform. This report provided the impetus for current education reforms including *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB, 2002), "by blaming

schools for the economic recession of the early 1980s" (Hursh, 2007, p. 498). The report

claimed as a nation America had "been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral

educational disarmament" and that American students were being left behind in the era of

globalization. According to Hursh (2007), this mindset rendered neoliberalism inevitable as

America's economic focus shifted toward individual entrepreneurism through unhindered

free markets and free trade. In addition, by tying the global market to public education,

neoliberals positioned education reform as the sole "solution to social and economic

inequality" (p. 295). Ultimately, the motivation for education reform may not be to improve

existing schools, but rather to blame schools for their deficiencies as private markets try to

absorb America's public school system based on the belief that competition will lead to

better schools (Giroux, 2003, 2009; Hursh, 2007; Kincheloe, 2006)

Kincheloe (2006) argued in this age of neoliberalism, "Conservative ideologues

engage in "profound doublespeak" in order to convince the American public that "public

ownership of public schools is a manifestation of oppression while private ownership is the

ultimate marker of freedom" and that school choice is an issue of justice and equality (p. 3).

Meanwhile, the marginalization of children worsens due to the erosion of the long-standing

democratic tradition of the social contract which presumed that the well-being of America's

youth was of primary importance (Giroux, 2009). Instead, "unprecedented greed and

fanatical capitalism" have ushered in a political era in which marginalized individuals have

become disposable within new landscapes of exclusion and of wealth (Giroux, 2009, p. 1).

The market becomes the focus and academically and socially agile students who "are likely

to rely on their cultural capital" to succeed at school and within the labor market become

valued commodities, while marginalized students who struggle to compete become educationally inconvenient and irrelevant (Hursh, 2007, p. 507).

Critical Theory: Reproduction, Resistance and Power

Fine proposed the act of dropping out of school should be reframed as an act of resistance and of power, as a "strategy for taking control of lives fundamentally out of control" (p. 4). Therefore, when the "inconvenient" youth drops out of a traditional high school, this act may be a critique of the educational institution, as well as a form of resistance. The decision to leave an uncaring and unwelcoming environment may represent an act of power in response to the reproduction of inequitable social and economic conditions within the traditional school context. In a critical framework, schools are not neutral environments and do not operate in a vacuum; they, therefore, may actively reproduce social and economic inequalities (Apple, 2004; Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Giroux, 2003, 2009; MacLeod, 2009; McLaren, 2009; Willis; 1977). Inequitable conditions and the neglect of caring and belonging needs may exacerbate the alienation of marginalized youth who lack dominant social capital at school.

Historically, cultural capital and economic capital are distributed based on societal divisions of labor and power. Schools reproduce these social and economic hierarchies and accept cultural capital as a natural gift of the social order. Bourdieu and Passeron (2000) equated cultural capital with the dominant social capital of the middle class. They theorized that schools have been standardized to accommodate this dominant capital based on the assumption that this action would level the educational playing field for all children, irrespective of cultural background. School culture, according to Bourdieu, actually serves to

legitimize, reproduce, and empower the dominant culture of society while disaffirming the culture of other non-dominant or marginalized groups (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000).

McLaren (2007) defined culture as the "set of practices, ideologies, and values from which different groups draw to make sense of the world" (p. 201). He explained how culture is inextricably related to who holds power and to how power is reproduced in society as well as in school. High status cultural groups have power to express their shared values and beliefs through collective strength. These groups wield dominant cultural capital because they are the "social class in control of the material and symbolic wealth of society" (McLaren, 2007, p. 201). McLaren (2007) wrote that culture and power interact in three ways. First, culture is intimately connected to social hierarchies which produce systems of oppression. Secondly, culture produces and reproduces unequal relations of power. Thirdly, culture is tied to the production and reproduction of legitimate knowledge. Furthermore, the dominant culture is able "to exercise domination over subordinate classes or groups through a process known as hegemony," that is through the consent of the dominated (McLaren, 2007, p. 203).

Critical educators argue mainstream schooling supports inherently unjust ideological and political imperatives that result not only in the transmission and reproduction of the dominant culture, but also in reproducing the division of labor and ruling class interests (Apple, 2004; Giroux, 1983, 2001, 2003; Kincheloe, 2007; MacLeod, 2009; McLaren, 2007; Willis, 1977). The "ruling class" consists of neoliberal and neoconservative groups who use hegemonic processes to perpetuate the "blame the victim" and the "blame the school" approaches to school failure. Within this framework of social injustice, society holds subordinated groups personally responsible for their own disadvantage as well as holding

marginalized youth responsible for failing to make the grade. This dominant, status quo culture may have set up some American schools to fail through underfunding, one-size-fits all standards, high stakes testing, and the exclusion of marginalized youth. McLaren (2007) proposed, "Poor academic performance represents…not individual competence or the lack of ability on the part of disadvantaged students but the school's depreciation of their cultural capital" (p. 219). Those students who hold dominant social capital have the "symbolic currency" to spend at school, which grants them the tools to be socially and academically agile, while marginalized youth have subordinate social capital and deficient currency to spend, which excludes them from power and privilege (McLaren, 2007, p. 218).

The reproduction of existing social inequalities also can be found in reform efforts that have shifted the focus from equitable educational access to equitable educational outcomes (Fine, 1991). This shift moved the blame for student failure from pervasive conditions of inadequate funding, facilities, and teachers to the individual student. Students who enter school minus dominant social capital historically receive a diminished educational experience, yet bear the blame for being "unable, uninterested, or unmotivated to learn" (Fine, 1991, p. 26). Fine (1991) argued dropouts should be "re-conceptualized as critics of educational and labor market arrangements" when they choose to leave uncaring and unwelcoming environments gripped by failure and despair (p. 4). Fine (1991) concluded that a student's decision to exit school "must be read as a structural, if not self-conscious, critique" (p. 14).

In his seminal ethnography, *Learning to Labor,* Willis (1977) did not portray students as passive agents in the reproduction of capitalist relations or as silent victims of the hegemony of dominant culture. He instead found that the British working class students he

studied actively resisted social reproduction by rejecting the school's middle class values and norms. Unfortunately, Willis (1977) determined the act of resistance worked against these students, limiting their ability to break free of their social class and binding them to the working class culture. McLaren (2007) concluded that these findings confirm that "social reproduction occurs with both the willing compliance and the active refusal of its own victims" (p. 228). Willis (1977) argued education should offer "the prospect of individualistic, humanistic development…in relation to a promise for greater social equality" (p. 203). However, in what Willis described as a "happy coincidence," education appears to serve two roles at once, that of social equalizer and skilled labor force producer (p. 203). He believed the inherent contradiction within this "coincidence" encourages education reformists to blame school failure on students' "environment, background, their early childhood experiences, or their surrounding culture" (Willis, 1977, p. 204).

Social reproduction and resistance theories offer an array of arguments and theoretical stances. Giroux (1983) critiqued reproduction and resistance theories, arguing they ignore "the contradictions and struggles that exist in schools" and that these theories "dissolve human agency…and unknowingly provide a rationale for not examining teachers and students in concrete school settings" (p. 259). He posited, "Power is never unidimensional; it is both a mode of domination and an act of resistance" at work in dialectical opposition to each other (p. 290). Nevertheless, Giroux (1983, 2001, 2003) understood that resistance is inherently contradictory. He noted although "students were capable of challenging the dominant ideology of the school, they failed to recognize the limits of their own resistance" (Giroux, 1983, p. 284). By dropping out of school, students effectively cut themselves off from "political and social avenues conducive to the task of

radical reconstruction" (p. 284). Furthermore, students who leave school prior to graduation renounce their "access to knowledge and skills that may allow them to move beyond the class-specific positions of dead-end alienating labor" (p. 288). Students need to comprehend how to exercise the power of critique so they can reject systems of oppression in a manner that does not render them powerless in the future. Giroux (2001) concluded resistance is of value only when it is aligned with critical thinking and reflective action. He proposed that although schools are sites of social reproduction, they can also be sites of social transformation if educators care enough to arm students with the critical tools to wage the political battle between the issues of power and social determination (Giroux, 2009).

Care and Belonging at Club High School

As educators we have an obligation "to respond constructively to children from all backgrounds and social conditions" (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986, p. 381). In a democratic society, school was never intended to be a club with exclusive membership and benefits for the academically and socially agile student. In addition, by placing the blame for school failure entirely on the students or on the schools, some researchers ignore inequitable social and economic conditions that may prevent marginalized youth from gaining membership within the school community. This then effectively releases educational policy makers from any shared responsibility. The need to belong within a community is foundational to an individual's well-being. This belonging need must be fulfilled before any other needs can be met (Maslow, 1962). Furthermore, individuals struggle in social environments that do not meet their psychological needs (Eccles et al, 1993). A mismatch between the social and academic demands of school and the affective needs of students, such as the need to feel care and a sense of belonging, may create the conditions for school dropout. Gable, Bullock, and

Evans (2006) identified this mismatch between school structure and marginalized youth as school failure to address gaps in diversity and school readiness. Hargreaves, Earl, and Ryan (1996) suggested a school as community approach in response. They proposed, "One of the most fundamental reforms needed in secondary or high school education is to make schools into better communities of caring and support for young people" (p. 77)

Some traditional schools may adopt "organizational practices that neglect and may actually undermine students' experience of membership in a supportive environment" (Osterman, 2000, p. 323). Some traditional public schools, often consumed with neoliberal and neoconservative policies and practices that promote individualism and competition at the expense of community, may pay scant attention to marginalized students' affective needs. This neglect may contribute directly to student experiences of social withdrawal and alienation (Osterman, 2000). Some adolescents may perceive traditional schools as uncaring institutions where they feel a denial of membership within the school community. These perceptions and feelings may help to construct traditional school as an alienating environment and may influence the decision to drop out of school. Alienation is the "flip side of the relatedness coin;" consequently, students who experience exclusion from the school community are prone to low motivation, low achievement, and dropout (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Osterman, 2000, p. 343).

Some researchers found that teacher support is critical to a student's sense of care and belonging at school (Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Ma, 2003; Noddings, 2005; Osterman, 2000). Teacher support fosters social capital by creating conditions in which caring is enacted, a sense of belonging is nurtured, and students perceive that they are valued and accepted within the school context. Conversely, students who do not

receive teacher support can suffer a low sense of relatedness within the school context.

Consequently, teachers play a major role in determining whether students experience feelings

of care and belonging within the school community (Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Ellerbrock &

Kiefer, 2010; Noddings, 2005; Osterman, 2000; Solomon, Battistich, Kim, & Watson; 1997).

Noddings (2005) argued the need to feel cared for is a universal human trait and that it is part

of a reciprocal process. Care must not only be given, but also must be received. She

concluded, "No matter how hard teachers try to care, if the caring is not received by students,

the claim 'they don't care' has some validity" (Nodding, 2005, p. 15). Ultimately, it is the

teacher's responsibility not only to care for students, but also to teach students how to give

and to receive care (Noddings, 2005).

Teachers also influence the quality of school relationships because they establish the

"values, standards, and norms in the classroom" (Osterman, 2000, p. 355). Unfortunately,

research consistently establishes that teachers often treat students differently based on

characteristics such as race, gender, class, ability, and appearance (Altenbaugh, Engel, &

Martin, 1995; Elliott & Voss, 1974; Gamoran & Berends, 1987; Schwartz, 1981). Students,

who hold dominant social capital or "status differentials," exhibit academic and/or social

agility and consistently experience more positive relationships with teachers than do

marginalized students who struggle (Osterman, 2000, p. 353).

Some organizational practices and policies within our traditional schools may have a

negative effect on the development of students' sense of belonging and community

(Deschenes, Cuban, & Tyack, 2001; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010; Osterman, 2000). Osterman

(2000) wrote, "Many of the changes necessary to satisfy students' needs for belongingness

involve drastic changes in the cultural values, norms, policies and practices that dominate

schooling, particularly at the secondary level" (p. 360). Furthermore, although not all students experience the same degree of alienation within the traditional school context, both students and researchers consistently describe schools as alienating institutions (Ma, 2003; Osterman, 2000). Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997) argued, "Students from subjugated groups typically feel that they are not a part of the school community, that they don't possess the secret knowledge that will let them into that club" (p.134).

Positive life experiences, reliable support systems, financial stability, and access to adequate resources all make up the dominant social capital needed for membership within "club high school." According to Walsh (2006), schools often are sites of "cultural imperialism" in which students who function in the normative sphere of school relations are granted club membership, while marginalized youth, designated as "other," are deemed deficient and relegated to the periphery (p. 230). America's public school system may be structured in a manner that reinforces and rewards middle-class values, attitudes, and behaviors, but neglects by omission the disadvantaged and the deprived (Giroux, 2003, 2009; MacLeod, 2009; McLaren, 2007). This omission serves to reinforce the "blame the victim" approach to traditional high school dropouts. Until society addresses the manner in which the educational system exiles students from the school community, schools will continue to reproduce the marginalization of children who are "economically powerless and who are disadvantaged by gender and race" (McLaren, 2007, p. 233). This dissertation explores the possibility that marginalized adolescents' decision to drop out may be related to the neglect of care and belonging, power and privilege needs within the traditional high school environment. In addition, this study proposes that dropping out ultimately constitutes "a strategy for taking control of lives fundamentally out of control (Fine, 1991, p. 4)).

Research Gaps that Limit Knowledge

I addressed four gaps in research that limit our knowledge about aspects of marginalized adolescents' traditional school experiences; qualitative, critical, student voice, and care and belonging. Some researchers proposed that current dropout research is quantitative heavy with an overreliance on survey data (Balfanz, Herzog, & MacIver, 2007). More qualitative research is needed, in particular critical research, to address the role schools may play in the reproduction of adolescent marginalization and student dropout (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010; MacLeod, 2009; Smith, 2000). New critical perspectives also may serve to stimulate the educational research field (Apple, 2004). In addition, much of the current dropout research lacks qualitative input from the adolescent's perspective. Few studies examine student voice (Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Cook-Sather, 2002; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010, Levin, 2000, Smyth, 2006; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). Wehlage and Rutter (1986) faulted researchers for discounting the importance of student voice and the reasons students provide for leaving school. Although some major studies seek out student opinions, this information is often treated as "surface data" and considered to be less powerful than the "underlying data" provided by individual characteristics or risk factors (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986, p. 376).

The final gap concerns the lack of research exploring a possible relationship between school climates of care and belonging and the dropout phenomenon. More studies exploring this relationship are warranted (Pellerin, 2005). Adler (2002) wrote, "school-based research on care is limited" (p. 244). She added that much of the research into care was conducted in elementary schools or had limited the participants to adults. Barber (2002) also concluded that much of the research into teacher-student relationships focused on the elementary level.

She suggested more studies focused on this relationship were needed at the secondary level. Furthermore, research into the relationship between students' sense of care and belonging and school dropout is needed primarily because it represents a different construct from traditional at-risk research (Cassidy & Bates; 2005; Goodenow, 1991; Ma, 2003; Noddings, 2005).

Summary

America's educational establishment is heavily influenced by current neoliberal and neoconservative school reform efforts. These efforts often include the reproduction of the dominant culture's version of knowledge, the privatization of schools, the silencing of alternative voices, and the mass production of workers and consumers who may not question or disrupt the status quo. Marginalized youth who do not possess the dominant social capital needed for academic or social success within the traditional high school context are inconvenient. Consequently, school forces often may encourage them actively or passively to leave school. Some marginalized youth resist normative discourses and choose to leave traditional school environments they perceive to be uncaring, unwelcoming, or even condemning. Fine (1991) concluded when young people who drop out are "portrayed as unreasonable or academically inferior, then the structures, ideologies, and practices that exile them systematically are rendered invisible" (p. 5). She proposed that in this manner, the critique inherent in the act of student resistance, manifested by walking out the school door is "institutionally silenced" (Fine, 1991, p. 5).

Giroux (2009) wrote, "It is education that provides the intellectual foundation and values for young people to understand, interrogate, and transform when necessary the world

in which they live" (p. xii). Critical educational theorists are united in their belief that schooling is a distinctly political and cultural process (McLaren, 2007). Therefore, students need to learn that knowledge and power can share an emancipatory relationship, that personal histories and experiences matter, and that "what they say and do counts in their struggle to unlearn dominating privileges, productively reconstruct their relations with others, and transform, when necessary, the world around them" (Giroux, 2009, p. 139). Resistance within the school context through critical and reflective action can empower the powerless and transform existing social inequalities and injustices. However, students who attempt to resist the hegemony of the dominant culture by dropping out of school may be exacerbating their own disadvantage by cutting off access to emancipatory knowledge and power.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

<u>Introduction</u>

The purpose of this qualitative study was to give voice to marginalized

adolescents to describe their traditional high school experiences and their perceptions of

care and belonging within that environment. In addition, these students were asked to

examine their experiences and perceptions in the context of power and privilege and to

discuss the processes involved in their decision to leave the traditional high school. I

begin this methodology chapter by describing the research design and exploring the

researcher's role within that design. The third section provides comprehensive

descriptions of the sample, the research participants, the school district, the community,

traditional high school, and alternative high school. The next section details methods and

procedures including sample selection methods, data collection, documents, artifacts and

instruments, and data analysis and representation. I also discuss *creative analytic*

practices as a writing strategy and explain the theory behind *performative writing* and

*poetic r*e*presentation* of data. The subsequent sections include ethical considerations,

triangulation of data, validity and reliability, the limitations of the study, and the case

study design.

<u>Research Design</u>

This qualitative study was positioned as emancipatory research and oriented as a multicase study. Constructionism provided my epistemological framework and critical theory was the theoretical lens through which I constructed my questions, collected my data, and analyzed my findings. Critical theory provides a philosophy and methodology that are fundamentally and explicitly political and can serve to change the nature of engagement (Patton, 2002). This theoretical perspective represented a deeply influential orientational framework because it focused on "how injustice and subjugation shape people's experience and understandings of the world" (Patton, 2002, p.130). Critical theorists use research to critique social institutions, to raise awareness, and to explore the relationship between power and privilege. Stake (2006) concurred, "Some researchers consistently raise social justice issues" (p. 11). The social justice issue I raised with this research study was student's experiences with marginalization within the traditional high school setting.

Stake (2000) wrote that case study research is not a methodological choice but rather a choice of what is to be studied. He referred to the phenomenon, object, or condition to be studied as the "quintain" (p. 6). The quintain is the starting point for multicase research and consists of individual cases. These cases are units of analysis pre-determined during the research design stage and are the basis for purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002). As researchers, we study the individual cases "in order to understand the quintain better" (p. 6). Well-designed cases should be both holistic and context sensitive (Patton, 2002). The use of a case study approach to qualitative inquiry is to gather "comprehensive, systematic, and in-depth information" about each case or unit of

analysis (Patton, 2002, p. 447). Stake (2006) concluded, "The case has an inside and an outside" in that certain features lie within the boundaries of the case while others lie outside of it (p. 3). Both inside and outside features help to define the structure and the environments of the case. Stake (2006) determined that the researcher must generate a dynamic portrayal of the case for the reader to see. In a multicase study, "the single case is of interest because it belongs to a particular collection of cases" (Stake, 2006, p. 4). The individual cases share commonalities while the cases viewed as a whole are bound together as members or examples of the quintain (Stake, 2006).

Patton (2002) offered nine characteristics I used to navigate my way through the processes of qualitative inquiry and my case study work. To begin, he proposed that qualitative field work is best conducted by the researcher and not by a proxy in the natural setting where the problem occurs. The natural setting for dropout research is within the school setting which explains my decision to conduct my participant interviews at the alternative high school campus. Qualitative researchers should also complete their own interview transcriptions and document reviews. Patton (2002) noted that this process "provides an opportunity to get immersed in the data, an experience that usually generates emergent insights" (p. 441). I found this to be true as I transcribed, analyzed, and interpreted each interview. Triangulation is another important characteristic of qualitative research as varied data sources can provide a thicker, richer understanding of the phenomenon than can be found using a single data source. Therefore, I triangulated student interview data with data culled from each student's alternative school application form. In addition, I thoroughly examined each data set for "participants' meaning" (Cresswell, 2009, p. 175). Furthermore, because qualitative

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inquiry necessitates an open and emerging design, I was mindful of the appearance of unexpected patterns and I adjusted and adapted my interview questions and prompts accordingly. The data did not shift, but did generate sub-themes as well as several unexpected findings.

Cresswell (2009) characterized qualitative inquiry as orientational because it is perspective driven. Therefore, I looked for the manner in which the lens of marginalization, especially within the contexts of care and belonging, power and privilege, oriented each participant's understanding and actions within the traditional high school setting. Furthermore, qualitative inquiry functions as interpretive research as it involves "interpreting the perceptions of Others" (Cresswell, 2009, p.176). The interpretation of *Others* is rife with the potential for misunderstanding, misinterpretation, and judgment. Self-reflexivity, an important process, helped me to avoid these pitfalls through the recognition that as a critical researcher, my voice is present within the interpretation and presentation of the data. My research stance was neither neutral nor passive as my experiences with and concerns for marginalized youth drove the purpose and structure of this study. Qualitative research as inductive inquiry is used to discover "patterns, themes, and categories in one's data" (Patton, 2002, p. 453). Using inductive analysis, I coded my data by building patterns and themes using open coding strategies. Finally, qualitative research is organically holistic in that it works to "develop a complex picture of the problem or issue under study" (Cresswell, 2009, p. 176). My goal as a qualitative researcher was to paint an evocative and well-rounded portrait of marginalized youth within the traditional high school setting as well as to provide descriptions of care and belonging, power and privilege issues within that same context.

Researcher's Role

One important initial exercise in qualitative, analytical work is self-reflexivity. Reflexivity is used to clarify the role of the researcher and to balance researcher, participant, and audience perceptions, experiences, and backgrounds in order to increase the validity of the collected data. Patton (2002) noted, "A credible voice conveys authenticity and trustworthiness; complete objectivity being impossible and pure subjectivity undermining credibility" (p. 494). Articulating researcher "positionality" can be achieved through the exercise of self-reflexivity, or what Davis (1999) referred to as the process of turning inward on oneself.

Patton (2002) presented a method of reflexivity he referred to as "triangulated reflexive inquiry" (p. 495). This form of self-reflexivity involves a triangulation between the self, the participants, and the audience and requires a thorough awareness of one's background, investments, voice, experiences, and perceptions. Pillow (2003) described this process as developing an understanding of self through "a focus on how does who I am, who I have been, who I think I am, and how I feel affect data collection and analysis" (p. 176). Madison (2012) developed five central questions to help triangulate the critical researcher's positionality between self, participant, and audience. In the following section, I paraphrased and responded to each question as a guide through the process of self-reflection:

1. How should I reflect upon and evaluate my own purpose, intentions, and frames of analysis as a researcher?

I have worked in public education both as a traditional high school teacher and as a traditional secondary school principal. I have been the principal of an alternative high school for the last nine years. My role as an alternative school principal has been to serve as an advocate for marginalized youth in order to help them graduate from high school. My goal as a researcher has been to continue to advocate for these youth and to develop a deeper understanding of the reasons behind adolescent alienation, marginalization, and exodus from the traditional high school environment. My intention was to allow my research participants to share their experiences and their voices in order to shed light on the dropout phenomenon through an examination of care, belonging, power, and privilege needs with the traditional high school context.

2. How could I predict consequences and evaluate my own potential to do harm through my research?

    Madison (2012) pointed out that "interpretation holds a great deal of power" (p. 4). The very act of interpreting the experiences of *Others* is laden with responsibility and fraught with the possibility of misunderstanding. Consequently, I kept in mind what Thomas (1993) had to say about positionality; We are "forbidden to submit value judgments in place of facts or to leap to 'ought' conclusions without a demonstrable cogent theoretical and empirical linkage" (Madison, 2012, p. 9).

3. How could I create and maintain a dialogue of collaboration in my research between myself and *Others*?

I recognized that each research subject brings his/her own epistemology, worldview, perceptions, and voice to the collaborative process and kept this positionality in mind in order to avoid ascribing identities to my research participants. Brayboy (2000) wrote that researchers always need to be cognizant of "what it means to be described as 'real' as well as who has the right to define authenticity or realness" (p. 416). The attention to voice is also of paramount importance within a critical framework. Voice referred not only to my own intentionality, but also to "intentionality and consciousness about whose voices and what messages are represented" (Patton, 2002, p. 495). Bott (2010) claimed that authentic voice helps to prevent the construction of "unequal or hierarchical power relations in social research" (p. 160). Therefore, my intent was to give my participants a platform upon which to share their "authentic voice." In addition, because the purpose of my research was emancipatory, I was careful to avoid the trap of speaking "for others in the name of doing good by them" (Gordon, 2005, p. 280).

4. How was the specificity of each participant's story relevant to the broader meanings and operations of the human condition?

Each participant's story served as a brushstroke to paint a broad portrait of the marginalized student within a traditional high school. These stories were also intended to illustrate a possible relationship between frameworks of social injustice within our public high schools and broader issues of social inequalities.

5. How could I ensure that my work would make the greatest contribution to equity, freedom, and justice?

The greatest contribution I hoped to make to social justice in education through my research was to present the "authentic voice" of each participant uninfluenced by my own expectations, assumptions, or desires. In addition, I must share my findings with the education leaders and policy makers in my own school district as well as make them available and accessible to leaders in other districts and regions.

Participants

Sample and Context:

The sample for this dissertation consisted of six former traditional high school students who graduated from an alternative high school. They were all at least 18 years of age at the time of the interview for consent purposes and included three males and three females. The adult consent form is located in Appendix B. I followed the appropriate steps to obtain IRB approval in order to protect the rights of my human participants (Appendix B). Every measure was taken to ensure the confidentially and anonymity of all research participants. All samples were drawn with the permission of the district superintendent from an Oklahoma school district that serves a suburban community approximately twelve miles from a major metropolitan area. The school district consists of one high school serving grades 11th-12th, one mid-high serving grades 9th-10th, one alternative high school serving grades 9th-12th, an 8th Grade Center, a 7th Grade Center, a 6th Grade Center, and eight elementary schools. This school district also provides a Virtual High School open to students in all grades.

