Theses, Dissertations and Capstones

1-1-2010

Dropping out: A Cross-Case Exploration of Why Students in One West Virginia County Choose to leave School

Debra Hunt Young
dyoung@hsc.wvu.edu

DROPPING OUT: A CROSS-CASE EXPLORATION OF WHY STUDENTS IN ONE WEST VIRGNIA COUNTY CHOOSE TO LEAVE SCHOOL

Debra Hunt Young, Ed.D., Ed.S., MSW
Marshall University
Graduate School of Education and Professional Development

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
Marshall University Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education
in
Curriculum and Instruction

Approved by
Committee Chair, Lisa A. Heaton, Ph.D.
Dixie Billheimer, Ed.D.
Edna Meisel, Ed.D.
Rudy D. Pauley, Ed.D.

Huntington, West Virginia, 2010

Keywords: At-Risk Student, Attendance Director, Guidance Counselors, Dropout

ABSTRACT

DROPPING OUT: A CROSS-CASE EXPLORATION OF WHY STUDENTS IN ONE WEST VIRGNIA COUNTY CHOOSE TO LEAVE SCHOOL

Debra Hunt Young

The indicators and predictors of dropout as documented in the literature are vast and encompass influences such as family, motivation, socio-economic status, and academic achievement, and could be accepted as universal reasons students choose to leave school and not return. This qualitative study investigated the reasons why students in one West Virginia county choose to drop out of school. Using cross-case analysis, the perceptions of current students identified as at-risk of dropping out, former students, and Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors were explored to determine emergent themes and provide proactive and reactive strategies to prevent dropout.

This study resulted in two major themes emerging from the data collected, and it was determined that all participants perceived Attitude about School (i.e., teacher attitude, academic attitude, and family attitude) and Drama (i.e., fighting and peer acceptance), as having significant impact on a student's decision to drop out. Through an application of ecological systems theory as a theoretical framework for the study, each case study provides representation of the micro- and macrosystems that directly influence the student's reciprocal transactions within the mesosystem of the school and in the microsystem of self. If dysfunctional, these transactions between student and environment can propel a student on the path to dropping out. The results of this study provide recommendations for change that can assist West Virginia Schools in preventing

dropout such as professional development for teachers, peer mentoring, in-school support

groups, and more traditional roles for school social workers and guidance counselors.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to those students like me; the ones who were (or are being) told that finishing school is not possible. Trust me, it is possible.

I also dedicate this dissertation to my parents who encouraged and supported me in my quest to break a multi-generational cycle of dropping out. Their pride in my accomplishments has made this journey worthwhile, and I am thankful they allowed me to pursue my happiness.

And finally, to Brian, my biggest fan. Throughout this process he has been my champion without compensation. I cannot thank him enough for endless hours of hearing "I'm busy," and "Listen to this and tell me how it sounds…" He was (and will always be) the King of Excuses, Cleaner of the Domain, Keeper of My Sanity, and Owner of My Heart. Without him by my side, none of this would be completed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Brian and Kimberly Hunt – My brother, my other half who has always been there no matter what; I'll always be your Holden, but I think through this you were mine. Kim, thank you for the countless hours of typing and transcribing, and crying along with me when listening to these stories; I couldn't have done it without you.

To my Doc Posse: Tracy Bradley, Kristy East, and Lisa Ramsburg – Who knew that Behaviorism Learning Theory would have facilitated the beginning of such a beautiful relationship? Thank you for the dinners, the laughs, the snark, the shoulders to lean on, and the years of true blue friendship. Our reputation as a tight knit group is well recognized, ladies, and I think it's well deserved!

To the administrators, faculty, and staff of Jenkins County Schools – Thank you Bill and Eddie and your wonderful, hardworking staff, for your wisdom, expertise, and time. Words cannot express my gratitude for allowing me to enter your schools, talk with your students and staff, and dig deep into this issue of dropout. Your dedication to helping me complete this process has been a labor of time and patience.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF TABLES

DROPPING OUT: A CROSS-CASE EXPLORATION OF THE PERSPECTIVES OF THE REASONS ONE WEST VIRGNIA COUNTY'S STUDENTS CHOOSE TO LEAVE SCHOOL

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Choosing to leave school is a historical problem that our nation has been battling for decades. Dropout rates continue at increasing rates, and "This tragic cycle has not substantially improved during the past few decades when education reform has been high on the public agenda" (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006, p. i). Along with the rest of the nation, West Virginia is witnessing an increase in dropout rates as well, especially in particular segments of county school systems. In Jenkins County[1], West Virginia, students are leaving school at a steady rise, and in the 2008-2009 school year, the West Virginia Department of Education (2009) reported that 437 students dropped out of Jenkins County schools, a 3.6% dropout rate; however, due to students returning to school after dropping out and then dropping out a second or third time, Jenkins County documented 555 dropouts that same year (Director of Counseling and Testing[2], Jenkins County Schools, personal communication, June 14, 2010). According to the Director of Counseling and Testing for Jenkins County Schools, (personal communication, June 14, 2010), between 2002 and 2005, Jenkins County saw a steady decline in dropout rates, with 2005-2006 reported at 443 students; however, beginning with the 2006-2007 year, Jenkins County has seen an increase in dropout rates, with an 21st Century high of 575 students in the 2007-2008 school year; consequently prompting Jenkins County administrators to question the reasons for such alarming numbers of dropouts. In discussions with Jenkins County administrators, several concerns were expressed about

---

[1] To protect confidentiality, the names of counties, people, and places have been changed.
[2] To protect the confidentiality of the county, the name of the Director of Counseling and Testing has been omitted.

the increase in dropout rates across the county. While a significant amount of quantitative data have been gathered, no research had been conducted in Jenkins County to explore the perceptions of students. County personnel expressed an interest in an ethnographic exploration investigating the reasons students are leaving school and not returning.

Background

Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morison (2006) conducted focus groups across America with dropout students aged 16-25 to gain insight into why students choose to leave school, and to provide a portrait of a dropout student that shares several factors that coincide with Jenkins County administrator's perceptions of why students are dropping out. Within the report, the researchers provided a listing of Top Five Reasons why students choose to leave school that include: "Classes were not interesting; Missed too many days and could not catch up; Spent time with people who were not interested in school; Had too much freedom and not enough rules in my life; and Was failing in school" (p. 3). The highest percentage of students, 80%, reported "uninspired teachers" (p. 4) and minimal homework (less than one hour to none) as significant reasons for leaving school.

Nowicki, Duke, Sisney, Stricker, and Tyler (2004) conducted a similar study to Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morison (2006) with 80 randomly selected participants in an Effective Learning Program. In the study, participating students were identified as juniors and seniors who were at risk of dropout. Nowicki, et al. (2004) compared participating student demographics with a group of 36 at-risk students who, although eligible for the program, were not randomly chosen to participate. Nowicki, et al. also compared participating student demographics with a control group of students who met exclusion

criteria for the study. Nowicki, et al. identified a correlation between dropping out and at-risk demographics by stating, "Dropping out appears to be associated with five major demographic indicators: (a) poverty, (b) race or ethnicity, (c) family configuration, (d) parental education, and (e) limited proficiency in English" (p. 226).

The data that were collected by Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morison (2006) and Nowicki, et al. (2004) provided qualitative, statistical, and perceptive information that delineates the perceptions of students rather than administrators, and speaks to the perceptions of why students are choosing to leave school.

According to Gordon (2004) there are several costs to dropping out of school, including illiteracy, lack of employability, and social costs that include poorer health, increased crime rates, and a higher dependence on social welfare systems. Gordon also discusses the cost of dropping out on the individual's meaning and quality of life. Gordon, citing Dei, et al, posits that decreased self-worth is paramount with dropouts, because "dropping out is seen as a personal failure" (p.14).

Karoly, Killburn, and Cannon (2005) support Gordon's beliefs, and report that children who come from disadvantaged (i.e., low socio-economic) backgrounds and have parents with less than a high school education will have gaps in their educational achievement, stating "Low rates of school achievement are then associated with higher rates of undesirable outcomes in adulthood such as being disconnected from school or work; welfare dependency; and delinquency, crime and imprisonment" (p. 125). These predictors are noteworthy if applied to West Virginia, where 81.5% of the population reported having a high school diploma or equivalency, and 12.7% of the population are below poverty level, of which an estimated 21.2% of the families living in poverty have

children under the age of 18 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). These predictors of the societal

costs of dropout and low academic achievement indicate a critical need for research to

strengthen the body of knowledge, as well as provide opportunity to develop proactive

strategies that will assist in decreasing dropout rates and increasing school performance.

Theoretical Framework

There are several theoretical frameworks that can be considered when exploring

why students choose to leave school; however, for the purposes of this research,

ecological systems theory will be applied due to its applicable characteristics and

theoretical underpinnings. This theoretical framework strives to describe the power

human, social, and cultural systems have when evaluating elemental human nature and

the biological, social, and cultural determinants that influence decision-making, problem-

solving, and self-actualization (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Huitt, 1996; Huitt, 2003; Iverson,

2002; Longres, 2000).

"The ecological systems theoretical tradition has, over the past 30 years, become

the main theoretical metaphor for understanding the context and the relationship between

people and their situation" (Nash, Munford, & O'Donoghue, 2005, p. 31).

Bronfenbrenner (1994) conceptualized the theoretical paradigm of the general ecological

model, which hypothesized that:

> …human development takes place through processes of progressively
>
> more complex reciprocal interaction between active, evolving,
>
> biopsychological human organism and the person, objects, and symbols in
>
> its immediate environment. To be effective, the interaction must occur on
>
> a fairly regular basis over extended periods of time. Such enduring forms

of interaction in the immediate environment are referred to as *proximal processes*. (p. 38)

Bronfenbrenner (2005) conceptualized a "hierarchy of systems" (p. 80) or "distal mechanisms through which features of the environment beyond the immediate setting can influence the power and direction of the proximal processes that affect development directly" (p. 80). The hierarchy, illustrated in Figure 1, is described as a series of reciprocal systems, including micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro- systems, that are viewed as environmental systems that influence the individual (student) or family's development in direct and indirect ways.
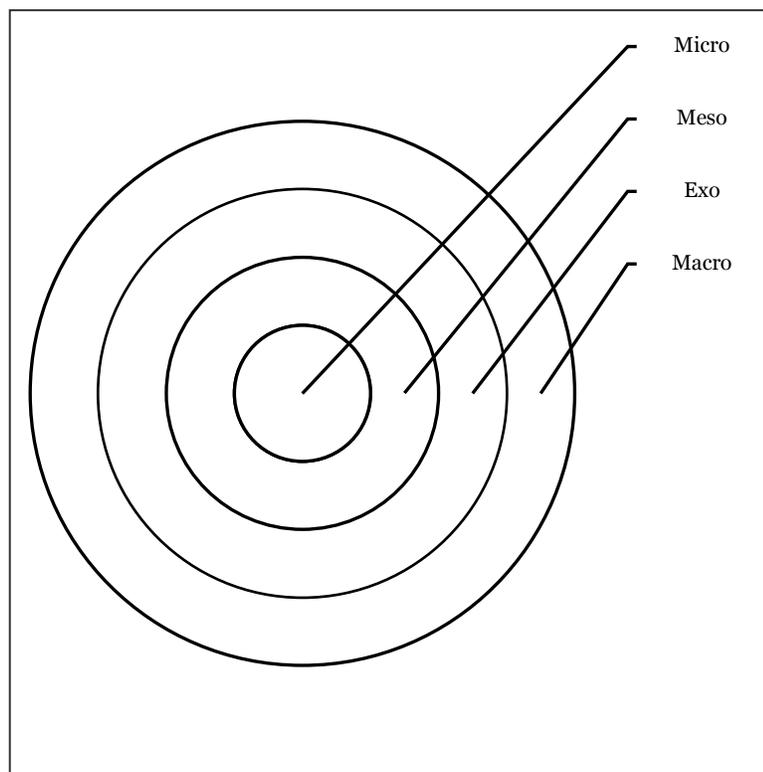
Figure 1 – Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1994)

According to Bronfenbrenner (2005), the *microsystem*, is typically referred to as the system in which the individual or family is contained (i.e., home, family unit), through which proximal processes occur. Transactions of interactional processes between

5

systems, referred to as input and output, directly affect the microsystem resulting in optimal or dysfunctional functionality in the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Miley, O'Melia, & Dubois, 2009; Nash, Munford, & O'Donoghue, 2005).

Moving concentrically outward from the microsystem, the *mesosystem* is comprised of those environments in which the processes take "place between two or more settings containing the developing person (e.g., the relations between home and school, school and workplace)" (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 80) in other words, a mesosystem of microsystems. In turn, the *exosystem*, is comprised of the environments the individual does not typically interact with directly, but is made up of processes between systems that have a direct influence on the system in which the person participates (i.e., the parent's work schedule and the child's afterschool activities schedule) (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Nash, Munford, & O'Donoghue, 2005).

The *macrosystem* encompasses those environments that consist of larger systems that have a downward influence on the micro-, meso-, and exo- systems. The macrosystem can be viewed as the "overarching pattern of ideology and organization of the social institutions common to a particular culture or subculture…It may be thought of as a societal blueprint for a particular culture or subculture" (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 81).

When applying Bronfenbrenner's theory to school systems, Iverson (2002) is supportive, stating that a student's environmental influences of home, community and human interaction contribute to his/her growth and development. Iverson goes further to apply Bronfenbrenner's theory to define environments as microsystem, mesosystems, and macrosystems: 1) microsystems are schools, classrooms, homes, and playgroups; 2)

mesosystems are the relationships between microsystems and constitute as the student's

learning environment; and 3) microsystems are the values, beliefs, and cultures that can

affect a student's behavior (p. 9-11). Iverson discussed the influence teachers and parents

have on the student's microsystem, and stated, "The school itself is a microsystem, as are

classrooms, playgrounds, lunchrooms, and so forth. The home is another microsystem.

Each individual microsystem has its own culture, norms, expectations, and influences on

children's growth and development" (p. 11).

When discussing the concept of humans in the context of systems and system

influences, Miley, O'Melia and Dubois' (2009) ecological systems perspective parallels

Bronfenbrenner's theory. Miley, O'Melia, and Dubois hypothesize that humans are

multifaceted and that they have individualized emotions and conflict, but are also

members of a larger, more complex system in which they are assigned specific roles. In

these roles, humans actively participate in events that enhance their development and are

consequently influenced and fashioned by external powers and situations (Miley,

O'Melia, and Dubois). Iverson (2002) supports this perspective stating, "Human nature is

such that behavior develops as a result of multiple and complex systems-level influences"

(p. 10).

One of the primary complex systems-level influences on a human's development

is the family unit. An individual's transactions in the family system will shape his/her

development, and "It is largely through the family that the character is formed, vital roles

are learned, and children are socialized for responsible participation in the larger society"

(Hepworth, Rooney, Rooney, Strom-Gottfried, & Larson, 2009, p. 276). The influence of

the family's culture, implicit and explicit rules, power structure, bonding with other

external systems, internal connectedness to each other, and family communication style has a direct impact on how the individual will develop his/her personality and essentially drive his/her proximal processes within the ecological systems with which he/she interacts.

In essence, the ecological perspective is one of affect and affected. Human responses to the influences of their environment in turn influence the responses of other humans and/or the environmental system in which the person is interacting; thus the phrase "person in environment" (Miley, O'Melia, & Dubois, 2009). Person in environment symbolizes the mutual relationship of a person interacting with his/her environment, consequently resulting in transactions that shape the self by the interaction; meaning humans take part in interactions everyday and are also part of larger systems which engage in transactions (Miley, O'Melia, & Dubois). Johnson and Yanca (2007) define person in environment as an approach that "…examines the exchange of matter, energy, and information among these systems over time, including past, present and future. Changes in these exchanges in one part of the ecosystem will affect other parts of the ecosystem" (p. 13). One could take this a step further and, for the purposes of this study, consider the concept of "student in environment."

Problem Statement

Nationally, there has been myriad research investigating why students choose to drop out of school. Literature documenting this research spans decades of dedicated analysis of dropout statistics, prevention methods, and reactive strategizing that identify indicators of dropout, methods that proactively decrease dropout rates, and alternatives for students to obtain an education using non-traditional means; yet, little research has

8

been conducted in Jenkins County West Virginia to determine why West Virginia students are choosing to leave school and not return.

The documented dropout rate for Jenkins County Schools increased annually from 2005 through 2007, with the highest reported rate of 575 cases of dropout documented by Jenkins County for the 2007-2008 school year (Director of Counseling and Testing, Jenkins County Schools, personal communication, June 14, 2010). In 2008-2009, Jenkins County saw a decline in dropout reporting 555 cases (Director of Counseling and Testing, Jenkins County Schools, personal communication, June 14, 2010). Regardless of this decline in dropout rates between 2007-2008 and 2008-2009, the dropout rate was at its highest in four years, and at the heart of this dropout crisis are Jenkins County's two largest high schools, which should be producing the highest numbers of graduates based on enrollment (WVDE, 2009). Sims High School's[3] reported dropout rate for the 2007-2008 school year was 84 students, which resulted in a 7.1% dropout rate. Comparatively, Park High School also reported higher dropout statistics. In the 2007-2008 school year, Park High School reported that 107 students dropped out, which resulted in an 8.5% dropout rate (WVDE, 2009). Noteworthy dropout rates in Jenkins County Schools' two largest high schools, Sims High School and Park High School, indicate a need to determine why students are choosing to leave school.

Jenkins County School administrators suspect that factors of absenteeism, suspension rates, socio-economic status, social barriers, and grade point average may be contributing to the increase; however, no research has determined if there is any significant correlation between suspected factors and student dropout rates. Furthermore, no research has explored the perceptions of Attendance Directors, Guidance Counselors,

---

[3] To protect confidentiality, the names of counties, people, and places have been changed.

and Jenkins County students. The aforementioned statistics further indicate a need for exploration to determine why the students attending Sims and Park High Schools are choosing to dropout, as well as exploration and formulation of recommendations to proactively decrease dropout rates and help students stay in school.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of current Jenkins County Schools students identified as at-risk of dropping out, former Jenkins County students who are no longer attending due to dropping out, and Jenkins County Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors. The purpose of exploring the perception of the Attendance Directors and the Guidance Counselors was to investigate their perceptions about what prompts the students they serve to leave school, in order to obtain recommendations for proactive strategies and anticipatory measures for dropout prevention. The purpose of exploring the current Jenkins County Schools at-risk students' perceptions, as well as the former Jenkins County Schools students who have dropped out was to investigate why students drop out of school along with what factors may be contributing to the desire to leave school and not return.

Research Questions

The following questions are addressed using qualitative research methods.

1. What perceptions do students identified as at-risk of dropping out, students who have dropped out of school, and Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors of high dropout ranked schools have about the reasons why kids choose to leave school?

2. What perceptions do students identified as at-risk of dropping out, students who have dropped out of school, and Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors of high dropout ranked schools have about proactive and reactive strategies that could be implemented to effectively prevent students who are at-risk from choosing to leave school?

Operational Definitions

The following operational terms are used to define participants in the study:

1. Attendance Director – Refers to the Jenkins County Schools professional social workers assigned to monitor attendance in an administratively assigned Jenkins County School. Attendance Directors track student attendance rates; report and prosecute excessive truancy; and work collaboratively with West Virginia Juvenile court, youth, and probation services, Student-based Assistance Teams, and Jenkins County Guidance Counselors and Administrators. Additionally, Attendance Directors conduct home visits to assess the students' socio-economic status, parenting efficiency, and student safety, as well as assist students with socio-economic hardship issues such as clothing and shoe vouchers, monies for groceries, and referral for community social services.

2. At-risk Student – Refers to students identified as at-risk of dropping out of Jenkins County Schools, aged 11-21. Students who have been identified share demographic indicators of dropout such as: poor academic achievement, history of retention, excessive absenteeism (10 days unexcused absence or more), multiple suspension or disciplinary action, and/or have an indicated desire to dropout of Jenkins County Schools.