The student population of the district, as of the 2012-2013 school year, was 9, 282 with 1,187 high school students and 1, 429 mid-high students. The percent of the K-12 student population eligible for the free lunch program is 23% and the percent eligible for reduced lunches is 6 %. The mid-high has one principal, two assistant principals, three counselors, and 75 teachers. The high school has one principal, two assistant principals, three counselors, and 79 teachers. The community housing this school district has experienced 60% growth in the last decade with a current total population of 29, 599. The median age is 32 and 51% of the population is female and 48% of the population is male. The median household income is $62, 867 and the median home value is $151, 526. The population is 76.5% white, 6.7% Hispanic, 6.5% Native American, 2.7% African American, 1.8% Asian, and 5.5% mixed race. Student demographics mirror that of the larger community.

Traditional high school refers to a standard public high school that serves grades 9-12. Due to larger student populations, high schools are often split between grade levels so that 9-10th graders attend a mid or intermediate high and 11-12th graders attend a senior high. In smaller communities, high school students usually attend school in one building. Alternative schools in Oklahoma generally serve grades 9-12. The alternative high school for the district from which the research sample was drawn opened in 1998 with one teacher and 15 students and currently serves approximately 120 students per year with a staff of eight including a principal, a counselor, a secretary, and five teachers.

Methods and Procedures

Participant Selection:

Qualitative inquiry benefits from an in-depth focus of small samples purposefully selected (Patton, 2002). According to Patton, sample size in qualitative inquiry is not based on a set formula. My participant size was small because I was searching for "depth" of knowledge as opposed to "breadth" of knowledge (Patton, 2002, p. 244). I used *purposeful sampling* as the method to select my student research participants in an effort to collect the most *information-rich cases* (Patton, 2002). Patton wrote, "information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry" (p. 230). He proposed that they yield greater insights and a deeper understanding than do empirical generalizations. Therefore, I used intensity sampling within the purposeful sampling framework to select participants who I believed represent intense examples of alienation while students within the traditional high school setting.

Data Collection:

Qualitative interviewing is predicated on the belief that the research participants' perspectives or lived experiences are "meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit" (Patton, 2002). My interview strategy was that of the *informal conversational interview* with semi-structured interview guides of predetermined yet open-ended questions (Appendix A). The informal conversational interview allowed me greater flexibility and spontaneity to pursue information without constraint. The interviews were taped and I took notes during the sessions. These notes consisted of my thoughts, additional questions or prompts, participant demeanor, body language, and expressions. Patton (2002) defined six types of interview questions for qualitative inquiry. These include *experience/behavior questions*, *opinion/values questions, feeling questions*,

knowledge questions, sensory questions, and *background/demographic questions*. For my

purposes, I used experience/behavior questions to elicit perceptions and descriptions of

participant experiences, opinion questions to find out what my participants *thought* about

their experiences, feeling questions to determine how they *felt* about their experiences,

knowledge questions to uncover what they *understood* about their experiences and

background questions that *situated* their experiences in relation to *Others*.

Although interview guides were used, some questions and prompts changed from

one interview to the next as part of an open and emerging design. Patton (2002) defined

the characteristics of a good question. First, a good question should be singular,

addressing only one concept at a time. A good question also should be clear and precise,

using vocabulary that makes sense to the interviewee. Finally, a good question should be

neutral and free of value judgments and bias. In addition, the more specific and thematic

the questions, the easier it was to code data. I used these characteristics to develop good

questions for my interview guides in order to generate the most descriptive and data rich

answers to the following research questions:

Research Questions:

1. How were marginalized adolescents' perceptions of care and belonging, power

    and privilege within the traditional high school context related to their decision to

    leave that environment prior to graduation?

    a. What did care and belonging look like through marginalized adolescent's

        retrospective perceptions of the traditional high school environment?

b. How did marginalized adolescents' retrospective perceptions of care and belonging in traditional high school relate to power and privilege?

c. Based on marginalized adolescents' retrospective perceptions, how were constructs of power and privilege reproduced within the traditional high school context?

d. Based on marginalized adolescents' retrospective perceptions, how were resistance and power related to the decision to leave the traditional high school?

Stake (2006) argued that research questions in a multicase study should be designed as a guide to search for understanding. He believed that even when a research study has been well done, "The research questions will not be fully answered" (p. 14). He proposed that instead some assertions could be made, existing questions would need revision, and new questions would have arisen. He noted that this might seem like "slim pickings" to the researcher (p. 14). Stake (2006) concluded, however, that the discovery of "increased familiarity" and "new realizations of complexity" were enough to validate a research study (p. 14).

Documents, Artifacts, Instruments:

The sole instrument for this research study was an open-ended interview guide (see Appendix A). I also used each participant's alternative school application as a prompt during the relevant interview session. Students who wish to attend the alternative school are required to complete an application. The application asks detailed information about the student's high school experiences including academic performance, attendance,

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and disciplinary history. The application also provides the student with the opportunity to explain why he or she has struggled in the traditional school environment. In addition, the applications ask for any pertinent personal information such as family crisis or health issues. This information helps the alternative school placement committee determine whether or not the alternative school is the appropriate setting for each individual applicant. I used information from each participant's application to prompt discussion and stimulate memories during our interview sessions. I also used information provided in these applications when writing the case study histories of each participant. Follow-up questions were asked of student participants as needed for further clarification and member checking was offered to each interviewee.

Analysis of Data:

Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) wrote that one of the greatest challenges in ethnographic writing is "to infer and to present *member's meanings*" (p. 109). The first step in accurately representing member's meanings was to closely examine not only what interview participants' said, but also what they did during the interview. In order to pursue member's meanings, I paid close attention to what my participants said and did and I wrote field notes about body language, facial expressions, pauses, and other note-worthy events during each interview session. Researchers also must recognize *naturally occurring descriptions* of activities, events, and groups provided by each interviewee (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 114). I made note of these descriptions during the interview sessions and later coded them as such within the transcripts. I was also cognizant of *member's stories*, which are "extended descriptions of events they witnessed or directly experienced" (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 116). These stories helped

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me to understand how my participants' constructed and derived meaning from their experiences within the traditional high school environment.

Next, I paid close attention to *member's types and typologies*, which are "every day, colloquial, and often evocative terms" used to characterize the people, incidents, and objects that make up one's world (p. 119). Finally, I tried to elicit *member's explanations and theories* from each participant without research filter (p. 124). These explanations and theories concerned the interviewee's opinion as to when, why, and how some event occurred. Pursuing member's meanings strengthened my efforts to discover how my research participants' thought, felt, understood, and situated themselves within the context of the questions being asked.

My analytical procedures followed a bottom up strategy (Cresswell, 2009). First, raw data consisted of interview transcripts and field notes written during the interview sessions. Next, I organized my data into categories that included student interviews with accompanying field notes and artifacts. I then immersed myself in the data, reading and re-reading as I searched for themes and descriptions. I analyzed the data for interrelating and overlapping themes, consistencies, and inconsistencies. Carspecken (1996) informed researchers to always code with analysis in mind to facilitate the emergence of themes. Discovered themes guided my analysis. I used *open coding* as a broad, open-minded approach to reading of the data allowing themes to emerge without pre-conceptions or bias (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995).

I examined student responses for their perceptions and perspectives concerning the presence or absence of care and belonging within the traditional school context as

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well as to how constructs of power and privilege may work in conjunction with or independently of these affective needs. Care, at school, operates within the framework of the teacher/student relationship and the school official/student relationship through demonstrations of attention, interest, and concern. In other words, when and under what circumstances did the student feel vocal, visible, and valuable at school? Themes and patterns of belonging should manifest as experiences of acceptance, engagement, connection, or bonding within the school setting. Did the student feel accepted at school? Was he or she actively engaged in the educational process? Did the student feel connected to other students, the faculty, or the school environment? Finally, did the student demonstrate an interpersonal or institutional bond with the school? (Nasir, Jones, & McLaughlin, 2011)

Disadvantaged youth are excluded from privilege and power through the process of marginalization. Therefore, I analyzed the data for patterns and processes of inequality, alienation, and disenfranchisement. Furthermore, I explored student responses for themes or patterns of resistance toward teachers, principals, school policies, the traditional school setting, and/or school in general. In addition, I examined the decision to drop out of high school from a resistance perspective. Was this decision an act of conscious or subconscious resistance to the traditional school environment? If so, was this act of resistance a manifestation of power? Once I finished the coding process, I wrote a series of analytical statements and memos to help me analyze and interpret meanings. My final analytical step consisted of the interpretation of these meanings followed by the construction and representation of findings.

Data Representation

Creative Analytic Practices:

Creative analytic practices involve the "integration of art, literature, and social science" as a strategy to merge creative and critical aspects of qualitative inquiry (Richardson, 2000). These practices entail the process of viewing research through the lens of more than one genre. Social science can be one lens, while the creative arts can be another. They are not mutually exclusive and melded together produce what Richardson (2000) refers to as a "social science art form" (p. 937). *Creative analytic practices* are constructed within a framework of rigorous research and can be found in the written representation of data. Richardson (2000) developed five standards of rigor for this type of representation. These standards include *substantive contribution, aesthetic merit, reflexivity, impact, and expression of reality* (Richardson, 2000).

Substantive contribution requires that the research be based on a social science perspective and that it contributes to a deeper understanding of some aspect of the human condition. Aesthetic merit refers to the artistic merit of the final creative product. In other words, is the completed product an *evocative representation* of the research? Is it beautiful, moving, or poignant (Richardson, 2000)? The third standard is reflexivity. Is the researcher's positionality to the data filtered through personal background, experiences, biases, and assumptions? The fourth standard requires impact. From a critical standpoint, does the piece promote change? Does it represent a call to action? Is it intellectually or emotionally stimulating? The final standard calls for the expression of a reality. Is the creative product "a fleshed out, embodied sense of lived experience"

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(Richardson, 2000, p. 937)? Does it construct the enactment of an embodied voice

(Madison, 2012)?

Performative Writing:

Performative writing can distill one moment of history purely, simply, and

aesthetically as well as to how that moment is remembered within a particular

subjectivity (Madison, 2012). Performative writing is creative writing that embraces

beauty, evokes emotion, and stirs reflection. Madison (2012) proposed four alliterative

criteria to guide performative writing; *to embrace, to enact, to embody, and to effect.*

Performative writing embraces when it is emotionally grounded to a cause as well as is

purposefully passionate. The written form should pull the reader into the deeper shadings

of the text. To embrace means that the researcher cares about the reader offering the

words of *Others* to *Others* in a dialogic communion between subject, author and reader.

The second criterion requires the writer to enact in order to describe (Denzin, 2001). To

enact provokes detail and sensuality. Descriptions and motifs are not black and white;

rather, they are rainbow-hued. Enactment is a metaphorical leap of faith.

To embody acknowledges and understands that the body writes. Writers create

text from within the body as well as through the body (Madison, 2012). Performative

writing "adheres to radical empiricism: the intersection of bodies in motion and space"

(Madison, 2012, p. 227). The final criterion is to effect. To effect is to embrace political

struggle and to understand that "human beings emerge from the world; objectify it, and in

so doing can understand it and transform it with their labor" (Freire, 1970, p. 125). To

effect is political advocacy; it is praxis: reflection and action joined together to transform

the world (Freire, 1970). By using performative writing strategies, case study data can find its form and its rhythm in poetry. Poetry can embrace, enact, embody and effect. The reading of poetry is performance-driven whether the words are spoken out loud or not. Poetry speaks directly to the reader and through the reader and in dialogic communion blends together the voices of *Others—*the research participant, the researcher, and the reader—in a harmony of oneness.

Poetic Representation:

Qualitative research written as poetic representation is an evocative form of analysis (Gee, 1985, 1986, 1991; Glesne, 1997; Richardson, 1992, 1993, 1994, 2000; Poindexter, 2002). Case study data is thus humanly situated, filtered through human eyes and perceptions, both limited and strengthened by human emotions. Social science qualitative interviews written as poetry display "the role of *prose trope* in constituting knowledge" (Richardson, 2000, p. 933). Reading or listening to poetry generates the understanding that the text has been constructed. Poetry can convey the manner in which something is said along with what is said. Poetry layers the emotions, the rhythm, the tone, and the volume of the spoken word. The dialogic communion between researcher and subject "creates a third voice that…is a combination of both" (Madison, 2012, p. 215).

McLaren (2009) posited, "All discourse is situated historically and mediated culturally and derives part of its meaning from interaction with others" (p. 244). Poetry is such discourse and can be an evocative and powerful method for deconstructing social worlds (Poindexter, 2002; Richardson, 2000). Poetic representation of data can highlight

the speaker's use of language, pauses, stops and starts, and repetitions. Poetic

representation can find its form through poetic transcription. Glesne (1997) defined

poetic transcription as "the creation of poem like compositions from the words of

interviewees (p. 202). She wrote, "Poetic transcription is…filtered through the researcher

but involves word reduction while illuminating the wholeness and interconnections of

thought" (p. 206).

I chose poetic transcription as a methodology in order to build an emotional

bridge between the reader and my study participants. Poetry resonates with intimacy and

emotion and is a compelling method to present narratives charged with intimacy and

emotion. Richardson (1993) argued that poetic representation could be viewed as both

aesthetic and empathic. Poetry is both beautifully engaging and humanistic promoting the

understanding of "others'" lived experiences. Disadvantages to this methodology do

exist. Poindexter (2002) acknowledged that the poetic representation of data is often

"debated and controversial" (p. 713). In her opinion, however, the advantages outweigh

the disadvantages. Poindexter found that through poetry, "core narratives and strong

emotions can be communicated with an economy of words" (p. 713). I believe that poetry

challenges, poetry uplifts, and poetry engages the reader at a visceral level more

completely than other expressions of the written word. Poetic representation allowed me

to merge my voice with that of my study participants. In this dialogic communion of

voice, my experiences and perceptions joined with my participants' experiences and

perceptions enabling me to craft poems using their words to represent and illustrate the

constructs of care, belonging, power, and privilege.

Poetic inquiry often presents itself in one of three forms (Prendergast, 2009, p. xxii). The first form is *vox theoria.* These are literature-based poems written in response to works of literature often from a critical perspective. The second form is *vox autobiographia /autoethnographia.* These are poems written from the researcher's positionality using field notes, journal entries, and reflective practices as the data source. The third form is *vox participare*. These are poems written from interview transcripts or direct conversations with participants. Vox participare poems may represent one or more voices and may blend the researcher's voice with that of the participant.

I used vox participare as my poetic inquiry form to blend my voice with that of my participants through the construction of *found* poems. Found poetry was introduced within the field of qualitative research by Richardson in 1992. She "transformed a sociological interview into poetry that represented the life story of her participant" (Butler-Kisber, 2013, p. 97). Found poems are evocative, non-linear constructions in which the writer "takes words from distilled texts and shapes them into poetic form as a way to represent a particular narrative or interpretation" (Butler-Kisber, 2013, p. 96). By exclusively using the participants' words, the researcher helps to maintain the purity and integrity of participant voice. Non-traditional forms of data representation such as poetry may help "disrupt the hegemony inherent in traditional texts and evoke emotional responses" (Butler-Kisber, 2002, p. 230). This allows otherwise silenced voices to be heard and more fully engages the reader with the work.

My process for writing poetic representations of data in the form of found poems began as I immersed myself in the participant interview transcripts, both the written versions and the tape-recordings. I listened for themes and patterns, for the repetition of

sounds, for rhymes and rhythms. I used data from within each individual transcript, from across all transcripts, and in combinations of transcripts. I first wrote found poems describing each of my study participants' overall school experiences. I placed each of these school story poems at the end of each related case study in Chapters IV, V, and VI. I next wrote found poems representing each participant's perspective on what constitutes a caring teacher. These poems are situated in the care analysis narrative in Chapter VII. In Chapter VIII and IX, I took a *chained narrative* approach to my found poems. Chained narratives involve the researcher distilling "episodes of a participant's story from transcripts" and then arranging them temporally (Butler-Kisber, 2002, p. 232). I used this approach piecing together episodes from within and across transcripts as I searched for thematic layers within the data concerning belonging, power, and privilege. I believe the poems help to capture the essence of each participant's experiences and perceptions, forge an emotional bond with the reader, and preserve the adolescent's authentic voice.

Ethical Considerations

Social critique combines ethics and virtue as well as the responsibility to engage in advocacy. Furthermore, bearing witness to the experiences of *Others* is an enormous responsibility. The critical researcher must understand that the *Other* is a person in his or her own right. Conquergood (1985) proposed five ethical stances to guide qualitative inquiry involving human participants. I used these stances as my ethical touchstone while conducting my interviews. These five stances include four ethical pitfalls and one moral center that constitute his "moral mapping of performative stances toward the Other" (p. 5). The first pitfall is *The Custodian's Rip-Off* (p. 4). This ethical violation occurs when the fieldworker's sole purpose is to acquire rich, descriptive material in order to further

his/her own agenda. In this situation, participants are relegated to the status of "raw material" to be collected and molded to serve the researcher's interests (Madison, 2012, p.143). The second pitfall is *The Enthusiast's Infatuation* (Conquergood, 1985, p.4). This ethical misstep consists of the researcher over-romanticizing the participants of the study while developing a superficial identification with them. This serves to trivialize the *Other* by supplanting his/her voice with that of the researcher. The third violation is *The Curator's Exhibitionism* (p.4). This offense happens when the researcher is enthralled by participant differences perceived to be exotic and remote. When this occurs, the researcher loses subjectivity and is prone to gross misinterpretation of meanings.

The fourth pitfall is *The Skeptic's Cop-Out*. In this situation, the researcher is detached and unwilling to cross the boundary into *Otherness*. This detachment leads to the inability to embrace, to enact, to embody, or to effect. Conquergood (1985) wrote, "The skeptic's cop-out is the most morally reprehensible…because it forecloses dialogue" (p.8). The fifth performative stance is *dialogical performance*. This stance consists of "genuine conversation" and serves as a moral cornerstone (p. 5). Dialogical performance grounds ethical considerations and "pulls together mutually opposed energies" (p. 9). The purpose of this stance is to merge self with Other "even while it holds them apart" (p. 9).

Dialogical performance provided the ethical touchstone for my research as I engaged in dialogical communion with my research participants. The use of purposeful sampling allowed me to select students from a known population. More importantly, this known population consisted of students with whom I had already established a trusting and caring relationship while working with them as their alternative high school

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principal. Although this was a "convenience," my purpose was not about saving "time, money, and effort" (Patton, 2002, p. 244). My intent was to interview marginalized youth who knew me, who trusted me, and who were willing to confide in me. The critical nature of my research demanded previously established, trusting and caring relationships with these students. These relationships led me to more profound insights and evocative descriptions than if I had interviewed students to whom I was a stranger. My ethical obligation to my participants was of critical importance because of this previously established relationship. I, therefore, carefully protected their anonymity, confidentiality, and privacy.

Triangulation of Data

Triangulation strengthens research studies through the act of combining methods (Patton, 2002). Four types of triangulation methods are available. These include *triangulation, triangulation of sources, analysis triangulation and theory perspective triangulation* (Patton, 2002). For the purposes of my research, I used the triangulation of sources method, which involves the process of bouncing ideas and information from different data sources off each other while working within the same method. The triangulation of sources can reveal that different data sources or inquiry types can yield the same results as well as reveal inconsistencies within the data. Inconsistencies can be illuminating and important providing additional, rich information as well as a greater depth of understanding of the phenomenon (Patton, 2002).

Cresswell (2009) maintained that it was important to triangulate different data sources of information because this process would help to build a cogent justification for

the discovery of patterns and themes. He wrote, "If themes are established based on converging several sources of data or perspectives from participants, then this process can be claimed as adding to the validity of the study" (p.191). I used several layers of triangulation. The first layer served to compare the perspectives of all six participants by triangulating student interview data and juxtaposing their perceptions of care and belonging, power and privilege within the traditional high school context. The second layer involved the triangulation of student interview data with data supplied by their alternative school applications.

Validity and Reliability

Cresswell (2009) defined qualitative validity as the determination that findings "are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, the participant, or the readers of an account" (p. 191). Three methods were used to assess this research for validity. First, I enhanced internal validity through the use of data triangulation. Multiple sources of data helped to build a strong justification for findings. Second, member checking assisted in verifying the accuracy of the themes, descriptions, and perspectives represented within my final product. Finally, I used a process of triangulated self-reflexivity to understand that within a critical stance, my personal experiences, pre-conceptions, expectations, and biases were not neutral in relation to the information provided by my research participants and in relation to the perceived expectations and biases of my intended audience.

Limitations of Study

This research study was small in scope with six participants selected from one

school district located within one Oklahoma suburban community. The small number of study participants may be a limitation. My goal, however, was not to reach a grand conclusion, but to provide a snapshot view of possible contributing factors to the national dropout problem within this context. The same research conducted in other school districts in Oklahoma or in the United States might result in different outcomes. A second limitation is that constructs of race and gender were not the factored into my data collection and analysis beyond the fact that I deliberately chose to have equal numbers of males and females as study participants solely in the interest of the fair representation of both genders. Furthermore, my sample was pulled from a predominately white school district. Five of my study participants are Caucasian and one is Native American. My experience with marginalized adolescents is limited, with few exceptions, to white students who feel like a minority within the traditional high school context through the process of marginalization. Therefore, I did not feel I could do justice to an exploration of race at this time, much as MacLeod believed he "would have been totally incapable of doing justice to the experience of girls" (2009, p. 468). A third limitation arose because I did research in my own backyard. Backyard research raises ethical questions and power issues as well as the balance of subjectivity and objectivity. Although special care was taken to avoid these questions and issues, this is a limitation that must be noted.

<u>Case Study Design</u>

Chapters IV, V, and VI provide the individual case studies for each of my six participants with two cases per chapter. Student names are pseudonyms to protect anonymity and confidentiality. I named the school district Suburban Heights, as well as the community which houses it. The Suburban Heights High School is split into two

campuses located directly across the street from each other. They are referred to as the mid-high (ninth and tenth grades) and the senior high (eleventh and twelfth grades). Each case study presents a participant's individual "story" told in his/her own words to allow the reader to hear the student's voice unfiltered by my own. Furthermore, because the interviews were open-ended and exploratory in nature, some details will vary from one participant to another. In other words, I followed where the student led.

The stories begin with a personal profile of each individual followed by a description of his/her elementary and middle school experiences both at school and at home. These experiences include perceptions of care and belonging during those school years. I believed it was important to include this information as these experiences can demonstrate the fact that students often begin to exhibit symptoms of disengagement and disillusionment with school prior to their high school years. In addition, school experiences do not occur in a vacuum. Students often carry any emotional and physical baggage they acquire at home with them to school. The weight of this baggage can take a negative toll on their school performance.

Next follows a poetic representation I wrote using each student's own words. These poems are intended to help illustrate an overall picture of each student, as well as to foster an emotional connection between the student and the reader. I added no words of my own to the poems. Sentences or words, however, may have been placed out of order and/or omitted for aesthetic purposes or for dramatic effect (Lanther & Smithies, 1997). The next section provides the heart of the student's story and thus presents an overview of the student's perceptions and experiences within the traditional high school setting. The final section briefly describes the student's transition to the Suburban

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Heights Alternative School and subsequent graduation from high school. Student

emotions are acknowledged throughout with italics and descriptive wording. I discuss

and analyze specific participant perceptions, experiences, and opinions pertaining to the

three major themes of care, belonging, power and privilege in Chapter VII, VIII, and IX.

CHAPTER IV

Alex and Beth

Alex's Story

I was kind of the kid,

off to the side,

that everybody just didn't care about.

<u>**Personal Profile**</u>

Alex is a white, 20-year-old male. He is approximately six feet tall with a slender build. He has lanky, dark brown—almost black hair, cobalt blue eyes, crooked front teeth, and a slightly, olive-tinted complexion. He is a shy, quiet, young man, soft-spoken, and deeply introspective. His daily attire consists of the typical teen uniform of t-shirts, jeans, and tennis shoes. His hobbies include drawing and soccer. Alex has two brothers, one older and one younger, as well as an older sister. He lived in a rural area in Oklahoma until the age of eight at which point his family moved to Suburban Heights. His mother homeschooled him for kindergarten, first, and second grades. When asked why his parents decided to discontinue homeschooling and enroll him in public school, he replied it was because, "We moved to a town that had a public school system." He was a student in the Suburban Heights School District from third grade to graduation. His demeanor during the entire interview was calm and composed. He spoke quietly and occasionally gave emphasis to a word or thought. He appeared emotional twice during

our interview session; this has been noted and described at the appropriate time during his story.

Elementary/Middle School Years

Alex described his elementary school years as the time when he experienced the most teacher care. He believed that overall his elementary teachers "cared about their students." He, however, qualified this statement by adding that this care manifested "in a different way than we think of caring right now." He portrayed it as impersonal, "The way you cared for a child that's like in the store that gets lost, like it's not actual loving for the child." He remembered it as just enough care "to where the child gets by." When he moved on to sixth grade, Alex described the school atmosphere as "Okay because there's not really any like discrimancy [sic] going on." He felt that his sixth grade teachers "were really cool about paying attention to their students and trying to interact with them." All in all, he stated, "That was probably one of my best years."

In the seventh grade, Alex's school experience began to go downhill. He said it "just kinda [sic] got worse progressively." He added, "It wasn't bad but it wasn't good either." His described his teachers. He remembered, "Some…would just not really care for you." As for the seventh grade principals and counselors, he believed, "They were just there for their job." He felt "that they didn't really care" about their students. Then, in the eighth grade, Alex said "I had a bad year…I had a spiral into depression." He continued, "That was my fault and I didn't really talk to anybody." He acknowledged, "I really didn't have any friends, so I just didn't really talk, and I also had problems with my dad." When I asked him if he thought the problems with his dad might have triggered the

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depression, he responded, "in some cases yes and sometimes not." He added, "It was just more of a selfish need rather than that."

Alex's parents divorced when he was in the eighth grade. Alex admitted that the divorce left him feeling "kind of relieved because it was like every single night they were fighting and yelling." He said his parents argued mainly because his dad "did stuff that he wasn't supposed to." He remembered, "At one point I was actually praying that something would happen between them because it was just like nobody got to sleep, nobody had any fun anymore because they were constantly fighting." Alex added, "Whenever they split up my dad took us because my mom has a thyroid issue and she was going through some problems with that." He said "so we just stayed at his house." I asked him "what was that like?" He replied, "*Hell*."

Experiences and Perceptions of Traditional High School

Alex's Poem

I was going
Through a
Punk phase

I would
Wear
Skinny jeans
And
Band tees
I had long hair

They would
Call me a
Faggot

They would
Say that

I liked to
Suck it
That I
Couldn't do
Shit

I had a friend that
Passed away
Everybody was just
Cracking jokes
Because he was
Homosexual

At one point
I just
Broke down
Started crying

The teacher
Told me to
SUCK IT UP

I just stopped going

You know
Most kids do

I was just like

I gotta
Get out of
HERE

In the ninth grade, Alex's first year at the mid-high, he dealt with the tragic and violent death of a close friend. His voice shook slightly when he said, "I had a friend that passed away." He added, "It was a pretty violent way for him to go…he was crossing the highway and a car hit him and the car just kept going and then he was hit three more times." Alex confided that this friend was homosexual and he believed that students and teachers at the mid-high made fun of his friend's death because of his sexual orientation. He claimed they would "crack jokes about like him getting hit and stuff like that."

Eventually, Alex grew so upset about these jokes that he broke down in class. He described his teacher's response. He recalled, "The teacher told me to just *suck it up*." He tried to get help from one of the assistant principals to stop the insensitive and cruel jokes about his friend. He was told, "She couldn't do anything."

Alex believed the mid-high environment was not "structured enough." He described the classroom environment as, "Kids goof off whenever they want." He concluded, "Whenever they're doing that it just makes it really hard for other kids." He described the daily routine, "Everyday it's the same thing, it's the same rules, everybody just does the same exact thing." He characterized his teachers' instructional style as, "They would explain it" and then they would say, "Okay go do your work." If a student did not get it the first time, Alex remembered, "They just wouldn't help you." He added, "When you did ask for help, they said to look in the book." Alex explained, "The book didn't help either." Alex became frustrated and stopped doing his work in class. He claimed the typical teacher response was, "They would tell you that you have zeros, but that's really it."

Alex perceived the mid-high to be "really biased." He remembered being "the victim of bullying." He said, "I would wear skinny jeans and band tees and I had long hair." He remembered, "They would like call me *gay*." He continued, "They would make gay jokes, say that I like to "*suck it and* that I couldn't do *shit*." When I asked him if he tried to get help from the teachers, counselors, or school administrators, he responded, "No because most of the time it was in front of teachers." He claimed the teachers "would look up and they would say sit down and that's it." He remembered, "They wouldn't send the person to the office. They wouldn't even send me to the office."

Alex described his own behavior while at the mid-high. He said, "I was kind of goofy. I was kind of like the class clown." He admitted, "After a while I realized that my grades were slipping so I cut that like real fast." When I asked him why he behave goofy or like the class clown, he replied, "I figured if I'm quiet I'm gonna [sic] think about things that I shouldn't be thinking about, then it's just going to throw me back into my depression." He said, "Whenever I goof off I don't really think about that stuff."

Alex revealed positive memories of one teacher from the mid-high: "There's one teacher in particular that made a *huge* impact in my life, especially during ninth grade after my friend passed away." She was his "science teacher" and he remembered, "She is just *awesome* because like she kind of took us under her wing." He continued, "Me and my girlfriend, we couldn't really handle the death of our friend and every day in her class she would come up and she would sit down with us and, like, *actually talk to us* about it." Alex added, "She kind of like took us in as her children." He hesitatingly said, "I think if she wouldn't have done that I might not have a chance of being here today." When I asked him to clarify, he said that he had thought about "hurting himself."

When Alex made the transition from the mid-high campus to the senior high campus, he remembered, "When you get into the high school, a lot of the kids that were originally picking on you really calm down." He said, "They realize, you know, hey I have two years of school left, I gotta kinda [sic] adult up." He added, "Other than that I didn't really see a difference." He characterized his senior high teachers' attitude as, "They were all really kind of just get your work done and get out of my class." He felt "stress" in class because he "wasn't a good learner" and struggled with the work. His perception was that he "was not getting taught it." He believed, "I have to learn how to

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do it by myself." Then, when he did not do his work, Alex remembered the typical teacher response, "'Hey you've got a zero' and then I get detention for it." At that point, he said, "I just kinda [sic] slacked off. I didn't really care." He admitted that he "didn't find anything fulfilling at school to actually wake up that early in the morning and get up and go."

As for the senior high principals, Alex said, "The principal is a little bit more of a jerk." He added, "I just think he goes through so many kids he just doesn't care any more." He remembered, "I know that the junior principal didn't like me at all because the teachers would always send me down there because I couldn't do my work." He continued, "Instead of try to figure out why, he just said that I was lazy and here's detention." Alex described the school counselors, "They weren't really counselors. They were more mentors that didn't really help." He continued, "I just don't think the counselors really cared. Everybody there was just there to get a paycheck and move on." He remembered trying to get help. He recalled, "I'll go in and try to talk to her about something and she'll just be too busy or she'll pretend to be busy when you know that she's not." He added, "They act really snotty towards you if it's not something that they can get done within five minutes."

Throughout his high school years, Alex felt, "He was not as good as everyone else." He admitted that he felt isolated "in a lot of instances." When I asked him to elaborate, he said "I didn't really have very many friends to call my own." Alex explained, "I felt like I didn't really fit in because it's like the school here is really orientated like if you can throw a football or if you can kick a soccer ball." He remembered, "I couldn't sign up for sports because I couldn't afford the equipment." He

added, "Soccer was like a huge sport to me." He continued regretfully, "I couldn't afford the cleats. I couldn't afford the shin guards." Alex recalled, "I was like dirt poor. I didn't, I couldn't buy anything." He added, "I wanted to have awesome clothing and stuff." He remembered, "I was kinda [sic] obsessed. I wanted to be like everybody else." He stated, "But I just couldn't do anything that everybody else was doing. Nobody really wanted to be around me because of that."

Alex dropped out of the senior high "at the very end of eleventh grade." He confided that during his junior year of school, his father "was going through his mid-life crisis and would just be late to work all the time and stuff like that." Alex said, "I have a little brother so I dropped out actually and went full time to my work and I started taking care of him." He added, "I paid the bills." One day, Alex remembered, voice breaking, he and his father "got into a really bad fight and the cops were called." His father told him "to pack up and leave." Alex said "so I moved in with my mom." He continued, "I just kinda [sic] didn't go back to school." He added, "I went back and I told them I'm dropping out." He remembered the school response as being, "Like oh, we kinda [sic] figured." He said, "I went up there to get the information to drop out. The counselor was just kinda [sic] like, really hateful about it." Alex's perception was, "She didn't really care or anything. She was really kinda [sic] snotty."

Transition to Alternative School

Alex was out of school for approximately "a year and a half" before attending the Suburban Heights Alternative School. He returned to school because, "I figured if I'm gonna [sic] be something one day then I have ta [sic] first take the initiative and go back

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to school and try to finish that up." He decided on the alternative program because he had "heard a lot of good things [about it] from some really good friends." On his alternative school application, he listed the reasons he felt he had been unsuccessful within the traditional high setting: bullying, boredom, excessive zeroes, lack of effort, low self-esteem, poor English skills, poor social skills, and feeling like he was not as good as everyone else.

Alex "proudly" graduated from the alternative high school in 2013 after having "dramatically" raised his grade point average. He said, "It's really something I'm really proud of, that I actually stepped up and finished." He liked the alternative school setting because, "Everybody here knows you by name and they know your story." He added, "Here they actually would sit down with you after the lesson's done and still go over it with you." Alex told the story of an alternative school teacher who asked him one day, "Are you okay or are you just really tired?" He remembered, "That really struck me because nobody's ever asked me that before. It really had a huge impact on me." He continued, "A principal like you and our counselor—like you guys did an awesome job." He said, "Every single hour you guys would be out in the hall and you'd actually interact with the students. Let the kids know that you're still there, you still care. You guys were like, 'Hey how are you guys?'" Two weeks after our interview, Alex left for basic training with the United States Army Infantry Division.

Beth's Story

If you don't feel like that teacher cares
if you're going to pass or fail,
then why care if you're gonna pass or fail.

Personal Profile

Beth is a vivacious, 18-year-old female of Native American descent. She stands approximately five feet tall with a slender build. She has straight, medium-length, brown hair and dark green eyes. She dresses according to current teen styles and describes herself as a "preppy" dresser. She has a bubbly, out- going personality coupled with a strong sense of right and wrong. She always appeared extremely at ease conversing with adults and presented as mature beyond her years. She described her need for attention throughout her school years as something she craved. She said, "I craved it from my parents. I craved it from my teachers." She has one sibling, an older sister whom she described as "book smart, made great grades." She has experienced a stable home life. Her parents are still married. Her father is an urban police officer while her mother works for a sheriff's department. Her grandparents as well as other family members figure prominently in her life. Beth confided that they all "took care of me, and made sure that I had what I was supposed to have." She attended Suburban Heights' schools from kindergarten through graduation. Beth was openly enthusiastic during the interview and willingly expressed her opinions about every topic that arose. She is a fast talker and quite verbose. She appeared regretful about many of her school experiences, but never seemed sad.

Elementary/Middle School Years

Beth attended pre-kindergarten in another school district before transferring to Suburban Heights Public Schools. She believed her pre-kindergarten teacher "knew that I was, uh, trouble." She added, "Even at the age of four I had problems." These

"problems" included having a "hard time" staying still in class and being extremely social. She remembered being tested for Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) "like four times." She said her parents "tried medications" with her and she "went to therapists." She described elementary school as a "*hard time.*" She believed the teachers "tried working with" her, but she "*just couldn't do*" the school work. Beth felt her elementary teachers cared about her "for the most part" and tried to help her with one exception. Beth's perception of her fourth grade teacher was, "She wasn't any help at all." She stated, "I was failing because I didn't have that attention that I needed."

Beth's middle school years revolved around her struggle with ADHD symptoms and treatment. She remembered taking "a very strong dosing of medicine for it" and that she "switched through a lot of them." She described debilitating side-effects from the medication such as insomnia and increased hyperactivity. She said, "Most of them would make me even more hyper [active] and would make me chew the inside of my mouth raw." She also dealt with "*really bad symptoms of depression*" during the seventh grade. Beth characterized that year as "*a really bad time*" in her life. Beth's doctor concluded that her ADHD medication was causing her depression issues and changed her medication.

Beth observed, "Middle school was when I really started having problems with teachers." She attributed her "problems" to the middle school teachers (sixth, seventh, eighth grade) who "have that mindset of you're old enough to do this by yourself." This "mindset" frustrated Beth. She remembered, "When I did struggle, they didn't help me at all when I *actually did* need them." She also experienced disciplinary consequences for the first time. She admitted receiving "detention a lot for talking in class, for being

disruptive" as well as swats for "misbehaving on a bus." When I asked her to provide an example of a caring teacher during her middle school years, Beth replied, "I can't think of one that I would go back and thank."

Experiences and Perceptions of Traditional High School

Beth's Poem

Because I came off
as
Preppy
as
Powerful and Wealthy
as
Well-Dressed and Well-Mannered

The Cookie-Cutter Popular Kid

They thought
that
I didn't need Help
They assumed
that
I was Fine
that
I was Okay
that
I was gonna Squeeze by

And I wasn't.

Because I was
Well-Off
They thought
that
I had it Down
that
I had myself Together

And I didn't.

I was *Drowning*

I saw it
as
Downhill

I saw it
as
I don't want
to be
Here

There is no use
for me
to be

HERE!

Once at the mid-high, Beth's sole focus was on the social aspects of high school.

She remembered, "I was popular. I was dressed nice, always had lots of friends." She

added, "I just wanted to be a teenager. I just wanted to have fun." Then, as her grades

dropped, she realized, "If I didn't step it up, I wasn't gonna [sic] graduate." At this point,

Beth remembered this time period as when she experienced "the *hardest time* I've had

with any teachers." She described feeling "*lost* in a sea of large classes." When she tried

reaching out to teachers for help, she said, "They would brush me off their shoulder."

She described her mother's efforts to get help for her. Beth recalled, "She would call

them. She would email them. She would come up there and speak with them." The

teacher response was, "We don't know what to tell you, she just doesn't succeed here."

Beth remembered trying to get "one on one with teachers." She said, "A couple of

them did it a couple of times, but then they would realized that after school hours were

more their time." She blamed herself for her lack of academic success. She noted, "It was my fault; I wasn't paying attention." In Beth's opinion, class size was related to how much attention an individual student received from the teacher. She observed, "I think it made a *huge* impact on how much attention you get in the classroom." She pointed out, "There's just so many different varieties of people that it's overwhelming to one teacher." She described the classroom dynamic as, "It's about the students that you're in there with. There's that one kid that drives the teacher crazy and is the class clown and she puts a lot of attention on that person." She added, "The teacher *always, always* grows a bond with that person."

Beth described herself as popular and nicely dressed with a small group of friends. She remembered her group's dynamic to be "really interesting how we all worked together." She said most of the girls in the group were "popular" like her, but there was one girl who "didn't fit in." Beth continued, "But she was really pretty and she just kinda [sic] worked her way in." Beth talked extensively about the various "cliques" at the mid-high. She characterized them as, "The kids who you would consider really weird. The kids who wear all black, the really smart kids, the overweight kids, the dorky, pervert boys, the jocks." When I asked her to describe what makes a kid "weird," Beth responded, "If they dress "emo" or gothic, if a guy was to wear makeup, if he did weird things." Beth observed, "The thing is with groups, they look like each other, they all have the same interests." She continued, "Then if one person in that group does something, it affects the whole group." She admitted, "The people you hang out with in my school district really do mold who you are."

Beth witnessed bullying at the mid-high. She believed some students are bullied if "they say something stupid or they wear something that wasn't very smart." She said the really smart kids were bullied because, "In class they'll ask 500 questions and in my school district you don't do that, you look like a loser." She added, "The kids who dress weird" were ridiculed. Beth described a "girl who dressed like a boy." She remembered, "She had short hair and most of the time you couldn't tell she was a girl." She acknowledged, "People picked on her a lot." Beth also remembered, "The handicapped kids get made fun of a lot." She described an instance when a handicapped student "got food thrown at him at lunch." She claimed another handicapped student was "thrown in the trash can." At this point, she stopped and said, "*Oh My Gosh* I'm going to cry." She added, "I mean it's just *really bad.*"

Due to credit deficiencies, Beth did not make a complete transition from the mid-high to the senior high. She was "what they call a tweener" because she was dually enrolled at the mid-high and the senior high and had to take classes on both campuses. She said, "I only had two classes at the high school because of not getting credit." One of her senior high teachers was an English teacher. Beth described her as being "more about social in her classroom than she was about learning." She believed this teacher favored the popular students. Beth claimed she "went towards more the popular people." Beth also described this teacher as not willingly to help "if you don't do it yourself." She said this teacher's response was, "Sorry I don't know what to tell you."

Beth's other teacher at the senior high was a history teacher. She described him as "Probably the *rudest* teacher I've ever had." She said, "He was a bully." She remembered he "picked on people and that made his class very hard." She believed he

resented being "stuck with a regular history class" after becoming used to teaching

Advanced Placement classes. She felt this resentment was the reason he "would make

things particularly hard for us." Beth added, "Like an example of an assignment would

be, read Chapter 12 in ten minutes, we will quiz on it; and Chapter 12 would be thirty

pages long." She recalled, "People were really *drowning* in that class." Beth asked the

senior high principals for help. She said, "They looked at me like, you know, *the same*

look I've been getting for twelve years." Their response was, "Sorry, it's your duty and

your responsibility to make sure you pass that class."

Beth had one teacher at the mid-high she felt cared for her. She stated, "She

stepped beyond her duties to make sure that I succeeded." Beth continued to struggle at

school. She remembered this caring teacher "came forward to me about this alternative

program." In addition, she discussed a caring, student teacher at the senior high. She said

"he would sit down with me and say, 'Did you get this done? Why didn't you get this

done?' " She added they were, "The only two teachers that have really *stepped out for me*

and so I ended up passing those two classes." Beth had mononucleosis during her final

semester in traditional high school. She missed two months of school due to this illness

and applied to the alternative school.

Transition to Alternative School

Beth's application to the Suburban Heights Alternative School described her

struggles in the regular school environment as being due to boredom, excessive zeroes,

lack of effort, poor attendance, poor math skills, and chronic health problems. She

attended the alternative school for one year and experienced none of the problems she

had dealt with in the traditional setting. She graduated in the spring of 2013. She credited

the alternative program for being "a savior on who I am and who I've become." She said,

"I can just go on and on about how much I love this school setting." She described the

environment as "just so much smaller, the teachers had more of a chance to be there for

me." She continued, "I felt like the teachers cared more about what they were doing." In

addition, she said, "They were just what I expected a teacher to be." Beth currently works

for the sheriff's department and is attending classes at a junior college with the intention

of becoming a nurse. On a deeply sad note, several weeks after our interview, Beth was

diagnosed with a brain tumor and is undergoing treatment at this time. Her prognosis is

uncertain.

Chapter V

Christian and Doug

Christian's Story

People were just always on me and always had this kind of condescending tone
like I was just this bad person.
They didn't even want me around.
They just wanted to get me out of the school.

<u>**Personal Profile**</u>

Christian is a white, 21-year-old male. He has short, sandy-brown hair and hazel eyes. He has a slender build and is approximately six feet tall. He is a highly intelligent and compassionate individual who projects a quiet and self-contained demeanor. He is usually dressed in jeans, death metal band tees, and tennis shoes. His hobbies include video games, playing with his dog, and singing angry, lead vocals in a death metal band. He described his socioeconomic status as "middle class before the middle class disappeared." He was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) in the second grade and treated with medication until he experienced negative side effects. He was born and raised in Suburban Heights and attended the Suburban Heights Public Schools from kindergarten through his graduation.

His parents divorced when he was in elementary school and he made frequent moves between his mother and father. He characterized his father as "a *bitter, angry*

man" whose "instant response is just *instant anger*" if "things are going the way he doesn't like." Christian added, "He's *definitely* a very, very, very smart person. He's *definitely* a really, really cool guy too." He believed his father had helped him "more than anyone in the world." Christian's mother is a teacher in an urban school district and suggested he apply to the alternative school. Christian was very emotional during the interview. He still harbors deep resentment and bitterness toward the faculty and staff at both the mid-high and the senior high. He did not tear up. His anger, however, was very evident not only through his word choice, but also through the stress he placed on words.

Elementary/Middle School Years

Christian described his elementary school years as, "The point where I enjoyed school more so than at any time other than being" at the Suburban Heights Alternative School. When I asked him to elaborate, he confessed that he felt less "pressure" in elementary school. He observed, "There wasn't really as much riding on you having to focus." Christian found focusing in the classroom difficult and was diagnosed with ADD when he was eight years old. His parents divorced around this time period. He remembered moving "back and forth" between the two homes all the way through school. He claimed that this "switching" back and forth did not have "much of an effect" on him. Christian liked elementary school because he felt, "The whole staff was just less demeaning." Overall, he perceived teachers at the elementary level to be "definitely more" caring and supportive "than in middle school."

Middle school was when Christian's school experiences began to go downhill. He recalled, "It was probably when I got to sixth grade that I started not liking school." He

said he quit doing his homework and stopped "caring about getting good grades." He

admitted he was not "sure it was the school that made it that way." He remembered his

attention was focused on other interests such as *Yu Gi Oh*, playing video games,

skateboarding, and "hanging out with friends." He, however, viewed the middle school

teachers as "all there just to do their jobs, to get a paycheck." He believed they got

"*mad*" often and "seemed just to not really care." He found his school work to be

"monotonous." He started getting in trouble at school for "talking in class," for not doing

his "homework," and for not "paying attention." He remembered his teachers would "get

real *frustrated and yell*" and then punish him "somehow." As a result, numerous hours of

detention and in-house placements framed Christian's middle school experience.

Experiences and Perceptions of Traditional High School

Christian's Poem

I dressed
you know
all Black and Stuff

People would call me
Emo and Gothic
and
start Fights with me

I would Fight
and
get Beat up

I had
bad Anger problems

I would
kinda
cause Self-Harm

I would
kinda
beat the Hell
out of a brick wall

I would
kinda
Stomp around
from class to class

I just
kinda
feel like
I didn't Care

I didn't like
the way
I Looked
or
the way
I Felt
or
the way
other people thought
of ME

It just
made me Feel
like
a lot Less

It just
made me Feel
like
A boring, standard
Other guy

like
There's them
And then the
Other guys

I was
just one of the

OTHER GUYS!

Christian attended both the mid-high and senior high campuses before joining the alternative school program. He described himself as wearing dark, "baggy clothes." He said he dyed his hair black and sometimes hung out with other students who dressed in a similar fashion. He recalled, "My closest friends didn't go to school" because they did not want to. He added, "Their mom just didn't make them go." Christian remembered this as the period of time when his "attendance was the worst." He attributed this to the fact that he did not like being at the mid-high because of "the staff." He emphatically declared, "I just did not like any of them." He continued, "I felt like I *hated* them and they *hated* me and didn't want me there."

Mutual antipathy was Christian's main perception of the mid-high faculty and staff. He remembered, "Most of the staff there was just *really, really crappy* to me." He angrily described his experiences with the mid-high staff in the following manner, "If I did something they didn't like or was behaving a way that they didn't want, they would just get *mad* at me and *punish* me and they were just *spiteful* people." Christian believed the mid-high staff was interested only in punishing him rather than helping him through what he confessed was "really kind of a *hard time* in my life." He remembered dealing with "a lot of explosive anger problems." He admitted, "I would kinda [sic] cause self-harm, not so much like cutting, just kinda [sic] beat the *hell* out of a brick wall." He also "got picked on a lot." He said, "A lot of people, bigger people, wanta [sic] pick on someone that they know can't do anything back and that was usually me." In addition, he felt, "The whole staff was picking on me too."

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Christian gave an example concerning the school librarian. She was the before and after school detention monitor and one day she would not allow him into the detention room when he left the sign-in line to retrieve his book from outside the door. The tardy bell rang while he was outside. He claimed that when he tried to get back in, "She said, nope, you're late." She refused to allow him sign in and do his detention. He added, "Then I got like two weeks of in-house because I missed detention." He remembered feeling that her actions were "really *spiteful.*" He believed, "She just really wanted ta [sic] *enforce* the rules really *hard.*" He thought her behavior "just seemed wrong."

Christian described the learning environment at the mid-high as "*so monotonous.*" He remembered, "The attitude of the whole staff in general was just kinda [sic] groggy." He said the teachers would, "toss a worksheet on your desk" and say, "Fill this out, finish it, turn it in." Christian described a daily regimen of worksheets or "work out of the book." He found this routine to be "boring" and "pointless." He added, "It didn't like help teach me anything or show me why it's important to know." Christian said he "definitely" did not find his classroom work to be relevant. He characterized his teachers' instructional style, "It was more like teaching us *how* to do the assignment, not so much teaching us what the assignment is like *supposed* to be teaching us."

Christian had a difficult relationship with the mid-high principal. "It just seemed like he just didn't really care." He described him as, "a *power-corrupted* guy who's just *angry* and trying to *punish* people." He believed the principal was "*spiteful*" and, "would kinda [sic] just like almost follow me around" and would give me "dirty looks." Christian's perception was that this principal was "just lookin' for any reason he could"

to get him in trouble. "*And he would take any reason he could too.*" He continued, "I just found myself in detention all the time." Christian concluded, "I was a little, kinda [sic], gothic looking kid and he just didn't like anything about me." I asked him if he could think of at least "one single positive relationship with any adult at the mid-high." He paused for a very long time and then responded, "I think there had to have been someone there." He added, "I would say that there were a few that I would joke around with and kinda [sic] have fun conversations and stuff like that every now and then." He continued, "But then, at the same time, those exact teachers would give me the worst experience there."

Christian described the senior high as, "pretty much the same story" as the mid-high. "It was just *more* students, *more* people, *more* of the same stuff." He characterized the staff as, "*angrier*" and *"more spiteful.*" He recalled, "I did not get along with" the teachers "and they did not get along with me either." Christian did, however, remember two teachers at the senior high that he liked. "They were friendly" and "They weren't looking for a reason to punish someone." He also felt they respected him as a person. He observed, "They showed me respect so I can, you know, give it back to 'em, and I would work for 'em, and I passed all those classes." Christian described the rest of his senior high teachers as easily "*frustrated.*" He claimed, "Halfway through the year they'd just get *mad* and they're kicking people out of their class." He continued, "They'd just start *punishing* people, just like *detention*, *detention, suspended.*"

Transition to Alternative School

Christian left the senior high during his junior year. He remembered, "I didn't

have nearly enough credits to graduate." So he applied and was accepted as a student at the Suburban Heights Alternative School. On his application he listed the following reasons for his lack of success within the traditional school environment: excessive zeroes, lack of effort, low self-esteem, and poor study skills. When I asked why he believed he had poor study skills, he responded, "Probably falls into the category of just not caring." He continued, "I wasn't going to study if I didn't care, *period***.**" In the beginning, he struggled at the alternative school with poor attendance and getting his work done in class, as well as with his anger problems. Christian managed to overcome these issues and credited the alternative school staff for helping him. He said, "Everyone here was just *awesome* and just like wanted to help me." He remembered, "I just became good friends with the whole staff here." He continued, "I always liked being here 'cause there's not many students and the teachers could actually relate to each individual student and know things about them." He added when teachers, "Know what they do and who they are they can actually teach them 'cause no one learns the same as somebody else." Christian graduated in 2010. He works full time for a company located in an industrial park just outside of Suburban Heights. He announced, "I'm discovering my spiritual side, put away my whole anger and depression and I just was left with nothing but just happiness."

Doug's Story

I don't know if I didn't want to go back,
or if I wasn't able to get in, but I should,
I should have been able to get in, right?

Personal Profile

Doug is a 19-year-old, white male. He has blonde, curly hair, and cornflower blue eyes. He is approximately five feet, ten inches tall with a stocky build. Doug's usual attire consists of knee length, jeans shorts (even in the winter), t-shirts, and tennis shoes. Doug is an intelligent, highly personable young man and comes across as solid and dependable. He is a blithe spirit and adversity does not appear to faze him. He comes from a lower socioeconomic background and was raised with the help of public assistance through the Oklahoma Department of Human Services. He said, without any hint of self-pity, "I've felt like a poor kid for most of my life." His hobbies include hanging out with friends and playing the bass guitar. He was born in Oklahoma and moved to Suburban Heights for the first time for his first grade year. His parents never married; his mother lives in Suburban Heights and his father lives in an urban community in Oklahoma. Doug moved back and forth between them until the eighth grade at which time he remained living with his mother in the Suburban Heights School District until graduation. Doug presented as stoically calm and matter of fact during the interview. He only showed emotion once and this occurred while talking about his dropout status. He seemed to not harbor any resentment toward anyone at the mid-high or the high school.