3. Dropout/Former Student – Refers to adolescents and young adults aged 11-21 who have formerly attended Jenkins County Schools. Former Students were identified at one point in their school career as at-risk due to demographic indicators of dropout such as: poor academic achievement, history of retention, excessive absenteeism (10 days unexcused absence or more), multiple suspension or disciplinary actions. Former Students are students who have formalized the decision to leave Jenkins County Schools and not return.

4. Guidance Counselors – Refers to the Jenkins County Schools professional counseling staff assigned to monitor student academic performance. Guidance Counselors are administratively assigned to Jenkins County Schools, and job duties include academic credit monitoring, referral for alternative education opportunities, academic achievement testing, referral to community-based social service agencies, and working collaboratively with Attendance Directors and Student-based Assistance Teams and Administrators.

Significance of the Study

As indicated previously, the perceptions about why students choose to leave school have not been ethnographically explored in Jenkins County, and obtaining the perspective of students at-risk of dropping out, former Jenkins County students that have dropped out, and Attendance Directors, Guidance Counselors will generate emergent themes that will enable Jenkins County administrators to develop proactive and reactive strategies for dropout prevention that, while not generalizable, may be useful for other school districts in West Virginia. The results of this study add to the body of knowledge

of the perception of students and administrators about the reasons students decide to dropout.

The information gained from this study can enlighten Jenkins County Schools Administrators and West Virginia Department of Education policymakers to the systemic issues that influence the students' decision to drop out. Moreover, the emergent themes generated by this study provide a unique perspective of the Jenkins County, West Virginia school system, and endow administrators, Attendance Directors, Guidance Counselors, and curriculum specialists with knowledge and information that may help in developing a framework of strategically-based action steps to address the high dropout rates in Jenkins County. Through the emergent themes and suggested strategies posited by the targeted students in both populations, Jenkins County Schools Administrators and West Virginia Department of Education policymakers should have a better understanding of the microsystem of the student (i.e., the human, family, social, classroom systems), that may allow for changes to policy and procedure to assist in addressing the systemic needs of the students and subsequently decrease student dropout rates.

The communities that surround Sims and Park High Schools, as well as the targeted feeder middle schools are vastly different due to the respective urban and rural culture and systemic dysfunctions that affect student retention. Study results may provide these communities with information and knowledge that highlight strategies to address community needs. This study may also provide Jenkins County with a clear and concise perspective of why students choose to leave school, and offer recommendations for change and strategies for programmatic and systemic improvement that directly affect the micro- and macrosystem environments with which Jenkins County students interact.

Assumptions and Limitations of the Study

Oftentimes qualitative research is criticized for the lack of generalizability in that the findings of qualitative studies are not attributable to the general public. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) address this issue by discussing the responsibility of the researcher and the reader by stating that "…if they [the researcher] carefully document a given setting or group of subjects, it is then someone else's job to see how it fits into the general scheme of things" (p. 33). That being said, even though the findings of this study are not generalizable to the population at large, the ultimate goal is reader generalizability.

This study did not use random sampling to generate data, but instead used purposeful and convenience sampling to provide comprehensive, rich data about the perceptions of why students become dropouts, which limits the generalizability of the study. Nevertheless, "Purposeful, strategic sampling can yield crucial information about critical cases" (Patton, 2002, p. 242). In addition to purposeful sampling as a limitation, there was significant difficulty finding Former Jenkins County Student interviewees in the county. Many of the Former Jenkins County Students chosen as possible participants were unable to be reached or located using the contact information provided by Jenkins County Schools, and of those that were contacted, several were unwilling to consent to participation. The goal of fifteen interviews with Former Jenkins County Students had to be adjusted to five to accommodate the barriers encountered; consequently minimizing the amount of data retrieved from this sample of the population.

Summary of the Research

This study is presented in six chapters. Chapter 1 includes the introduction, theoretical framework supporting the purpose and findings of the study, problem

statement, purpose of the study, research questions, significance of the study, and assumptions and limitations. Chapter 2 discusses the research questions, research design, population and sample, instrumentation, data collection procedures, and data analysis procedures.

Chapter 3 presents a pilot study with At-risk students, and serves as one of three case studies provided in this cross case analysis document. Chapter 3 includes methods used in the pilot study, literature review and emergent themes of the pilot study findings, and At-risk student recommendations. Chapter 4 presents the second case study and includes the perceptions of Former Jenkins County Schools students, methods used to collect and analyze data, literature review and emergent themes, and Former Jenkins County Schools student recommendations for action steps. Chapter 5 presents the third case study which includes the perceptions of Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors, methods used to collect and analyze data, literature review and emergent themes, and Attendance Director and Guidance Counselor recommendations for action steps. Chapter 6 presents the cross case analysis of the three case studies, including a summarization of the theoretical framework, lessons learned from the emergent themes, recommendations for change, and recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER TWO: METHODS

Research Questions

The following questions are addressed using qualitative research methods.

1. What perceptions do students identified as at-risk of dropping out, students who have dropped out of school, and Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors of high dropout ranked schools have about the reasons why kids choose to leave school?

2. What perceptions do students identified as at-risk of dropping out, students who have dropped out of school, and Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors of high dropout ranked schools have about proactive and reactive strategies that could be implemented to effectively prevent students who are at-risk from choosing to leave school?

Research Design

The research design selected for this study is a cross-case analysis of the perceptions of why students choose to leave school and not return. Cross-case analytical studies involve comparing groups that have separate, yet implicit characteristics that have consequential repercussions for a program or situation (Patton, 2002). Essentially, a cross-case analytical study is when "two or more case studies are done, and then compared and contrasted" (Bogdan and Biklen, 2003, p. 62). In this particular study, the separate groups of At-risk students, Former students, and Attendance Directors/Guidance Counselors all have characteristics that are similar, but each group provides a singular perspective about their perceptions of why students choose to leave school.

In order to determine if a qualitative study exploring the perceptions of students in Jenkins County would be feasible and to meet the design requirements of a cross-case analytical study, it was decided that a pilot study would be conducted through ethnographic exploration of at-risk student perceptions using focus groups and individual interviews. The pilot study allowed the researcher to test and fine-tune the design methods to determine the best method of research, modify interview questions, and anticipate any problems to amend discrepancies in the research process to determine if conducting larger-scale research was possible (Glesne, 2005; Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 2008; Patton, 2002).

Due to the pilot study's success, the researcher conducted further ethnographic exploration of Former student, Attendance Director, and Guidance Counselor perceptions in order to support the powerful themes and voices heard during the pilot study. These results should assist school administrators and personnel in their understanding of the children being served in the county school system, as well as provide other West Virginia county school systems with action items that may assist in decreasing the number of dropouts across the state.

Data Collection Procedures

The research is an ethnographic exploration of student perceptions using qualitative methods of individual interview and focus group interview. It was determined that individual interviews and focus groups would be conducted to gain the maximum amount of information.

Individual Interviews

Interview questions were constructed to explore the perceptions and experiences of the interviewee. Patton (2002) suggests open-ended questions to guide participants in providing rich information that reconstructs events or experiences to a level where the event or experience "could have been observable had the observer been present" (p. 349-350). The interview questions for the pilot study and subsequent data collection were modeled after Patton's categories of Opinion and Values questions and Knowledge questions. Opinion and Values questions, which are "… aimed at understanding the cognitive and interpretive processes of people ask about opinions, judgments, and values…; Knowledge questions inquire about the respondent's factual information – what the respondent knows" (p. 350).

Focus Group Interviews

Patton (2002) states that focus groups should consist of "…6 to 10 people with similar backgrounds who participate in the interview for one to two hours" (p. 385). There are several advantages to focus group interviewing that include diversity of thought or experience, a sense of camaraderie, and interactions that "enhance data quality" (p. 386). According to Morgan (1997), focus groups should have three elements: "…focus groups are a research method devoted to data collection, group discussion as the source of the data, [and] acknowledges the researcher's active role in creating the group discussion for data collection purposes" (¶ 3).

Focus group interviews were selected as a data collection method in order to obtain as much information as possible in a limited amount of time and contact. A focus group environment is what Partridge (1938) calls a secondary group environment,

"Secondary groups …do not exert a great deal of influence upon the individual members. Only infrequently do they come together as a group. The members do not, as a rule, have an opportunity to know each other intimately, and hence the influence of one upon the others is limited" (p. 91).

Prior to collecting data, the researcher obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to conduct the pilot study (Appendix A) and subsequent studies (Appendix B). If the Jenkins County At-risk student was a minor, the researcher enlisted the assistance of the Attendance Director/Guidance Counselor to obtain an initial Parental Consent for participation prior to the At-risk student participating in the interview/focus group. The Parental Consent outlined informed consent and the ability to withdraw from the study at any time. In order to ensure understanding of informed consent, the researcher verbally described and distributed a Child Assent for participation that outlined confidentiality, informed consent, and the ability to withdraw from the study at any time prior to conducting the interview/focus group with the At-risk students.

The researcher obtained consent for participation, distributing informed consent forms at the time of the scheduled interview with Attendance Directors, Guidance Counselors, and adult Former students prior to beginning the respective interview/focus group sessions. If the Jenkins County Former student was a minor, the researcher obtained Parental Consent from the Former student's parent or legal guardian prior to obtaining Child Assent from the Former student.

Instrumentation

For the pilot study, five open-ended questions were developed for both individual interviews and focus group interviews:

- Tell me about your school.

- What are some things you like about being in school?

- What are some things you dislike about being in school?

- What are the reasons some students decide to drop out?

- What do you think would make some students decide to stay in school?

For the subsequent data collection with Former Jenkins County Schools students, six open-ended questions were used for the individual interviews:

- Tell me about your school experience.

- What are the reasons you decided to drop out?

- What are some things you liked about being in school?

- What are some things you disliked about being in school?

- What do you think would have made you decide to stay in school?

- What are your plans for the future?

For the subsequent data collection with Attendance Directors/Guidance Counselors, six open-ended questions were developed for both individual interviews and focus groups:

- Tell me about a typical day working with at-risk students at your school(s).

- What are some of the reasons students decide to drop out?

- What influences students to leave school?

- What proactive measures could be incorporated to keep students in school?

- What reactive strategies do you employ with students who are planning to drop out?

- How prepared do you feel to handle the drop out crisis at your school(s)?

There were also several probes developed to prompt all participants to expand on thoughts and opinions. Probes are used to deepen understanding and clarification, and allow the researcher to gather more information from the participants (Glesne, 2005). Examples of probe questions include:

- Tell me more about _____.

- Can you give me an example?

- Can you paint a picture of _____ for me?

- How did you (feel, know, learn)?

- What do you mean when you say _____?

Population and Sample

The sampling methods used for this study are purposeful sampling, entire population, and convenience sampling of At-risk students, Former Jenkins County Schools students, Attendance Directors, and Guidance Counselors selected from two targeted high schools (Sims and Park) and two targeted middle schools (Campbell and Matthews[4]) in Jenkins County, West Virginia.

The 22 At-risk students identified to participate in the pilot study were purposefully selected because they were determined to be at-risk of dropping out. Based on the selection of at-risk students by the Attendance Directors and/or Guidance Counselors, as well as the need for both parental consent and child assent, it was determined that the pilot study research would consist of three individual interviews and four focus groups – one group per targeted school. Purposeful sampling allowed the researcher to study the issue in-depth by identifying select students who could provide a

---

[4] To protect confidentiality, the names of counties, people, and places have been changed.

significant amount of information about antecedents that may trigger a student to make the decision to leave school (Glesne, 2005). A total of 22 students participated in the pilot study, and consisted of At-risk students from Sims High School, Park High School, and two respective middle schools, Campbell and Matthews. The At-risk student sample consisted of two individual interviews with high school At-risk students, and 20 At-risk middle and high school focus group participants.

Five Former Jenkins County students were selected using purposeful sampling as well, because Jenkins County School Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors felt that both At-risk and Former students selected to participate would be able to provide rich, comprehensive perspectives about why students choose to leave school. According to Seidman (2006), people symbolize their experiences through language, and this ability is the fundamental nature of being human. To understand human behavior, interviewers must listen to the language; thus, allowing researchers "…access to the context of people's behavior and thereby…a way for researchers to understand the meaning of that behavior" (p. 10). The Former student sample consisted of five Former students who participated in individual interviews.

The Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors sampling selections were determined by their professional appointment in the four target schools. The four targeted schools participating in the study employ a total of four Attendance Directors, all of whom are under the supervision of one Lead Attendance Director. Both Sims High School and Matthews Middle School employ one Attendance Director that serves the entire student body respectively. Park High School employs two Attendance Directors,

one of whom is shared with Campbell Middle School. All Attendance Directors for the four targeted schools, as well as the Lead Attendance Director participated in the study. Sims and Park High Schools employ a total of nine Guidance Counselors, one of whom is also a School Psychologist, all of whom are under the supervision of the Director of Counseling and Testing. This entire population was invited to participate in the study. Eight of the Guidance Counselors along with the School Psychologist who serves as a Guidance Counselor participated in focus groups at their respective employing schools. The Director of Counseling and Testing choose to participate in Sims High School's focus group.

In sum, twenty-two At-risk Students, five Former Jenkins County Students, four Attendance Directors, one Lead Attendance Director, eight out of nine Guidance Counselors, one School Psychologist, and one Director of Counseling and Testing provided information for this study.

Data Analysis Procedures

Analysis of data collected through qualitative measures "…involves organizing what you have seen, heard, and read, so that you can make sense of what you have learned" (Glesne, 2005, p. 147). The individual interviews and focus group interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, which enabled the researcher to sort, arrange and code the data into classifications that converged into themes of information that were interpreted to find meaning in the information given by the participants. This process included finding common words and phrases, as well as looking for patterns in the topics. Preliminary analysis yielded categories, which were further analyzed and organized into major themes and the prevalent subcategories that defined them.

23

The pilot study reported in Chapter 3 enabled the researcher to gain valuable information and provided a supportive case for further research (Glesne, 2005; Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 2008; Patton, 2002). Chapters 3, 4, and 5 individually report the emergent themes elicited from individual analysis of each data set collected; consequently facilitating three individual case studies. Chapter 6 triangulates the findings of Chapters 3, 4, and 5 in order to analyze the findings across cases to determine overarching themes and provide recommendations for further study.

In order to eliminate bias and influence, as well as provide a foundation of support for the emergent themes, the literature review for all three case studies was conducted following the data collection, which accommodated the timing of the study and increased "…openness to whatever emerges in the field" (Patton, 2002, p. 226).

CHAPTER 3: DROPPING OUT: A PILOT STUDY EXPLORING AT-RISK

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF WHY STUDENTS CHOOSE TO LEAVE

SCHOOL

Introduction

Data collected by Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morison (2006) and Nowicki, et al. (2004) provided statistical and perceptive information that delineated the perceptions of students rather than administrators, and speaks to the perceptions of why students are choosing to leave school. In an attempt to explore at-risk students' perceptions of why students drop out of school and what factors may be contributing to the desire to leave school and not return, a pilot study was conducted with 22 Jenkins County School[5] students who were identified as at-risk of dropping out.

Methods

Design

In order to determine if a qualitative study exploring the perceptions of students in Jenkins County would be feasible, it was decided that pilot research would be conducted through ethnographic exploration of student perceptions using focus groups and individual interviews. The pilot study allowed the researcher to test and fine-tune the design methods to determine the best method of research, modify interview questions, and anticipate any problems to amend discrepancies in the research process to determine if conducting larger-scale research was possible (Glesne, 2005; Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 2008; Patton, 2002).

---

[5] To protect confidentiality, the names of counties, people, and places have been changed

Sampling

The students identified to participate in the pilot study were purposefully selected because they were determined to be at-risk of dropping out, and because Jenkins County School Counselors and Attendance Directors felt the students participating would be able to provide a rich, comprehensive perspective about why students choose to leave school. Based on the purposeful selection of students by the Attendance Directors and/or Guidance Counselors, as well as the need for both parental consent and child assent, it was determined that the pilot study research would consist of three individual interviews and four focus groups – one group per targeted school. Moreover, all students selected to participate in the individual and focus group interviews had some type of interaction with the school's Attendance Director and/or Guidance Counselor. These relationships were a key element in obtaining parental consent for participation.

Purposeful sampling allowed the researcher to study the issue in-depth by selecting students who could provide a significant amount of information about antecedents that may trigger a student to make the decision to leave school (Glesne, 2005). Individual interviews and focus group interviews were conducted to gain the maximum amount of information. The original intent of the pilot study was to include a maximum of 32 Jenkins County Middle and High School students from two feeder middle schools and two high schools who had been pre-determined as at-risk of potential dropout.

In all, 22 students participated in the pilot study. Of the 22 students who participated in the study, there were nine (9) boys and 13 girls; the age ranges of the students participating were 12-19. Students participating were African American, Bi-

racial (African American and Caucasian), or Caucasian. There were three individual interviews with female students, and four focus groups comprised of a mixture of boys and girls. The largest focus group consisted of six students, with the smallest consisting of four.

Data Collection

Individual Interviews

"At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman, 2006, p. 9). Interviewing helps the researcher learn more about the phenomenon and to gather information from participant's life events, ideas, insights, and perceptions. "We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe" (Patton, 2002, p. 340). The purpose of conducting individual interviews was to gain the perspective of three female students who fit the sample criteria. Two of the participants attended middle school, and one was in high school. All three females consented to participating in the interviews, which were conducted in the student's school environment on the final two days of the 2007-2008 school year. Both environments were relatively empty of students, thus providing an environment of minimal interruption and promoting a level of comfort in a natural environment.

Interview questions were constructed to explore the perceptions and experiences of the interviewee. Patton (2002) suggests open-ended questions to guide participants in providing rich information that reconstructs events or experiences to a level where the event or experience "could have been observable had the observer been present" (p. 349-

350). The interview questions for the pilot study were modeled after Patton's categories of Opinion and Values questions and Knowledge questions.

For the pilot study, five open-ended questions were developed to be used in both individual interviews and focus group interviews:

- Tell me about your school.

- What are some things you like about being in school?

- What are some things you dislike about being in school?

- What are the reasons some students decide to drop out?

- What do you think would make some students decide to stay in school?

There were also several probes used to prompt participants to expand on thoughts and opinions. Probes were used to deepen understanding and clarification, and allow the researcher to gather more information from the participants (Glesne, 2005). Examples of probe questions included:

- Tell me more about _____.

- Can you give me an example?

- Can you paint a picture of _____ for me?

- How did you (feel, know, learn)?

- What do you mean when you say _____?

Focus Group Interviews

With the assistance of the Attendance Directors for each targeted school, additional students were selected to participate in focus group interviews. Patton (2002) states that focus groups should consist of "…6 to 10 people with similar backgrounds who participate in the interview for one to two hours" (p. 385). Focus group interviews

were selected as a data collection method in order to obtain as much information as possible in a limited amount of time and contact. It was also assumed that the adolescents participating would provide more information in a group environment. A focus group environment is what Partridge (1938) calls a secondary group environment, "Secondary groups …do not exert a great deal of influence upon the individual members. Only infrequently do they come together as a group. The members do not, as a rule, have an opportunity to know each other intimately, and hence the influence of one upon the others is limited" (p. 91).

Because adolescent behavior is characteristically related to conformity and fitting in with peers, typically youth within the age ranges of the selected participants (12-19) are forming a sense of identity that develops a sense of autonomy as well as meets societal expectations; adolescents are consequently creating a sense of self within a group context (Lerner, 1997). From this perspective, it was assumed that a socialized group setting would be an optimum choice for data collection.

For the pilot study, the Attendance Directors and School Counselors were asked to select students who met the criteria of at-risk. Possible at-risk criteria included: history of poor academics, high levels of disciplinary issues, and excessive truancy.

Data Analysis

Analysis of data collected through qualitative measures "…involves organizing what you have seen, heard, and read, so that you can make sense of what you have learned" (Glesne, 2005, p. 147). The goal of the pilot study data collection was to discover if the emergent themes would warrant an in-depth study of Jenkins County School students' perceptions of choosing to leave school. The individual interviews and

focus group interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, thus enabling the researcher

to sort, arrange and code the data into classifications that converged into themes of

information that could then be interpreted to find meaning in the information given by the

students. This process included finding common words and phrases, as well as looking

for patterns in the topics. Preliminary analysis yielded categories, which were further

analyzed and organized into two major themes: Attitude about School and Drama. Table

1 displays the two major themes and the prevalent subcategories that define them.

Table 1: Emergent Themes & Prevalent Subcategories: At-Risk Students

Attitude about School	Drama
Teacher attitude (includes classroom climate and teacher support)	Fighting (includes physical and verbal altercations over relationships or gossip/rumors, race and territory battles)
Academics (includes plans for the future and graduation credits)	Bullying (includes peer status, peer pressure, drug use, and teasing)
Family Influence (includes history of dropout and truancy)	
Disciplinary action (includes policy enforcement and alternative education)	

Research Question 1: Perceptions

What perceptions do students identified as at-risk of dropping out have about the

reasons why kids choose to leave school?

Introduction

In order to eliminate bias and influence, as well as provide a foundation of

support for the emergent themes, the literature review for the pilot study was approached

following the data collection (Patton, 2002) to accommodate the timing of the study and

with the knowledge that specific elements and themes would emerge from the data

collected.

The purpose of the pilot study was to explore at-risk students' perceptions of why students drop out of school and what factors may be contributing to the desire to leave school and not return. Being aware of the mass quantities of literature available about dropouts, the literature pertaining to these issues was explored, and it was discovered there was significant correlation between the themes emerging from the data collected.

Attitude about School

Dewey (1897) proclaimed that a child's learning is psychological and sociological. Dewey hypothesized that from birth a child's participation in his/her environment stimulates and shapes the child's perception of the surrounding events and provides the opportunity for participation and eventual development of habits, ideas, feelings and emotions. Chen (n.d.) supports Dewey's proclamation by hypothesizing that that a child's coaches, parents, teachers, and/or peers, when actively involved with a child's learning, become instruments of culture that give the child cognitive tools needed for development. In essence, a child's intellectual development is a direct derivative of social interactions shared by a group or culture, wherein the child eventually internalizes the information and builds knowledge based on interpretations of the social environment (Abdul-Haqq, 1998). Abdul-Haqq goes further to hypothesize, "Social or Vygotskian [Lev Vygotsky] constructivism emphasizes education for social transformation and reflects a theory of human development that situates the individual within a sociocultural context…Individuals construct knowledge in transaction with the environment, and in the process both the individual and the environment are changed" (¶ 6).

Teacher attitude. Students participating in the pilot study stated several reasons why they maintain a particularly negative attitude about school, with teacher attitude and

academics being the most prevalent. In the review of literature, poor teacher/student interaction has been identified as an antecedent to student dropout. In a longitudinal study, Christle, Jolivette, and Nelson (2007) used quantitative and qualitative data from 20 Kentucky schools that met inclusion criteria of high dropout rates and 20 Kentucky schools that met exclusion criteria of low dropout rates to determine school factors that may contribute to dropout. The researchers conducted the longitudinal study in three stages and determined implications of: a decreased stress on the importance of school climate, unprofessional teacher appearance and poor interaction with students, decreased instructional strategies, supervision and student engagement in the classroom, and poor school condition (air quality, size, appearance, building quality) all having significant correlation with increased dropout rates (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson).

Within the pilot study data, several indicators of "teachers as a problem" emerged as one of the most prevalent subcategories, especially when students were discussing teacher support in the classroom. The common perception was that teachers do not communicate care. Knesting (2008) corroborates this perspective, stating, "…this group of students identified the significance of feeling respected and cared for to their decision to stay in school. Their biggest complaint about school was uncaring and disrespectful teachers and administrators" (p. 8). Students at all four pilot schools indicated that teachers were a reason why they think students drop out of school. Moreover, the students identified lack of classroom interaction and academic support, as well as lack of alternatives to didactic instruction as specific indicators of dropping out (e.g., getting too far behind or not completing work because of unclear expectations and lack of one-on-one time to explain in depth). When asked about the things disliked about school, a

female student emphatically discussed one particular teacher's attitude toward the

students and negative communication style, stating,

> It's like some of the teachers are just here for a paycheck.
> Ms._____'s not here; she really sit down and you
> know, be there, like you ain't gotta be a friend. Just be,
> like, a teacher, and be here to help you succeed and
> everything. You wanna yell at us so much about coming to
> school and getting an education? Then you need to take the
> time out to sit down and teach us what we need to know.
> There's this math teacher here, she's just, like, she's a good
> teacher but she's not. I don't know how to put it, she's just,
> like, she likes to argue with students all the time and when
> you ask her to help you, it's like she just be like, "Look in
> the book," and when you still don't understand it, she's
> like, "Well I'm not gonna help you. You just need to look
> in the book." And then, she'll just say unnecessary
> comments like, "Man you're not gonna succeed. Why are
> you here _____?" She just don't need to say that.
> Teachers need to just come, do their job. And, there are
> certain teachers that do really care about you, that will take
> the extra time to help you, but there's some that's just there
> just to be there. That's what I think.

Across the board students voiced "teachers" as being a significant reason why a student would choose to leave school and provided strong points about their perceptions of negative teacher attitude, negative communication and interaction, and classroom climate. A dialogue between two high school students in one focus group provided insight into the poor interaction teachers in their school have with them:

GIRL: Most teachers, teachers, they talk about you don't

need to come to school.

BOY: The teachers at this school, they don't talk about,

you need something _____?

GIRL: Yeah they'll sit there and look at their computer and

never looking at us.

BOY: So, they're not even looking at what they're

supposed to be looking at.

A second focus group had a similar dialogue, albeit reluctantly. The three students in this interaction, all have hopes of staying in school and becoming professionals, but presented the following with attitudes of resignation and hopelessness when discussing why they believe students choose to leave school:

INTERVIEWER: You said the school? What do you mean

about the school?

BOY: It's pathetic!

INTERVIEWER: What's pathetic about it?

BOY 1: The whole thing!

GIRL: It's a joke!

INTERVIEWER: What do you mean by it's a joke? Give

me an example?

GIRL: It's like a carnival. It's like a fake show.

INTERVIEWER: Explain a little more…

GIRL: It's like everyone comes to watch something fake.

INTERVIEWER: What would be fake?

GIRL: Like, the teachers and stuff, they don't care. They

just come in and do their job.

GIRL: …you ask a question and they say, "You should

know how to do this, you are in the 10th grade!" I

have never seen this stuff before; nobody in my

class has seen this stuff before. Everybody is

failing, and there are classes, like that, well there is

nothing that you can do. A lot of them don't care or

want to help you at all.

INTERVIEWER: (To group): What do you think?

BOY 2: …Teachers don't really take anything seriously.

INTERVIEWER: Give me an example of them not taking

anything seriously?

BOY 3: Just like she said, they don't care whether you pass

or fail, they just want their paycheck. They just

want the money in their pockets.

In a study similar to Christle, Jolivette, and Nelson's (2007), Haley (2006) used focus groups to gain the perspective of students who initially dropped out of school and eventually returned to a school environment. Haley gained insight into what aspects of the student's school experience contributed to the decision to drop out and their subsequent return to an alternative environment, with analysis of the data indicating that the student's perception of school climate and teacher involvement, identified as "care" was a most prevalent contributor to dropping out. Haley indicated that a significant motivator to leave school was poor student/teacher relationships.

Lack of support and alienation was also indicated in a qualitative study conducted to determine young female students' perceptions about school life, stating, the influence of school "policies, attitudes, and actions on that perspective; and the influence of that perspective on the student's decision to leave school" (Grant, 1999, p. 6) is detrimental to student retention. Grant concluded:

> Alienation can influence the student's degree of effort, knowledge, and skill development. These factors, of course, affect the student's success or failure. Thus, the perception these participants had of their teachers' credibility and care influenced their view of personal learning as well as their efforts to participate and learn. (p. 106)

In the pilot study, the students did not attribute dropout to alienation, but to a perception of favoritism, and students made strong points about their perceptions of selective teacher attitude and classroom climate, with a majority of the students recognizing that they are not in the chosen group. With a laugh and a knowing smile, a high school boy stated,

Yeah it's like, hey, M. _____, like, he picks his favorite. I mean everybody is gonna have their favorites, but it's like, you pick your favorites who like do any and everything….It's like, well you got your favorites; the rich people that has the money. You'll let them do any and everything. You'll let them walk around wearing whatever they want to wear, say whatever they want to say, just because they never get in trouble or they'll do something that the teachers won't get onto them or stuff like that.

This type of selective process of singling out and tracking students based on behavior and academic status in the classroom was also noted by two boys attending different middle schools:

BOY 1: They got certain people in certain groups. Nice people, kind of disabled people, and stuff like that in certain groups and the other people, like say for instance me. Like, the blue group, they say we're the bad group and they can't trust us for nothing. They gotta lock up the bathrooms…

BOY 2: Like uh, one is, like, helping you with your work. You'll be asking for help and they don't want to help you. Like, somebody smart that, like, makes all good grades and stuff? They ask them for help and they want to help them.

Roderick (1993) supports the Jenkins County Schools students' perspectives about favoritism and student tracking, when discussing adolescent development and middle school to high school transition, stating,

> At-risk students according to this perspective encounter greater difficulty during the first year in a middle level school because of a "stage environment" mismatch between the developmental needs of adolescents and the practices of secondary schools. As at-risk students move into middle school and high school, their interactions with school personnel become more anonymous and less supportive, their in-class experiences become less engaging and rewarding, and they receive direct messages in terms of track placement regarding their relative position in their school. (p. 135)

One Jenkins County participant summarized this perspective, stating, "They try to, if you're not the best person in class, they try to find every little thing that you do to make them try to get you out of there."

Academics. Many of the students in the pilot study were identified as at-risk due to academic standing, and both middle school and high school students reported that their grades were "not good" or they were "catching up" in order to move onto the next grade level. Several of the students in the study were participating in summer school programs and additional blocks of academic time after school, with many of them being 1-3 years older than the projected age for their grade. For example, one student was on the cusp of her sixteenth birthday, and if she did not attend summer school, would be re-entering seventh grade in the fall of 2008; the average age of a seventh grade student is 12-13.

When asked how she felt about being 16 and in the seventh grade, her response was,

"Awkward." This is not an unusual phenomenon, and according to Roderick (1993),

> Students who experience a retention may face an increased risk of school
>
> leaving because they do more poorly in school or have lower self esteem
>
> as a result of that retention. Students who are retained in grade may also
>
> be at a higher risk of dropping out because a grade retention makes them
>
> overage. (p. 103)

There is a significant amount of literature that attests to the correlation of poor

academic standing with dropping out of school; however, Bridgeland, DiIulio, and

Morison (2006) provide statistical information that states that poor academic standing is

not the primary reason students drop out: "Thirty-five percent [of students surveyed] said

that 'failing in school' was a major factor for dropping out" (p. iii), which parallels with

the perceptions of the students in this pilot study. Out of the 22 students participating in

the pilot study, only two students indicated a strong desire and plan to drop out of school.

The other 20 students had specific plans for their future, with many of them citing college

or vocational education as the next phase of their lives to go on to careers in: Forestry,

Cosmetology, Social Work, Military, Medicine, Veterinary, and Law Enforcement. Two

of the students were grounded in the reality of their academic situations, and spoke to

lessons learned from poor academic decision making. When asked about what could be

done to keep students in school, one boy thoughtfully stated,

> I'd change everybody's thoughts about school, because I
>
> learned that it's not really the teachers… I mean, it's
>
> yourself. If you're gonna put yourself in that bad situation,

you're gonna have a bad year. Put yourself in a good

situation, go to class and do your work, keep your head on

straight; it's gonna be alright. This here, I use to hate

_____. No teacher. I fought everybody. My friends

would say, man, came to school this year with a different

attitude, started doing work and everything else. It's

changed. A lot of teachers like me now, and I made friends

with a lot of teachers. I mean, I try to stay away from, you

know, the bad grounds.

      Family Influence. The microsystem of the family has a direct effect on the

student's development and growth as an individual, and Ecological Systems Theory

assumes a social constructivist perspective, positing that the family-culture (ethnic and

values/beliefs) "…considers any individual as embedded in his or her actual family

system, which is, in turn, embedded in larger sociocultural systems" (Okun, 2005, p. 43).

According to Chen (n.d.), the tools the family-culture provides for a child include

introducing cultural history, social context, and language. Essentially, adults and peers

introduce and expose children to a specific culture, and consequently the children will

model and mimic said culture, eventually developing individual ideas and concepts based

on that cultural introduction (Chen). Miley, O'Melia, and DuBois (2009) support Chen's

(n.d.) perspective by stating that "Social constructivism centers on how people construct

meaning in their lives…meaning [is] generated through language, cultural beliefs, and

social interaction. Each person determines meaning as it is filtered through the

'ecosystemic' layers of the social and cultural environment" (p. 32).

Demographics provided by the participating students correlate with the literature that states that family-culture influence, especially the family's attitude about school, has a direct relation to student dropout. Information emerging from pilot data indicates that low socio-economic status, parent education levels, and family configuration (single and divorced) are common demographics of the children categorized as at-risk of dropping out of Jenkins County Schools. Many of the students in the pilot study reported that they knew of at least one (oftentimes more than one) family member dropping out of school, with parents and older siblings being the highest demographic.

In a Canadian study, Terry (2008) purposefully sampled 70 school dropouts participating in an Adult Literacy program. The results of the study indicated that lack of parental support, lack of reading material in the home, too much television viewing, and parental support and encouragement to drop out were influential factors that prompted these adults to drop out. Other parental influences that had a direct effect on the decision to drop out were: promises to home-school that never came to fruition, parents needing assistance with financial contribution, home care or child care, moving multiple times, poverty, parents' physical/alcohol/drug use, parents' low education levels and/or dropout status, and non-traditional households (single parents & divorce). Having multiple siblings and older siblings that dropped out were also factors in Terry's study.

Within the pilot study data, several demographic indicators similar to Terry's (2008) were reported, especially parental effect on dropout. In the pilot study, the two students who clearly indicated a strong desire/plan to drop out of school have the encouragement and support of their parent(s). Both students are female high school

students, one of whom is living in a single parent home with several younger siblings; the other female lives with extended family while awaiting her mother's release from jail.

Other discussion points that correlate with Terry's (2008) findings are laissez-faire parenting styles and lack of parent education. For example, when asked the question, "What do you do when you're not in school?" one middle school student flippantly replied, "Well, me and my mom will go down the road to my maw maw's, or something, cause she makes me stay home…" This same student spoke about her father's lack of education, stating with chagrin,

> He didn't finish school. My dad is retarded. I mean, I'm not
>
> joking either. He looked at me and asked me what 20 plus
>
> 20 was! He was like calculating stuff. And my mom,
>
> whenever she was pregnant with me, she had my dad's
>
> kids, my two sisters and my brother, and she was teaching
>
> them how to read, and the whole time she was teaching
>
> them, she was teaching my dad.

A more significant indicator of laissez-faire parenting styles emerged when high school students from single parent homes discussed their primary care-giving parent's attitudes about downtime from school and drug/alcohol use. When asked about what students do when not in school, one boy laughed and said, "Drink." After probing him to elaborate, the boy then matter-of-factly explained that he and his father drink together; he described these events reverently, almost proudly as if the two were bonding as men friends rather than father and son. Another male student defensively discussed his daily marijuana use as a way of coping with school stressors, and when probed about his

mother's knowledge about said use, reported that his mother was aware of his smoking, and asked him not to "do it in the house; so I go out into the woods." Kung and Farrell (2000) determined that lack of parent monitoring, along with peer pressure, can have a significant influence on adolescent drug use, particularly if the student lives in a single-parent home. Barrett and Turner (2006) support Kung and Farrell's determinations, stating,

> The relatively high levels of substance use among adolescents from single-parent families that lack the protective presence of an additional relative are explained largely by their greater stress exposure and association with deviant peers… it appears that the family processes that matter the most are those that protect offspring from high levels of stress exposure and limit their association with deviant peers. (p. 118)

Lack of parent monitoring was also evident when a 16 year old female high school student talked about how she spent her weekends at a local university's fraternity house, partying and hanging out with "nerdy white boys." The girl explains how she became associated with the fraternity,

> GIRL: Ok, I am really good friends with _____and
>
> her boyfriend _____, and I used to have a
>
> thing with their best friend _____, and he
>
> goes [university] now and now we are all just
>
> friends…
>
> INTERVIEWER: So you don't go home at all?
>
> INTERVIEWER: You are shaking your head no.

Disciplinary Action. Several of the students indicated having altercations with school administration over dress code and classroom disruptions like "clowning" and talking in class. Most of the students related the disciplinary issues to poor interaction or persecution by school administrators. For example, when discussing frustration about the dress code, a high school girl reported with exasperation:

> I was almost suspended yesterday for flip flops! 27 students
>
> in the main office because they were wearing flip flops! I
>
> think they crack down too much on dress codes. As long as
>
> they aren't flaunting everything they got, [it] shouldn't
>
> matter what they are wearing as long as they are in school
>
> and they are learning! They do focus too much on the dress
>
> code.

Out of the 22 students who participated, only two students indicated that they had a history of mental health issues, and two reported attending alternative education that was directly related to maladaptive behaviors. In a study examining students who exhibit "externalizing behaviors" of negativity, temper outbursts, disruptiveness, poor attitude, or diagnosed with mental illnesses such as oppositional defiant disorder, Jenson, Olympia, Farley, and Clark (2004) suggested preventative, proactive measures for less segregation and possibility of dropping out by providing a background literature review that implicates poor teacher support and negative response from teachers in the classroom as primary means for negativity being reciprocated by the student. Although Jenson, Olympia, Farley, and Clark relate to themes of disciplinary issues that emerged in the pilot study, especially the most prominent subcategory of teacher attitude, the

44

externalizing behaviors of the students in the pilot study were not discussed. The primary

motivation behind the selection of the particular sample chosen for the pilot study was

that the students were all at-risk of dropping out of school, and disciplinary status was a

possible indicator; however, it is assumed that the risk factors varied from school to

school. It would be unfair to assume that the students in the pilot study all exhibited

"externalizing behaviors," but it would be worthwhile to explore this angle.

Drama

Across the board students discussed "Drama" as a primary motivator for dropping

out of school. Drama is defined by the students in a variety of ways: physical fighting,

arguing, spreading rumors, teasing about differences, peer pressure to skip school or

leave, drugs, and race and territory battles. Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morison (2006)

found that 38% of students surveyed identified "Too much freedom…as a factor in their

decision to drop out of high school" (p.8). Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morison continued,

stating, "As young adults grew older, they had more freedom and more options, which

led some away from class or the school building. It was too easy to skip class or join in

activities outside of school" (p. 8).

Fighting. Within the pilot study, the high school focus groups and the high school

students' individual interview, fighting was discussed at length. Physical altercation

between two students, fighting over relationships as the primary reason (boy/girl/girl

triangulation), and gossiping/rumor spreading as the secondary factor. It was mainly

female students who discussed physical altercation. One high school girl proudly

described:

INTERVIEWER: How often is there a fight at this school?

45

GROUP: Almost every day!

GIRL: The day I got in the second fight, there were six

fights in a half hour. Towards the end of the year it

gets really bad, that's pretty much anybody has any

girl they fight over it. There is fights everywhere.

Another type of fighting that was discussed on the high school level was a division based on geographic territory. Both of the high school focus groups reported some type of geographical battle between students. A high school boy nonchalantly explained:

BOY: Like, last year for example, might start out at a

party, got brung to school on Monday.