Elementary/Middle School Years

Doug lived with his mother and went to a Suburban Heights elementary school for the first grade. He revealed, "I had to repeat the first grade because my reading was not all that great." His reading improved enough the following year to get him promoted to the second grade. His overall perception of his elementary school years was, "First

grade was fine and then all the rest was fine until I got into like sixth grade." He moved away from Suburban Heights to live with his father during his second, third, and fourth grade years. Doug remembered liking the consistency of being "at the same elementary school for like three years" and acknowledged, "If you go to the same place for a while you start to build relationships with people and stuff like that." He moved to an urban community in Oklahoma with his mother for fifth grade and admitted, "I didn't do well because I didn't go to school as often." Doug confessed that not going to school was his choice. He acknowledged, "At that time, I walked all over my mom and she folded all the time; so if I didn't want to go, I didn't have to go."

One of the reasons he did not want to go to school during the fifth grade was due to bullying. He remembered, "Kids were more brutal, more cruel and I was considered the minority there because I was one of the few Caucasians." He also recalled being made fun of because of his size. He acknowledged, "I've always been a bigger person all my life." He stated that his mother "wasn't very responsible." Doug added that his "dad was stricter" and that was the main reason he moved back and forth between them. His mother would not make him go to school, but his father would. He moved back in with his father for the sixth and seventh grades.

Doug believed that sixth grade was the school year in which he really started getting off track academically. He said, "The work got harder and I guess I slacked off. I was lazy about it." He also remembered, "I was always in trouble; I was grounded all the time for my grades." He added, "I never had good grades." Although his reading had improved since first grade, he confessed that he "didn't do very well in math. Doug blamed himself for his lack of academic success, not his teachers. He said, "I don't know

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if it was I didn't care or if I just didn't try." In seventh grade he transferred to a large, urban school and had to wear a uniform. He recalled, "Things were different there. He continued, "The standards were a little bit higher so I tried. I did pretty good in some classes." He also remembered no longer having to deal with bullying as well as making a lot of friends. He said, "I had never really had friends that I chilled out with outside of school. Things just started changing then. I had girlfriends and friends and went to concerts and stuff like that."

Doug moved back to Suburban Heights to live with his mother for his eighth grade year and remained in the school district until he graduated from high school. He described eighth grade as "A blast, it was really fun." When I asked him to elaborate, he admitted that living with his mother was fun. It meant he "had a lot more freedom" and could go out with his friends more often than when he lived with his father. For Doug, eighth grade was all about "going to school for the social thing more or less than the education." He remembered thinking his eighth grade teachers "were really cool." He added, "They didn't take their job so seriously." However, he confessed, "It felt like some of them didn't like me. They were just stricter." He continued, "They just came down on me sometimes." Doug gave these teachers the benefit of the doubt. He concluded, "Maybe I was a talker. It might have been because of my grades, because I didn't try very hard in that class."

Experiences and Perceptions of Traditional High School

Doug's Poem

I hung out
with the people

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that
Wore all the black
and
try to keep to
Themselves

Everybody thought
of us as
Outsiders
We were
there
but we never did
Activities

I got
caught up in the
Social life
and
Started doing drugs

It started off
as
Smoking cigarettes
then
someone said
Hey try this

It caught up with me!

My friend got
in
Trouble
and then
My other friend got
in
Trouble
and then
I got
in
Trouble

I got suspended
in February

January
of the next year

I was allowed
to come
Back

That's a really long
That's a really,

Long Time!

Doug described attending the mid-high as "a change." He added with a sigh, "It was alright." He said, "You're finally up there around older students." He continued to view school as a social endeavor. He said, "Everyone I knew was there. People were my life." He remembered, "I hung out with all the people that wore all the black and try to keep to themselves." He described himself as "that one bright shirt from the group." He found support and acceptance within this group of friends. He said, "I had people there to back me up. If someone didn't like me it was okay because I had these people that liked me." His group of friends considered themselves to be "the outsiders" at school. Doug observed, "I've felt like a poor kid for most of my life" living in "a very wealthy town." He continued, "You can see it. They'd flaunt it off for sure." He gave an example, "People are, like, oh check out my new shoes. They're like $150 bucks." His response was, "That's cool, my shoes are from Wal-Mart, they're $13 bucks."

In the classroom, Doug acknowledged, "I was distracted by other people." He said, "I would look for a person in class to make friends with so I wouldn't have to bother with the boring teacher sitting up there." He confessed, "I did poorly in my classes." He added, "I think I was pretty lazy about it. I just, you know, tried to float and so I'd get real bored." In addition, if he did not understand the lesson or the assignment, Doug did not feel "comfortable" asking for help. He said, "I didn't like going up and asking

questions 'cause it made me feel stupid." He did not do his work in class and one teacher described his zero-riddled grades as looking like a "pearl necklace." He remembered some of the teachers would try to get him to do his work. He said they would comment, "Hey you've got way too many zeroes, you need to start doing your work." On the other hand, he added that some of his teachers "didn't say anything" about his zeroes. Doug's perception was that these teachers had the mindset, "Okay this kid obviously doesn't want to try, so I'm not going to try." He admitted, "I wasn't putting effort into it." However, he observed, "They would never ask me why."

Doug liked one teacher in particular because, "He had a lot of energy. He was excited about teaching." He continued, "He didn't get very *mad* if you didn't do something." He acknowledged, "I would listen because I wanted to. He gave teaching more positive energy about it than most do." He described another teacher, "She just seemed mad all the time, *angry* all the time." He believed "She just didn't seem like she ever wanted to be there." He added, "She'd give us an assignment and then be *angry* about the slightest little mess up about it." As for the principals, he said, "I never really encountered 'em." Doug continued, "They never made an effort to talk to me—ever." He said he "never had any problems with authority" and he "never got in trouble." When I asked him if perhaps he "flew under the radar," he responded, "Right." His attendance was poor. He admitted, "I might have just have missed as many days as possible." He continued, "I don't know if I missed more days than I was supposed to."

Doug only attended the mid-high campus. He never made it across the street to the senior high campus. He acknowledged, "I got caught up in the social life and started doing drugs and going out with women and all that fiasco." He added, "It caught up with

me." A little over halfway through his freshman year in February, he was suspended from school for possession of marijuana and for being under the influence of marijuana at school. He remembered, school administrators "took pocket lint out of my jacket and shook it in a little vial, and since I was out smoking the weed, I was considered under the influence for 45 days." Doug's pocket lint tested positive for marijuana.

Doug was originally suspended for 45 days and required to attend a drug counseling class once a week for an hour. At the end of this time period, he was given a urine test. He said, "I guess I had failed the test so then I had to do my regular suspension which was like 90 days." Later in the interview, Doug remembered, "I got suspended in February" and, "It was the January of the next year that I was allowed to come back in." His enrollment in the district was revoked and he was listed as a dropout during his suspension period. He claimed being labeled a dropout "didn't bother" him at the time. He added, however, "It bothers me now." The end result was that he was suspended out of school for almost an entire calendar year. Doug conceded, "That's a *really long time*." He also appeared to have been unclear about the length of his suspension and went with his mother to the mid-high campus to enroll the following August. Because he was still under suspension, he was not allowed to enroll. Doug said, "I wasn't sure if they didn't want me there or if something was wrong."

<u>Transition to Alternative School</u>

At the urging of his mother, Doug applied to the Suburban Heights Alternative School while he was out of the mid-high on suspension. He was accepted and started the following March of what should have been his sophomore year in high school. He listed

the following reasons on his alternative school application for his struggles in the traditional school environment: alcohol/drug use, boredom, excessive zeroes, lack of effort, and poor English skills. He started the alternative program as a 17-year-old freshman. At first, he struggled with poor attendance issues as he had in previous years. He overcame these issues and graduated in the spring of 2013. Doug credited the alternative school for his change in attitude about school. He said, "It wasn't until I came here that I liked to learn." When I asked him to elaborate he said, "I had more one-on-one time with the teachers." He continued, "And the way they would present it, I got into the groove of things." He remembered, "It actually made me want ta [sic] look up things and find out more about that." He claimed that having close relationships with his alternative school teachers "was pretty important." He added, "Since I knew my teacher, I wasn't afraid to walk into the classroom." He currently is working at a store in Suburban Heights and is planning to attend junior college.

Chapter VI

Erica and Faith

Erica's Story

She made me feel like I did not need to be there.
She said you need to go there, like
I wasn't good enough for the high school,
for them.

<u>**Personal Profile**</u>

Erica is an 18-year-old, white female. She has light brown, shoulder length hair, hazel eyes, and an impish smile. She stands approximately five feet tall and has a slender build. Erica's birth was premature, and she has had a pacemaker since she was two years old due to a heart defect. She is usually dressed in blue jeans, t-shirts, and boots. Erica presents as more mature than her years suggest. She is intelligent, extremely good-natured and kind. She loves history, reading, and learning new things. She attended another school district for kindergarten and first grade. She then moved into the Suburban Heights School District for second grade and stayed through graduation. Erica's parents have remained married, and she experienced stability at home with caring and attentive parents. When I said she was fortunate to have parents who made sure she went to school even when she didn't want to, she shared her philosophical view, "It's your parents' responsibility to make sure you go to school, until you're eighteen or out of high school."

Erica was visibly nervous to begin the interview. Her voice shook slightly and she got a little red in the face. She calmed down after the first five minutes or so. In spite of her nerves, she was willing to share her opinions, and they were definitely strong ones. She continues to harbor resentment toward the mid-high and has a poor opinion of the people who work there.

Elementary/Middle School Years

Erica's elementary years seemed to go well. She stated, "I did fine in elementary; really, I didn't have any problems then at all." She remembered one teacher in particular who she felt was a caring teacher. She described him as a teacher who "went out of his way" to make sure all of his students were successful. He would check to make sure his students understood, and if they "had problems on a certain subject" he would talk to them after class. He also kept his students' parents "informed about everything." He was, however, the only example she could provide. The rest of her teachers she described as, "Nice and stuff, but they were never one-on-one attention."

Middle school was when things took a turn for the worse for Erica. She noted, "The teachers seemed to be a lot more stressed out." She added, "Some of them didn't even know your name, or didn't remember how you were doing in class or anything." Erica defended the teachers remembering, "There's like 30 kids in a classroom." She continued, "In middle school, a lot of kids are going through changes and some of them have attitude problems and took their attitudes out on the teachers." She observed, "That must be stressful to deal with." In spite of this defense, Erica's overall opinion was, "I didn't feel like they really cared." She proposed, "One of the basic things to show that

you care about someone is knowing their name." She said, "It's that they didn't take the time to get to know their students, even though there's a lot, at least you could try to remember everybody's name."

A close friend of Erica "committed suicide" toward the end of her seventh grade year. She remembered, "It was a very hard time and just coping with that was hard." The following year, in eighth grade, school became increasingly difficult for Erica. Her grades dropped and she remembered, "I think I passed two classes, maybe. I don't know how I got to high school." She added, "Eighth grade wasn't a very good time for me. I had a lot going on and school on top of it just made it worse." Erica spiraled into depression and finally, later in the year, talked to her parents about her emotional state. She commented, "I didn't get help until about, I want to say like April of my eighth grade year." In spite of failing grades in the eighth grade, Erica was promoted to the mid-high.

Experiences and Perceptions of Traditional High School

Erica's Poem

Step aside
And see what's

Going on

Something might be

Going on

No one asked

If I understood
What I needed to do

No one asked

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I felt like
They didn't care
I felt like
I didn't care

I felt like
It didn't matter

It's simple
To be
A caring teacher
But everybody
Makes it seem

So hard

Just show
A student
You care
That
They succeed

That they graduate

When
You know
That
Someone doesn't care

If you pass or fail

You kinda
Just feel like
Well

If they don't believe in me

Who Will?

When I asked Erica to describe her experiences at the mid-high, she laughed and

said, "I think that the system at the mid-high is messed up. I don't think that they have it

set up for students to succeed over there." When I asked her to elaborate, Erica related an

instance when she asked her English to teacher to re-explain a lesson. Erica had been

distracted by other students who "were talking the whole time that the teacher was

talking." After the lesson, she went to the teacher's desk to ask, "Could you explain again

I didn't hear you." Erica remembered the teacher's response to be, "No, well you were

probably talking; I'm not gonna [sic] explain it again." Erica felt frustrated and angry

remarking, "Teachers shouldn't be like that. They should pay attention to who is paying

attention." Erica also experienced feelings of "boredom" while in class. She recalled,

"We never did any fun project that make you interested, or like do group discussions."

She described her teachers' instructional style as, "Here's your work, here's how to do it,

it's due tomorrow." Erica added, "Then they went and sat down at their desk." She said,

"From my experience, that's what all my teachers did."

Erica believed she was given too much homework "in every single class." She

perceived that there were "so many kids in the classroom," the teachers "just dismiss

them if they did not get their work done." She added, "I think if you're not doing your

work, the teacher should step aside and see what's going on." She said, "There was no

structure." She blamed this on packed classrooms with "30 kids in a classroom and one

teacher." She remembered, "It's just talking all the time and half the time the teachers

just gave up. They're like, you know, whatever, just do what you want." Erica defended

her teachers saying, "Maybe they had bad experiences. Maybe the kids just treated them

awful. Maybe they feel like, if you're not gonna [sic] respect me, then why should I try."

Erica remembered one "awesome teacher" who "asked me what was going on and

stuff." She continued, "He seemed like he cared." She said, "He made sure that I was

okay and if I was having a bad day, he let me go to the counselor's office." She,

however, qualified her opinion of this teacher. She observed, "But he didn't say, you know, you need to do you work." Other than this one teacher, Erica felt ignored by her teachers. She explained, "They never asked *why*" she was not doing her work. She said, "No one asked what was going on," or if she "understood" what she needed to do.

Erica believed that her appearance negatively influenced the way she was treated. She stated "I think it was partly because of the way I dressed in ninth grade. She said, "I kinda [sic] went through the whole black clothes and all that." She described feeling "stereotyped." She added, "A lot of people over there do stereotype the school that way." She remembered, "If you just didn't dress like brightly colored, or if you just didn't dress *normal*, you were labeled as a druggie or a troublemaker." Erica added, "What I noticed was at lunch, when I would hang out with my friends the teacher would stand closer to us, he would watch us more, and in class." She continued, "Even if you didn't do anything, teachers seemed to be more like, what are you doing, like watching you."

Erica remembered getting in trouble at the mid-high for the first time "ever in the entire time I've gone to school." She hugged her boyfriend outside the school building before school one morning. The principal called both Erica and her boyfriend into his office and told them, "Parents don't need to be seeing that." He assigned both of them detention. She described the principal's demeanor as "not exactly hateful, but he just seemed *extremely* upset for not a very good reason." Erica said, "I *cried* 'cause it's the first time I'd ever gotten in trouble." She expressed disdain for the principal's reaction adding, "It wasn't like a PDA hug." She also wondered why "some parents aren't allowed to see people hug."

Erica never made it to the senior high campus. In December of her freshman year, she had surgery on her pacemaker and was out of school "for two weeks in recovery." When she returned to school, she was told, "I had missed too many days, even with the doctor's note." She found out, "I would have to repeat my freshman year." I asked Erica if the school offered to give her extra time to make up her work or to take the finals she had missed. She replied, "No." Her father visited with the school counselor in January. The counselor told him that Erica "wasn't trying in the school and that maybe an alternative program would be better." His response was, "Well obviously you guys don't care here. Obviously you're not helping." Erica said, "He was like maybe one-on-one alternative school would be better." Erica's father signed her out of school that day and she never went back.

Transition to Alternative School

Erica was out of school until the following August when she started attending Suburban Heights Alternative School. On her application to the alternative school, Erica listed the following reasons as to why she felt she had not been successful within the traditional high school setting: boredom, chronic health problems, excessive zeroes, lack of classroom structure, low self-esteem, and poor math skills. Erica did not experience any of these problems while attending the alternative school. She started the program with zero credits and graduated after two and a half years in the fall of 2012. She concluded, "This school really changed my life." She continued, "It really did 'cause they *actually care* you know, and they went out of their way to make sure that you were okay." She remembered, "I was *shocked* when I came here and you said my name in the hallway and asked me how I was." She said, "I went home and told my parents." She

admitted, "I had never had a principal or anybody, like *know me.*" She added, "Schools need to do that more. They need to have more of a connection with their students." Erica is currently working at a fast food restaurant in Suburban Heights and is attending a junior college. She is studying psychology with the intention of becoming a counselor.

Faith's Story

It seemed like there the teachers really didn't even care

if you failed or passed.

I've had teachers that flunked me by like one point.

They didn't even try to help you get that one point up.

Personal Profile

Faith is an 18-year-old, white female. She is 4'11", has a stocky frame, bobbed, medium-brown hair, and brown eyes. She is quiet, very shy, and can appear reticent. Once she trusts a person, she presents as friendly and confident. She can be quite outgoing. She is a deeply spiritual person and is an active member of her church. She loves children and worked as a nanny and babysitter during her high school years. She attended a vocational school for a while studying early childhood development with the hope of becoming an elementary school teacher. She went to another, larger school district in Oklahoma for kindergarten, first, and second grades. She moved to the Suburban Heights School District for her third grade year and stayed through graduation. At the beginning of the interview, she was very nervous and her voice shook. She struggled to articulate her feelings partly because she has a fairly introverted personality. In addition, she still feels intense emotion about her school experiences in the traditional setting. She teared up and cried periodically throughout the interview. Her feelings about

these experiences are visibly raw and reveal an individual wounded by her school experiences.

Elementary/Middle School Years

Faith struggled with the transition when she moved to a Suburban Heights elementary school for third grade. She remembered, "I had a really hard time like first switching districts." She observed, "It was a lot harder out here than it was there." She believed her troubles in school could be traced back to this point in time. She added since third grade, "I have pretty much struggled the whole time." She continued, "The work was a lot harder for me to comprehend." Faith felt, however, that her elementary teachers cared about her. She said, "I had teachers that I really liked and I know that they cared about me." She laughed nervously and added, "They seemed to kinda [sic] help me then more than they did as I got older." She, however, immediately qualified this remark by acknowledging, "I don't know if they like went out of their way to help me with anything." Overall, Faith admitted, "I liked school in elementary school." She said, "I think elementary school was more kinda [sic] like fun to me or whatever, not boring."

Faith acknowledged she "kind of" liked middle school. She, however, noted that her school experience "pretty much went downhill after sixth grade." She said, "Sixth grade it just got blah and they gave you more work to do." She remembered struggling with "math and science." In addition, "It seemed like that the teachers didn't care, they just want ta [sic] have all the kids pass or whatever, and then move on." She felt like her middle school teachers "weren't friendly…they didn't like talk to you, like have normal everyday conversations with you." Faith believed one teacher "in seventh grade" cared

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for her. This "science teacher" was someone who "actually had a relationship with her students." Faith explained, "Even to this day, if I see her somewhere she'll be like, 'Oh Hi' and she'll call me by name and she remembers me." Faith believed for most teachers, "the school district was so big they couldn't like remember everyone" or "get to know everyone."

Experiences and Perceptions of Traditional High School

Faith's Poem

I had a lot
Of zeroes
Because
I just didn't want to do
The work
Because
I didn't want to be

THERE

I was just like
Why do it
Because
I didn't like it
At all
Because
I didn't feel close to

ANYONE

If
You weren't popular and
If
Everyone didn't know you and
If
You didn't have money
You didn't

FIT IN

If

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You didn't have a lot of friends and
If
You were quiet like me
Then no one talked to you
You weren't

COOL

You were an

OUTCAST!

Faith cried off and on when she talked about her years at the mid-high. She pinpointed ninth grade as the time when she completely stopped liking school. It was also the year when her parents separated. She said that no one at the mid-high, teachers, counselors, or principals, knew what was going on in her personal life at that time. As for school, she confessed, "I had a lot of zeroes." She said, "I just didn't want to do the work." She added, "I didn't want to be there because I didn't like it at all." She more than disliked the mid-high. She "*hated it.*" When I asked her why, she said, "Because I didn't feel close to anyone." She tearfully recalled, "I had one good friend I was always with." She acknowledged, "I had other people that I talked to, but they were just like acquaintances." She added, "I just didn't feel like I belonged in that school." Faith concluded, "At that school, if you weren't popular, and if everyone didn't know you, you didn't fit in." She felt neither "popular" nor "cool." In spite of this, she said her attendance "wasn't bad." She remembered, "I only missed when I was sick."

When I asked Faith who the popular kids were, she stated, "Pretty much anyone that played sports and were jocks." She went on to include, "cheerleaders, basketball players, football players" and "band people." She believed the "jocks" in particular "got special treatment" from "all the teachers." She provided an example. "If you had a

teacher that was a coach, if anyone that even played that sport was in their class, it seemed like they would have a relationship with them, but not the other people." Faith described being treated differently because she was not well-off. She remembered, "If you didn't have money to buy designer clothes and all that stuff then just forget about it 'cause you're *not even.*"

Faith felt that at the mid-high, "The teachers really didn't even care if you failed or passed." She believed, "They just did their job and they got *rewarded* or whatever for it." She remembered one teacher who flunked her "by like one point." She resented this and claimed the teacher "didn't even try to help get that one point up." Faith tearfully confessed, "The whole not helping me bring my grade up and making me have to go to summer school because of one point. *That just* wasn't a good thing for me." Overall Faith believed the mid-high teachers were indifferent to her. She observed, "Probably 'cause I usually didn't try my hardest and I never made A's and all that stuff." She acknowledged struggling to get her work done. She confessed, "I've just always had a wandering mind." She added, "I just got distracted way too easily."

When I asked Faith if she could provide one example of a caring mid-high teacher, She replied, "Um, not really." I asked her if she felt ignored by the teachers and she admitted, "Yeah, kinda [sic]." She elaborated, "They would teach or whatever and then they would just, okay here's your assignment and then they'd go sit at their desk." She remembered, "I had like one teacher at the mid-high, my English teacher in tenth grade that would talk to you." As for the school counselors, Faith said, "I didn't ever really talk to them." She acknowledged the principals at the mid-high "were nice, but I didn't really have a relationship with them." She added, "They wouldn't be able to tell

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you my name." Faith remembered, "They would always come out during passing period or during lunch." "They would sometimes talk to students." She concluded, "They probably favored the people that were always in the office, the office aides, 'cause they actually knew them."

Faith moved across the street to the senior high and I asked her to describe her experiences there. She said, "I didn't like it at all either because it was just too big." She remembered it as "just basically the same thing as the mid-high, if you weren't popular and didn't have money, you didn't have friends." She continued, "If you were quiet like me, you were pretty much an outcast." She acted relieved when she said, "I was only there like three hours of the day because I went to tech school." She added, "I did pretty good for the most part at tech." Faith continued to struggle in the classroom. She acknowledged, "I didn't do my work and I wouldn't do my homework." She remembered, "In the classroom, my mind just wanders a lot." She added, "I would just get bored and I'd be sitting there." She described her class work as "book work pretty much." She observed, "If you didn't get help with it, you didn't want to do it."

Faith struggled with the daily routine. She remembered, "In my history class, every day we came in and we took like two pages of notes, every single day." She continued, "Then we'd talk about it a little bit and then every Friday we had a test over the notes." She exclaimed, "And that's it all year long." Faith claimed this was the pattern for every class "pretty much every day." When I asked her what kind of assignments she would have liked, she said, "Ones where you actually got to do cool stuff, be creative, like express yourself through stuff." Faith chose not to do her homework. She admitted,

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"I just had other things I wanted to do." As for consequences, she said, "I mean if you got a zero you got a zero, that's all."

Faith did not feel like she belonged in the traditional high school environment. She remembered, "At the mid-high and the high school you were just another student in the halls." She described popularity dynamics on both campuses as "pretty much the same." She continued, "If you didn't party then you weren't cool." She recalled after the weekend "all you ever heard" was "who partied with who and who did this with who." She said, "It seemed like that's all they cared about." Faith believed teachers and students considered popular kids to be "cool." Because of this, she claimed, "They could probably manipulate the teachers and I'm sure they could manipulate other students."

Faith found the counselors at the high school to be "very rude." She recalled her mother would try to "call them all the time and they'd never return her calls." Faith believed the counselors did not think her struggles were "important enough to call back." Faith admitted, "My grades were bad. I was failing every single class." At this point she remembered, "My mom told the counselor that she thinks that I should go to alternative school." The counselor's responded, "I just don't think that's the right route for Faith." Faith continued, "I don't understand why that wouldn't be the right route for me when I'm failing every single class at the high school and not getting any one-on-one." She felt, "They were very rude about it." Faith's perception was, "I guess they just thought if I failed my classes then I should have to go to summer school or night school and pay for it to make it up."

Transition to Alternative School

Faith applied to the Suburban Heights Alternative School in spite of the senior high counselor's recommendation. Her application described the following struggles with the traditional school setting: boredom, excessive zeroes, lack of effort, poor math skills, and poor study skills. Faith did not exhibit any of these problems while attending the alternative school. She said that she liked the alternative setting "*very much.*" She remembered, "The teachers *actually cared*. They talked to you." She added, "They could tell if something was going on in your life 'cause they actually paid attention." She continued, "Over here everyone was a *family*." She said, "It seemed like you weren't teachers and students, you were a *big family.*" She concluded, "That's completely different from the mid-high and the high school." Faith graduated in the spring of 2013. She is currently working full-time and is attending a technical school with plans to become a dental assistant.

Chapter VII

Care

Alex: "They don't really care."

Beth: "I personally have not met a whole lot of teachers who I feel care about what they are doing."

Christian: "They seemed to not really care."

Doug: "Some of the teachers didn't seem like they were into it."

Erica: "I didn't have any teachers that openly seemed like they cared."

Faith: "It seemed like that the teachers didn't care."

Introduction

For the purposes of this study, I defined care as thoughtful attentiveness toward another which people can express through demonstrations of empathy, concern or solicitude. Heidegger proposed that care was "the very Being of human life" (Noddings, 2005, p. 15). He emphasized that the need to care and to be cared for encompasses all living reality. At its most basic form, care manifests through a loving relationship between two human beings. The dynamic structure of a caring relationship includes both the carer and the cared for person (Noddings, 2005). A caring relationship is predicated on the ability to listen attentively to another person and then to respond to that person as positively as possible. Noddings described the ability to demonstrate care as "a responsiveness characteristic" (xiii). She concluded that the carer and the cared for must both contribute to the relationship or the relationship has no meaning. Furthermore, if for whatever reason, the cared for person denies feeling care from the carer, this negates the existence of a caring relation (Noddings, 2005).