GIRL: Yep.

BOY: Then that Monday, it turn into a riot.

GIRL: Uh huh.

BOY: _____against _____The whole

courtyard is filling up…

BOY: And that's drama to me.

GIRL: You see it coming though.

BOY: I mean, like, you know like little relationship

problems. Boyfriends - that's not drama. What I'm

talking about drama, I'm talking about you know,

somebody's life…

GIRL: _____ [territory-based] drama that was like

everybody here could have been…

BOY: Yeah.

GIRL: Everybody here could have died.

BOY: Everybody could have died.

In a quantitative study of 4,500 violent youth, Ellickson, Saner, and McGuigan (1997) determined that more than half of the participants engaged in some type of violent behavior. It was also determined that violent youth were also twice as likely to drop out of school or have low academic performance. Ellickson, Saner, and McGuigan also determined that, "approximately 25% of youth engaged in multiple high risk behaviors, including drug and alcohol misuse, sexual activity, dropping out of school, and serious delinquent activities" (¶ 29), which supports the subcategories of drugs and youth violence as indicators of dropping out/poor academic performance that emerged from the high school data.

In addition, Staff and Kraeger (2008) determined that peer social standing (i.e., popularity) had greater influence on student dropout, with participating in violent groups as a significant indicator. Staff and Kraeger conducted a longitudinal study with male adolescents and determined "that disadvantaged boys with high status in violent groups are at much greater risks of high school dropout than other students" (p. 87). The students in the pilot study did not identify if the territorial fights were mainly male or female gang behavior, but both high school focus groups indicated a territorial divide, with one high school insinuating an underlying issue of racial division.

47

Bullying. Espelage and Swearer (2004) hypothesize that bullying has a negative transactional affect on the ecological systems, stating that all systems (micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-) with which the student interacts are reciprocally affected by bullying in school. Espalage and Swearer break down the ecologically systemic delineation of bullying:

> The microsystem depicts the child's immediate interaction with others, and includes others' reactions to bullying behaviors…Thus, the bully, bully-victim, victim, or bystander interacts with others in his or her social environment, and this interaction either exacerbates or mitigates bullying and/or victimization behaviors. The mesosystem includes the interrelationship between systems in the child's life (e.g., home and school). The mesosystem depicts the congruence between two or more environments, such as the congruence between home and school regarding bullying behavior. The exosystem includes influences from other contexts, such as the effect of a school district's antibullying policy or parental involvement in the school system. Finally, the macrosystem is the influence of cultural mores, such as societal attitudes toward bullying behaviors. (p. 4)

Universally, the students agreed that some form of bullying was endemic in the school environment; however, there were some differences in the perception of bullying between the middle school and high school participants. Under the umbrella of bullying, students included elements of peer status, peer pressure to skip school or do drugs, teasing, and harassment. The adolescents participating in the pilot study all fall within

the puberty and adolescence stage of development; a period of psychosocial development of identity formation and societal role expectation. Lerner (1997) defines this as a period of growth "In trying to find an orientation to life that meets both individual and societal demands, the adolescent is searching for a set of behavioral prescriptions -- a role -- that fulfills the biological, psychological, and social demands of life" (p. 314). From this perspective, it can be assumed that the students participating in the pilot study are across the spectrum of the puberty and adolescence phase of development, which, as the students mature, will consequently transform their perceptions of social interaction with their peers.

From the middle school perspective, students' primary perception of bullying as a form of Drama centered on teasing. Students described teasing as making fun and calling names. In both middle school focus groups, the students targeted a participant as a victim of bullying. When questioned how they felt about being bullied, neither of them chose to talk about their situations. One girl discussed teasing when talking about a notorious bully in the school,

> Well, she picked on people though, because people pick on
>
> her. They call her "fat" and "ugly" and "stupid" and
>
> "skanky." Last year she, like, her hair, she couldn't brush it
>
> or nothing. I don't know why, but her hair was real nappy
>
> and stuff, and people would call her "nappy head" and stuff
>
> like that. So, she just picks on people this year, because
>
> there's, the only [one] reason really to pick on her besides
>
> calling her fat. And she'll look at you and go, "I know I'm

fat and your problem is?" So, I mean she really don't care

this year. Her main [attitude] this year is, "Don't worry

about who is bullying me - bully them."

Terry (2008) determined that peer effects including bullying and peer pressure by

out of school friends/boyfriends are factors that contribute to dropping out, with peer

relationships and torment/abuse from peers as significant factors that contributed to

dropping out. Terry's study also identified other indicators that included: shame related to

appearance, clothing, and home, bullying, language barriers, having friends that are out

of school or who have dropped out already, being married or in relationships with out of

school peers, and pregnancy.

In Staff and Kraeger's (2008) study of male adolescents, the boys nominated

their five best friends, and the researchers compared the nominations with the

demographic indicators of dropout that were exhibited by the boys in the study. Staff and

Kraeger determined that, "The odds of dropout are lowest for the most popular youth

(who received seven or more friendship nominations). Thus, in keeping with the findings

of most prior research, our measure of peer status has a positive association with

educational attainment" (p. 456). A female participant from one of the target high

schools spoke to this perspective of "have and have nots" stating,

People come to school and talk about people just to make

their self feel better, and make their self look, you know…

think that they're better than you. And, personally, I don't

think nobody is better than anybody cause you wear the

same clothes, you shop at the same place, you don't put

your clothes on no different than I put my clothes on…

Two other perspectives where two high school students are talking about

the divide in peer status,

> BOY: It's all about respect too. Somebody who's, you
>
> know, somebody who might come from a rich
>
> neighborhood, just can't come with somebody…
>
> GIRL: Yeah.
>
> BOY: You know somebody's area and just say "Yo, I'm
>
> better than ya'll. Ya'll not but poor trash."
>
> GIRL: It's like…
>
> BOY: You can't do that. I mean, off gate that's gonna
>
> cause a fight. I wouldn't let somebody come here
>
> and say that I'm broke, you…
>
> GIRL: You got some of the kids here that, that actually
>
> come out of like, "Yeah I'm better than you…"

There seemed to be a correlation between gossip/rumors and fighting, and from

the high school student's perspectives, one (gossip) leads to the other (fighting). A female

high school student proudly explained a fight in which she was a participant with another

female student who was pregnant:

> …because this girl she was pregnant, and she started
>
> talking about me being pregnant and saying stuff about my
>
> dad made me mad, so, when she got pregnant I started

rumors about her. She did the same thing to me. It got

really bad. Said she was going to fight me, so I ran down to

the office, so she fought me down there.

Another girl spoke to this trend when discussing the reasons why her best friend dropped out of school:

Well, she is a trouble maker! She stirs up a lot of stuff with

people; stuff with boys and girls. She was in 18 fights

before two months of school this year, and her dad told her

he was sick of her running her mouth and getting into so

much trouble at school. And, she ended up getting into a

fight on the school bus and a bunch of people jumped in

and she got jumped. But she still won; it was like six

people against one, and one of the girls she fought was

pregnant and she didn't know it and she lost the baby and

she felt bad about it. And, her dad said he was sick of it and

her dad made her drop out.

Another aspect the high school participants spoke about was peer pressure to skip school or do drugs. In a study of 8-10th grade students, Henry (2007) determined a correlation between truancy and drug use, stating;

…truancy and drug use to coexist due to the unsupervised time that

truancy affords a young person. It is well known that young people with

large amounts of unsupervised and unproductive time are more likely to

demonstrate delinquent behavior, including drug use. (p. 34)

52

As stated earlier, lack of parent monitoring and parent effectiveness has been determined as an influence on adolescent drug use (Barrett & Turner, 2006; Kung & Farrell, 2000). Barrett and Turner (2006) stated, "The relatively high levels of substance abuse among adolescents from single-parent families that lack the protective presence of an additional relative are explained largely by their greater stress exposure and association with deviant peers" (p. 118). The high school participants supported these points when they discussed drugs as either using to cope with school or selling to make quick money. Only one boy targeted drug use as a factor in dropping out, and in the discussion related the drop out connection to lack of parent intervention:

> Well, drugs. I think is the main thing. I know a lot of
>
> potheads at school, and about 95% of them drop out of
>
> school. Because if they are not at school, then they can just
>
> sit at home and get drunk all day and their parents don't
>
> care. That is one of the main reasons - is that parents just
>
> don't care anymore. That is what I think.

A high school boy discussed how others drop out of school to sell drugs for quick money, demonstrating the acceptance that using and selling drugs has become a part of the students' everyday reality,

> Nah, not they on [drugs]. I mean, while you're in school,
>
> some people look at it as like, you can't make no money in
>
> school! Got a better chance of skipping school and going
>
> out on the street and making money. That's the way some
>
> people say it, then after that, I mean, you got some people

might skip school couple days, go out on the street and

chill, and then end up getting locked up.

Truancy and unsupervised time also were topics of discussion related to peer pressure and fitting in. A high school girl talks about her one and only experience skipping class:

I got caught skipping, and it was the first and last time I

skipped! Because one of my friends asked me to, and then a

bunch of other kids skipped, so there was about seven

students walking down the hall skipping. So, it was kind of

obvious so we got caught…because we were all skipping

from the same class. Like idiots.

Two other high school students laughingly discuss peer pressure to skip or leave school as a regular occurrence:

BOY: People, I mean, they be trying to get you down on

their level. Like, trying to get you to skip class or

trying to get you to catch the 11:00 bus and leave.

(Group laughter)

GIRL: …it is fun, and then somebody get in trouble cause,

and then you sitting there in the office. You can't go

back to class. It's boring, but if you got somebody

else with you, then it's funny.

Research Question 2: Recommendations

What perceptions do students identified as at-risk of dropping out have about proactive and reactive strategies that could be implemented to effectively prevent students who are at-risk from choosing to leave school?

When asked, the students offered a variety of recommendations about how to keep students in school, including a recommendation from a middle school focus group for same sex classrooms. Other recommendations like, more frequent and lenient bathroom breaks, less restrictive dress code, and allowance to take smoke breaks, are suggestions that could be seen as trivial or troublesome to administrators, but are taken very seriously by the students. Regardless of these requests, students also had recommendations that directly support the emergent themes.

Students recommended that teachers and administrators communicate more. In the words of one high school girl, "Talk to kids more; see what they want!" A middle school boy expanded this perspective when he stated:

> I think they really should ask you what they can do for you
>
> to stay. And, I think the teachers should be more involved
>
> in…well I think they should help you more. It's like, if you
>
> have low grades or you are actually trying to get higher
>
> grades, I think they should try to help you more and try to
>
> help you get higher grades. So people could pass and go on
>
> to college and do something good…. A good teacher to me
>
> basically is someone that's willing; that's gonna take the
>
> time and, you know, see your backlight, your background

and why. Like, why are you so angry and this and that?

What can I do to help you?

Another recommendation from the high school interviewees is that students receive more communication about graduation credits and the impact of academic failure. As stated earlier, several of the students were older than the majority of their classmates because they had failed or were behind on graduation credits; however, many of them had no idea that they would not be graduating with their class, and believed that chronological age is what propelled them in school, not credits. The majority of the high school participants had little to no understanding about graduation credits, and what is necessary to graduate. The general consensus was that because they were allowed to return each fall, they had "passed" and moved on to the next grade level. In reality, many of the high school students who participated in the study were still classified as 9th graders, regardless of age. Out of the 12 high school students who participated, three (3) had an acute awareness that without summer school and fourth block (after school classes), they would not move forward to the next grade. A high school girl describes her experience when she discovered that she did not have enough credits to move out of 9th grade:

> GIRL: I don't think that nobody realizes that happens.
>
> Like, I know when I was goofing off I never
>
> realized how, what, I was doing cause I thought I
>
> could always, you know, it was like middle school.
>
> Middle school, I didn't really do much but they
>
> passed me anyway. I mean_____, they'll

send you to the next grade, but you still gotta get

that credit and I didn't even realize they kept

sending me to the next grade. I kept thinking

everything was cool, but it really wasn't.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me about that, when you found out,

"Wait a minute I'm not going to be able to graduate

on time if I don't get it together!"

GIRL: I found that out when I was locked up [juvenile

detention center]. Because here? I never realized

that, they kept sending me to the next grade. Well,

then I was locked up, and they sent me to another

school and they put me back in 9th grade! I was

like, "I'm not in 9th grade!" And they was like,

"Yeah you are, you don't have enough credits."

Many of the middle school interviewees recommended "fun in the classroom" as an incentive for staying in school. A middle school boy stated, "Yeah like I think it should be, maybe a little more funner in class and I think we should get to move around more." A middle school girl recommended incentives for finishing work early: "…you know, like after we get done with all the work we can look at our iPods and play our games; as long as he [the teacher] couldn't hear it."

Because teacher attitude was such a prominent theme, several of the students spoke about improving teacher communication and classroom climate. One middle

57

school boy stated, "Having nicer teachers, funner teachers that'll let you do stuff and not scream at you all the time." A high school girl describes her favorite teacher:

> Ms. _____, she is the best teacher, because she is
>
> fun, but yet she is strict. She interacts with you more, she
>
> explains things a lot, but she is really young, and she is a
>
> young teacher which is a good thing. She appeals to us
>
> more like some of the older teachers who just don't
>
> understand us. She is a real sweet heart; she always active
>
> with her class.

Overall, the At-Risk Students participating in the study felt that changes needed to be made in the microsystems with which they interact in order to achieve optimum functionality, which could be characterized as success in school. Systemic dysfunction in the microsystems of the classroom, family, and student peer groups have a direct influence on student functionality and reciprocal transactions between the other environmental systems with which students interact. Moreover, the influence of the family's culture, classroom teachers, and peers have a significant impact on how these students develop their personalities and drive their proximal processes within their ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1994); consequently, the student in environment interacts with the dysfunctional systems with which they come into contact and, through classification of At-Risk, reflect a need to improve the functionality of the microsystems in the students' lives (Miley, O'Melia, & Dubois, 2009).

CHAPTER 4: GETTING ON WITH LIFE: A CASE STUDY EXPLORING THE

PERCEPTIONS OF WHY STUDENTS CHOOSE TO LEAVE SCHOOL

Introduction

Data collected about dropping out of school over the course of the last decade, provides statistical and perceptive information about the choices students make to leave school and not return, and along with statistical information gathered by Jenkins County Schools provides a comprehensive quantitative portrait of a student dropout (Batelaan, 2000; Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006; Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007; Ellickson, Saner, & McGuigan, 1997; Espelage & Swearer, 2004; Gordon, 2004; Hernandez Josefowcz-Simbeni, 2008; Knesting, 2008; Nowicki, Duke, Sisney, Stricker, & Tyler, 2004; Roderick, 1993; West Virginia Department of Education, 2009). However, in an effort to explore the qualitative perceptions of why students drop out, along with what factors may be contributing to the desire to leave school and not return, interviews were conducted with five Former Jenkins County Schools[6] students who dropped out of Park High School and Sims High School, two of four targeted schools that are experiencing high dropout rates.

Methods

Design

In order to support the emergent themes identified in the pilot study that explored the perceptions of at-risk students in Jenkins County, as well as triangulate data collected, it was decided that additional research would be conducted through ethnographic exploration of Former Jenkins County Students' perceptions through individual

---

[6] To protect confidentiality, the names of counties, people, and places have been changed.

interviews. Obtaining these perspectives allowed the researcher the opportunity for further exploration into the dropout crisis Jenkins County is experiencing, and enabled the researcher to further analyze the data to determine emergent themes across cases and provide strategic information for dropout prevention (Glesne, 2005; Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 2008; Patton, 2002).

Sampling

The Former Jenkins County Students identified to participate in this study were selected using purposeful sampling with the assistance of Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors. Purposeful sampling methods were used to identify both male and female Former Jenkins County Students who dropped out of Sims and Park High Schools for reasons of: truancy, academic failure in the school setting, continued relationships with their home schools through peers or administration, availability of locating in the community, and/or were of age or had a parent available to give informed consent, All of the students selected to participate in the individual interviews had some type of interaction or relationship with the Attendance Directors and/or Guidance Counselors, and these relationships were key elements in obtaining consent for participation from the Former Students and their parents/guardians for participation. Purposeful sampling allowed the researcher to study the issue in-depth by selecting students who could provide specific and detailed information about the triggers and events that prompted them to leave school and not return (Glesne, 2005).

Using contact information from Jenkins County Schools, 98 students were contacted, and five Former Jenkins County Students (three from Park and two from Sims) consented to participate in the study. Oftentimes the contact information for the Former

Jenkins County Students was a disconnected telephone number or the number of a neighbor or friend. Several of the minor students who were able to be reached could not obtain parental consent due to living outside of the parents' home. Of the five Former Jenkins County Students interviewed, three males and two females consented to participate. Two out of the five had obtained a Graduate Equivalency Diploma (GED) at the time of their interviews, one was participating in a GED course, and two were not attending any type of education programming.

Data Collection

The research is an ethnographic exploration of perceptions using qualitative methods of individual interview. It was determined that individual interviews would be conducted to gain the maximum amount of information, as well as protect the confidentiality of the participants. The researcher obtained consent for participation, distributing informed parental consent and child assent forms at the time of the scheduled interviews with minor participants 17 and younger, and distributed informed consent forms to adult participants aged 18 or older.

Individual Interviews

The interview process enables researchers to develop a more in-depth understanding of participant's perception of their environments and provides a rich narrative of a person's experiences and lives (Patton, 2002; Seidman, 2006). The purpose of conducting individual interviews was to gain the perspective of Former Jenkins County Students who dropped out of either Park High School or Sims High School. In order to maintain confidentiality, as well as develop quick rapport, individual interviews were conducted in the Former Jenkins County Students' place of choice. Interviews were

conducted in a private room of a local library in Jenkins County, over the telephone, in a private home, at Park High School, and in the researcher's vehicle.

Interview questions were constructed to explore the perceptions and experiences of the interviewees. Patton (2002) suggests that open-ended questions guide participants in providing rich information that reconstructs events or experiences to a level where the event or experience "could have been observable had the observer been present" (p. 349-350). Interview questions for this case study were modeled after Patton's categories of Opinion and Values questions and Knowledge questions. For data collection with Former Jenkins County Students, six open-ended questions were developed:

- Tell me about your school experience.

- What are the reasons you decided to drop out?

- What are some things you liked about being in school?

- What are some things you disliked about being in school?

- What could have helped you decide to stay in school?

- What are your plans for the future?

There were also several probes used to prompt participants to expand on thoughts and opinions. Probes were used to deepen understanding and provide clarification in order to gather more information from participants (Glesne, 2005). Examples of probe questions included:

- Tell me more about _____.

- Can you give me an example?

- Can you paint a picture of _____for me?

- How did you (feel, know, learn)?

- What do you mean when you say _____?

Data Analysis

Analysis of data collected through qualitative measures "…involves organizing what you have seen, heard, and read, so that you can make sense of what you have learned" (Glesne, 2005, p. 147). The goal of data collection from Former Jenkins County Students was to obtain alternative perceptions of the reasons why Jenkins County students choose to leave school, as well as triangulate the emergent themes from the pilot study. The individual interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, enabling the researcher to sort, arrange and code the data into classifications that converged into themes that could be interpreted to find meaning in the information given by the Former Jenkins County Students. This process included finding common words and phrases, as well as looking for patterns in the topics. Preliminary analysis yielded categories, which were further analyzed and organized into the same two major themes, Attitude about School and Drama, that emerged from data collected with the Jenkins County At-Risk Students, with variation in sub-themes that are relative to this particular group of participants.. Table 2 displays the two major themes and the prevalent subcategories that define them.

Table 2: Emergent Themes & Prevalent Subcategories: Former Jenkins County Students

Attitude about School	Drama
Teacher attitude (includes classroom climate and teacher support)	Fighting (includes physical and verbal altercations, harassment and/or victimization)
Academic Attitude (includes academic expectation, 9th grade transition, truancy and/or juvenile court involvement, and alternative education)	Peer Pressure (includes intimacy and peer status)
Family Attitude (includes influence in students' decision to drop out)	

What perceptions do students who have dropped out of school have about the reasons why kids choose to leave school?

Introduction

The purpose of the case study with Former Jenkins County Students was to explore their perceptions of why students drop out of school and what factors may be contributing to the desire to leave school and not return. As is common practice with qualitative research, the review of literature has been integrated into the reporting of findings that follows.

Attitude about School

Teacher Influence. In a similar vein as the At-Risk Students, all five of the Former Jenkins County Students indicated that teacher attitude toward students is a problem, and all felt that teachers had a direct influence on their decision to drop out of school. Although the reasons varied, the overarching theme that prevailed in this subcategory was the students' perceptions that teachers did not care about their needs, struggles, and other ecological dysfunctions that might interfere with school success. As one student resignedly stated, "Some of the teachers were, honestly, I can say that they were there just to be there..."

According to Gregory and Ripski (2008) student-teacher relationships are an integral part of a student's motivation to succeed in school. Fostering a sense of trustworthiness and authoritative, yet supportive, relations is imperative to a student's academic success in the classroom environment and can decrease student aggression and

discipline referral. The researchers determined that teachers who attempt to have an emotional connection to students have more cooperation with classroom rules and expectations; thus creating a more harmonious and functional classroom environment. Moreover, Gregory and Ripski found that if students trusted the teacher as respectful and authoritative, "…students may give teachers the benefit of the doubt when interpreting a teacher's behavior and offer the teacher a blanket respect…" (¶ 38). The Former Jenkins County Students discussed the lack of trust and confidence their teachers had in them, especially once a student demonstrated untrustworthy or noncompliant behaviors in the classroom. For example, a student described his or her desire to rectify the relationship between himself and a teacher by trying to, finally, do the work assigned:

> INTERVIEWER: You talked about teacher drama. What's
> teacher drama?
> STUDENT: I don't really know, just… even if I was to ask
> for help it didn't really matter. I don't know,
> because they just… I just look like that type of
> person, I guess. Like, "Aw he's a troublemaker. I
> don't wanna help him," or anything like that.
> INTERVIEWER: Was that ever said to you?
> STUDENT: Not really, but I could feel it. I know what
> teachers feel about me because I don't have a good
> record or anything.
> INTERVIEWER: How could you feel it? Describe it.

STUDENT: Just, like, I don't really know. I mean, when I

asked for help and they'd be like, "No." Or, they'd

be too busy or you know, just walk by me and, like,

because like, where I was kind of a troublemaker,

I'd get on their bad side and then [they] don't really

want to fool with me because it's just like, "Oh he's

just gonna goof off." And when I actually wanted to

do something, they wouldn't believe me. They

wouldn't bother to even waste paper on me.

In this situation, the teacher could have been demonstrating what Cangemi and Khan (2001) refer to as insensitivity. Cangemi and Kahn posit that insensitivity to students' external influences, along with inconsistent discipline in the classroom (i.e., tolerating negative behavior in the classroom one week and then punishing another) can create confusion. In essence, teachers who are sensitive to the external issues students face outside of the classroom and are consistent in classroom management can foster positive, supportive relationships and prevent dropout. The student felt the teacher had pigeonholed him as a troublemaker, and because of this stigma, felt the teacher had no use for him in the classroom; there was no bond between him and the teacher, and he no longer felt connected to her.

These feelings of disconnect discussed by the student are discussed by Gregory and Ripski (2008) and are defined by Srebnik and Elias (1993) as bonding. Srebnik and Elias state that with the assistance of "prosocial" (p. 529) adults that mentor through activities and relational rapport, students should be engaged and contributory in the

school process, feel a particular sense of responsibility and skill confidence, and receive

positive reinforcement for their engagement. Srebnik and Elias state, "Bonding increases

engagement through reciprocal processes that occur between students and peers and

between faculty and students" (p. 531). Two students described being singled out as

negative examples of student behavior. One stated, "I wasn't doing anything but like, this

teacher just liked to point me out and point out like, my flaws, I guess, like, 'You don't

wanna be like him.'" Another student discussed the reciprocity of student-teacher respect,

and how critical it was to feelings of being singled out as a troublemaker in the

classroom:

> STUDENT: It's mainly, if they don't show me respect like
>
> from the get-go, I don't show them nothing. Like, I
>
> will be rude to them if they don't show me respect.
>
> INTERVIEWER: What do you mean by respect?
>
> STUDENT: Like, they just, like… I don't know. If I'm
>
> like, like, let's say in a scenario - I'm walking in
>
> and I'm a new student and I come up and introduce
>
> myself and they want to get all… they're kind of
>
> gripey or rude with their speech then I'll
>
> automatically have a negative impression of them.
>
> Like, they've already proven to me that I'm not
>
> going to be friends - I'm not even going to be cool
>
> with them at all. That happened to me before. I've
>
> actually walked in and, you know, teachers been

negative. Like not even polite! And I've just been

like "Yeah, I'm not going to show you nothing!"

Like, disrespect to the students, a teacher doesn't

like you. M. _____ , last year, man, like, she

showed me zero respect and I showed her respect

and I don't know… now that I think about it I don't

know why I did.

INTERVIEWER: What do you mean, she showed you zero

respect?

STUDENT: She always blamed me for distracting

everybody and I was, like, everybody was talking in

the whole class, but she wanted… I hate when

teachers single people out. They have no business

doing that.

Communicating care was an important issue with the students, and all five felt

that teachers were oftentimes not interested in the issues with which the students were

coping both inside and outside of the school microsystem. In a longitudinal study by

Englund, Egeland, and Collins (2008) with 179 men and women from birth through 23

who were identified as potential dropouts and potential graduates, it was discovered that

friendly student-teacher relationships have a direct influence on a students' success in the

academic environment:

Teacher–child relationship factors also predict high school graduation or

dropping out: Students who have positive relationships with their teachers;

feel motivated and supported by their teachers; perceive their teachers as

caring, encouraging, and responsive; and receive guidance and assistance

from their teachers are less likely to drop out of high school. (p. 80)

Moreover, Englund, Egeland, and Collins also determined that, regardless of academic

ability, students who had positive teacher-student relationships that were nurturing and

supportive, had "…positive attitudes towards their teachers and school and…were more

likely to continue to succeed academically" (p. 89). The Former Jenkins County Students

discussed having poor relationships with teachers, and all felt unsupported by their

classroom teachers. One student vehemently discussed student-teacher interactions at

Matthews Middle School and Park High School:

> INTERVIEWER: Tell me about [Park] High?
>
> STUDENT: There was too many people! I didn't like all
>
> the people. And teachers were assholes! Sorry for
>
> saying that word.
>
> INTERVIEWER: What do you mean, by "teachers were
>
> assholes?" Give me an example.
>
> STUDENT: They thought they run shit, which I guess they
>
> do… but it's just like, I don't know. But, yeah, it's
>
> not what you think it is at all. And, the teachers they
>
> just are annoying, they really are! Like they think
>
> that they… I don't know.
>
> INTERVIEWER: You said earlier they think they run
>
> everything. What do you mean?

STUDENT: Like, when you're sitting there talking, and a
teacher comes running like, "Shut up!" You know,
it kinda pisses you off! If they were like, "Please be
quiet for a minute," but no, they turn around and
they talk to you like you're nothing. And that's how
teachers talk to you. They talk to you like you're
nothing. Every teacher I came across has talked to
me like I'm nothing; like I don't matter in the
world. I don't know; it's just crazy.

INTERVIEWER: Can you remember something somebody
said to you? Like a quote that made you feel that
way?

STUDENT: A teacher actually told me I was never going
to be nothing one time.

INTERVIEWER: Wow, tell me about that.

STUDENT: When I went to [Matthews Middle School],
me and this girl got in an argument, and the teacher
took me out of the room, and she was, like, talking
to me and she had an attitude behind it and
everything. I told her to "Shut up and leave me
alone!" I was aggravated. She looked at me and she
said all kinds of crazy shit! She said, "You're never
going to be nothing in life!" And she said "It's

nobody's fault but your own." She said, "You're

going to be one of these thugs out here on the

streets!" All kinds of stuff…

INTERVIEWER: Wow.

STUDENT: And teachers really act like that towards

people and I don't know … a lot of kids have

trouble in school. The teachers say a lot of stuff to

them.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of kids are the ones that get

talked to this way?

STUDENT: Like, kids that has like problems in school.

Kids that like act out (yawning). I'm sorry. Kids

that like… act out, kids that have trouble, you

know? Like, there's kids that go to school - they've

went through a lot in life, a lot, they act out for them

reasons you know? And the teachers kind of take it

out on them. They tell them stuff that's not true.

You know, they might have trouble in school but

that don't mean they're never going to amount to

anything. I'm sure half of these people out here, like

lawyers and stuff, I'm sure they've all had trouble

in school. But teachers take kids that goes through a

lot, and it seems like they're not gonna be nothing

in life and they put them down. They really do, they

put them down. And it makes the kids like, "Well,

that's my teacher, that's supposed to be here for me.

She's supposed to help me? Okay, so I'm not going

to be nothing in life." You know, some of these kids

at school that act out and stuff they don't need

people to sit there and punish them for it and people

to be like, "This is what you're doing wrong." They

need people to be like, to support 'em you know?

To tell them that everything's gonna be okay, that

they can do what they gotta do, if they just put their

mind to it. You know what I'm saying? But teachers

don't talk to kids like that. They just… don't do

that.

A few of the Former Jenkins County Students saw that mutual respect between

themselves and their teachers was a reciprocating transactional process, and assumed

some responsibility for the dysfunction in the classroom and in communication with each

other, stating, "It might have just been my fault, really. But I guess it was a little bit of

everything; like me not wanting to do it [class work]." Students also felt there were some

teachers who were supportive and helped them throughout their time at Park and Sims. A

student describes:

INTERVIEWER: How could you tell that somebody was

there to support you?

72

STUDENT: By the way they would talk to you.

INTERVIEWER: Like how?

STUDENT: Uh, teachers that care about you. You know,

they would sit down and make time for you, like,

they sit there and explain everything in detail that

you need help with. You know, they're like, "You

need anything just come to me."

INTERVIEWER: How did that make you feel when a

teacher did that?

STUDENT: It made me feel pretty good.

Regardless of the positive attitudes toward certain teachers, none of the Former

Jenkins County Students indicated that the minimal positive student-teacher relationships

they had while in school were not supportive enough to prevent them from dropping out.

Disciplinary Action. All of the Former Jenkins County students discussed a lack

of discipline as a significant influence on their decisions to drop out of school and not

return. According to the Former Jenkins County students, lack of discipline was

described as a lack of academic motivation and commitment to school that manifested in

academic failure, truancy, criminal behavior (or other misbehaviors) that resulted in

disciplinary action at the school level and/or juvenile court involvement, and/or

alternative educational placement. The three male Former Jenkins County Students who

participated identified themselves as being students who, at the time of dropout, were

older than their peers due to previous school failure of one or more grade levels, and were

unmotivated, and/or lacking enough credits to finish school in a timely fashion.

Conversely, the two female Former Jenkins County Students dropped out due to stress and peer related issues. One student, who currently has a GED and is attending college, discussed his decision to drop out:

> STUDENT: I was a few credits short and I just didn't want
>
> to go through a whole 'nother year of high school.
>
> INTERVIEWER: Okay, so you knew that you would have
>
> to come back; you wouldn't graduate on schedule?
>
> STUDENT: Yeah.
>
> INTERVIEWER: What can you tell me about some of the
>
> things that you had fallen behind on?
>
> STUDENT: Like, why I didn't graduate?
>
> INTERVIEWER: Yeah.
>
> STUDENT: Uh… never really did any work. Yeah, I didn't
>
> do homework. I was a procrastinator; I'd wait until
>
> the last second to do anything.

Retention and academic failure as early predictors for the pathway to dropping out was explored in a longitudinal study by Bowers (2010), and it was determined that as early as seventh grade, students can be on a trajectory of failure. Bowers goes further to state that "the most hazardous years for dropout… appeared to be Grades 8 and 11, the transition before entering high school in Grade 9, and the year when students are old enough to drop out of school legally" (p. 203). Another student described how the culmination of being older than his peers, having a need for teacher support, and minimal accumulation of graduation credits influenced his decision to drop out of high school:

STUDENT: I just felt kind of obligated - I was getting

older. I was going to be a freshman for the third

time, and I know there's a limit. You can only be in

high school for so long. I knew they would

eventually kick me out; there wasn't really a point

in working if I knew I was just going to get kicked

out in the long run.

INTERVIEWER: Do you know how many credits you had

when you left?

STUDENT: I think I had 1.5, maybe two.

INTERVIEWER: Out of 25?

STUDENT: Yeah. I was failing all my classes. The only

class I actually passed was algebra one. I passed it

one time. I got expelled before I could finish the

second half of algebra and I went back and had a

different teacher and I failed. I passed one half of

class; I passed gym. Once I passed art. So, I knew I

was going to get held back again and no teacher

really helped me… I had one teacher who…. I had

an A+ in this class; it was algebra. But that's

because he sat there and he would not stop teaching

a thing until everybody knew what was going on.

But some teachers… not all teachers are like that.

75

But a lot of teachers are like that, and they didn't

really want to help me.

In line with Bowers' (2010) findings of critical drop out time frames, the transition to ninth grade proved to be a tough time for the Former Jenkins County Students, and several of them spoke to the difficulty they encountered when transitioning from middle school to high school. Ninth grade transition can be a tumultuous and critical time for students who are at risk. According to Neild, Stoner-Eby, and Furstenberg (2008), "… the experience of the ninth-grade year contributes substantially to the probability of dropping out, despite controls for demographic and family background characteristics, previous school performance, and pre–high school attitudes and ambitions" (p. 558). McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) support Neild, Stoner-Eby, and Furstenburg's conclusions, and also attribute the pressure of high graduation credit accumulation to the difficulties incoming ninth graders face. McCallumore and Sparapani hypothesize that ninth grade students have more pressure, experience feelings of loneliness and isolation, and have the highest rate of absences and discipline referrals than any other class. Moreover, McCallumore and Sparapani (citing Fritzer and Herbst, 1996) state, "The ninth grade also has the highest enrollment rate in high schools. This is mainly due to the fact that approximately 22% of students repeat ninth-grade classes" (p. 448). The conclusions made by Bowers (2010), Neild, Stoner-Eby, and Furstenburg (2008), and McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) can be applied to the participants in this case study. A student from Park High School discussed his first attempt to drop out of school in the ninth grade at age 16:

INTERVIEWER: What grade were you in when you left

the first time?

STUDENT: Um, what, like left school? Like, the first time

I left school? 9th grade. I was 16 in the 9th grade. I

left to go to the academy [Mountaineer Challenge

Academy, MCA] when I was 18.

INTERVIEWER: So what happened in that time between

you leaving here and you going to the academy?

STUDENT: Well, okay. In the 9th grade, I was skipping

school in the first semester then I left and didn't

come back for the rest of the year and then I came

back last year… the whole last year but I didn't do

anything. My attendance was great; I just didn't do

my work.

Another student from Sims High School also experienced the tough ninth grade

transition discussed by Bowers (2010), Neild, Stoner-Eby, and Furstenburg (2008) and

McCallumore and Sparapani (2010), and spoke about his difficulties transitioning from

Pine Forest, Jenkins County School's singular K-8 school to Sims High School, one of

the largest high schools in the county:

INTERVIEWER: I know [Pine Forest] is a K-8 school.

How many students typically were you with in

class?

STUDENT: Um, about, I mean, maybe 15-20?

77

INTERVIEWER: Okay. How about when you went to

[Sims]?

STUDENT: Like, depending on what class I had, there was

like 25 people in there.

INTERVIEWER: So it sounds like you went from a school

that had maybe 200 students to a school that almost

had 2,000.

STUDENT: That's right.

INTERIVIEWER: How was that transition from 8th grade

at [Pine Forest] to [Sims]? Tell me a little bit about

that.

STUDENT: Um, see I feel like it was kinda unfair for me

to even go to [Sims] because, I mean, as a kid I did

alright in school for a little bit, but then I started

getting lazy and then it's, like… I don't know I feel

like sometimes, like teachers didn't want to teach

me for some reason and uh, so it was like right after

6th grade I had went to summer school twice and

they just passed me for no reason. So I mean if you

think about it I wasn't ready to go to Sims at all...

When I got held back, it was my second year of

ninth grade so I was getting ready to turn 18 and

78

I'm still a freshman and they're not going to let me

finish. I know they're not gonna let me finish.

Another contributing factor to dropping out discussed by three of the Former

Jenkins County Students was being referred by school administration for alternative

education services. Hernandez Josefowcz-Simbeni (2008) describes alternative

education environments as having specific characteristics that can meet student needs in a

specialized way. Even though the students were all referred to differing alternative

environments to help assist with maintaining status in an educational environment, all

three discussed the impact the alternative environment had on their educational

experience and how it facilitated their decisions to drop out of traditional public school.

One student was referred to the county's largest comprehensive behavioral health center

for crisis stabilization outpatient treatment for aggressive behavior in the classroom:

> STUDENT: I punched the desk and then I flipped it over.
>
> INTERVIEWER: Wow.
>
> STUDENT: And then, I broke my hand on that one. And I
>
> walked out and I got expelled and then had to go to
>
> _____. I had to go there because the teacher
>
> said I threw the desk at her, which I did not. I had to
>
> go to _____ and I was there for about a month
>
> and a half and I got to go back to school.

A second student spent the majority of middle school in Jenkins County Schools

alternative middle school, Reynolds Middle School. Reynolds was established as an

alternative educational setting for students with high discipline issues. Students can be

referred from their home school if they are unable to remain in the traditional school environment. The eventual goal of Reynolds is to transition students back into their home school environment. The student discussed her time at Reynolds positively, and indicated that she felt successful in the smaller, alternative environment than at Matthews Middle School or Park High School, and once she was unable to attend Reynolds dropped out of Park:

INTERVIEWER: Did you quit when you were at [Matthews], or did you end up going to [Park] and quitting?

STUDENT: No, because when I was first going to [Matthews] [they] put me in [Reynolds] because I just skipped school all the time. So they put me in [Reynolds]. I like [Reynolds] pretty good. I did pretty good there; I made pretty good grades and everything. Then I went to [Park] and I went like, half of 9th grade, like three weeks of 9th grade and then I quit.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me about [Reynolds], what was it like there?

STUDENT: It was alright; except for they search you every morning. But it was good…Because it wasn't as big as a hassle as [Matthews]. I don't know... it was just like… I guess because it was a bad kids' school, so

it was like, I don't know how to explain it. I did
better there.

INTERVIEWER: How so?

STUDENT: My grades and stuff.

INTERVIEWER: So how long were you there?

STUDENT: All the way through middle school from 6th
grade to 8th.

Finally, a third student committed a felony and was referred by the Juvenile court system to Mountaineer Challenge Academy (MCA), a quasi-military school housed in Kingwood, West Virginia. In addition to the referral to MCA by the Juvenile court system, the student became aware that MCA would allow him the opportunity to recover failed credits and obtain his GED, which became an additional incentive to attend the program:

STUDENT: I'm a recent graduate of the Mountaineer
Challenge Academy. I left school because my
credits were kind of bad. I only had two.

INTERVIEWER: Wow.

STUDENT: So I wanted - my main objective, going to
academy was for credit recovery. I'm not even on
probation now; they released me as soon as I
graduated [from MCA]. So that was just awesome
how I got out of that.

> INTERVIEWER: Was one of the stipulations of the
>
> probation that you go to the academy?
>
> STUDENT: Yep, that was the agreement.