A care can also be a thought, situation, or concern that weighs on a person's mind or causes anxiety or anxiousness. Marginalized youth who often have extra worries or concerns in their personal lives may be in need of extra measures of care at school. Noddings (2005) proposed that many educators frequently ignore the possibility that students might have "pressing cares and interests not addressed by the subject matter presented in schools" (p. 7). She argued that overall, "Schools should be more responsive to the expressed needs of…students" (p. xiii). During her interview, Faith suggested that care at school could be vitally important for those students who "might not be getting cared for at home." She added, "School might be the only place where they're getting that." Doug characterized the need for caring teachers as "pretty big." He elaborated, "I mean when my mom wasn't forcing me to go to school, it's like the teachers [in alternative school] were more worried about you than your own parent." Students, who experience instability, traumatic events and/or other disruptions in their personal lives, may be the most in need of caring relationships with adults at school.

Analysis of Care Data

McGregor and Mills (2011) stated, "Unique background combinations of gendered influences, family practices and support systems, emotional and social capital and class positioning all contribute to the shaping of a young person's attitude towards schooling" (p. 846). Disadvantages within these background characteristics also may contribute to the shaping of public school educators' attitudes toward marginalized youth. Those students who struggle to achieve at school due to background disadvantages and social capital deficits may inconveniently hinder the academic progress of a school through poor attendance, poor standardized test scores, and higher dropout rates. Instead

of blaming these individuals, however, for being off the normative track, educators can

help by creating school support systems framed by empathy and care. Such systems are

vitally important to the academic success and social well-being of marginalized students

(McGregor & Mills, 2011). The following matrix reveals some of the disadvantages

experienced by the six participants of this study.

Table 1

Personal Profile Matrix

	SES	Health Issues	Crisis	Left H.S.
Alex	Low	Anger, Depression, Insomnia	Divorce, Mobility, Friend's Death	11th
Beth	Middle	ADHD, Depression, Insomnia, Mononucleosis	Personal Health Issues	11th
Christian	Lower-Middle	ADD, Anger, Depression	Divorce, Mobility	10th
Doug	Low	Drug/Alcohol Use	Unwed Parents, Mobility, Long-term Out of School Suspension	10th
Erica	Lower-	Pacemaker,	Friend's Suicide	9th

	Middle	Depression, Heart Surgery		
Faith	Low	Anxiety, Social Withdrawal	Parent's Separation	11th

Two of these participants experienced divorce, Christian in second grade and Alex in eighth grade. Faith's parent separated when she was in the ninth grade. Doug's parents never married, and he experienced extreme mobility between the two homes. McGregor and Mills (2013) concluded, "Young people who live in unstable and/or unsupportive/neglectful environments will find it difficult to comply with many of the cultural expectations of mainstream, middle-class schools" (p. 846). Only Beth and Erica described parental stability at home. All six adolescents experienced some form of physical or mental health issue, two self-described as poor, and the other four are from low to middle class socioeconomic backgrounds. In addition, all but Beth experienced one or more traumatic events during their school years, although her negative experiences with ADHD medication could be characterized as traumatic. Noddings (2005) suggested, "We should not ignore our children their purposes, anxieties and relationships in the service of making them more competent in academic skills" (p.10). Existential experiences shaped the purposes, anxieties, and relationships of these adolescents and in so doing helped to frame their experiences at school.

The following matrix represents each participant's perception of his/her struggles within the traditional high school setting. It provides a summary of the reasons each

participant gave as to why he/she left or wanted to leave the traditional high school. Just as in their personal profiles, commonalities are evident as well as informative.

Table 2

<u>Alternative School Application Matrix</u>

	Alex	Beth	Christian	Doug	Erica	Faith
Boredom	X	X	X	X	X	X
Excessive Zeroes	X	X	X	X	X	X
Lack of Effort	X	X	X	X	X	X
Low Self-Esteem	X		X		X	X
Poor Social Skills	X					X
Bullying	X	X	X		X	
Excessive Absences	X	X	X	X	X	X
Credit Deficiencies	X	X	X	X	X	X

Each of the six participants felt disengaged from the traditional high school with experiences characterized by boredom, not doing their work, lack of motivation, and poor attendance. Four dealt with low self-esteem issues, two with poor social skills, two experienced bullying and two witnessed acts of bullying. All suffered from credit deficiencies. Their grade point averages when they started attending the alternative school ranged from .0 to 1.9. In this era of "neoliberal national educational competiveness," these already marginalized adolescents, based on their interview

responses, may have been further marginalized by a school system that deemed them to be "the problem for failing to negotiate the hazards of this so-called risk society that demands increasing levels of social, emotional, and educational capital to succeed" (McGregor & Mills, 2011, p. 845). In current discourse, social justice has been refashioned as equal access to a public school education. Equity, however, ignores the fact that children arrive at school from unequal starting positions yet still are required to equitably navigate their way through school (McGregor & Mills, 2011).

Perceptions of Care: Elementary and Middle School:

Each of the participants described their experiences with care as gradually declining from kindergarten through high school. The elementary school years were their best years in school with the exception of time spent in the alternative program. Even though they felt some measures of care during the elementary years, each of them, with the exception of Doug, qualified their comments about teacher care. Due to excessive mobility, Doug seemed to be the most disengaged student of the six participants. He characterized elementary school as "fine." I elicited the following comments when I asked each participant to describe feeling cared for by teachers during the elementary school years:

> Alex*:* I think they cared *about* their students in a different way than we think of caring right now. Like they cared for them the way you cared for a child that's in the store that gets lost. It's not like actual loving for the child but it's enough to where the child gets by.

Beth**:** Yes, *for the most part*. I had *one teacher in particular* that really stepped

out and made a difference and I got an A in her class.

Christian: *For the most part*. I'd say definitely more so in elementary than in

middle school.

Doug: I think first grade was *fine* and then all the rest was *fine* until I got into like

sixth grade.

Erica: There was *one in particular* that I did. But most of the time, I mean, you

know, they always came off nice and stuff, but they were never one-on-one

attention.

Faith: They seemed to kinda [sic] help me more than they did as I got older. I had

teachers that I really liked and I know they cared *about* me. But I don't know if

they like went out of their way to help me with anything.

Noddings (2001) distinguished between the concepts of caring *about* someone

and caring *for* someone. She wrote "caring for refers to the direct, personal response of a

carer for a cared-for" (p. 37). Caring for someone represents the ethic of relational care.

Caring about someone is more indirect and is only effective when and if it turns into

caring for someone. Caring about represents the virtue of caring in which the carer has

the best interests of a person at heart, but does not hear or see the expressed, individual

needs of that person. Noddings (2003) argued, "Students need and want teachers to care

for them as persons and to convey this care through listening and responding to their

expressions of concern" (p. 244).

Alex described the care he experienced in elementary school as impersonal. He referred to it as being cared "about." He felt the teachers cared about him as they would for any child, but not for him as an individual. For Alex, this kind of care was just enough for him to "get by." Faith believed her teachers cared about her, but was not able to claim that they cared for her on an individual basis. She based this belief on the fact that her teachers did not seem to go "out of their way" to help her. Beth and Christian shared the perception that they experienced caring teachers "for the most part." Beth and Erica each remembered one teacher "in particular" who demonstrated care. Doug made no direct comment either way about care in elementary school. As an experience, it was just "fine."

Middle school was a period of decline for each of the six participants, not only in terms of care, but also in overall experience. McGregor and Mills (2011) stated, "As young people move through primary into secondary schooling, and in particular into the senior phase, the rules pertaining to curriculum, content, and assessment become increasingly inflexible (p. 846). Perhaps this growing inflexibility was at least partly responsible for the following negative perceptions of the participants' middle school years:

Alex: Seventh grade… just kinda [sic] got *worse* progressively.

Beth: Middle school was when I really started having *problems* with teachers. I wasn't getting any help and it *frustrated* me.

Christian: Right after elementary school it seemed like they were all there just to do their jobs, to get a paycheck. It was just do your work or I'm *mad*. I don't know, they seemed just to *not really care.*

Doug: It felt like some of them *didn't like me* just because, I don't know why, maybe I was a talker or I don't know.

Erica: I think it was about eighth grade. I just *wasn't doing well*. I didn't want to try in eighth grade because I felt like they *didn't care*, I felt like I didn't care, you know I felt like it *didn't matter.*

Faith: It pretty much went *downhill* after sixth grade because it seemed like that the teachers *didn't care*. They just wanted ta [sic], I guess, have all the kids pass or whatever and then move on. Like that's all they cared about.

These descriptions of the middle school years are riddled with negative emotions. Some of the participants described their school experiences in terms of "worse," "downhill," "problems," "frustrated," "mad." Alex said his school experience got worse. Christian, Erica, and Faith felt that their teachers did not care. Doug believed some of his teachers did not like him. Beth said she did not get the help that she needed. Erica remembered not doing well, but did not care or want to try because "it didn't matter." These comments reflect the initial emergence of a sub-theme that reappears later in the traditional high school data. This sub-theme pertains to student perceptions of teacher engagement; that teachers show up just "to get a paycheck" and their only concern is to make sure students are "passing and moving on."

Perceptions of Care in Traditional High School:

High school represents the bottom of the downward trajectory of these adolescents' educational experiences and their perceptions of care. These perceptions represent not only what they experienced, but also what they wanted and needed to experience. Each adolescent described what he/she thought care should look like. They described how teachers could show they care for students as opposed to care about them. The use of student voice is significant in this study because it signals that students have "a legitimate perspective and opinion" (Smyth, 2004, p. 288). Smyth (2004) posited, "If we want to really understand phenomena like 'dropping out,' we need to access the mining of these concepts and excavate them from the inside out" (p. 288). Therefore, the following quotations along with my poetic representations of their words are my attempt to excavate student perceptions of care from the inside out and to mine the data for emergent themes. The reader is encouraged to listen carefully to each participant's voice as he/she describes perceptions of care within the traditional high school environment.

<center>**Alex's Voice**</center>

"It wasn't very friendly at all, like the teachers would like try to be your friend and every now and then you would find a good teacher, but all of them are just, they don't really care. I think that everybody there was just there to get a paycheck and move on. They were all really kind of just, get your work done and get out of my class."

<center>If you want a student to learn

You don't just say
Here
Take this and go do it</center>

You have to say
Here
This is how you do it

If you're gonna have classes

You need to get to
Know
Your students
You need to
Know
What they're going through

Don't push them too far!

Don't confuse them!

Don't leave them stranded!

Pay attention
To
The students

If you're gonna care for them

Pay attention
To
Them

Beth's Voice

"I feel like it's the teacher's job to step out and be a loving person, but nowadays we

don't have teachers like that very often. I personally have not met a whole lot of teachers

who I feel care about what they are doing. I think it's important, just like in family or

friendship relationships, you need to better each other. A teacher-student is a

relationship, it is a type of relationship and I don't think people see that anymore. People

see it as a job. I think it's more than just a job. It's kind of a lifestyle too, because you

have people coming in and out of your life all the time; students coming in, students

going out."

A caring teacher is someone…

Who
helps you
even
if she has
Little time

Who
checks
on you
if you're
Gone

Who
makes sure
you're
Okay

Who
keeps that line
between
friend and teacher
Close

Who
shows you
that
they're not just some
Mentor

A caring teacher is someone…

Who's
going to be there
for you
if something goes

Wrong

Who's
going to help you
become
the person you're supposed
TO BE!

Christian's Voice

"It seemed like they were all there just to do their jobs, to get a paycheck. They seemed to not care. Very rarely was teachers actually genuine. They were just there for a check so they just get frustrated easily instead of talking to me. I just didn't feel like anyone was trying to teach me anything, they just like trying to get all their students to make good grades. That doesn't necessarily mean they learn. Just kind of like, here you, go do this. I didn't care really. I didn't want to be there."

A caring teacher is...

Someone who

Has this job to help people learn
And
Will actually teach in a way
That's
Not just like fill out this worksheet
Or
Work out of the book
Or
Just kinda like say facts at you

A caring teacher is...

Someone who

Talking to them one on one
Really
Trying to get on their level
Really

Trying to understand where they're
                              Coming from
                         Trying to like portray that
                             They are there
                               To help

A caring teacher is…

                           Someone who

                      Will talk to you after class
                                If
                       You're not paying attention
                                If
                       You're not doing your work
                             And ask you

                        Is there a reason?

                 Is there anything you need help with?

                 Is there something I can do differently?

                          Doug's Voice

"I think it's very important knowing a teacher wants you at school. If they're making an

effort to contact me on a personal level, then I would probly [sic] try, and I would feel

more comfortable to walk up and talk to them and be like, hey, I don't understand this,

what is this, this, and this."

Some teachers
                      You can hear it
                                      In their
                                               Voice

                  The teachers that want to be there

They're enthusiastic
                      They gave that
                                      Positive energy
                               133

About teaching

                        The teachers that want to be there

Some teachers
                    Just were
                                        More
                                                      Into it

                        The teachers that want to be there

Knowing
                    A teacher
                                        Wants you
                                                      At school
It makes
                    You want
                                        To go to
                                                      Their class

                        The teachers that want to be there

They care
                    And maybe
                                        I should care about
                                                      What they're teaching

                        The teachers that want to be there

Erica's Voice

"Most of the time, they always came off nice and stuff, but they were never one-on-one

attention. First, they should know their name and just express their concern for you and

they make sure that they explain everything. If they see a student struggling they should

go and say, hey do you understand this? Do you need help?"

One teacher…

                    He
                    Would talk to me

After class

He
Made sure
My parents were informed
He
Went out of his way
To make sure all of his students
Could succeed

He
Asked me what
Was going on

He
Made sure that I
Was okay

He
Seemed like
He cared

Faith's Voice

"A caring teacher would be someone that actually talks to you about your life and like

you're a human being, not just a student, and they'll like talk to you about their life.

They'll actually talk to you like a friend. They just care and they let you know they're

there for you. If the teacher doesn't care or anything, the student's not going to care and

I'd be like, well if the one that's making me do the work doesn't even care, why should I

care?"

Over here

The teachers
actually
cared
they talked to you

You weren't

<div align="center">

like

crowded

in a bunch of students

Over here

The teachers

cared

if

you had your grades in

They could

tell

if

something was going on in your life

Over here

They

actually

paid attention

They

communicate

with you

</div>

Three sub-themes layered within the main theme of care emerged upon a close reading of the previous comments. The first emergent sub-theme is teacher attention. The second sub-theme is teacher engagement. Teacher attention and teacher engagement together relate to the third sub-theme which is student motivation. I provide an in-depth analysis of each of these emergent themes in the following section. Again, I rely heavily on student voice.

Emergent Sub-Theme 1: Teacher Attention

Alex: Pay *attention* to the students…if you're gonna [sic] care for them.

Beth: I tried getting *one-on-one* with teachers.

Christian: Probably just talking to them *one-on-one*. Like really trying to get on their level, really trying to understand where they're coming from.

Doug: I had more *one-on-one* time with the teachers of course.

Erica: They were never *one-on-one* attention.

Faith: I'm failing every single class at the high school and not getting any *one-on-one*.

Noddings (2003) wrote, "The most basic idea of relational caring is to respond to each individual in such a way that we establish and maintain caring relations (p. xviii). Lee and Bryk (1989) concluded that responsive school environments needed teachers who "engage students personally" (p. 189). The above quotations illustrate each participant's desire for teachers to engage with them on an individual and personal level. Beth described care as the relational foundation of the teacher to student classroom dynamic. She envisioned the relationship as reciprocal suggesting that the teacher and student should "better each other." Within this dynamic, the teacher or carer gives attention to the student in such a way that the student feels cared for through engagement on a personal level. Doug characterized caring attention as when, "They're making an effort to contact, you know, me on a personal level." Or, as Faith suggested, like the student is a "human being."

The first step in establishing a personal relationship according to Alex, Beth, Christian, and Erica is for the teacher to know the student's name. Erica said, "One of the basic things to show that you care about someone is knowing their name." Beth agreed, "If you don't care enough to know my name, why do you care if I fail or pass." Christian took this theme one step further by saying that teachers "could actually relate to each individual student" if they "know things about them and know you know what they do and who they are." Alex concurred, "You need to get to know your students more and like know what they're going through." He continued, "You have to get to know your students to be caring for them." He responded positively to the alternative school environment because as he said, "Everybody here knows you by name and they know your story."

According to my study participants, teacher attention represents care when it is characterized by individualized attention paid to a student through one-on-one interaction. Croninger and Lee (2001) found, "Students who come from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and who have had academic difficulties in the past find guidance and assistance from teachers especially helpful" (p. 548). Five of the six participants specifically used the term *one-on-one* attention when describing the kind of attention they wanted and needed from their teachers. Alex referred to personal attention from teachers as "interactive." He provided the example of one teacher who would "sit down with us and like actually talk to us." He added, "If you're interactive with your student or me in that case, I'll understand it, if you're not interactive at all, I'm not going to understand." Open dialogue between a teacher and a student appears then to be a crucial part of teacher attention. Christian described wanting teachers who would "talk to

you after class if you're not paying attention, you're not doing your work and ask you like is there a reason" and "communicate with me on a level that I could relate to." Beth described one-on-one attention as when "that teacher sat down with me and said, 'Did you get this done? Why didn't you get this done?'"

Teacher attention as personalized engagement can have far-reaching consequences. Croninger and Lee (2001) discussed the manner in which a caring teacher might serve as a "safety valve for adolescents" (p. 551). When a teacher provides a student with emotional support, encouragement, and assistance, the student may be better able to withstand the pressure of academic or personal problems. This was the case for Alex. He described previously how one caring teacher helped him stop thinking about hurting himself after his friend was killed in the ninth grade. He remembered how she sat down every day with him and his girlfriend, talked to them, and "kind of like took us in as her children." He said, "I think if she wouldn't have done that I might not have a chance of being here today."

Adler (2002) wrote, "Caring for students is frequently cited by novice teachers as a primary rationale for entering the teaching profession" (p. 241). This seems perhaps to be an essential motivator for becoming a teacher. One might think that providing individual guidance and assistance to students in need would be an inherent aspect of the teaching profession. Yet, these adolescents perceived that individual attention toward students seemed to take an extraordinary effort on the part of the teacher. In fact, each participant seemed surprised when and if it happened. Beth described a teacher having "*stepped beyond her duties* to make sure that I succeeded." Erica remembered one teacher who "*went out of his way*" to help her. Alex expressed the importance of teachers

who "sit down with us and like *actually talk to us*." Faith, however, recalled feeling that her teachers "*never went out of their way*" to help her.

Beth suggested teachers should, "*Step out* and show people that you care about them." Erica said, "If they see a student struggling they should go and say, hey do you understand this? Do you need help?" Christian agreed. He thought it was important "for the teacher to talk to you after class if you're not paying attention, you're not doing your work, and ask you like is there a reason you're not?" Teachers should take the time to sit down with a student even if, as Beth said, "they have little time." Faith observed that teachers should try "to help you get that one point up."

Emergent Sub-Theme 2: Teacher Engagement

Alex: They were all really kind of just, get your work done and get out of my class. I think everybody there was just there to get a paycheck and move on.

Beth: I feel like some of them, they don't care about what they're doing and they've showed me that throughout the years. People see it as a job. I think it's more than just a job. It's kind of a lifestyle too.

Christian: It seemed like they were all there just to do their jobs, to get a paycheck. It was just kinda [sic] the attitude of the whole staff in general.

Doug: Some teachers you can hear it in their voice, the teachers that want to be there. They're enthusiastic. They gave that positive energy about teaching. Some teachers, just, they were more into it.

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Erica: I didn't have any teachers that openly seemed like they care. It was here's your work, this is when it's due, and then they went and sat down at their desk.

Faith: They just did their job and they got rewarded. They would teach or whatever and then they would just go, okay here's your assignment and then they'd go sit at their desk.

Based on participants' perceptions, it appears teacher care demonstrated through teacher attention encompasses more than just one-on-one engagement with students. Teacher engagement demands that the teacher engage actively with the art of teaching, engage actively with the curriculum, and engage actively with the teaching profession and its inherent responsibilities. The perception of the participants was that most of their teachers were not engaged. The teachers seemed to just be going through the motions. Each of the participants described the everyday routine in class as "boring" and "monotonous." They all listed boredom on their alternative school application as a reason for leaving or wanting to leave the traditional high school.

Erica described the daily routine, "It was, 'here's your work, this is when it's due' and then they went and sat down at their desk." Christian remembered the day to day routine as they would "toss a worksheet on your desk, fill this out, finish it, turn it in." He added, "It just feels so monotonous." Beth said, "They're just handing you a piece of paper and expecting you to do it, and if you don't do it you're gonna [sic] fail." Faith described class as, "The teacher would talk about the assignment, give you an assignment, and then if you didn't finish it you had homework and that was pretty much

every day." Alex added, "It's like every day it's the same thing. Everybody just does the exact same thing."

To Alex, Christian, and Faith, most of the teachers behaved as if they were just "there to get a paycheck." Christian proposed that a caring teacher should be "someone who has this job to help people learn, not for a paycheck." Faith said, "I mean you would think that when you go into the profession it would be to help kids." Christian described one such teacher. He said, "She obviously wanted to be there and she wanted to help people learn. It wasn't to help people get good grades. It was just to help people learn." Christian made a clear distinction between learning and grades. In his opinion, grades do not necessarily reflect what or how much a student learns. He desired relevancy. He wanted teachers who would, "Show me why it's important to know."

Doug related teacher engagement to enthusiasm for the profession. He said you could tell "the teachers that want to be there." He remembered, "You can hear it in their voice. They're enthusiastic. They gave that positive energy about teaching." Christian described the disengaged teacher as "kinda [sic] groggy." He said, "They don't really want to be there. They'd rather be off doing something else. They were just there for a check." Faith described teachers who were only interested in moving students through the grades. She said, "They just wanted ta [sic] have all the kids pass and then move on. Like that's all they cared about it." She believed her teachers were not interested in student success. She commented, "The teachers really didn't even care if you failed or passed."

Emergent Sub-Theme 3: Student Motivation

Alex: I didn't find anything fulfilling at school to actually wake up that early in the morning get up and go.

Beth: People, who don't feel cared about, lose interest in what they're doing. If they don't feel you care about it, they're not going to care about it.

Christian: They showed me respect so I can you know give it back to 'em and I would work for 'em and I passed all those classes.

Doug: If they're making an effort to contact me on a personal level, then I would probly [sic] try.

Erica: If a teacher actually shows that they care, it's gonna [sic] make you more motivated to do your work and succeed.

Faith: It seemed like there that the teachers really didn't even care if you failed or passed. If you didn't get help with it, you didn't want to do it.

Croninger and Lee (2001) reported, "Dropouts frequently complain that their teachers do not care about them, are not interested in how well they do in school, and are unwilling to help with problems" (p. 551). Each of the six participants credited lack of effort as a reason they struggled within the traditional school environment; lack of effort equaled lack of motivation. They each tied effort and motivation to perceptions of teachers caring about student success as well as teacher encouragement. In other words, teacher care inspired student care. As Beth said, "If you don't feel like that teacher cares if you're going to pass or fail, then why care if you're gonna [sic] pass or fail." She continued, "You're just there because there's no one motivating you. There's no one

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saying you can do it and there's no one encouraging you." Erica observed, "When you know that someone doesn't care if you pass or fail, pretty much you don't feel motivated. You kinda [sic] just feel like well maybe I shouldn't or I won't pass anyway." Erica continued, "They didn't make you feel like you were going to succeed. It was kind of why should I go if I'm not going to succeed?" She added, "You want to feel like people care, you want to feel like they want me to graduate. It kinda [sic] takes your self-esteem. I kinda [sic] just feel like well if they don't believe in me who will?"

Faith concluded, "If the teacher doesn't care or anything, the students not going to care. I'd be like well if the one that's making me do the work doesn't even care, why should I care?" Doug remembered feeling motivated by teachers who demonstrated care for their subject matter. He said, "They care and maybe I should care about what they're teaching." Student motivation led to student success. Beth remembered having "only two teachers that have really stepped out for me and so I ended up passing those two classes." Christian described several teachers who inspired him to do his school work. He said, "They showed me respect so I can, you know give it back to 'em, and I would work for 'em and I passed all those classes."

Barber (2002) suggests that being a teacher requires a "special duty of care" (p. 383). Beth described a similar philosophy of teaching, "I think it's important that you do like people if you're going to go in the profession so you do step out and show people that you care about them." My six participants observed that teachers demonstrate care for their students by asking questions and providing individual attention. A caring teacher will sit down with a student and provide one-on-one assistance. A caring teacher asks why a student is not doing work. Teachers show they care by "stepping up" and

"reaching out" to students. In addition, the participants wanted to be seen and heard as unique and distinct individuals. They wanted to be respected and recognized as "human beings." They did not want to be as Faith said "just another student in the halls."

Chapter VIII

Belonging

Alex: "I felt like I didn't really fit in."

Beth: "I didn't want to be there. I would call and say I have a headache

and I wanted to come home."

Christian: "I didn't care really, I didn't want to be there."

Doug: "The people in my group thought of our group as like kinda the outsiders."

Erica: "I didn't feel like I belonged there."

Faith: "I just didn't feel like I belonged in that school."

Introduction

From her review of school belonging research, Osterman (2000) concluded, "The

research is consistent in identifying the psychological sense of belongingness as an important

factor in participation, school engagement and dropout" (p. 336). She found that some dropout

studies established a relationship between a student's perceptions of acceptance at school and the

decision to remain in or to leave that school. Research findings, however, also suggest that

feelings of belongingness and acceptance at school diminish as students age (Wentzel & Looney,

2006). The term "belonging" is often used interchangeably with "relatedness" and

"connectedness" (Johnson, 2009). When applied to the school setting, these terms refer to the

degree to which a student feels engaged with and within the school community. Osterman (2000)

equated feelings of belonging with a "sense of community" (p. 323). "Community" can be

defined as a social organization in which members know, care for and support one another

(Solomon et al., 1997, p. 236). Furman (1998) concluded that the notion of community cannot be

achieved unless members actively experience feelings of belonging. In other words, the relationship between the two is reciprocal. The one cannot exist without the other.

Deci et al. (1991) proposed that the desire to form relationships is a basic psychological need. Baumeister and Leary (1995) defined the need to belong as "a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships" (p. 497). Some research studies found that teacher-student relationships foster school connectedness, which in turn enhances student engagement and well-being (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Student perceptions of belonging, relatedness, and/or connectedness are "in large part, determined by their relationships with teachers" (Johnson, 2009, p. 101). In fact, for many students, a lack of involvement and participation within the classroom and its practices leads to the "realization that they do not 'fit in' and to disengagement" as well as to the realization that school is not for them (McFadden & Munns, 2002, p. 363). In spite of this, little formal attention is paid to the affective needs of students within the school context (Osterman, 2000). Instead, the main priority, especially in high school, continues to be academic achievement measured, in particular, by one's performance on high-stakes standardized tests.

<u>Analysis of Belonging Data</u>

Perceptions of Belonging in Traditional High School:

Chapter VII conveyed how perceptions of care within the school context decreased as the six study participants progressed from elementary through secondary school. As their perceptions of care declined, so too did their perceptions of belonging. None of the participants described feelings of not belonging until our discussions led to their experiences at the traditional high school. Perhaps up to that point, they either experienced some degree of school belonging

or were not cognizant of being without it. At the traditional high school, each participant

experienced feelings of not belonging within the greater school community. Alex said he did not

"fit in." Erica and Faith never felt like they "belonged there." Beth and Christian did not want "to

be there." Doug perceived himself to be an "outsider." These feelings of not belonging applied to

the school context as a whole. Each, however, expressed some sense of belongingness when they

were socializing with friends at school. The following chained narrative, found poem presents

their voiced experiences and perceptions pertaining to belonging at the traditional high school:

I
Felt like
I belonged

Sometimes

Whenever I was just
With friends

Other than that

I
Felt like

I didn't really
Fit in

I didn't
Feel
like I belonged
there

'Cause there was no
interaction with
teachers or with principals

I at least didn't
Feel
like I was accepted
there

I didn't have the

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Feeling
that I wanted to go to

school

I
Feel
Like if you
Feel
Cared for at
School

You are going to
Feel
Like you
Fit in

You might not
Feel
Popular

But you're gonna
Feel
Like you're supposed to be
There

Like someone wants you to be

THERE

I mean
if you care for

someone

You're gonna
make 'em

Feel
like they

BELONG

The participants framed their discussion of belonging in terms of feeling. Solomon et al. (1997) argued that disadvantaged youth in particular need to "feel" the connection in order to feel like they belong at school. Furthermore, Solomon et al. suggested, "The feeling of connection in school may be particularly important for disadvantaged students because of their greater need for the motivational boost these can provide" (p. 236). Some educators, however, may make certain assumptions relative to a student's sense of belonging within the school context that do not benefit marginalized youth (Kunc, 1992). The first assumption is that student achievement is more important than a student's sense of belonging and that content is more important than connection. Most educators certainly are concerned with student learning and success in the classroom. However, Maslow's (1962) hierarchy placed an individual's need for belonging above the need for knowledge and understanding. He posited that belonging needs must be satisfied before authentic learning could take place.

Kunc (1992) proposed that some educators may award school membership as a prize to those students who comply, achieve, and do not disrupt the status quo. In this manner, school membership becomes a privilege extended to students who are socially and academically agile enough to forge a timely and successful path through high school. Disadvantaged youth, who often struggle with the increasingly high stake demands of high school, may then be denied the privilege of school membership because they stray from the norm. Kunc also suggested that many educators assume that student affective needs are met at home and do not, therefore, need to be met within the school context. This assumption ignores the negative effect that disadvantages such as divorce, poverty, family crisis can have on a child's psyche as well as on his or her school performance.

Three sub-themes emerged from a close reading of the data pertaining to belonging. This data includes the quotations presented at the start of this chapter as well as the poetic representation. The first sub-theme explores the possible relationship between participant perceptions of belonging and perceptions of teacher care. The second sub-theme examines the role membership within social groups may play in the perception of belonging. The third sub-theme connects feelings of belonging to student motivation and engagement. Each of these sub-themes is discussed below with a heavy emphasis on participant voice.

Emergent Sub-Theme 1: Teacher Care

In the poetic representation of voice previously presented, the participants described a relationship between feeling cared for by school adults and feelings of belonging. Their responses suggest that when a student feels cared for by teachers and school officials, that student will feel "accepted" at school. The student will feel like he or she is "supposed to be there." Ma (2003) pointed out, "Teachers and administrators are in a powerful position to influence students' sense of belonging to school" (p. 348). According to my participants, one effective way teachers and principals show they care is by interacting with the students. One-on-one attention and interaction were shown in the previous chapter to be powerful manifestations of teacher care. Teacher care demonstrated through individual attention and interaction may lead to a student experiencing feelings of membership not only within the classroom, but also within the larger school context.

Goodenow (1993) found that the experience of having attentive teachers was significantly related to feelings of belonging. Erica expressed feeling as though she did not belong at the traditional high school because she had no "interaction with teachers or with

principals." Faith observed that feeling cared for could make students "feel like they belong." Faith used the ethical form of care by defining teacher care as caring *for* a student rather than *about* him or her. A school climate that facilitates student perceptions of being cared for may be conducive to the development of a positive sense of belonging at school. Routt (1996) concluded that students related teacher attention with care, which in turn fostered a sense of belonging. Ultimately, teachers who demonstrate care for students may provide the socio-emotional support that students, particularly the disadvantaged, need to be successful in school through the enhancement of their feelings of school belonging (Eccles, 2004).

Emergent Sub-Theme 2: Peer Relationships

Peer acceptance and approbation may be related to sense of belonging and school engagement (Furlong, 2003). Osterman (2000) described the importance of peer acceptance as a source of support for all students, but in particular for disadvantaged youth. She noted that some studies found that low peer acceptance and low sense of school membership placed adolescents at risk of dropping out as does the perception that schools are uncaring environments. Inclusion, acceptance, and approbation by peers may play a key role in the development and maintenance of a sense of belonging. Goodenow (1993) proposed that group identity often forms the core of social support for adolescents. Each participant described their social group experiences:

Alex: I just, feeling like I didn't belong. Everywhere I went there'd be like a group of like 15, 30 people standing around just like, you know, laughing a lot and I'm just walking by. I just, I didn't really have very many friends to call my own.

Beth: The personal group that I was in there was I think five or six of us and it was really interesting actually how we all worked together. There were a couple of girls who were of my popular, you know, status quo. It was a little bit of everything, but it worked for us.

Christian: My closest friends didn't go to school. I was kinda [sic] alone. I would just kinda [sic] stomp around from class to class and just sit around and be quiet.

Doug: If someone didn't like me it was okay because I had these people that liked me and it didn't matter what they think you know I've got my friends who think highly of me. I had people there to back me up if some argument came down.

Erica: At lunch, I would hang out with my friends.

Faith: "I didn't like it at all, hated it because I didn't feel close to anyone. I just didn't feel like I belonged in that school. I had one good friend that I was always with and I had people that I talked to but they were just like acquaintances."

Doug remembered, "Individuals that didn't have a group, they sat by themselves." This was Christian's experience. His "closest friends" did not go to school; therefore, he felt "alone." Perhaps students who find themselves without a group feel isolated and alone. Based on the participants' comments, it appears that having friends is important, but the number of friends may also be relevant. In other words, one or two good friends may not be enough to foster a sense of belonging. This held true for Faith. She acknowledged having "one friend" she was always with. This did not, however, protect her from feeling like she "just didn't" belong. Alex described not having many friends "to call my own." He remembered large groups of students hanging out and laughing while he walked by feeling like he was an "outcast." Perhaps a

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relationship exists between the number of friends an adolescent has and the degree of alienation and disengagement the adolescent experiences at school.

Doug had a large group of friends. He described feeling supported and protected because of these friends. He claimed he did not care what other people thought of him because "I've got my friends who think highly of me." Although Doug felt like he belonged within this group of friends, his group as a whole appeared to feel disengaged and alienated from the school environment. He remembered that he and his group referred to themselves as "the outsiders" at school. But, he said, "I was involved with my people and it didn't matter." Beth had a small group of friends, "five or six," and she did not feel alone. In fact, she described herself as "popular" within her group. Whether or not she was considered "popular" within the overall school context is unknown. Her group dynamic seemed to at least make her feel socially secure. She commented "it worked" for her and the other members of her group. Being part of a small group did not, however, keep her from feeling disengaged from the school environment to the point she would fake "headaches" so she could go home. While Doug's after school activities with his peer group ultimately led to his suspension from school. He remembered school officials were told he "was out smoking the weed" with some of his friends. He continued, "It led to me and I got in trouble."

Based on Doug's and Beth's experiences, groups of friends appeared to serve, to a certain extent, as a buffer or protective factor against the alienating climate of the traditional high school. Doug had the largest group of friends, and appeared to be disengaged from all but the social aspect of high school. He remembered that he "tried to float" through high school. When I asked him if he felt like he "flew under the radar" until the day he got in trouble, he replied "Right!" All that mattered to him was socializing with his friends. He confessed, "People were

my life." Beth proposed that having a lot of friends signified social acceptance. She observed, "People want to have lots of friends and they want to not be known as the weird kid." Although Doug and Beth were both highly social in high school, peer acceptance was not enough to keep them at the traditional high school. Doug's group participated in a high risk lifestyle that led to him getting in trouble while Beth's struggles in the classroom negated the approbation she felt from her peer group members. As for Alex, Faith, and Erica, having one or two friends did not offset perceptions of an uncaring and marginalizing high school environment. While Christian, friendless and alone, "stomped around" and took his anger out by beating on "brick walls."

Peer group membership is complicated in high school and often results in the formation of cliques. High school cliques usually represent status categories. Merten (1996) wrote, "Status categories are at the heart of adolescent social systems because they both represent major divisions within the social world and also place individual students in that world" (p. 52). Cliques create a hierarchy of students and each individual is sorted and labeled accordingly. Clothing appears to play an important role in this sorting and labeling process. Each participant described his or her position within the social order while a student at the Suburban Height's high school campuses as well as characterized the hierarchy of student cliques. The following quotations and my poetic representations of their words authentically represent the participants' voices:

Alex: I was going through a punk phase. I would wear skinny jeans and band tees.

Beth: I was popular. I was dressed nice.

Christian: I was a little, kinda [sic], gothic looking kid. I was always, always definitely baggy clothes, dark.

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Doug: I hung out with all the people that, you know, wore all the black and try to keep to themselves.

Erica: I went through the whole black clothes and all that.

Faith: If you didn't have money to buy designer clothes and all that stuff, then just forget about it.

There were all
the cliques

There was like
the emo
and
the gothic

The kids
who
you would consider
really weird
who
wear black
every day

There was like
the smart kids
that
are so smart
they don't take care
of themselves
smart kids
who
dress nice
but they're not
popular

There was
the kids
who
are overweight
and
are really sweet

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if you get to know them
but
no one takes the time
because
they don't fit in
to what you would want them
to be

There was
the dorky pervert boys
who'd
just sit around
and
joke all the time
about stuff

There was
like
the band kids.

There was
the popular girls
and boys.

There was
the jocks
the football team,
the baseball team,
the soccer team

Merten (1996) proposed that membership within a status category, such as a clique, is

based on possessing similar social advantages or disadvantages. Cliques serve as a sorting

mechanism placing individual students in this group or that group based on similarities in

academic achievement, athletic achievement, clothing, weight, behavior, extra-curricular

activities, and social agility. The socially advantageous are those students who possess dominant

social capital which can be traded in for popularity and prestige. According to the study

participants, combinations of wealth, athletic ability, attractiveness and social agility are the

prerequisite characteristics for popularity. Popularity equates with high measures of belonging

and of fitting in. Alex remembered, "I felt like I didn't really fit in because the school here is really orientated like if you can throw a football or if you can kick a soccer ball." He added, "If you're rich you're pretty much popular." He also observed if a person "looks, you know, appealing to people, they're automatically popular."

A high school clique often can be identified based on the way its members dress. Beth observed, "It's really about the people that look like you 'cause you'll notice they look like each other. They all look like each other." Individuals outside of the clique, however, may choose to imitate a group's clothing style in spite of not being members. Alex dressed as though he belonged to the "emo" group. He admitted, however, that he did not belong to any group. In fact, he acknowledged, "I wanted to be like everybody else. I wanted to, you know, be popular. I wanted to have awesome clothing and stuff." Faith believed if she had worn "designer clothes" to school she might have been "popular." Beth claimed she "dressed nice" and described herself as "popular." Christian and Erica dressed in black and others labeled them as "gothic." They were not, however, members of the gothic group. In fact, Christian admitted, "As for the actual gothic group, I'd say we were more enemies than anything." Doug's group members wore all black and were self-described gothic. Doug did not, however, wear black. He remembered being "that one bright shirt from the group."

Apparently, however, looking the part does not automatically grant membership in a group, nor does not looking the part deny membership. Alex, Christian, and Erica dressed as though they belonged to a certain clique but did not. Perhaps doing so helped foster for them some sense of belonging. Another possibility is that the black attire was related to their emotional state. Each of them struggled with depression issues. Perhaps black clothing was simply the outer manifestation of inner turmoil. Doug did not dress as though he belonged to a

clique even though he did. He appeared able to express his own individuality and still maintain membership in a group whose other members all dressed alike. Some adolescents appeared to construct at least a temporary identity by being part of a group or a clique. Beth noted that some students moved back and forth between groups; "People switch to another group and they'll form into the other persons' personalities." She added, "The people you hang out with in my district really do mold who you are."

Being a group or clique member often created a sense of sameness and exclusivity. Beth observed, "If one person in that group does something, it affects the whole group." Erica remembered, "If you try to talk to other people that don't dress like that, they're just like what is he doing, you know, like that you can't talk to them." Faith described high school group dynamics, "That's like the people they're always around. Like I guess they just associate with everyone else in that group, with each other all the time and not everyone else." Beth proposed in high school, "People are trying to find out who they are." Adolescents often struggle with concepts of identity. They may strive to "fit in" and "belong." Sometimes, however, by choosing a group identity, adolescents may be denying their true self in order to fit in. Beth stated, "People think it's cool now to be someone that you're not." She described her personal epiphany, "I got to the point where I realized that I am who I am." She continued, "I'm one of those people that has to go, go, go. It was my personality. It wasn't ADHD. If I don't have something going on, I do get bored." As for other adolescents, she said, "I feel like people haven't realized that yet. They're trying to find out who they are."

Emergent Sub-Theme 3: Student Engagement

Goodenow (1993) wrote, "Relatedness may have a domain-specific influence" (p. 23).

She proposed that a sense of belonging and receiving support in a particular context, such as high school, might enhance motivation and engagement in that context. The opposite may be true as well. Students who do not experience feelings of belonging and support may exhibit lack of motivation and engagement. Each study participant described feelings of not belonging within the traditional high school setting. As detailed in Figure 2 of Chapter VII, each also experienced lack of effort within the same context. When students' belonging needs are not being met in the educational setting, it may be natural for them to experience diminished motivation, alienation, and poor performance (Osterman, 2000). Osterman (2000) noted, "There is substantial evidence showing or suggesting that the sense of belonging influences achievement through its effects on engagement" (p. 341).

> Alex: At first I just stopped going you know most kids do. I was just like "no I gotta [sic] get out of here."

> Beth: I didn't want to be there because I knew as soon as it started to go downhill, I lost more and more interest in making it go back uphill. I saw it as, "well we're downhill, I don't want to be here, there's no use for me to be here."

> Christian: It wasn't so much that I just didn't have the ability to pay attention, I just didn't want to.

> Doug: I don't know if I missed more days than I was supposed to. I might just have missed as many days as possible.

> Erica: I could of done my work. I could of but I didn't.

Faith: I had a lot of zeroes because I just didn't want to do the work because I didn't want to be there.

In the previous quotations, each of the participants described disengagement from the traditional high school setting either through not doing work, poor attendance, and/or not paying attention. Alex just "stopped going" to school altogether. Beth lost interest in trying once she perceived her achievement had gone "downhill." Christian chose not to pay attention. Doug pushed his absences to the limit. Erica said she could have done her work but chose not to, and Faith refused to do her work because she "didn't want to be" at school. Goodenow (1993) noted that disengaged students might stop attending school altogether because of "the heightened self-awareness or self-consciousness" of their developmental stage (p. 23). She proposed that a sense of public embarrassment and shame in the classroom also could have "significant negative implications for motivation" (p. 23). Beth addressed this very issue. She confessed, "Another reason why I really didn't want to be there was I found myself not doing anything in class, and it would become a little bit embarrassing whenever I didn't do my work and then a teacher would collect work." Doug admitted, "I didn't like going up and asking questions 'cause it made me feel stupid." Goodenow (1993) proposed, "A general sense of trust and belonging in school settings then may be needed as a counterbalance to this heightened sense of exposure and interpersonal risk" (p. 23).

In Chapter VII, I discussed a possible, relational dynamic between teacher care and teacher engagement and student motivation based on my six study participants' perceptions and experiences. In this Chapter, the participants revealed feelings of not belonging within the traditional high school environment. Each described wanting to feel like they belonged and credited low social status based on socio-economic status for not belonging. The marginalized

adolescents in this study also tied their perceptions of teacher care to their perceptions of belonging. They proposed that teachers can create an atmosphere of belonging and acceptance for their students by demonstrating care through individual attention and interaction. Next, I discussed the importance of peer relationships, group membership, and cliques to the issue of belonging within the traditional high school context. In addition, I explored the possibility that student perceptions of belonging are related to student motivation. Group memberships and cliques will be discussed in further detail in Chapter IX within the context of power and privilege. Student motivation will also reappear in relation to oppositional behavior and resistance.

Chapter IX

Power and Privilege

Alex: "The class president, he always has power over everybody."

Beth: "It really is about your status in the community."

Christian: "The principal at the mid-high was just like a power-corrupted guy."

Doug: "The people that did the extracurricular activities, I've always felt like

they've had more power."

Erica: "The popular people, they just feel like they have more power than

anyone else at the school."

Faith: (The popular kids) "They could probly [sic] manipulate the teachers,

and I'm sure they could manipulate other students."

<u>Introduction</u>

When a society is based on hierarchies of caste, social class, gender or religion, the social

relations within most of its organizations are usually ordered on the basis of power relations

(Lodge & Lynch, 2000). Schools as social organizations are hierarchically structured along

authoritarian lines with adults at the top of the hierarchy and youth at the bottom. Lodge and

Lynch (2000) argued, "The core relationship of the school institution is a power-based one in

which young people are structurally defined as subordinate to adults" (p. 46). This subordination

reproduces their lesser status in society as well. At the top of the school hierarchy is the school

principal, a position vested with the organization's central power. The principal holds authority

over the school faculty and staff, as well as over the student body.

Teachers, in turn, have authority over the students in their classrooms. They are vested

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with power over their students, not only by virtue of their adult status, but also through their position as knowledge providers. Teachers are the arbiters of knowledge acquisition. They control the pacing, sequencing, and evaluating of the learning process (McFadden & Munns, 2002). Freire (2009) referred to this process as "the banking concept of education in which the scope of action allowed to the student extends only as far as receiving, filing and storing the deposits" (p. 72). Students, in general, are not empowered to have a voice within the school hierarchy because they lack the status of experience, age, and knowledge (Freire, 2009; Lodge & Lynch, 2000). Hierarchical power relations within the classroom and the school may render marginalized students more voiceless and more susceptible to school failure than others (Lodge & Lynch, 2000).

The primary hierarchy of the public school organization consists of the school official to student dynamic. A secondary hierarchy functions within this primary one. This secondary hierarchy comprises the social organization of the student body based on dominant status categories. It is a "prestige hierarchy" in which students with dominant social capital hold positions of power at the top of the student social order, while those with the least social capital have little or no power at the bottom (Merten, 1996, p. 51). Merten (1996) proposed, "Once status categories gain prominence, they configure the social system in a manner that both reflects levels of social recognition and at the same time limits many students' access to positive social recognition" (p.52). Status categorical terms carry with them a significant evaluative connotation hence the term "prestige hierarchy." Students who find themselves at the top of the school social order carry the most prestige. This may translate into special measures of both power and privilege, as well as perceptions of care and belonging. Giroux (1983) wrote, "Students whose families have a tenuous connection to forms of cultural capital highly valued by the dominant

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society are at a decided disadvantage" (p. 88). He argued, "Schools serve as the trading post where socially valued cultural capital is parlayed into superior academic performance" (p. 88). Dominant social capital may also be traded in for popularity and for participation in extracurricular activities. Disadvantaged students, who come to school with social capital deficits, may find that they are shut off from school power relations. Consequently, they may be denied equal measures of power and privilege at school.

Analysis of Power and Privilege Data

Perceptions of Power and Privilege in Traditional High School:

According to study participants, individuals who hold positions of authority, such as the school principal or the class president, wield power at traditional high school. Alex explained, "The class president can pretty much just get up and leave whenever he wants. Every now and then he'll get in trouble, but not like nearly as severe as we would." He added, "The principal will back him up even if the principal knows he's wrong." Christian described the mid-high principal as a "power-corrupted" individual who actively searched for students to punish. He remembered, "He was just lookin' for a reason to do his job, just walkin' around and looking for people to get in trouble." Christian compared the high school's social hierarchy to prison. He said, "I'd say it's comparable to prison; groups of people that stick together and that have to." Christian described the power relations between adults and students at school as being one-sided. He remembered school personnel "have control over everything." He concluded, "The only control students have is over each other. That's why groups form."

For Christian, the traditional high school environment was highly punitive in nature. Discipline and punishment framed his experiences. He remembered feeling that everyone tried

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"to punish me into wanting to do my work." He said, "All the teachers and staff, they are just constantly punishing people." He admitted he felt like he had no control over his school experience. He felt powerless. He acknowledged, "That's why I felt so helpless, that's part of the reason I just hated everyone there and I didn't want to work, do anything for those people." Christian's experiences left him bitter and fueled his existing anger problems. He acknowledged wishing that someone would "actually talk to me to where it's like I actually have some control." Schools and teachers, through their use of power and control, can limit a student's self-efficacy. Erica remembered, "It kinda [sic] takes your self-esteem. I kinda [sic] just feel like, well if they don't believe in me, who will?" She continued, "They didn't make you feel like you were going to succeed. So it was kind of, why should I go if I'm not going to succeed?" Students who deal with experiences and perceptions such as these may eventually come to the realization that "school is not working for them," as well as the opinion that "the practices of teachers are not of any use in their own lives" (McFadden & Munns, 2020, p. 362). This realization may lead to students leaving traditional high school prior to graduation.

In addition to the class president, other students who acquire a certain status within the traditional school community also hold power and privilege. Faith proposed that "popular" students have a certain degree of power over not only other students, but also over teachers and administrators. She believed "popular" students were able to manipulate both groups. Erica perceived that popular students were treated more favorably. She said, "The teachers usually are more lenient" with them. Erica also believed popular students wielded power over the non-popular students. She recalled, "Other students usually are intimidated by them." Doug observed that coaches would overlook discipline issues from their players. He described his interpretation of the coaching mentality; "If I've known this kid and he's been playing for my team for a

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couple of years, I would probably let him get away with something that others wouldn't." Doug used one of his own teachers as an example; "He was a coach and no one was allowed behind his desk. He had things back there no one was allowed to touch. Well, I mean one of the players would go up there and be like, oh this is cool, but if a regular student went up there. '*What are you doing? You see this sign? You know not to touch things on my desk.*' " He added, "Certain kids, they knew they could get away with it, so they're like, 'oh look at me I can touch things on his

desk.' "

Alex believed "the jocks and the popular kids" were privileged. He remembered, "Athletes got away with stuff definitely. Like throwing stuff around. Like throwing other people's backpacks around to mess with a person, or breaking their binders and stuff." Faith also observed "special treatment" given to athletes. She said, "I mean you could tell especially if you had a teacher that was a coach and they had like their team in the class." Erica observed, "They just weren't as hard on you if you were an athlete or popular. It seemed like the teachers knew about that and they cut you more slack." She continued her description of the popular kids; "They would be the teacher's pet. They didn't get in as much trouble or anything." Christian recalled, "I would see other people, like popular students, would be doing way worse things than me, and he'd [principal] just laugh along with 'em and everything was fine. But me, I was a little kinda [sic] gothic looking kid and he just didn't like anything about me."

Merten (1996) discussed the important role social networks based on status play in the lives of adolescents. He described the manner in which status categories serve to define the boundaries of adolescent social systems through a sorting mechanism and that all students are

sorted and placed according to their social status within these boundaries. Beth and Faith

referred to the groups resulting from this sorting process as "cliques." Alex described the manner

in which he believed the traditional high school social system operated through these cliques; "I

think power at school of all things would be like what the students think of you. If one person

thinks you're a low life, then everybody thinks you're a low life. If one person thinks that you're

awesome, then everybody else thinks you're awesome." He continued, "If you belong to a

certain group, then you're accepted by everybody." Walsh (2006) referred to this process as

"cultural imperialism." He explained, "Cultural imperialism in schools serves the normative

function of centering one social group's experiences while marginalizing and deeming deficient

those groups located on the periphery" (p. 230).

This process can also render the marginalized group's perspective invisible, stereotype

individuals, and designate them as "other." This was the nature of Christian's traditional high

school experience. He described the result of being relegated to the margins of the school social

order; "It made me feel like I was just a boring, standard other guy. Like there's them and then

the other guys and I was just one of the other guys." Johnson (2006) proposed that "other" is the

key word in understanding how systems are identified with privileged groups. When a system

becomes divided between those who hold power and privilege and those who do not, those who

do not are categorized as "other." In addition, when systems are identified with privileged

groups, any and all attention becomes focused on them. Who they are, what they say and do, as

well how they do it becomes the focal point (Johnson, 2006). Furthermore, Te Riele (2006)

concluded that society often further marginalizes already marginalized youth by viewing them in

an increasingly hostile manner. She said, "Young people who are perceived as a 'risky Other' are

seen not only as different from most of us but also as a threat to both themselves and society" (p.133).

Erica discussed acts of stereotyping and judgment-making that she believed occurred at the mid-high. She felt stereotyped by the school faculty because her clothing was all black. She remembered, "A lot of the people over there do stereotype the school that way." She continued, "If you just didn't dress 'normal,' you were labeled as a druggie or a troublemaker." Beth explained that students who were considered "not normal" were viewed as "really weird." When I asked her to describe "weird" she said, "If they dress 'emo' or gothic, if a guy were to wear makeup." She continued, "Somebody who doesn't blend in. Someone who purposely kind of drags out the 'I'm weird card.' " In addition, Beth observed, "If some person in your group does something" and is "labeled as a bad name, your whole group becomes that name." She added, "I feel like there is a little bit of stereotyping."