Family Influence. Family can have a significant influence on a student's decision to drop out of school (Barrett & Turner, 2006; Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006; Chen, n.d.; Englund, Egeland, & Collins, 2008; Gordon, 2004; Karoly, Killburn, & Cannon, 2005; Kung & Farrell, 2000; Nowicki, Duke, Sisney, Stricker, and Tyler, 2004; Terry, 2008), and according to four out of five Former Jenkins County students, family influence played a significant role in the students' decisions to leave school and not return. The four Former Jenkins County students described their families candidly, and four out of five felt their parents were disinterested and "lacked care." In addition to a lack of interest and support, the students felt that their parents were too preoccupied with issues of substance abuse, poverty, and/or grief to help the student succeed in school. The four Former Jenkins County students felt their family's dysfunction as a whole, and particularly their dysfunctional relationships with their parents, had a considerable impact on their decision to drop out.

Englund, Egeland, and Collins (2008) support the students' perspective, and in a longitudinal study that followed low-income men and women from birth through 23 years, determined that, regardless of a student's academic ability, a lack of parental interest and support can propel a student toward school failure and eventual drop out:

> Children whose parents were involved in their school in middle childhood
>
> and who experienced good parent–child relationships in early adolescence
>
> were more likely to continue on a positive trajectory toward academic

success. By contrast, those who had poor relationships with their parents were more likely to drop out of high school despite doing well academically and behaviorally… youth who are academically and behaviorally competent rely on their parents as an important source of support for their continued educational success; without parental support, academically able adolescents may divert from a successfully educational pathway to one of failure. (pp. 88-89)

Fortin, Marcotte, Potvin, Royer, and Joly (2006) concur, stating, "…low parental expectations towards school achievement and inadequate supervision of day-to-day activities are variables strongly associated with the child's dropping out of school" (p. 365). One student described his relationship with his parents after he had been skipping school for quite some time to be with a girlfriend:

STUDENT: We broke up in July 2008; I went back to
    school in August.

INTERVIEWER: Where were your parents during all of
    this?

STUDENT: At home? (Laughs) I mean, they wasn't really
    nagging me, they was at first, about it but then after
    a while they just lost care about it. After like, three
    or four months.

INTERVIEWER: How did that feel? That's a pretty
    powerful statement, "They lost care." What do you
    mean?

STUDENT: Like, they didn't, like, they didn't, they cared

about me, they loved me and everything, it just

kinda got forgotten that I left school, like it wasn't

really a hot topic with them. I mean we never talked

about it or anything. It was just kinda dropped that I

wasn't going to school.

Another student discussed experiencing a lack of parental support, along with

sibling preference issues:

INTERVIEWER: You said that your parents were

supportive but not really. When you say, "Not

really," can you expand on that a little bit more?

STUDENT: Well, my mom was very upset because she

wanted me to finish school. And I told her my plan

to get a GED and everything like that. In my family,

to me, it seems like my sister is the "Golden Child."

Like, uh, everything she would do they would

compare me to her. Like, she would have a 3.0 or

4.0 GPA all throughout high school. You know,

me? I didn't do anything in high school and I was

stupid and everything like that. But honestly, my

parents didn't think I would make it this far.

INTERVIEWER: How does that make you feel?

> STUDENT: Embarrassed, sad, wanting to prove them
>
> wrong.

All of the Former Jenkins County Students also discussed how their parent's inability to financially support themselves and the family as a whole prompted them to leave school. In a qualitative study by Terry (2008), the issue of students leaving school to work and help out the family was discovered to be a catalyst for dropout. Vitaro, Larocque, Janosz, and Tremblay (2001) support Terry's perspective that parental economic struggle can have a direct influence on dropouts, and in a study of 751 low socio-economic status (SES) students, determined through exploration of socio-family influence in areas of family structure, as well as both parents' education levels, occupations, and ages that "socio-family adversity has a direct link to school dropout" (p. 410). One of the Former Jenkins County Students discussed how dropping out enabled her to get a local job and assist with the family bills and expenses that accumulated due to her parents' substance abuse:

> STUDENT: Another reason why school didn't work out for
>
> me is because my mom and dad was going through
>
> a hard time and when I was 14 I got my first job at
>
> _____ [a local restaurant], and I helped out
>
> my mom and dad a lot with that. I figured school…
>
> I wouldn't be able to make as much money if I went
>
> to school, so I kind of quit going to school then.
>
> INTERVIEWER: So tell me about helping your mom and
>
> dad out.

STUDENT: They kind of hit a rough spot…

INTERVIEWER: Financially?

STUDENT: Yeah, my dad got laid off and they needed
help with like bills and groceries and whatnot, so I
got my job down there at _____ and helped
them out then _____ closed down so…My
whole family's messed up.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me about your family.

STUDENT: My dad's side of the family comes from drug
dealers and drug addicts and robbers and bad people
and then my mom's side of the family comes from
preachers and cops and all that good stuff. So it's
just, all of it.

INTERVIEWER: Now, was your dad on drugs when you
were around?

STUDENT: Yeah. Both my parents have been on drugs
my whole life.

INTERVIEWER: They still are?

STUDENT: My whole life they've been on them; it don't
bother me though.

INTERVIEWER: Like what?

STUDENT: Nothing real bad, they like pills a pretty good

bit, that's about it. That's all they really mess with

is like Lortabs and stuff.

INTERVIEWER: Is that where their money goes?

STUDENT: Yeah. That's what happened to their little

"financial problem." It makes me mad, but I mean,

I'm never going to have another set of parents in my

life.

Poverty and financial strain, along with his mother's depression and substance abuse, was also a reason a male Former Jenkins County student left school. Unlike his female peer, he did not contribute to the family income, and he and his mother moved into his grandparents overcrowded home. He describes how the congestion of people living in his grandparent's house prompted him to float between various friends and his girlfriend in order to have a place to sleep:

INTERVIEWER: Who do you live with now?

STUDENT: Nobody, really. I'm kinda all over the place. I

stay with my friend, and then I stay with my

girlfriend and those are the main two places I

bounce around at. And, if I can't stay at either of

their houses, I'll stay at my mommaw's which is

where my mom lives right now because she doesn't

have a job to pay bills. She's had jobs, but she's just

lazy and doesn't want to work - and wants to try to

file social security or whatever… She's trying to pull money in somehow and you know… When I was living there… she was relying on a friend to even pay the bills and stuff and her… I mean, back as a kid she used to be like an alcoholic, and you know, driving me crazy and then um, doing her whole drinking and bringing guys home and stuff and you know? I know that's probably tweaked me as a kid or something, but I remember I went to school someday, said I wanted to kill myself and got sent to [the hospital],so I went there for a while. But I just said I was being stupid; I didn't mean it or anything, but I should have watched what I said. All that and then, you know, we moved and lived with that… and I don't know, her, she was married and her husband passed away.

INTERVIEWER: He wasn't your Dad?

STUDENT: He was my stepdad. And, uh, after he passed away, she kind of started going downhill; getting real depressed and you know, she would just yell at me and taking what she feels out on me, basically. And, she would yell at me and we'd argue pretty bad. There was one time I think she tried to kill

88

herself or something. I wasn't there but that's what I heard. So, coming back into that situation, then my brother moved in with his family and they started doing pills and stuff, and I was stuck in the backroom with my girlfriend. I was basically, like, shunned from my house and everybody. I felt hated in my own house. So, I got tired of that and I moved in with my girlfriend. And then after I quit my job, her mom basically said I couldn't live there anymore. That's the reason I got kicked out in the first place. Ever since then, I've kinda just been bouncing around everywhere. Mom lost her house; somehow, all my stuff's gone. I had a bunch of… I know I didn't have a lot of stuff, but the stuff I had was at the house, and some chick moved in and said that she basically owns the house now and threw all our stuff away.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, wow.

STUDENT: So, I don't even have a home anymore, but you know, I don't know, it's weird. It sucks not actually having a home that I can…that I can always be able to go to. Because I had that at my mommaw's, but that house is packed. I'm serious,

it's not a very big house, there's like three

bedrooms, alright, and one bedroom there's my

sister, her husband, her kid… another bedroom, my

aunt, and her friend that comes over all the time,

and the other bedroom there's my mommaw and my

mom, and in the living room is my papaw. So, if I

go down there and it's like that, I have to sleep on

the couch.

INTERVIEWER: Wow.

STUDENT: So, you know, before Mom moved in there I

had a bed; I could go down there any time I wanted

to but now it's kinda hard.

Drama

A second theme that emerged from the data collected was Drama. Drama, to the

Former Jenkins County Students, manifested in two subcategories: Harassment and peer

pressure. All of the Former Jenkins County Students experienced some type of Drama in

their home schools that contributed to the decision to drop out of school.

Fighting. All of the Former Jenkins County Students participating in the study

discussed fighting in some fashion as a reason why they dropped out of school. Former

Jenkins County Students defined fighting as verbal altercations, and/or

harassment/victimization. The male students discussed drama as conflict between peers

that was usually triggered by boy-girl relationship issues of cheating or rumors, whereas

the female students discussed harassment and victimization as their reasons for leaving

90

school. Hernandez Josefowcz-Simbeni (2008) discusses the differences between male and female perceptions of aggression stating, "Although boys engage in more visible forms of verbal and physical altercations, the developing literature on relational aggression points to the use of gossip, ostracization, lying, and name calling as forms of female peer harassment" (p. 54). The male Former Jenkins County Students did not fall into Hernandez Josefowcz-Simbeni's delineation of sexes, and participated more in drama surrounding peers and/or isolation from peers. One male student discussed how he would sit back and watch the drama unfold:

> STUDENT: I don't know, it's just at first…it was mainly
>
> just something to do, like it wasn't, it was always
>
> exciting here [at Park]; it was never boring.
>
> INTERVIEWER: Give me an example of exciting.
>
> STUDENT: Just, my social life and the fun things that
>
> would happen here, and the fun, like you know, the
>
> drama, that goes on - like the drama goes on around
>
> me I'm never caught up in it…
>
> INTERVIEWER: Tell me about the drama.
>
> STUDENT: Like, any type of like, gossip, rumors,
>
> anything that goes around, I'm always around it, but
>
> I never get caught up in it, ever. Like, it could
>
> happen to every single one of my friends here and it
>
> wouldn't happen to me.
>
> INTERVIEWER: Like what? I don't know what "it" is.

STUDENT: Like, I don't know - like, any type of

relationship problems with somebody else, like you

know how it was back in high school, how the

gossip goes around, like somebody will say

something about somebody and then you know it

just gets stuff started, say like they want to fight or

something - stuff like that. And I was never caught

up in that stuff.

INTERVIEWER: But you were part of it?

STUDENT: I wasn't part of it; I was just there. I was like a

dead body standing in the way or something.

A female student discussed the harassment she endured at Matthews and Park in
the wake of a cousin's crime, and how being bullied and harassed by other female
students led to her decision to drop out; a decision she regrets.

INTERVIEWER: When did you drop out of school?

STUDENT: When I was 15.

INTERVIEWER: Why did you leave school?

STUDENT: Bunch of drama.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me about the drama.

STUDENT: I was in [Matthews], my cousin stabbed

somebody and the people, the person that he

stabbed - their family - seen him at my house and it

just kind of got kind of sort of turned. We got

92

jumped in school. They told me a bunch of bullcrap - every time they seen me they'd jump me. Ten, fifteen girls would. Then I just quit school. I can say though since I dropped out of school I miss it. Because high school was like, I don't know... it's kind of like what every person dreams about. It's like, I can't go to the prom, but… I'm sorry if I get emotional (Crying). But, whenever you have to go to school and you have to worry about if you're going to get jumped that day; what you have to put up with during school, I mean you don't want to go, you know. I got jumped *every day*. The principal was like, "Them girls wouldn't do that." That's really what he told me! I got threatened for something I had nothing to do with! You know, it wasn't my fault that my cousin done what he done, you know? It wasn't my fault at all, and I mean, they just… I don't know! It's just school. I mean, I like going to school. I wasn't that great at it, but I liked going to school. But it's just like, every day it was just something different. Somebody different had something to do with it or something. And

teachers, they don't care. You know, they don't try

to help it out at all. They really don't.

This perception of teacher insensitivity to victimization and harassment, was explored in a study by Aceves, Hinshaw, Mendoza-Denton, and Page-Gould (2010), and it was determined that students who feel supported by teachers are more apt to report the bullying and victimization and choose not to respond with physical fighting or aggression. The female Former Jenkins County Students who participated in this study felt unsupported by teachers and indicated that they felt frustrated by the teachers' and school's inability to protect students, including themselves, from harassing or victimizing peers. The other female Former Jenkins County Student discussed bullying and teacher insensitivity:

> STUDENT: I don't know… too many people pick on
>
> people in school.
>
> INTERVIEWER: Can you give me an example?
>
> STUDENT: There's a lot of bullies and, um, like, I seen
>
> people in school like pick on younger kids like if
>
> they're seniors and stuff like that they pick on the
>
> freshmen. They're just mean.
>
> INTERVIEWER: Can you tell me kind of an example of
>
> what you mean by mean?
>
> STUDENT: Um, yeah. I was going through the hall - I
>
> think it was a couple of days after school started,
>
> and there was a little ninth grader that started school

and then this senior just looks at her and called her

"Fresh Meat" instead of a freshman, and she had a

skirt on but she had leggings on under her skirt -

and they called her a whore and the teacher just sat

there and laughed.

Peer Pressure. Three of the Former Jenkins County Students also attribute

negative peer influence as a motivator to dropping out, especially when intimate

relationships would interfere with school time. The influence of friends' deviancy on a

student's decision to drop out of school was discussed in a study by Vitaro, Larocque,

Janosz, and Tremblay (2001). Vitaro, Larocque, Janosz, and Tremblay surveyed 751 low

socio-economic boys in Canada to explore the triggers for early withdrawal from school,

and discovered that the negative influence of friends who have already dropped out or

exhibit maladaptive behaviors can have a significant impact on a students' decision to

leave school and not return. McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) also hypothesize that

negative peer influence can have a negative impact on a student's decision to drop out

stating, "… association with deviant/dropout friends acts as a proximal precipitating

factor on the decision to drop out from school" (p. 448). A male Former Jenkins County

Student described his experience of worrying about trying to fit in and appear tough to

his peers:

STUDENT: I hung out with the wrong people.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me a little bit about that.

STUDENT: Like, hanging out with the wrong people, not

like drinking or anything like that, you know? I

95

worry about trying to fit in more than actually

trying to focus on school.

INTERVIEWER: What do you mean by trying to fit in?

Can you give me an example of that?

STUDENT: Well at [Park] or whatever, the school that I

went to, um, I don't know, people would always

mess with other people and they would always

wrestle the weak people, and so I would try to put

up this guard that I was a tough guy, that way they

wouldn't, you know, do you understand?

Hernandez Josefowcz-Simbeni (2008) concurs with the findings of McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) and Vitaro, Larocque, Janosz, and Tremblay (2001), and goes a step further, positing that students who engage in early sexual and intimate activity are more prone to dropping out than students who do not establish intimate relationships during their schooling years. All five students, at the time of study, had been or currently were involved in sexual relationships that were on a pathway to marriage and family. Three out of the five students were engaged at the time of interview, and one was in a common-law living situation with an older boyfriend. A student explained how the combination of friendship and intimacy influenced his decision to drop out:

INTERVIEWER: When did you make that decision?

STUDENT: To stop going to school? I just stopped

because me and my girlfriend had broke up and I

was living in this real, real crappy place. Like, me

and my friends really, just this house… the only

thing it had was electricity. So we had no water, no

heat, no money, no food, and then… I kinda was

just, like, I don't even want to go to school.

Another student discussed dropping out of school at 15 to work and live with her older boyfriend who was 22:

STUDENT: Yeah then whenever I was 15 I ended up

getting my own place. I haven't been living with

my Mom and Dad very long. My boyfriend lost his

job too…

INTERVIEWER: So you moved in with him?

STUDENT: Yeah. Well, me and him moved in together.

Then he lost his job too; he had a little setback but

that's okay. Anyways, I had my own place from the

time I was 15 until the time I was 17.

Finally, another student discussed his decision to skip school and eventually leave home and drop out of school in order to spend time with a girlfriend:

INTERVIEWER: Okay, so you guys would skip together

and go do what boys and girls do and hang out

and… yeah I have a teenager.

STUDENT: It was like that for a while and eventually I

moved out of my house. Like, I would go there

almost every day, but I wouldn't stay there. I would

stay with her.

INTERVIEWER: At her home?

STUDENT: Or wherever we was staying.

INTERVIEWER: So you guys floated around? Where'd

you float?

STUDENT: Because she didn't have nowhere to go, and

you know, I did. I mean I can go back home

anytime I wanted; it's just I wanted to be with her

because I didn't want her being alone. Like, she had

a rough life growing up and I just wanted to be

there for her; be there with her.

Research Question 2: Recommendations

What perceptions do Former Jenkins County Students have about proactive and

reactive strategies that could be implemented to effectively prevent students who are at-

risk from choosing to leave school?

The students had few recommendations for Jenkins County Schools to prevent

dropping out, because all five Former Jenkins County Students assumed the bulk of the

responsibility for their decision to drop out. Out of the five, only two expressed regret

about not returning to receive their diploma. When reviewing the individual interview

transcripts, two issues that were mentioned and could be categorized as recommendations

for change would be the student's reflection of teacher support, and the opportunity for

alternative educational environments versus traditional educational settings.

All five Former Jenkins County students discussed a lack of teacher empathy as a catalyst for dropping out of school, especially in the areas of extra attention to their differing learning styles and insensitivity to the external environmental stressors that have a direct effect on the students' ability to concentrate on school. Some of these stressors included: mental health of the student, family poverty, parental substance abuse, parental mental health, and parental disinterest in the student's education as a whole. Literature has shown that a lack of a positive adult role model and influence can have a significant downward pressure on a student's ability to maintain academic success (Bowers, 2010; Englund, Egeland, & Collins, 2008; Gregory & Ripski, 2008; Hernandez Josefowcz-Simbeni, 2008). A student discussed how his school could have helped if there was an understanding of his family crises and his differing learning needs:

> INTERVIEWER: What do you think the school could have done if they knew about what was happening in your family? What would've helped?
>
> STUDENT: I mean, it's not really much they can do about the home situation but just be a little bit more, you know, sympathetic to my issues. You know? So like, if I'm having a bad day, if I look upset, there's no need to sit there and pound me. You know what I'm saying? So I feel like maybe if they would have known, maybe they could have. But it's sad that I have to have a problem for them to want to take the time to honestly help me. I shouldn't have to have a

99

problem. They should just want to do it because, as

a teacher, I feel like, I mean if you're honestly a

teacher and you get paid. So I mean, you have to

want to see kids you know, do well. I felt, for me,

they just didn't really want it. But I mean, if they

would have took a little bit of time to help me out in

the ways that I needed it, then maybe things would

have been different.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me which ways. What ways did you

need?

STUDENT: I needed the hands-on type learning. I needed

them sit there and actually help me. Not to get all

pissy or anything. Because a lot of teachers, they

didn't like me, so they didn't want to help me. But I

needed it, and I kinda just dug myself into a hole

with the suspensions and the… my whole attitude

toward school made them kind of seem like I didn't

want to do it, but when I needed the help then you

know…

A second recommendation that could be inferred is the increase of alternative

educational opportunities for students who are at risk. Four out of five of the students

expressed a desire to "get on with my life," and four had specific plans. Out of the five

Former Jenkins County students, four participated in alternative education and all four

expressed positive experiences that helped them prepare for adulthood and for their future. Moreover, two have completed and successfully obtained their GED, and one is participating in a GED course. The other two students expressed a desire to obtain the GED, but at the time of this study, were not involved in any programs or plans to do so. Hernandez Josefowcz-Simbeni (2008) defines alternative educational settings as having specific elements, including:

> …small size, supportive relationships, individual attention, varied choices, student autonomy and participation in decision making, well-defined rules, specialized services, and school accountability and monitoring of school performance… Alternative educational environments can create room for those who reject conventional norms or those who need special attention. (p. 59)

McCall (2003) supports the perspective that alternative placements can be successful, and in a study with groups of students who returned to traditional school following alternative placement, determined that the group of "students who dropped out were not engaged with positive or productive relationships with most school personnel" (p. 116). McCall reports that this failure to remain in school is specifically based on the amount of individualized attention and instruction students receive in the alternative setting versus the traditional setting. A Former Jenkins County Student described her experience at Reynolds Middle School, the only alternative middle school in Jenkins County:

> INTERVIEWER: You were at [Reynolds]?