All six participants perceived that within the traditional school "prestige hierarchy," students who had money and who participated in extra-curricular activities belonged at the top of the hierarchy because they had acquired popular status. Furthermore, based on their perceptions, the state of being "wealthy" actually facilitated participation in extra-curricular activities. Therefore, a higher socioeconomic status appeared to lead to higher levels of school engagement, which in turn resulted in popularity. Subsequently, popular students seemed to be privy to measures of power and privilege, while non-popular students were relegated to "regular student" or "other" status. Specific participant views concerning power and privilege within the traditional high school context led to the emergence of two sub-themes. The first sub-theme reveals a possible symbiotic relationship between dominant social capital and social status at

school. The second sub-theme discusses student oppositional behavior as a form of resistance to the processes operating within the traditional school environment.

Emergent Sub-Theme 1: Social Capital

> Alex: The principal and the teachers all still preferred you know the *higher ups* than you know the average people. I would say the *jocks* and the *popular kids* are [privileged]. If you're in sports you're their favorite. The band was like you know the *higher ups*.

> Beth: It's always the kids who are *wealthy*. I think that's what makes you *popular*. It's not just on television, it's in real life.

> Christian: It's usually *athletes,* too, have a huge wardrobe of Abercrombie and Nike Shocks and stuff like that, always clean and well-dressed, expensive stuff you know cell phones and cars and things like that.

> Doug: The people that played football and the people that did the *extracurricular activities* such as sports. Oh yeah, I mean, I've always felt like they've had more of the *power* cause they know the teachers there and the teachers already know them. They have more of a one-on-one connection other than just a student. They're a name on the team.

> Erica: If they have a lot of *money* or if they at least dress like they do, if they have the name brand clothes or anything. They're usually an *athlete*, like a cheerleader or something or the flag team.

> Faith: If you weren't *popular* and didn't have money, you didn't fit in. If you weren't popular and if everyone didn't know you, you didn't fit in, you weren't cool. If you

didn't have a lot of friends you weren't cool, and if you were quiet like me then no one

talked to you and you were pretty much an outcast.

If
You're rich
You're pretty much
Popular
It's like that in every school

if
you're poor
you have a chance
but not much

It's
Always the kids
Who
Are wealthy
Who
Dress nice
Who
Are outgoing
Who
Go with the flow of what's trendy

I was like
dirt poor
I wanted to have
awesome clothing and stuff
I couldn't buy anything

If
You just were popular
The teachers
Cut you more slack

poor kids
end up being
outcast
treated differently
even by the staff

If
You were an athlete
They just weren't as
Hard on you

You're their favorite

poor kids
are usually
in their own group
keep to themselves

Everybody
Loves 'em
And
Adores 'em

I couldn't
sign up
for sports
 I couldn't
afford
the equipment

Everybody
Gives 'em
All kinds
Of stuff
All kinds
Of special treatment
All kinds
Of fun stuff

I couldn't
afford
the cleats
I couldn't
afford
the shin guards

Popular kids always get the big end of the stick!

Johnson (2006) wrote, "Systems organized around privilege have three key

characteristics" (p. 90). These three characteristics include being dominated by privileged

groups, identified with privileged groups, and centered on privileged groups. These

characteristics support the idea that members of privileged groups are inherently superior to

those below them, and therefore, deserving of privilege. Merten (1996) discussed the

relationship between status categories and extracurricular activities. He argued that these activities function within a hierarchy that bestows prestige upon those who participate. Each study participant suggested that money and extra-curricular participation seemed to be prerequisites to achieving popularity. Popularity in turn bestowed prestige, power, and privilege. Alex referred to the popular students as the "higher ups." According to Alex, the "higher ups" were "preferred" by school adults and were, therefore, superior to the "average people." Christian mentioned that students with power and privilege at school were "usually just the popular kids, athletes." Doug classified the non-privileged at school as the "regular" students. Beth exclaimed, "It's always the wealthy" who are the popular students. Faith equated "rich" with "popular." Erica described popular kids as the students who "have a lot of money" or "at least look like" they do.

Erica tied a student's ability to wear "name brand" clothing to popularity, as did Christian. He noted that athletes could afford to buy "Nike" and "Abercrombie" apparel as well as other "expensive stuff," such as "cars" and "cell phones." Doug discussed the socioeconomics of Suburban Heights. He described it as "a very wealthy town." He said, "You can see it. People are like, 'Oh check out my new shoes. They're like $150 bucks.' " He continued, "They'd flaunt it off for sure." Doug's response was, "That's cool! My shoes are from Wal-Mart. They're $13 bucks." Alex connected having money with the ability to participate in extra-curricular activities. He remembered not being able to play soccer because he "couldn't afford" the necessary equipment such as the "cleats" and the "shinguards." Faith observed, "If you didn't have money to buy designer clothes and all that stuff, then, just forget about it." She added, "If you weren't popular and you didn't have money, you didn't fit in."

When privilege dominates a system, the privileged group or groups hold positions of power and become identified with power as a naturally occurring phenomenon (Johnson, 2006). Doug reinforced this assumption. He stated, "The people that did extracurricular activities such as sports, I've always thought they had more of the power." In his opinion, this power resulted from students making a "name" for themselves. Doug believed such students were able to form closer relationships with teachers. He remembered they had a more "one-on-one connection" with teachers. When I asked Christian who had power and privilege at school, he observed, "Just athletes 'cause they're favorites of the coaches which usually also means the teachers." Christian added, "Whenever you're like that then the teachers will communicate with you, really reach out to you and help you on a personal level." He continued, "All the teachers love you and all the students love you. Everything's easier, every day it's just awesome for them." Erica remembered, "They just feel like they have more power than anyone else at the school. They feel like they are better than other people."

Privileged groups become the standard of comparison representing the best within a social organization (Johnson, 2006). Hymel, Wagner, and Butler (1990) argued that "status differentials" influence how group members perceive and interact with their peers. They proposed, "Popular children acquire a positive halo and unpopular children acquire a negative halo" (p. 157). These "halos" color the manner in which young people are "perceived, evaluated, and responded to by others" (p. 157). This may ensure that status distinctions are preserved. School teachers and administrators at the traditional high school appeared to respond to students who possessed positive halos and dominant social capital by giving them, in Christian's word "the big end of the stick." While the "poor" or "quiet" students who possessed negative halos received the short end.

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Participants' perceived that popular students with their dominant social capital and positive halos appeared to receive measures of care from the teachers that non-popular students were denied. In addition, students at the bottom of the prestige hierarchy, such as the non-popular, poor, and quiet students, were perceived as not belonging within the school community. In this way, the traditional high school environment appeared to reproduce social "landscapes of condemnation" in which disadvantaged youth "didn't fit in," were "outcast," and forced to keep "to themselves" (Polakow, p. 2007). Erica described the teacher-popular student relationship. She declared, "You know I honestly don't know if they care more [about popular students], but they sure act like they do." She continued, "I don't know why they would be more lenient and act like they care more to kids who just have nicer clothes and are popular. I don't understand." Christian noted, "Quieter kids that tend to keep to themselves and want to do their own thing, they always get looked down on like there's something wrong with us." He added, "Poor kids are usually in their own group, keep to themselves more and they end up being outcast, kinda [sic] treated differently even by the staff." Faith said, "If you were quiet like me, then no one talked to you and you were pretty much an outcast." Beth described two specific instances of a teacher's poor treatment of students who did not hold dominant social capital.

<div align="center">Beth's Voice</div>

A history teacher…

> Once told
> A kid
> He was lucky
> That
> They wanted education for
> Poor kids
> If
> They didn't

<div align="center">175</div>

He wouldn't be

THERE

A history teacher…

Once told
A kid
That
If this was several years ago
He would be
Working on a railroad
That
He wouldn't be
In the school system
Because
He didn't belong

THERE

Croninger and Lee (2001) argued that teachers can be an important source of social

capital for students, especially for young people who face economic and social hardships at

home. Furthermore, marginalized youth are especially "dependent on schools for support and

guidance if they cannot find these forms of social capital elsewhere in their lives" (Croninger &

Lee, 2001, p. 549). However, when teachers make comments to disadvantaged youth such as

those presented above, they are effectively denying these adolescents access to social capital in

the form of support and guidance, as well as in the form of care and belonging. Beth perceived

that the teacher quoted above demonstrated a profound lack of care for these students as well as

sent the message that "poor" students did not belong at that school.

Connell et al. (1995) found that students often receive support based on "their level of

engagement, with more engaged students receiving more support" (p. 58). In this manner,

students who need the least support actually receive the most support, while those students most

in need of support receive the least. In addition, when teacher support is tied to engagement or any prerequisite such as social status, then it becomes a privilege meted out to those students deemed deserving of it. This puts students who hold dominant social capital at an advantage, while simultaneously disadvantaging marginalized youth. This is one way in which schools reproduce social inequality. Osterman (2000) noted, "We want children to succeed; we reward those who do" (p. 355). When teachers have a positive view of a student's ability, engagement and performance in the classroom, this may determine the nature of their relationships with students. Marginalized students, who have the most to gain from teacher support and guidance, also have the most to lose if they are denied it because a teacher views them in a negative light (Croninger & Lee, 2001).

Emergent Theme 2: Oppositional Behavior

Alex: A lot of the time I didn't really want control so I didn't even try, so I really didn't want to take that role in that particular school. At first I just stopped going you know most kids do. I was just like no I gotta [sic] get out of here.

Beth: I didn't want to be there. I would call and say I have a headache and I wanted to come home.

Christian: I just didn't do my work. I think it was pretty much a way of rebellion. I just hated it. I didn't want to work do any of that. I just wanted to not do anything just to spite them. It wasn't so much that I just didn't have the ability to pay attention. I just didn't want to.

Doug: I never paid attention. I wasn't putting effort into it.

Erica: I could of [sic] done my work. I could of [sic] but I didn't. I didn't want to do work there.

Faith: I didn't do my work, and I wouldn't do my homework. I usually didn't try my hardest. I think one time I got in trouble for having my phone out or something but that was just 'cause I didn't care what was going on.

McInerney (2006) explained, "When students have little power, when they have little say in their schooling, when their learning has little relevance to their lives and aspirations, or when they are devalued or marginalized, they resist or withdraw their assent" (p. 3). My six study participants displayed oppositional behavior by actively resisting and withdrawing their assent from the daily processes of schooling while students at the Suburban Height's high school campuses. Christian, Erica, and Faith refused to do their work. Christian described not doing his assignments as a form of "rebellion." He refused to do his work or pay attention "just to spite" his teachers. He admitted he could have done both, but he "didn't want to." Erica also chose not to do her work "there." She was very specific in her word choice. She acknowledged being capable of doing her work if she chose to, just not "there" at the mid-high. Faith resisted doing work in class and at home. She violated the cell phone policy because she "didn't care what was going on" at that school. Doug chose not to pay attention or try. Beth faked headaches to go home early. Alex remembered not wanting or trying to have any "control" at "that particular school." In fact, he wanted out of the high school, so he left. Alex's leaving was an act of resistance to a place that made him feel demeaned and devalued. His emotional response to this environment was, "No I gotta [sic] get out of here."

Disengagement at school can be viewed as a relational failure between the student and the school. This viewpoint allows the construction of students as "active resistors" as opposed to "passive victims of school alienation" (Atweh et al., 2008, p.10). Disengagement then becomes equated with political resistance rather than some type of pathological condition (Atweh et al., 2008). Each of these six former students experienced alienation and disengagement from the traditional high school context. Each perceived that the school faculty and administration did not care for them. Each perceived that they did not belong or fit in "there." Five of these marginalized adolescents believed they held no power or privilege because they were not wealthy, popular, or an active participant in extra-curricular activities. Beth, on the other hand, described herself as "nicely dressed" and "popular." However, she also criticized the relationship among wealth, popularity, and engagement to power and privilege. In addition, although she considered herself to be "popular," she did not have the power to make her teachers pay attention to her. She did not have the power to get the help she requested and needed. In fact, her appearance actually worked against her. Because she appeared to be "powerful" and "well-off," She believed her teachers thought that she was "okay," when in fact she was "drowning."

MacLeod (2009) posited, "Not all forms of oppositional behavior stem from a critique, implicit or explicit, of school–constructed ideologies and relations of domination" (p. 21). For example, he argued that the violation of a school rule is not an act of resistance unless the adolescent who breaks the rule is purposely doing so because he or she sees through the schools' achievement ideology. Therefore, according to MacLeod, the study participants needed to be aware that the withdrawal of their assent and their resistance to school processes was due to a clash between their expressed needs and the schools' accountability demands. I believe the following quotations provide evidence that these marginalized adolescents saw through the

achievement ideology at the mid-high and high school. A critique of the schools' ideologies and relations is explicitly verbalized:

> Erica: I think that the system at the mid-high is messed up. I don't think that they have it set up for students to succeed over there. I just, I don't.

> Alex: They were all really kind of just get your work done and get out of my class.

> Faith: The teachers just wanted ta [sic], I guess, have all the kids pass and then move on. Like that's all they cared about.

> Doug: It felt like some of them didn't like me. I don't know why. It might have been because of my grades.

> Christian: I just didn't feel like anyone was trying to teach me anything. They just like trying to get all their students to make good grades. That doesn't necessarily mean they learn.

> Beth: I think it's important that no matter who you are, whether you have power or not, they're not just sending you off with a diploma, they're sending you off with life lessons.

Alex, Christian, and Faith perceived that their teachers' only concern was to make sure every student passed and move on. While teachers should want their students to be successful, these three former students suggested that this goal might have been a goal of expediency rather than of care or concern. The implication within their quotations is that of an assembly line approach to teaching. The teachers simply wanted to get rid of one batch of students and move on to the next. Alex described his teachers' attitude as "get your work done and get out of my class." Faith believed her teachers only "cared about" making sure "all the kids pass and then

move on." Christian perceived that his teachers' only concern was the grade instead of whether he learned anything. Beth addressed the relevancy of what was being taught. She wanted to leave school with "life lessons" and not just a "diploma." Doug believed teachers did not like him because he was unsuccessful and made poor grades. Erica denounced the mid-high system as "messed up." Based on her experiences at that campus, she concluded that student success was not a priority for students like her. She stated, "They didn't make you feel like you could succeed." She suggested teachers should, "Just show a student that you care that they succeed, that they graduate."

The school's achievement ideology appeared to clash with the care and belonging needs of these marginalized students. A disconnect existed between the teacher goal of student success and the concerns of the study participants. Perhaps this disconnect was due to the disadvantages the participants were dealing with at the time. They each had concerns more pressing than academic success (Fine & Zane, 1991). Alex had serious family conflicts at home and struggled with grief and depression issues following the death of his friend. Beth's ADHD caused her to struggle in the classroom. She had trouble paying attention, doing her work, and getting the teacher attention and help she needed. Christian struggled with anger and depression as well as intense feelings of injustice at the hands of school personnel. Doug was spending his free time partying and smoking marijuana. He described his mother as irresponsible because she did not care if he went to school. Erica dealt with depression issues, had on-going health concerns, and required surgery on her pacemaker. Faith's experiences were marked by social anxiety and withdrawal issues. She felt alone and unwanted within the traditional high school environment.

Based on their experiences and perceptions of traditional high school, all six participants believed that wealth, dominant social capital, and participation in extra-curricular activities are

the characteristics required to achieve popularity at school. Individuals with dominant social capital achieved "popular" status fit in and obtained membership at "club high school." Popularity also conferred power and privilege on these individuals. Popular students were viewed as the "higher-ups" by other students as well as by school personnel. In addition, students who belonged to high status groups appeared to receive "special treatment" from school faculty members because of their position at the top of the school's prestige hierarchy. Marginalized youth, however, occupied the lowest tier of this hierarchy and were relegated to "other" status. Consequently, they were denied equal measures of power and privilege within the traditional high school setting. Furthermore, each participant appeared to view the school's ideologies and relational system as oppressive and hostile to disadvantaged youth. Each, therefore, described the manner in which he or she defied and resisted the status quo by withdrawing assent from school processes and ultimately, by leaving the school altogether.

Chapter X

Conclusion

Introduction

This final chapter provides a general overview of the entire study. I first summarize the problem statement and purpose of my research. I also restate the research question and sub-questions used to guide the collection and analysis of data. I then present my findings concerning care, belonging, power and privilege within the traditional high school context, as well as four unexpected findings that emerged during the course of my research. I discuss the conclusions I have drawn from these findings through the critical lens of my theoretical perspective and main research question and four sub-questions. I next provide several, practical implications derived from my research within the framework of theory, research, and practice. Lastly, I make suggestions for future research and conclude with a brief summary of the study purpose, design, and conclusions followed by a personal reflection and a final poetic representation of data.

Summary of the Study

Each year in the United States, approximately one-third of all high school students leave school prior to graduation (NCES, 2010). Some research into the "dropout" phenomenon focuses on individual risk factors. This has been characterized as a "blame the victim" approach (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Deschenes, Cuban & Tyack, 2001; Lee & Burkam, 2003;

McInerney, 2006; Rumberger, 2001; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). Some researchers take a "blame the school" approach and pinpoint school organizational factors as responsible for early school leaving (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Deschenes, Cuban, & Tyack, 2001; Lee & Burkam, 2003; McInerney, 2006; Rumberger, 2001; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). Other researchers blame the dropout rate on push/pull factors (Bergeson, 2006; Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; Lan & Lanthier, 2003; Jordan, Lara & McPartland, 1996; Stearns & Glennie, 2006; Wald & Losen, 2007). Recent research proposes that unfulfilled care and belonging, power and privilege needs may contribute to marginalized adolescents opting to leave high school prior to graduation (Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Eccles et al., 1993; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010; Fine, 1991; Finn, 1989; Osterman, 2000; Pellerin, 2006; Rumberger, 2012).

The purpose of this study was to critically examine marginalized adolescents' perceptions of care and belonging, power and privilege within the traditional high school context. The six participants selected for this study left traditional high school prior to graduation. Each then attended and graduated from an alternative high school. Three of the participants dropped out of traditional high school before returning to an alternative high school. Three of the participants specifically left the traditional high school for an alternative high school. All six participants were asked to reflect on their traditional school experiences during open-ended, semi-structured interview sessions. They were asked to describe experiences and perceptions of care and belonging as well as power and privilege within the traditional high school setting.

For the purposes of this research, I defined care using Noddings' (2005) ethical form of care which involves a relational dynamic between the carer and the cared for. Within this dynamic, both parties must contribute to the caring relationship and the cared for must feel the

care or the relationship has no meaning. I defined belonging as the degree to which a student feels engaged with or connected to the school community. Just as with care, marginalized youth must feel a sense of belonging at school. If they do not feel it, the connection is invalid and meaningless (Solomon et al., 1997). I defined power and privilege as working together within a reciprocal relationship in which power, acquired through the possession of dominant cultural capital, results in privilege, the bestowment of benefits, entitlement, and/ or prestige. One research question guided my research process and was supported by four sub-questions.

Research Question:

1. How were marginalized adolescents' perceptions of care and belonging, power and privilege within the traditional high school context related to their decision to leave that environment prior to graduation?

Sub-Questions:

1. What did care and belonging look like through marginalized adolescents' retrospective perceptions of the traditional high school environment?
2. How did marginalized adolescents' retrospective perceptions of care and belonging in traditional high school relate to power and privilege?
3. Based on marginalized adolescents' retrospective perceptions, how were constructs of power and privilege reproduced within the traditional high school context?
4. Based on marginalized adolescents' retrospective perceptions, how were resistance and power related to the decision to leave the traditional high school?

In the review of the literature, I provided a critical overview of blame-driven dropout research. I examined critical literature that addresses the manner in which neoliberal and neoconservative social policies may further marginalize already marginalized adolescents within our public schools through the reproduction of social landscapes of blame and condemnation for the disadvantaged and disenfranchised (Polakow, 2007). I discussed critical theory literature concerning reproduction, resistance, and power within the school context. In addition, I explored critical literature that addresses the implications of access to dominant cultural capital as opposed to social capital deficits. Finally, I presented research supporting the importance of meeting marginalized youths' care and belonging needs within the school setting.

Findings

Perceptions of care at school diminished over time for all six study participants. Each perceived some measures of care in elementary school. In middle school, their school experiences and perceptions of care declined. Without exception, each participant described the traditional high school as an uncaring environment. Overall, they believed the high school teachers, administrators, and counselors did not care for them. Three sub-themes based on the participants' observations emerged from the care data. The first sub-theme revealed the participants' belief that teachers can demonstrate care for their students through respectful, individualized, one-on-one attention and through the recognition of each student as a unique, human being. The second sub-theme proposed that teachers can demonstrate care for their students by being fully and actively engaged within the classroom, as evidenced by quality lesson plans, engaging instruction, and teacher attention. The third sub-theme revealed that teacher attention and teacher engagement can enhance and promote student motivation.

As perceptions of care declined, so, too, did perceptions of belonging. Each of the participants described some degree of belonging within the traditional high school setting when they were with friends. Each, however, experienced feelings of disengagement and alienation from the traditional school environment as a whole. They expressed these perceptions in terms of not belonging, not fitting in, not wanting to be there, and feeling like an "outcast" or an "outsider." Two sub-themes emerged from the belonging data. The first sub-theme related teacher care to belonging. The participants' observations and experiences suggested that when they felt cared for by teachers at school, they also felt accepted at school. They felt a sense of belonging. The second sub-theme discussed the importance of peer relationships to school belonging and connectedness. Study participants had a lowered sense of school membership because they did not receive peer acceptance and approbation from high status groups. In addition, participant peer relationships appeared to serve as a slight buffer against the alienating nature of the traditional high school environment. The more friends the participant had, the greater the buffer effect appeared to be.

Findings concerning power and privilege linked these two constructs to students who were "wealthy," "popular," an "athlete," or otherwise involved in extracurricular activities. Wealth, popularity, and extra-curricular participation appeared to coexist in a reciprocal relationship. Each participant credited wealth with facilitating popularity as well as participation in school activities. Therefore, in the opinion of these former students, the key to membership at "club high school" was money. Students, who came from perceived "wealthy" homes, appeared to have it made and "every day was just awesome for them." While students who were poor "had a chance, but not much." Two sub-themes emerged from the power and privilege data. The first sub-theme explored the relationship between dominant social capital and "special treatment"

within the traditional high school setting. Students who held dominant social capital appeared to receive dominant status within the traditional high school's prestige hierarchy. This dominant status, in turn, seemed to lead to greater measures of privilege at school manifested as special treatment, leniency, and favoritism from teachers, coaches, and principals. The second sub-theme described the manner in which these marginalized adolescents, through oppositional behavior, critiqued and resisted the daily processes of schooling through the withdrawal of assent in the classroom and through early school leaving.

Unexpected Findings

Four unexpected findings emerged from the data and each presents valid implications for future research. The first unexpected finding consisted of negative interactions with the school counselors. Five of the study participants experienced negative encounters with the school counselors on both high school campuses. Doug, however, revealed no personal experiences with any of the three school counselors at the mid-high.

> Alex: I just don't think the counselors really cared. They act really snotty towards you if it's not something that they can get done within five minutes.

> Beth: In the school system that I'm in, counselors are actually really hard to get in with. They make you put your name on a list and then you might not get in for three weeks, if ever. I met with the counselor finally. They were telling me that you actually don't get the credit in this class because you have this many tardies or this many absences. It was matter of fact. Here it is, okay, we're done.

> Christian: I had like a pink slip for detention or something. I had to take it to the counselor's office and I went in there and put it on her desk. She told the principal that I

went in there and just threw it on her desk and stomped out. He was just furious and gave me like two weeks of in-house and I had to write her this big apology note. I just did not do that. To this day, I did not do that.

Erica: The only time I saw my counselor was the time my dad signed me out. She told me you should really get an application for the alternative school. She was like, "'Cause you don't need to be here." She made me feel like I did not need to be there. She said, "You need to go there," like I wasn't good enough for the high school—for them.

Faith: The counselors, I was not a fan of them. At the mid-high, I didn't really talk to the counselors, but at the high school, I wasn't a fan of them because they didn't even help. They were very rude.

The second unexpected finding involved comments made by the three female participants. Each seemed to understand that class size and school size may have played a negative role in their traditional high school experiences. Furthermore, Beth made a connection between the number of students a teacher deals with on a daily basis, and the ability to demonstrate care.

Beth: Maybe more teachers would have the chance to be there for people and to be better teachers if they didn't have 40 kids in one class.

Erica: There's so many kids in the classroom that if someone doesn't get it done, they just dismiss them. There were just so many kids there that you're just one little person with a bunch of people.

Faith: It seemed like the school district was so big, they couldn't like remember everyone, like get to know everyone.

The third unexpected finding resulted from Beth's experiences and perceptions as a self-described "popular" and "well-dressed" student. Based on her personal description of herself, Beth should have been high up in the prestige hierarchy, but was not. Three possibilities emerged from this. The first possibility is that "name-brand" clothing is only one factor in achieving high social status. The second possibility is that Beth's vision of herself was skewed and she was not actually popular within the larger school context, just popular within her small group of friends. The third possibility is that Beth's failure to fit in with the achievement ideology of the school due to her extreme ADHD excluded her from a spot at the top of the hierarchy. Popular and well-dressed as she may have been, she did not have the power to access measures of privilege within the traditional high school environment. Furthermore, Beth's appearance as a "well-dressed" student may have worked against her by misleading teachers into assuming that she was on a successful path, when she was not.

The fourth and final unexpected finding is drawn from Doug's experiences with and perceptions of teacher care in the classroom. He said, "They care and maybe I should care about what they're teaching." In addition to tying teacher care to student motivation, this comment also holds academic capital implications. Doug did not appear to understand the importance of schooling and needed his teachers to show him the value and relevancy of what they were teaching. St. John (2011) wrote, "Class reproduction provides a conceptual basis for framing the underlying cultural forces that reinforce conveyance of social class—and educational attainment—across generations" (p. 37). Education can be an important form of social capital within families (St. John, 2011). Doug's parents never completed high school and may have

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consciously or unconsciously transmitted low educational expectancies to Doug. Furthermore, his mother actively modeled to Doug that school was not important by not making him attend consistently. A deeper exploration of academic capital is beyond the scope of this research study, however, this is a significant topic for expanded conversations as well as for future research.

Conclusions

The six marginalized adolescents who participated in this study provided perceptions and experiences illustrating not only what care, belonging, power and privilege looked like within the traditional high school context, but also how these four constructs were related to their decision to leave that environment prior to graduation. The participants presented two perspectives for each construct. They discussed what they experienced in terms of how they were treated, as well as how they wanted to have been treated. The first perspective revealed experiences devoid of feelings of care and of belonging, as well as of power and privilege. The second perspective detailed what they wanted from school as opposed to what they got. Each participant described how teachers could demonstrate care for students and through this care, foster feelings of belonging. In addition, each shared their opinions concerning the manner in which high status groups' access to power and privilege at school shaped very different experiences for those fortunate individuals.

Based on my research findings concerning care, I concluded that the level of success marginalized adolescents experience in high school is dependent upon the degree of teacher care received. Teacher care is an important source of social capital for students transmitted through supportive and nurturing relationships. This care is especially vital for marginalized youth who lack access to other sources of social capital, in particular dominant social capital. Teacher care,

through the fostering of social capital, can enhance student engagement and serve as a protective factor against disadvantaged youth dropping out of school.

Three conclusions emerged from the belonging data findings. First, I concluded that a marginalized youth's sense of belonging is related to teacher care. When teachers show care for marginalized adolescents, they help nurture and support feelings of belonging and acceptance at school. Teacher care can make disadvantaged students "feel…accepted" and "feel like they belong." Second, I determined that peer group membership does not guarantee school engagement, nor does it necessarily protect against dropping out. Third, I concluded that lack of membership in a group or group membership in low status, high risk groups corresponds to disengagement and withdrawal from the traditional high school context.

Findings from the power and privilege data led to three conclusions. First, I concluded that having access to dominant social capital is related to having power and privilege at school. Students who hold dominant social capital ascend to the top tier of a school's prestige hierarchy, and, therefore, benefit from power and privilege at school. Second, I determined that care and belonging are related to power and privilege at school. Students who hold power and privilege at school receive greater measures of care and belonging than those who do not. Finally, I concluded that each participant's oppositional behavior to the traditional high schools' achievement ideology and hegemonic relational structure was resistance as well an act of power leading to the decision to leave that environment (Fine, 1991; Ogbu, 2003, 2008). Each of these marginalized adolescents silently withdrew their assent from the daily processes of the traditional high school until they finally withdrew completely, and left an environment in which they felt unwelcome, voiceless, powerless, and inconvenient. Although the participants may not have articulated the decision to leave the traditional high school in political terms, the critique inherent

in the act is not diminished. Implicitly or explicitly, these former students were "voting with

their feet" when they exited the traditional high school campuses for good (Johnson & O'Brien,

2002, p. 6). Because a primary goal of this research was to authorize student perspectives, I again

let the participants speak for themselves (Sather, 2002):

Doug: I didn't want to go back.

Beth: I didn't want to be there.

Christian: I didn't want to be there.

Erica: I didn't want to be there.

Faith: I didn't want to be there.

Alex: I just stopped going.

Connection to Theory

Apple (2009) wrote, "The sphere of education is one in which the combined forces of

neoliberalism and neoconservatism have been ascendant, moving across regions, national

system, and institutions (p. 22). These forces encourage reform efforts that advance a political

agenda based on maintaining the status quo for those who hold dominant social capital through

the promotion of school privatization, the silencing of inconvenient voices, and the continual

reproduction of a worker-consumer base. Disadvantaged youth are problematic to these efforts,

disrupting the operational flow of schools through perceived anti-social behavior, disruptive

behaviors, and academic failure. Unfortunately, society is encouraged to accept that it is entirely

appropriate to have winners and losers even in schools (Apple, 2009). Some believe the only

way to support a market economy is to encourage everyone to think of themselves as individuals selfishly engaged in activities that maximize their own interests (Apple, 2009). Lee and Burkam (2003) argued, "The peculiarly American attitude of individualism holding individuals largely responsible for their own success and failure undergirds dominant attitudes about school dropouts" (p. 356).

Marginalized adolescents too often are held responsible for their own marginalization and accountable only to themselves for school failure. Many of these "inconvenient" youth choose to leave schools perceived to have uncaring and condemning environments. Some drop out of school never to return, some drop out and then return to alternative programs, while some purposefully leave traditional schools for alternative programs. Smyth (2004) pointed out, "We need to re-map the issues by starting from the cultural mismatch between what schools as instruments of state power are trying to do, and the lives, histories, circumstances and aspirations of disadvantaged children (p. 23). In order to do so, society must first move beyond the belief that the problem resides almost exclusively with the children and their families without taking into consideration social justice issues (MacLeod, 2009). Smyth (2003) proposed teachers can help keep social justice alive in the classroom if they are willing to recognize and deal with the mismatches and misrecognition between school demands and the needs of disadvantaged youth.

From a critical viewpoint, "Young people who are subjugated by oppressive social, economic, and cultural forces are denied any real sense of agency and lack a capacity to act on and change their world" (McInerney, 2006, p. 12). This is why research "authorizing student perspectives" is so important, as it introduces into critical conversations the missing perspectives of those who experience firsthand the negative effects of existing educational policies and practices (Sather, 2002, p. 30). Marginalized youth, who "have been silenced all their lives,"

have a compelling and important story to tell (Giroux, 1992, p. 158). Giving voice to student

perspectives can help insure that students count among those who have the knowledge and the

position to shape education processes and reform efforts (Sather, 2002). Now is the time to count

marginalized students among those who hold this authority.

Implications

Study findings and conclusions generated several implications related to theory, research

and practice. Theoretical implications lend support to Noddings' ethic of care as well as

Maslow's theory of belonging. This study also provides examples supporting the critical view

that schools, as historically and socially constructed institutions, actively reproduce social and

economic issues operating at the macro-level in society. In addition, study findings relate student

oppositional behavior to resistance. Implications for research include support for the importance

of additional research employing qualitative methodologies, critical perspectives, and student

perspectives. Practice implications present the importance of meeting adolescent care and

belonging needs within the nation's traditional high schools as well as validate the role

alternative high schools play in dropout prevention, intervention, and recovery efforts.

Theory:

Findings from the care data support Noddings' (2005) theoretical distinction between the

ethic of care and the virtue of care. The ethic of care encompasses the relational dynamics

between the carer and the cared for, whereas the virtue of care hinges on care as an internal

quality held by the individual. Individuals who display the ethic of care, care *for* others and

respond to their individual, expressed needs. Individuals who exhibit the virtue of care, care

about others and do what they believe is in the cared about person's best interests. Many

educators are accustomed to doing what they believe is in the best interests of their students because they care about them. However, this study has demonstrated the importance of the ethic of care to marginalized students. Each participant in this study described the desire to be cared for by teachers as opposed to being cared about by them. Each wanted teachers who would respond to his or her individual, expressed needs. Each wanted teachers who cared for them as distinct individuals, not as one of many.

Findings also lend support to Maslow's (1962) theoretical hierarchy that places the individual need to belong above the need for knowledge and understanding. Participant perceptions demonstrated the importance placed on belonging at school and how a sense of not belonging interfered with the desire to be at school as well as to perform academically. Low levels of belongingness contributed to low levels of school engagement and to eventual physical withdrawal from the traditional high school environment. Furthermore, participant perceptions of the alternative high school environment as a caring and supportive environment in which they experienced a sense of belonging lends support to the importance of meeting the affective needs of marginalized adolescents. Each participant experienced feelings of being cared for and of belonging while attending the Suburban Heights Alternative School. Subsequently, each participant found success within that environment and graduated from high school.

Study findings also support the critical theory view that schools are historical and social constructs and as such reproduce issues generated by broader social and political forces (Apple, 2004; Arnowitz, 2009; Fine, 1991; Giroux, 2009; Kincheloe, 2006; Thomas, 2006; MacLeod, 2009; McLaren, 2007; Willis, 1977). Social issues exhibited at the macro-level of society manifested at the micro-level within the halls and classrooms of the Suburban Heights high school campuses. One such issue, the shrinking middle class, was addressed by Christian. He

noted that his socio-economic status was "middle-class before the middle class disappeared." In his opinion, his diminished social status played a role in his diminished experience at school. He felt like an "other guy" and envied the rich students, the athletes, and the popular kids.

In addition, findings reinforce the theory that marginalized adolescent's oppositional behavior in the classroom may be viewed as resistance to the school's achievement ideology and prestige hierarchy. The academic demands of the traditional high school worked in dialectical opposition to the care and belonging needs of marginalized youth. Furthermore, the economic requirements needed to achieve high status placement within the school's social hierarchy served to further disenfranchise these same youth. As a result, study participants withdrew their assent from the daily processes of the classroom and eventually completed their withdrawal by leaving the traditional high school environment prior to graduation.

Research:

A primary goal of this study was to contribute to emancipatory knowledge through the documentation of the authentic voices of marginalized adolescents (Gordon, 2005). The nation's dropout rate is a critical issue and I believe the key to a better understanding of this phenomenon is through conversation with those most affected; students who leave high school prior to graduation. Who better to explain the motivating factors, the processes, and the consequences of this decision, as well as to shed light on potential prevention efforts that might help keep disadvantaged youth in school. This study adds to the literature concerning the dropout phenomenon in the United States. The voices of the six study participants contribute additional perspectives to the discussion and shift the conversation toward the relationship between dropping out of the traditional high school environment and school climates that are

unresponsive to the care and belonging needs of marginalized adolescents (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Lee & Burkam, 2003; Pellerin, 2005; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986).

This study also addresses gaps within the fields of qualitative inquiry and critical inquiry (Apple, 2004; Balfanz, Herzog, & MacIver, 2007; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010; Smith, 2000; Wehlage & Rutter, 1989). This research approached school failure from a different construct than previous risk factor research by focusing exclusively on perceptions and experiences rather than on survey data (Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Goodenow, 1991). In addition, this qualitative study explored the manner in which a traditional high school may be reproducing marginalized youths' academic failure through the reproduction of social inequities at a micro-level as well as through the neglect of student affective needs. Furthermore, much of the previous research into student-teacher relations has been conducted at the primary school level (Barber, 2002). This study took a different approach by addressing student-teacher relations at the upper secondary level. More research concerning the manner in which school climate affects student sense of belonging also has been needed (Ma, 2003). This study addresses that gap. My research findings and conclusions underscore the importance of creating communities of care and belonging within our schools. Doing so could help to ameliorate the damage social and economic disadvantages can inflict on the young, as well as provide them with the support they need to successfully navigate through the public school system.

Practice:

Beth described the importance of a caring student-teacher relationship to the educational processes in the classroom. She also noted, however, that the caring nature of this relationship seemed to be diminished. The other five study participants also experienced diminished

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relationships with most of their traditional high school teachers. Noddings' (1995) wrote, "Personal manifestations of care are probably more important in children's lives than any particular curriculum or pattern of pedagogy" (p. 676). Study implications demonstrate that this is so. Each participant hungered for teachers who would show individual interest and care for them as unique, distinct individuals through personal attention and active teacher engagement in the classroom. Current and future teachers, be they ideologically progressive or traditional, need to understand the important role teacher care, attention, and engagement are to the success of their students, and especially to disadvantaged youth. All teachers would benefit from a comprehensive understanding of the distinction between the ethic of care and the virtue of care. Most teachers do care *about* their students and want to do what they perceive is in a student's best interests. More teachers, however, need to learn to care *for* their students, listen to their expressed needs, and respond to each of them based on these needs.

While not a specific goal of this study, findings support the important role alternative schools play in dropout intervention, prevention, and recovery efforts. The six study participants attended an alternative school after leaving the traditional high school. Three were recovered dropouts. Three left the traditional high school for the alternative program. Each participant achieved success at the alternative high school, most demonstrating none of the issues they experienced while at the traditional school. Christian and Doug admittedly struggled at first, but through care, guidance, and loving perseverance on the part of the alternative staff, they learned how to experience success. Each participant credited the Suburban Heights Alternative School with preventing the inevitability of dropping out. Beth called the program "a savior on who I am and who I've become." Each earned their high school diploma, has a brighter future ahead, and avoided the onus of being labeled a "high school dropout."

Recommendations

Study participant perceptions indicate the important role teacher care, demonstrated through attention and engagement, plays within the classroom. The focus, however, of many teacher preparation programs is subject matter training with a current push toward advanced levels of subject matter expertise. This objective, a consequence of teacher accountability reform efforts, is evident in the drive to turn teachers into nationally certified practitioners. In addition, educators are accountable for teaching pre-packaged, standardized and testable curriculum and students are accountable to learn this curriculum and successfully reproduce it on high stakes tests. Accountability has become the driving force in education, while the student-teacher relationship has been relegated to the backseat. Noddings (1995), however, suggested that society should desire more from its education system than high scores on achievement tests. She proposed, "We will not achieve even that meager success unless our children believe that they themselves are cared for and learn to care for others" (Noddings, 1995, p. 675). She advised that themes of care should be a "major purpose of schools," as well as a major focus of teacher preparation (Noddings, 1995, p. 676).

Noddings (2005) suggested that educators should make "the responsiveness characteristic of caring more basic than accountability" (p. xiii). My primary recommendation, therefore, is that university education departments create teacher preparation classes that emphasize the importance of the student-teacher relational dynamic. Most new teacher training includes courses on human growth and development as well as teaching the exceptional child. This training should be expanded to incorporate special instruction in issues of care. Future educators need to learn how to show care for all students. They need to understand that a personal connection with students is equally important to the content of the subject matter. New teacher education should

emphasize the importance of responding to the expressed needs of each individual student. Ethic of care training would promote the value and worth of each individual, work to offset stereotypes, and help keep social justice alive in the nation's classrooms.

I believe that meaningful learning can only truly take place within the framework of a caring student-teacher relationship. This is particularly true for disadvantaged youth. Furthermore, I propose that Noddings' work should be required reading for anyone entering the field of education. In particular, I suggest her book, *The Challenge to Care in Schools* (2005), as an excellent starting point. Most teachers still operate at the virtue of care level and need to learn how to expand their vision of care to the ethic of care level. In addition, I highly recommend professional development training for current educators, teachers, counselors, and administrators, concerning the ethic of care. Current educators, along with future educators, would benefit from an understanding of the importance of creating warm spaces of care and belonging for all students within the classrooms, within the halls, and throughout school buildings.

My secondary recommendation is the nation-wide investment in additional, non-punitive alternative schools. A non-punitive philosophy is essential so that these programs do not become convenient dumping grounds for school districts wanting to dispose of "inconvenient youth." These schools should be based upon the 17 research based components (70 O. S. 1210-568) recommended by the Oklahoma State Department of Education as well as by the National Alternative Education Association. These components help to ensure quality, proactive, and caring programs that do respond positively to the expressed needs of disadvantaged youth. As long as marginalized adolescents feel uncared for, unwelcome, disconnected, and inconvenient within the traditional high school setting, the need for quality alternative schools will continue to grow.

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Future Research

This study used qualitative methodologies with performative writing strategies and focused solely on the retrospective experiences and perceptions of six marginalized adolescents. Additional qualitative research could enhance study findings by juxtaposing the concurrent experiences and perceptions of marginalized youth with those of their traditional high school teachers. Adding the real-time perceptions and experiences of school teachers to that of their marginalized students could provide additional insight to the teacher-student relational dynamic as well as into the importance of meeting the affective needs of disadvantaged youth. Individuals often are unaware as to the manner in which they are being perceived. Many teachers may believe they are showing care for all of their students while at the same time, some of their students may perceive that they are not. Many teachers may believe that they treat all students the same, while some students may perceive this is not so. A study of this kind could be a revelatory experience for teachers. Furthermore, this research path could add to the discussion concerning care and belonging issues within the traditional school environment as well as on issues of power and privilege at school.

Summary

This qualitative study was designed to explore the dropout phenomenon through marginalized adolescents' retrospective perceptions and experiences of care and belonging, power and privilege within the traditional high school environment. In addition, this study examined the role these constructs may or may not have played in the participants' decision to leave the traditional high school prior to graduation. Critical theory provided the theoretical perspective for this study with the intent to add to the depths of emancipatory knowledge within

the fields of dropout research and marginalized youth. This study authorized student perspectives and presented authentic student voices uncovered in qualitative data through individual interview sessions. Along with the extensive use of student quotations, I used the poetic representation of data by writing found poems with the goal of building an emotional bridge between the reader and the participant. Findings indicate that marginalized adolescents' success at school may be related to experiences of care, belonging, power, and privilege. In addition, findings reveal that early school leaving may be viewed as an act of resistance to a school ideologies and hegemonic structure.

Reflection

I have been the principal of an alternative high school for the last nine years. During that period of time, I have interviewed hundreds of marginalized youth. I have listened to their stories, perceptions, and experiences. I began to see a pattern emerge that ultimately led to the focus of this study. This pattern involved one adolescent after another crying out "nobody cares" and one after another describing feelings of not belonging and of not being accepted for who they are within the traditional high school setting. I personally have witnessed disparaging comments and treatment directed toward these youth by people within the community, as well as by educators within the district. The contempt and disdain with which many hold the alternative program and the adolescents who flee the traditional high school is disheartening. Many adults, including educators, label alternative students as "bad kids," they also label the alternative school as "a school for bad kids."

I have often wondered over the past nine years when it became socially acceptable to describe children as 'bad.' I have questioned how it came to be that so many have lost sight of

the fact some children are born into bad circumstances as well as have bad things happen to them. Some adults are no longer able to distinguish between the child and the circumstances of their lives and their behavior. Some appear to have forgotten that bad choices and bad decisions may be inevitable outcomes of bad circumstances and uncontrollable events. Many seem to have decided that some children are more valuable than others and have come to view the "others" as disposable commodities.

Neoliberal and neoconservative ideologies have created social landscapes of condemnation in which the poor are blamed for their socio-economic circumstances, a minimum wage raise is resisted, and social safety net programs such as unemployment benefits, food stamps, and school lunch programs are on the chopping block. These macro-level landscapes are being reproduced at the micro-level in the classroom when marginalized youth are told they do not belong at school or are shown that they do not belong through the implicit or explicit actions of school faculty and administrators. Meanwhile, students who hold dominant social capital attain popular status within the school's prestige hierarchy and receive "special treatment."

I am fortunate to work at a school where disadvantaged youth do blossom under the warmth of teacher care and concern and where each year troubled and struggling youth find their voice, achieve success, and transform into radiant, happy individuals. I am fortunate to witness so many young people emerge from deep, dark cocoons of resignation and despair. My hope is that one day every adolescent's voice will count and every child will matter regardless their socioeconomic status or abilities. Dewey (1902) wrote, "What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy" (p. 3).

At the end of our interview, I asked Doug why he believed adolescents leave school and what schools could do to keep students from dropping out. In his response, he unwittingly described a kind of educational triage in which the school focused on the kids that were going to make it anyway, the "good" kids, the successful kids, while kids "on the edge" were perceived as not worth the effort and, therefore, were allowed to drift away. The life stories of inconvenient youth are written in the margins of society. They live their lives outside the lines at the edge of social consciousness. Instead, of pushing them over the side, we should be pulling them back to safety!

Doug's Voice

I've seen students
Drop out
Because
Of poor grades
Because
They wanted to
Because
Of drugs

I don't know

How do you keep
Students from
Dropping Out?

It's like picking people
For the team

This kid's
Gonna look
Good
This kid
He was doing

Bad

They're too
Many students
Some of them
Are right on the Edge
And
Some on the Edge

Don't Matter!

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Student Interview Guide

1. Can you explain the reasons why you dropped out of the mid-high (high school) and

   came to the alternative school?

   a. Can you explain the reasons why the traditional high school environment was not

      right for you?

   b. Can you describe personal issues you may have dealt with that interfered with

      your commitment to school?

   c. How would you describe the results of that decision?

2. Can you describe positive relationships you have had with teachers? With principals?

   With counselors?

3. Can you describe feeling cared for by an adult at the traditional high school? If so, how

   did that make you feel?

   a. In your opinion, do school faculty members care more about some students at

      school than others? If so, why do you feel this way? Can you provide examples?

   b. Can you describe what makes a caring teacher?

4. Can you give examples of feeling like you belonged at the traditional high school? If not, can you explain why?

    a. Can you give examples of students who do belong at the traditional high school?

5. Can you describe feelings of control or lack of control at school?

6. Can you describe who has power at school?

7. Can you describe if some individuals or groups have more privilege at school than others?

Appendix B

ADULT CONSENT FORM

OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY

PROJECT TITLE: *Inconvenient Youth:* A Critical Exploration of Marginalized Adolescents' Perceptions of Traditional High School

INVESTIGATORS: Johanna Woodard, Ph.D Candidate, Oklahoma State University, B. A. University of Tulsa, M. A. University of Kansas.

PURPOSE: The purpose of this research study is to critically explore the relationship between alternative high school students' care and belonging, power and privilege experiences within the traditional high school setting and their decisions to drop out and follow an alternative path. The intent is to give voice to marginalized youth through their participation in this study

PROCEDURES: Each participant will take part in an interview session lasting for approximately one hour. All interviews will be recorded and later transcribed. Follow-up questions seeking clarification may be asked over the phone or in person. Participants will have access to a copy of their interview transcription.

RISKS OF PARTICIPATION: There are no known risks associated with this project which are greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life.

BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION: The benefit to participants is the knowledge that they may be adding to the research literature concerning high school dropouts as well as providing information that may help school officials to be more responsive to the affective needs of marginalized youth.

CONFIDENTIALITY: The records of this study will be kept private. Participant confidentiality will be maintained at all times. Written results will discuss findings in a way that will not identify you. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher and

individuals responsible for research oversight will have access to the records. All data will be stored at the researcher's home on a secure and private computer and in a locked cabinet. Consent forms will be stored separately in a locked cabinet. No one except the researcher will have access to the data. It is possible that the consent process and data collection will be observed by research oversight staff responsible for safeguarding the rights and wellbeing of people who participate in research. The data will be kept for two years and then destroyed. The data will be used exclusively within the researcher's dissertation.

COMPENSATION: All participants will receive a $25 gift card to thank them for their time and participation.

CONTACTS: You may contact the researcher at the following address and phone number, should you desire to discuss your participation in the study and/or request information about the results of the study: Johanna Woodard, Owasso Ram Academy, 202 E Broadway, Owasso, OK 74055, 918-272-8040 or 918-720-1054. If you have questions about your rights as a research volunteer, you may contact Dr. Shelia Kennison, IRB Chair, 219 Cordell North, Stillwater, OK 74078, 405-744-3377 or irb@okstate.edu

PARTICIPANT RIGHTS: I understand that my participation is voluntary, that there is no penalty for refusal to participate, and that I am free to withdraw my consent and participation in this project at any time, without penalty. Subject's participation may be terminated in the event of failure to show up for an interview session.

CONSENT DOCUMENTATION: I have been fully informed about the procedures listed here. I am aware of what I will be asked to do and of the benefits of my participation. I also understand the following statements:

I affirm that I am 18 years of age or older.

I have read and fully understand this consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. A copy of this form will be given to me. I hereby give permission for my participation in this study.

_____   _____

Signature of Participant   Date

ADDITIONAL CONSENT: I give the researcher permission to access my alternative school application and my cumulative folder for use during the interview session.

_____   _____

Signature of Participant   Date

I certify that I have personally explained this document before requesting that the participant sign it.

_____   _____

Signature of Researcher   Date

Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board

Date: Tuesday, June 11, 2013

IRB Application No   ED1399

Proposal Title: Inconvenient Youth: A Critical Exploration of Marginalized Adolescents'
                                   Perceptions of Traditional High School

Reviewed and   Expedited
Processed as:

Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved   Protocol Expires: 6/10/2014

Principal
Investigator(s):

Johanna Woodard   Bernita Krumm
1333 N Willow Ave   310 Willard
Tulsa, OK 74120   Stillwater, OK 74078

The IRB application referenced above has been approved. It is the judgment of the reviewers that the
rights and welfare of individuals who may be asked to participate in this study will be respected, and that
the research will be conducted in a manner consistent with the IRB requirements as outlined in section 45
CFR 46.

✗ The final versions of any printed recruitment, consent and assent documents bearing the IRB approval
   stamp are attached to this letter. These are the versions that must be used during the study.

As Principal Investigator, it is your responsibility to do the following:

1. Conduct this study exactly as it has been approved. Any modifications to the research protocol
   must be submitted with the appropriate signatures for IRB approval. Protocol modifications requiring
   approval may include changes to the title, PI, advisor, funding status or sponsor, subject population
   composition or size, recruitment, inclusion/exclusion criteria, research site, research procedures and
   consent/assent process or forms.
2. Submit a request for continuation if the study extends beyond the approval period of one calendar
   year. This continuation must receive IRB review and approval before the research can continue.
3. Report any adverse events to the IRB Chair promptly. Adverse events are those which are
   unanticipated and impact the subjects during the course of this research; and
4. Notify the IRB office in writing when your research project is complete.

Please note that approved protocols are subject to monitoring by the IRB and that the IRB office has the
authority to inspect research records associated with this protocol at any time. If you have questions about the
IRB procedures or need any assistance from the Board, please contact Dawnett Watkins 219 Cordell North
(phone: 405-744-5700, dawnett.watkins@okstate.edu).

Sincerely,

Shelia M. Kennison

Shelia Kennison, Chair
Institutional Review Board

Vita

Johanna Woodard

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Thesis: INCONVENIENT YOUTH: A CRITICAL EXPLORATION OF
          MARGINALIZED ADOLESCENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF TRADITIONAL
          HIGH SCHOOL

Major Field: Educational Leadership & Policy

Biographical:

        Education:

        Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy in Educational
        Leadership & Policy at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in
        July, 2014.

        Completed the requirements for the Master of Arts in Soviet & East European
        Studies at University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas in 1987.

        Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts in French at University of
        Tulsa, Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1985.

        Experience:

        Principal, Owasso Ram Academy, 2005-present
        Principal, Owasso 8th Grade Center, 1999-2005
        Assistant Principal, Owasso 9th Grade Center, 1998-1999
        French/Spanish Teacher, Owasso, 1989-1998

        Professional Memberships:

        Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
        Collaborative Council for Secondary School Administrators
        Golden Key International Honour Society
        Oklahoma Association for Secondary School Principals
        Phi Kappa Phi