STUDENT: They sent me back to [Matthews], but every time they sent me back to [Matthews] I just skipped so they'd send me back to [Reynolds].

INTERVIEWER: So the majority of your time in middle school was spent at [Reynolds] versus [Matthews]?

STUDENT: I mean, whenever I got sent to [Reynolds], I went; I just felt like I fit in more at [Reynolds].

INTERVIEWER: What do you mean by that?

STUDENT: Um, I don't really know how to explain this. I guess just because the kids that go there, they're just all alike. Like big schools, you got kids that are really, really smart, you got kids that are somewhat smart, and you got kids that are… can do better. I was one of them kids that can do better probably… Whenever you're at [Reynolds] you don't got all these really, really, really smart people because, you know, they all don't act out and stuff - some of them did, you don't got, like, all these people that like… because I get discouraged real fast. And whenever, I don't know, whoever you're at [Reynolds] there's just like all kinds of kids there that's like you in like different ways, you know? Like, some kids are kind of slow in the head. I'm

102

not slow in the head; I'm just not smart. Anyways,

then you got kids there that's had a hard life, that

can relate to like the stuff that you went through in

your life, and got kids there that, that I don't know.

I don't know how to explain it. I mean some kids;

it's just like "Oh my God," but see now that school

has like 100 kids probably….

Reynolds Middle School is an option for students who are at risk or who are identified as disruptive. Park High School also houses the _____Academy, an in-house program for high school students, and referral to Homebound Education for safe school violations. Jenkins County also can make referral to alternative education based on the student's individualized needs, including referral to:

- _____ Mental Health Center's Innerchange Program for students experiencing psychiatric issues;

- The School-Aged Expectant Mother's Program for pregnant teenage girls;

- The University of Charleston and West Virginia State University Collaborative Schools for students who are academically gifted;

- Medical Homebound Education;

- Home Schooling

Mental health referral and school discipline referral are catalysts to locally based alternative education, but another option for students that is statewide is Mountaineer Challenge Academy (MCA) (n.d.), which was developed in 1993 under West Virginia Public Law 102-484. According to the website:

The mission of the Mountaineer Challenge Academy is to train and

mentor selected at-risk youth to become contributing members of society

using the 8 Core Components in a quasi-military environment during a 22-

week residential and one year Post-Residential follow-up program. (¶ 2)

Referrals to MCA can come from a variety of sources including the student, the students'

family, and from the West Virginia Juvenile Court system. One Former Jenkins County

Student that participated in this study encountered this option following a criminal

offence. The student described how the enforcement of the alternative environment of

Mountaineer Challenge Academy (MCA) changed his trajectory from dropping out to

obtaining his GED:

> INTERVIEWER: The Mountaineer? So you already
>
> knew… when did you make that decision?
>
> STUDENT: Very early in the school year - because I got
>
> put on probation last year so that decision was made
>
> quick. Like, I made that decision probably
>
> November or December 2008 that I was going, but I
>
> didn't want to go to the winter class. So, I waited
>
> and went to the summer class.
>
> INTERVIEWER: You were put on probation. Tell me
>
> about that.
>
> STUDENT: Oh that was just a bad mistake right there,
>
> because it kinda sucked, because the day that I
>
> broke the law, a lot happened that night. One, my

friend fell off a cliff and broke his leg, and that
same night my papaw passed away.

INTERVIEWER: And then you did what? You said you
broke the law, what'd you do?

STUDENT: It was a B and E - I was charged with breaking
and entering and receiving and transferring stolen
property.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, you need to tell me more about
that.

STUDENT: I don't even know. It was getting ready to be
the beginning of the school year, and I guess what
mainly got us was like, I don't know, we had like a
shoe fetish or something, we wanted shoes and
clothes - so we were like, yeah why don't we steal
these game systems, get the cords and sell them and
go buy clothes and some shoes so we can look fresh
for school. It didn't turn out too well; it didn't work.
I was, like, as soon as the cop was, like, I looked
over at [my friend] and was like, "Yeah I'm going
to Juvie." He was like, just shook his head. I was,
like, fully cooperative with the cop.

INTERVIEWER: How old were you?

STUDENT: 17 - I dodged a bullet on my age because that

would have been bad…

INTERVIEWER: Yes you did - a felony.

STUDENT: Yeah, they actually - when I got put on

probation, right before I went to the academy, I had

court and they dropped the misdemeanor receiving

and transferring stolen property and they dropped

the felony to destruction of property and I didn't

have to pay a dime for anything.

INTERVIEWER: And it didn't go on your record?

STUDENT: No, it's gone. I'm not even on probation now.

They released me as soon as I graduated. So that

was just awesome how I got out of that.

INTERVIEWER: Was one of the stipulations of the

probation that you go to the academy?

STUDENT: Yep. That was the agreement.

INTERVIEWER: How did you react when the judge told

you that you needed to go to Mountaineer

Challenge?

STUDENT: I was like, "Yeah I'm going to look into this

place." I was told it was just like ROTC, and I'm

like. "Okay, well that has me interested. Now, let's

see if I can find anything else about it." It was like,

six months residential program - I was like, "Well,

six months," and I was thinking "Well, that's better

than like 2-5 years in jail; that's a *lot* better!

Because, you know… get off probation if I go here

for six months plus I get my GED and all this other

stuff, and I might be able to come back to school

and graduate." Yeah, you just can't pass up a deal

like that.

Like the At-Risk Students participating in the study, the Former Jenkins County Students felt that the microsystems of the teacher, classroom, and family could be adjusted to promote successful transactional reciprocity in the school environment. The Former Jenkins County Students felt that an adjustment of communication styles of the teacher in a fashion that communicates interest and care via positive reciprocal transaction would have helped them remain in school. In addition to an adjustment within the teacher microsystems, the Former Jenkins County Students felt that the mesosystems of alternative school environments were representative of functional environments with which they interacted, and felt that additional alternative options would have benefitted them by allowing them to continue to have successful interaction with teachers and school systems that promoted their success in school and could have prevented their ultimate decision to drop out.

In addition to the systemic changes suggested, the Former Jenkins County students expressed dysfunction in proximal processing with their family microsystems, and felt that their family's dysfunction had a direct effect on their decision to drop out.

Moreover, this familial dysfunction negatively affected their ability to maintain successful relationships with their teachers and peers in the school environment. The Former Jenkins County Students felt that systemic dysfunction of their family that manifested in an indifference to the students' school success, along with the ecosystemic influences of substance abuse and poverty, directly influenced the student's functionality as whole. Furthermore, the Former Jenkins County Students felt some personal responsibility for their internal systemic dysfunction and acknowledged that poor decision-making and an inability to cope contributed to the ultimate decision to drop out of school. In context of the concept of "student in environment," the Former Jenkins County Students discussed myriad environmental influences that culminated in a final decision to leave school permanently.

CHAPTER 5: GOING THE EXTRA MILE: A CASE STUDY EXPLORING ADMINSTRATIVE PERCEPTIONS OF WHY STUDENTS CHOOSE TO LEAVE SCHOOL

Introduction

Johnson and Yanca (2007) define role as "the way the worker uses self in the specific helping situation" (p.226) and posit that role choice is based upon a client's need rather than the task at hand, and roles become important when client's difficulties or situations arise; thus prompting a need for "action and interaction – a reciprocal relationship" (p. 227). In terms of this study, the Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors step into several roles that allow for reciprocal transactions between themselves, the microsystem of the student, the microsystem of the school, the student's family microsystem, and the macrosystem of the community. Vetere and Carley (2006) describe:

> Social workers intervene and mediate daily between people and their environments to assist them with realizing their potential and resolving difficulties—injecting preventive strategies and removing barriers to growth as they go. Interventions occur at different levels across many systems and at any given time can have an impact on individuals, groups, and communities. (p. 175)

Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors perform specific roles within the microsystem of their respective schools, and often find themselves in situations where working together to support students and each other creates a stronger front of assistance and respect for the student. Moreover, due to a lack of availability or situational

incidences, there are circumstances where Attendance Directors or Guidance Counselors must take advantage of situations presented and perform a role reversal that allows them to embrace the other's professional stance. Although Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors have specific delineated role-based functions that allow them to work and interact independently within the ecological systems of school and community, oftentimes the individual roles come together to offer a collaborative, shared perspective of mutual, supportive relationships with Jenkins County Schools[7], as well as with the communities in which they work; the families and students with which they interact; and with their professional colleagues.

Methods

Design

In order to support emergent themes identified by At-risk Students and Former Students in Jenkins County, as well as triangulate data collected, it was decided that additional research would be conducted through focus groups and individual interviews with Jenkins County Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors. Obtaining these perspectives allowed the researcher the opportunity for further exploration into the dropout crisis Jenkins County is experiencing, and enabled the researcher to further analyze the data to determine emergent themes across cases and provide strategic information for dropout prevention (Glesne, 2005; Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 2008; Patton, 2002).

Sampling

The Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors identified to participate were selected using the entire population and convenience sampling respectively. The entire

---

[7] To protect confidentiality, the names of counties, people, and places have been changed.

population of Attendance Directors for the four targeted schools (Park High, Sims High, Campbell Middle, and Matthews Middle) participated in the study, along with the Lead Attendance Director. The Guidance Counselors, along with a School Psychologist, and the Director of Counseling and Testing were selected using convenience sampling from the two targeted high schools (Park and Sims).

The four targeted schools participating in the study employ a total of four Attendance Directors, all of whom are under the supervision of one Lead Attendance Director. Sims High School employs two Attendance Directors who split the student body, one of these Attendance Directors also serves Campbell Middle School. Park High School employs one Attendance Directors, who has sole responsibility for Park. Matthews Middle School has one Attendance Director who is responsible for the entire student body. All Attendance Directors for the four targeted schools, as well as the Lead Attendance Director participated in this study.

Sampling the entire population of Attendance Directors allowed the researcher to collect comprehensive information that addressed their perceptions about why students choose to leave school, as well as gain insight into the role the Attendance Director plays in the school setting. Furthermore, sampling the entire population offered the opportunity to gain all-inclusive information about the targeted schools that encompassed multiple perceptions that were rich with knowledge regarding the ecological and systemic influences on the targeted schools students. Both Sims and Park High Schools employ a total of eight Guidance Counselors and one School Psychologist, all of whom are under the supervision of the Director of Counseling and Testing. All eight Guidance Counselors, along with the School Psychologist and the Director of Counseling and

Testing were invited to participate in a focus group at their respective employing schools using convenience sampling methods. The Director of Counseling and Testing choose to participate in Sims High School's focus group. Convenience sampling, which relies on available subjects (Rubin & Babbie, 2008), was the most feasible method to obtain ethnographic data from this group regarding their perceptions of why students are choosing to leave school, and was also selected because of the size of the population. Eight, out of the nine invited, chose to participate.

Data Collection

The research is an ethnographic exploration of perceptions using qualitative methods of individual interview and focus group interview. It was determined that individual interviews and focus groups would be conducted to gain the maximum amount of information. The researcher obtained consent for participation, distributing informed consent forms at the time of the scheduled interviews/focus group sessions with Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors.

Individual Interviews

The interview process enables researchers to develop a more in-depth understanding of participant's perception of their environments and provides a rich narrative of a person's experiences and life (Patton, 2002; Seidman, 2006). The purpose of conducting individual interviews was to gain the perspective of the entire population of Jenkins County Attendance Directors professionally appointed to the four target schools. The Lead Attendance Director and two Attendance Directors elected to conduct their individual interviews at the Jenkins County Board of Education home office. The

other two Attendance Directors were interviewed at their respective schools. All interviews were completed in an environment with minimal interruption.

Interview questions were constructed to explore the perceptions and experiences of the interviewees. Patton (2002) suggests that open-ended questions guide participants in providing rich information that reconstructs events or experiences to a level where the event or experience "could have been observable had the observer been present" (p. 349-350). Interview questions for the pilot study were modeled after Patton's categories of Opinion and Values questions and Knowledge questions.

For data collection with Attendance Directors/Guidance Counselors, six open-ended questions were developed for both individual and focus groups:

- Tell me about a typical day working with at-risk students at your school(s).

- What are some of the reasons students decide to drop out?

- What influences students to leave school?

- What proactive measures could be incorporated to keep students in school?

- What reactive strategies do you employ with students who are planning to drop out?

- How prepared do you feel to handle the drop out crisis at your school(s)?

There were also several probes used to prompt participants to expand on thoughts and opinions. Probes were used to deepen understanding and clarification and allowed the researcher to gather more information from participants (Glesne, 2005). Examples of probe questions included:

- Tell me more about _____.

- Can you give me an example?

- Can you paint a picture of _____ for me?

- How did you (feel, know, learn)?

- What do you mean when you say _____?

Focus Group Interviews

At the request of the Director of Counseling and Testing, it was determined that the Guidance Counselors would participate in focus group sessions at each targeted high school, totaling two focus groups; one group per high school. Focus groups typically consist of groups of people who have shared perspective (Patton, 2002). It was determined that focus group interviews would be the most feasible way to collect data with the Guidance Counselors in order to obtain the maximum amount of information possible in the limited amount of time available.

Data Analysis

Analysis of data collected through qualitative measures "…involves organizing what you have seen, heard, and read, so that you can make sense of what you have learned" (Glesne, 2005, p. 147). The goal of the data collection from the Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors was to obtain alternative perceptions of the reasons why Jenkins County students choose to leave school, as well as triangulate the emergent themes from the pilot study. The individual interviews and focus group interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, thus enabling the researcher to sort, arrange and code the data into classifications that converged into themes of information that could then be interpreted to find meaning. This process included finding common words and phrases, as well as looking for patterns in the topics. Preliminary analysis yielded categories, which were further analyzed and organized into the same two major themes, Attitude about

114

School and Drama, that emerged from data collected with the Jenkins County At-Risk

Students, with variation in sub-themes that are relative to this particular group of

participants. Table 3 displays the two major themes and the prevalent subcategories that

define them.

Table 3: Emergent Themes & Prevalent Subcategories: Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors

Attitude about School	Drama
Academics (includes graduation credits, 9th grade transition, accessibility to alternative services, and truancy)	Acceptance (Adult acceptance and role modeling, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (GLBTQ) and intimacy issues, and fighting)
Teacher Attitude (includes student/teacher relationship, and classroom mediation)	
Family Influence (includes parent education and support, family substance abuse, poor health, poverty, and extended family or friend parenting)	

Research Question 1: Perceptions

What perceptions do Jenkins County Attendance Directors and Guidance

Counselors have about the reasons why kids choose to leave school?

Introduction

In order to eliminate bias and influence, as well as provide a foundation of

support for the emergent themes, the literature review for the pilot study was approached

following the data collection (Patton, 2002) to accommodate the timing of the study and

with the knowledge that specific elements and themes would emerge from the data

collected.

Attitude about School

　　Academics. All of the participants discussed having a vested interest in students'

success in school and expressed feelings that their respective jobs serve to ensure that

each student receives academic support in a way that promotes graduation. However,

Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors all discussed that regardless of their

intervention there are students who "fall through the cracks," and choose to leave school

for a variety of reasons. "Falling through the cracks" is described by the Attendance

Directors and Guidance Counselors as: poor 9th grade transition; inappropriate classroom

placement (i.e., qualifies for special education services and does not receive them);

functional illiteracy that is undetected; lack of graduation credits required to graduate;

and a lack of transportation to alternative schooling for pregnant students. According to

the Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors, the issues of inappropriate academic

placement and/or functional illiteracy are notable contributors to students dropping out of

school. An Attendance Director describes, "Well, we do have some of the kids that really

do have trouble in school. I mean the school is not a happy place when you can't read.

You know, it's not fun when you can't read, and you're not in the right place, and you're

not in the right classroom. You know, you need to be in Special Ed, but you can't be

because you don't come to school enough?" A Guidance Counselor (GC) from Sims

spoke to this issue as well:

　　　　　　GC: Educationally, working especially with kids in the 9th

　　　　　　　　　grade, sometimes we don't catch it until the 12th

　　　　　　　　　grade, but kids that don't have the academic ability

　　　　　　　　　when they step into the school, it's real easy for a

116

kid to sit in the back of the classroom and be quiet

and kind of fall through the cracks. So we're

identifying kids at mid-term, kids that are failing

classes, reviewing their grades, talking to their

teachers, having meetings to determine whether

they have a learning disability, or if there's a home

situation or what's going on…We found kids that

definitely should have been in Special Ed and either

had not been tested or had been exited from Special

Ed and weren't receiving those services. That's the

other stuff we do, determining their academic

ability.

Along with inappropriate academic placement and/or functional illiteracy,

transition from school to school is a factor that was noted as a significant reason for

academic failure that leads to dropping out. Hernandez Josefowcz-Simbeni (2008)

discusses the critical time period of transition from elementary to junior high as one of

high developmental stress that can propel a student toward dropping out. Hernandez

Josefowcz-Simbeni states that there is disconnect between the developmental needs of

the student and the expectations of the junior high environment, and a "poor adjustment"

(p. 55) from elementary school to junior high can contribute to student dropout. This

transition, a time when students are experiencing a decline in "Grades, academic

achievement, perceptions of ability, achievement motivation, educational expectations,

and educational values" (p. 51) is also the time when "grade retention, special education

and alternative school placement, tracking, absences, suspensions, and dislike for school all increase" (p. 51). All participants discussed the transition between middle school and high school as a difficult time for students in Jenkins County, stating that it is especially difficult for students transitioning from smaller middle school environments to larger high school environments.

In a study with one Oregon school district, McIntosh, Flannery, Sugai, Braun, and Cochrane (2008) explored the significance between academic achievement and problem behavior following the transition from 8th to 9th grade, and determined that there is a correlation between academic performance and discipline referral. McIntosh, et al. called this phenomenon a crossover effect, and determined that students who have low expectations of academic success have higher incidences of problem behavior once they reach 9th grade, stating "…the presence of low academic skills often interferes with social behavior, but the presence of problem behavior nearly always interferes with academic learning" (p. 251). Although discipline referral per se was not a significant indicator of dropout in the targeted Jenkins County Schools, fighting, a behavior that can cause suspension or expulsion from Jenkins County Schools, is a significant issue that was discussed by all participants.

In a different study exploring student transition from middle school to high school, Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell, and Feinman (1994) examined the transition from middle school to high school from a systemic perspective and determined that there is a "developmental mismatch" (p. 507) between the transitioning student and the high school microsystem, stating,

Developmentally, early adolescence is an inopportune time to leave the

familiarity of one's school peers for a new group of peers, many of whom

are older and who are perceived as having more antisocial values… This

mismatch is particularly troubling because it comes at a time when youth

are trying to develop an identity beyond their family and being pulled in

other directions by peers…The transition into a large, anonymous, and

bureaucratic setting makes the establishment of supportive relationships

increasingly unlikely. (p. 519-520)

Lan and Lantheir (2003) described the developmental issues students transitioning

from middle school (junior high) to high school have as a critical event that can cause a

student to begin a downward spiral of low self-esteem, poor academic performance,

identity confusion, and isolation from peers and teacher, stating:

During the transition period, students are cognitively moving more firmly

into Piaget's formal operational stage where the abilities of abstract

thinking, hypothesis testing, and hypothetical–deductive reasoning

emerge. These abilities are necessary to compete and succeed in the

challenging academic curriculum in high schools. (p. 326)

A unique reason for high drop rates identified by both the Attendance Directors

and Guidance Counselors for Sims High School was tough 9th grade transition for

students moving into Sims High School from Pine Forest Middle School, a rural

kindergarten through eighth grade feeder school. Although Pine Forest was not identified

as a target school, it is important to note that all of the professionals associated with Sims

High School, vehemently believed that students from Pine Forest Middle School

contribute to the high dropout numbers Sims High School is experiencing. A Guidance Counselor explained:

> GC2: In our school specifically, [Pine Forest Middle School], those kids have been in that building since Kindergarten. They're family. Everybody's on a first-name basis. Those kids are just beside themselves when they come into this building where there are as many kids in their 9th grade class as there were in their whole building! And, if you did some studies, you'd see a lot from that area who don't finish. They just can't handle the pressure of the amount of people in the building. The other feeder schools are bigger, but it's still a major, major adjustment to come into this larger school. The population; the numbers. In the whole of Pine Forest School, there's around 4 or 5 hundred kids, maybe that many. This year's 9th grade class started out at 400 something in their class alone. That's a major adjustment. A lot of those kids have been together since kindergarten. Now they get thrown into this big population of people, and if they're not social, if they're not able to do large crowds, they start to pull back. They get sick, "I don't want to go

to school", and this is from probably not the greatest economic area…

In addition to the targeted feeder schools identified as participants in this study, the experiences of the Pine Forest Middle School students (as perceived by the Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors), speaks directly to the relationship between social problem behavior and poor academic performance determined by McIntosh, et al (2008), as well as the developmental mismatch discussed by Seidman, et al (1994).

All participants also discussed graduation credit loss as a significant reason students choose to leave school. In Jenkins County, students must have 25 credits to graduate high school, with a minimum of 18 to be obtained between 10th and 12th grade (WVDE, 2009). A Guidance Counselor explained graduation credit and the barriers students face:

> GC2: A child can earn 32 credits in four (4) years. It only takes 25 to graduate. So if a kid gets behind, has a problem, there are ways to meet those requirements. We help in any way that we can, with the block program, we have had different grants over the years to help the kids with the things they cannot pay for, like to make up classes after the county said we had to charge for fifth block…But by the time they get to us, or it's time to go to work on counting the credits that you have to have, like she said, they

go through 9th asking why they're not getting

promoted. But, there's no 'buts', this is high school.

This is when the final part of your education begins.

This has to happen in order for you to move on.

That's either when they turn around, get it done and

move on, or [they say], "Well I'm just not gonna do

it."

INTERVIEWER: How many 9th graders do you retain on

average?

GC1: What is it for last year, 40-60? It's high. This year I

don't think it's that high, but we don't know yet.

INTERVIEWER: You're talking about a 9th grade class of

nearly 400 students, and you're talking about a

senior class that's 240. What happens between 9th

grade and senior year to those who disappear from

that number?

GC2: A lot move, they're retained in a class so they

become a member of another, and then you have the

drops.

According to the West Virginia Department of Education (WVDE, n.d.), the

breakdown of credits for Jenkins County is as follows:

- 4 Language Arts

- 4 Social Studies (must include U.S. to 1900, World Studies to 1900, and Twentieth Century)

- 3 Mathematics (Two of three will be Algebra I and above)

- 3 Science (Coordinated and Thematic Science 9 and 10, and one lab science above Thematic Science 10)

- 1 Physical Education/Wellness

- 1 Health

- 1 The Arts

- 4 Career Majors (College or Vocational)

- 4 Electives

The Guidance Counselors for both Sims and Park High Schools discussed the impact of graduation credits on a student's decision to drop out of school. The Guidance Counselors described graduation credit requirements and the impact of retention:

> GC2: …They haven't had the learning that's taken place.
>
> They don't have the intelligence. Then we get them
>
> in 9th grade, and they can't do 9thgrade work. They
>
> can't do Algebra I. They can't…they fell way
>
> behind, then they come and we're counting credits.
>
> We're making it where you have to have 25 to
>
> graduate. You can't have…you know, "Good job,
>
> you tried, you go on to the 10th grade, you go on to
>
> the 11th."

GC1: They honestly think that, some of the 9th graders, that

they can get promoted like they did in middle

school. Some of them honestly believe that. I met

some of those kids.

INTERVIWER: …You mentioned credits. Can you tell me

a little about that and how that influences a kid to

stay in school or leave school?

GC3: I have a student who spent the year here, he's 20

years old. He still did not graduate. He could. He

likes school. He thought he could just come back

next year, "Oh, I'll just make that up." "No, you're

21 then, you're not coming back." But they have to

have 5 credits, then 11 credits, then 17. And, if they

don't have that, they don't move on. So once

they're 17, 18 years old and only have two credits?

You can't hardly keep them. Unless they're dealing

or something, there has to be some reason why they

keep coming to school…

GC1: Why would somebody not having the reading skills,

the math skills, the writing skills from elementary to

middle school and they're thrown into 9th grade?

Right off the bat they fail first semester. Then

they're behind and go on to second semester and

they fail that. Then there's more credits to make up, and I think they're just frustrated with all the classes they've failed and need to make up, then we move them on and they still fail. It just overwhelms them with how much they have to make up, and they don't have the skills to make them up.

GC2: I think the [Jenkins] County Board of Education puts them at a real disadvantage, because if a kid fails three subjects as a 9th grader, they cannot take any of those three their 10th grade year. Major subjects I'm talking about. And I think it's real discouraging to the kids, because after 7 classes they've gotta take credit recovery at another time. They can't survive seven (7) classes, now are they gonna take eight (8) or nine (9)? What's wrong with the kid taking 9th grade English again? I know teacher ratio is the excuse, but you know…

GC1: What they say is they want that child out of here in four (4) years, and that child has to move on every single year, four (4) math credits, four (4) English credits in order to get those four (4) every year and get them out of here, then they keep hoping those kids will make summer school, or after school,

make those up on their own, and a lot of time with

these kids…

GC2: It's not a reality.

GC1: It's not a reality.

GC3: We meet with every student, every year, individually

when we do scheduling. So they're aware of their

credit situation. It's not like they're in the dark

about what they need to make up. We do see each

student planning out their next year for them. They

know what they need to make up.

INTERVIEWER: Do they know that they're still

technically a 9th grader, that after three years they're

still a 9th grader?

GC3: They don't want to admit that, but we have retention

homeroom. So they know that, they just don't want

anybody else to know that.

Although monitoring of graduation credits is a primary responsibility of the Guidance Counselors, Attendance Directors have strong feelings about the pressure students endure when faced with 25 credits and how that pressure can provoke students to make the choice to drop out. One Attendance Director (AD) passionately described their perspective of the requirements:

AD: …a lot of the kids are overwhelmed. A lot of them

say, "Gosh, I'm not any good at math, how am I

going to make it?" Then they beat themselves up

before they've even gotten there. If they didn't have

a good foundation in math, where do you go to

catch up? Every evening up here they have some

kind of tutoring. Again, some kids can't stay. Some

kids have to leave here and work a job. Some kids

don't have transportation. So it's limited, but it

helps some. In that sense, I think there's too much

of an expectation. The kids who are going to college

and getting the scholarships, they're going to be

taking those classes anyway. Not everybody needs

Trig or Biology or Anatomy. To get a good career

in life, and do what they need to do to support

themselves - not everybody needs that. In that

sense, this new credit recovery thing, I am so totally

against it. It sucks in some ways, and in others I can

see a plus. Maybe for kids who are half a semester

down, or just one credit. It's just too hard,

especially for a special education student, it's just

hard.

Along with missing or failing graduation credits, both Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors discussed how this issue particularly correlates with students transferring from school to school. The transition from one school to another can create a

situation where the student loses credit when he/she enters the new school environment; consequently putting him/her at a disadvantage with little hope of recovery; thus prompting the student to decide to leave school. Jenkins County High Schools have three different operating systems for scheduling content delivery, based on the school year academic calendar. Some Jenkins County high schools have an eight course, 50 minute class schedule that switches after one semester, or two consecutive nine weeks; other schools operate using four 90 minute blocks of courses that switch at the semester, or two consecutive nine weeks; and one school operates on a nine course, six week schedule that can be modified to meet student needs. Due to these differing content delivery schedules, a student transitioning from Park High School, which operates on the eight courses, 50 minute class schedule to Sims High School, which operates on the Block schedule, can easily walk into the classroom behind in academic learning and be deficit in academic credits. The Guidance Counselors at Sims discussed:

> GC1: …In [Jenkins] County, we don't even have each
>
> school on the exact same semester system! If they
>
> just move in-county several times, they'll wind up
>
> losing credits just here in the county.

> GC1: For example, [Park] is on a different schedule. They
>
> do seven or eight periods a day, all year long. We
>
> do four a semester. So if a student comes here in
>
> November, we're almost finished with four full
>
> credits. They're not even halfway through seven or
>
> eight. We'll have kids that come here and they lose

credits, or we have kids move from here to there,

they won't accept them there. So they'll drop on our

roll. They'll just say "I'm sorry, we can't get you

caught up on credits, you're not gonna make it."

Oh, it happens.

GC2: And then you have [Hall] High [students] who are on

a modular schedule, and their credits are all

configured completely different, even than [Park]'s.

So when those two schools transition out to the rest

of us, it causes a lot of problems.

GC1: The reality is that a lot of these families will tend to

do better in this area than they will in some of those

other areas because it's a lower income area. So we

end up with a lot of these kids who don't have a lot

of credits. And, they either drop out or have to go to

an 11th grade class, when they should be in a 12th

grade class.

Finally, the Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors discussed

transportation to alternative schooling and lack of child care for pregnant teenagers and

teenage mothers respectively as contributors to this particular demographic of students

dropping out. According to the participants, pregnancy is not a contributor to dropout, but

lack of support for pregnant girls does contribute to the dropout problem in both target

school areas of Jenkins County. A Guidance Counselor at Park High School provided of

portrait of a new mother trying to attend school and graduate, "I have a student who struggles. She's a parent; has a child here in the day care. She struggles; cannot pass a class. She can't make it up, got no transportation. She's gonna keep the baby - she's got it here in day care. So when we have after school to make it up [missed course work], what's she going to do with the baby?"

Lack of transportation to the county's Expectant Mother's alternative program is a serious issue for pregnant teenagers from Sims High School that want to continue their schooling in an alternative setting that allows them freedom to self-pace, accommodate doctor appointments, and six weeks post-birth homebound education. For Park students, there are two options: Applying for a slot in the school's in-house child care center or attending the Expectant Mother's program. According to one Attendance Director, neither option is ideal:

> AD: …it's [The Expectant Mother's program] proven to be
>
> a good program for all those girls who decide to go.
>
> But afterwards, they have the baby, they can finish
>
> out a certain length of time but then they have to
>
> come back to school. Well, then again, they have a
>
> different responsibility… They do have some slots
>
> in the daycare up here which helps some girls, but
>
> again, it doesn't seem to be a problem for the girls
>
> so much though. They put them on the bus and
>
> bring them to school with them. They will bring
>
> him to school, they take him to the daycare, and

then the teachers let them leave about five minutes before everybody else is dismissed to pick up the baby and get on the bus. But there's only so many slots, so it doesn't work for everybody. But you have, um, but I think, you know, so in that sense some girls make it, some don't. You know, you stay up all night, the baby is sick… you start missing school… you can't get up in the morning to get motivated and then you got school on top of that. Sometimes it's overwhelming and it's too much, so they end up quitting. Back to the expectant mothers program - when they come back they don't have the structured setting again and they've got the added responsibility… but the social piece doesn't seem to be as big an issue anymore. At least up here. The stigma's not there anymore, really, among the students. I don't see it. I don't see the stigma of a student having a baby - they're standing out here waiting in line with them for the bus.

Sims High School does not have an in-house childcare center, and if a pregnant teen needs to attend the Expectant Mother's program, transportation is a barrier that contributes to the pregnant girl dropping out of school. An Attendance Director described the barrier:

AD: With pregnancy, we have a program for students who

become pregnant, but our end of the valley has

provided no transportation to it. So we don't have as

much participation as we could have because we

don't have availability. And we don't have a

program like [Park] has where they have the day

care center in the school, whether they don't have

the space or whatever the reason. I think that's been

very successful at [Park].

INTERVIEWER: How significant is pregnancy at your

school?

AD: I don't have any percentages or numbers, but I think it

is more significant at [Sims]. [Sims] and [Park] may

run neck and neck. I don't work that program. We

have someone who does, but my own guess is that

[Sims] would be right up there, percentage-wise

with [Park].

INTERVIEWER: Wow - sounds pretty high.

AD: It is, but again we have no transportation for the

program. If you don't provide transportation…in

town you can catch the city bus and get there. If

you're in [Puddle, Riverbend, or Shelby Creek], are

132

you gonna walk out pregnant for a mile to catch the

city bus? No, of course not.

Teacher Attitude. In the pilot study, as well as the study with Former Jenkins

County Students, poor student/teacher relationships were identified as an antecedent to

students dropping out. Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors also discussed the

impact of poor student/teacher relationships and classroom climate as triggers that

provoke students to skip school or class, which leads to excessive truancy and eventual

drop out. One Guidance Counselor believed that teachers do not understand their

influential power, stating "I think some teachers don't realize they have the ability to

empower a child to love school, love education, love learning. They don't always realize

the impact they have as an adult role model."

Skipping school or class can cause a student to face disciplinary action and

eventual truancy charges. The Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors discussed

skipping as a stepping stone to dropout created by poor student/teacher relationships; the

catalyst for the student's decision to stop attending school. An Attendance Director

described:

> AD: Skipping school. Big issue at [Sims]. Go to the
>
> bathroom, somewhere else. "I don't like that
>
> teacher, I'm not going." So they skip that class. If
>
> they're skipping a class every day, obviously
>
> they're going to flunk that class. If they've already
>
> started the mindset of "If I don't like that teacher

I'm not going", then we need to talk to them about

it.

In a longitudinal study of the psychology of student dropouts and the influence of teacher-child relationships, Englund, Egeland, and Collins (2008) determine that students who experience negative or neglectful teacher-child interaction are more likely to drop out of school regardless of their academic standing. Englund, Egeland, and Collins hypothesize that positive systemic reciprocity with both home (parent/child) and school (teacher/child) microsystems can help provoke students to stay in school and graduate, stating that as the student transitions from year to year within their school system, "academic success across development is embedded in their interactions with parents and teachers…" (p. 90). A Guidance Counselor provided an example of this type of interaction in one of the targeted Jenkins County High Schools, stating that teachers aren't always supportive and helpful, and there are some teachers who, "When the kid gets in trouble, they get yelled at instead of talked to and asked 'What's going on?'" The Guidance Counselor goes further to say, "I have some new teachers who, and this is one of my big pet peeves, they won't even look at that kid, they'll just say 'Go sit down over there.'"

In another longitudinal study, Cangemi and Khan (2001) discuss issues similar to those discussed by Englund, Egeland, and Collins (2008), hypothesizing that issues of inconsistent and insensitive classroom practice are potential reasons students may choose to drop out of school. Cangemi and Khan (2001) speculate that teachers who have inconsistent discipline in the classroom create hostile and confusing climates that provoke students to skip class or quit school altogether. An example from a Guidance

Counselor described the rare, but real, occurrence of this in Jenkins County Schools stating,

> GC: And I think sometimes, and this is very rare, but I
> think sometimes the teachers do not take into
> consideration the background that the students are
> living in. I had a student this year that would go to
> sleep in class and the teacher would grab the desk
> and shake it. Well, it's just like if you scare an
> animal - they're gonna lash out at you. And it's just
> a lack of sensitivity to the needs of the student.

Cangemi and Khan also hypothesize that teacher insensitivity is a portent to dropout, and speculate that "Teachers, generally speaking, have one to two potential dropouts in their classrooms" (p.117). Cangemi and Khan posit that there are teachers who are not aware of what the students are bringing to the classroom from the other systems in which they interact, which consequently leads to teachers having a lack of empathy for the systemic influences students face. Moreover, these teachers who exhibit insensitivity are more likely to discipline and punish students for problems for which the student may not have control. One Attendance Director discussed what students bring to the classroom from the microsystem of family, and how teachers approach the classroom, stating "They are very, for the most part, they're just really structured; teachers are very structured. Our kids aren't structured. I mean the ones that are dropping out. You know, they're not coming from homes where there's a lot of structure and there's a lot of you know motivation." Another Attendance Director provided a more detailed description of the

systemic influence of parents and classroom teacher insensitivity to possible issues a child may bring to the classroom:

> AD: …If they [students] don't have any consequences at home, then if they're having problems, then they ask "Why am I…?" Sometimes you have old-fashioned teachers who do the reading aloud from paragraphs because they don't want to teach; they don't want to do a lesson plan. But to look like "I'm a great teacher", you read the first paragraph, you read the second one, and we'll go all through the class. Then you get to that one kid that's waited, and they can't read, or read very well. They've had to deal with that anxiety, going all through the class, then it gets to them. It's a lot easier to just blow up, "Eff you all!" then get kicked out, or just walk out and leave, than to face that embarrassment.

> INTERVIEWER: Tell me a little more about the relationships between students and teachers.

> AD: There's only so much a teacher can do: A teacher's a role model and an authority figure while you're at school, but it's not a parent. As long as that child doesn't have a parent, you can't just expect a kid to do everything right when they don't have to do

anything right at home, or what they've perceived

as right at home, really, is not at all. They're doing

adult things, smoking cigarettes, cigar, pot,

whatever it is, drinking, whatever. Cursing like a

sailor, not showing respect for authority. You get

them for eight hours a day and you want them to be

angels, and that's not gonna happen. I also think

that teachers have to toughen up a little bit and not

wear their feelings on their shoulders. So what if a

kid tells you to "Eff off"? It's not appropriate, I

know, but it's not worth kicking them out of school.

INTERVIEWER: It's not personal.

AD: It's not personal. "Eff off" is a little strong, but they do

slip a cuss-word. Because that's what they're so

accustomed to! Pull a kid aside and say, "Look,

John, I really respect you, and I don't disrespect you

in any way, but I would appreciate it if you don't

disrespect me anymore in my classroom." And,

you'll get a lot further with my kids by doing that

and by asking them. Now it's different if they

constantly do it and they're oppositional and they're

trying to provoke things in your class, but we have a

lot of kids that just slip once, and "BAM", you're

out.

Helker, Schottelkorb, and Ray (2007) discuss the impact of student/teacher relationships on the student's success in school and determine that classroom teachers have a direct influence on the student in a developmentally negative way, stating:

> …the student-teacher relationship serves as a vehicle for the child to continue to develop a personal view of self, others, and the world. This relationship can confirm a child's perception of being valuable, worthy and able to contribute in meaningful ways, or the relationship can lend credence to a child's feeling of worthlessness and incapability. (p. 33)

The Guidance Counselors support this perspective. One Guidance Counselor stated "…a lot of times the relationship is so important to getting them to the point where they can be a student and they can learn from a teacher," and felt that there needs to be a goodness of fit between the student and teacher to help facilitate a successful relationship that promotes classroom attendance and motivates student learning. Helker, Schottelkorb, and Ray (2007) also hypothesize that a negative student/teacher relationship can have a direct effect on the student's social and academic ability as early as elementary school, and state that students who "experience relationships with teachers characterized by conflict and dependency (from the teacher's perspective) tend to like school less, avoid school more, and are less engaged in class…" (p. 33).

Family Influence. The Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors felt that family influence contributed significantly to students dropping out of Jenkins County Schools. The participants specifically discussed a familial lack of support or

understanding for a student's educational goals, along with family substance abuse, poverty, family health, and de facto foster parenting as the primary interferences to a student remaining in the school environment. As one Guidance Counselor stated, "It's unbelievable, some of the things that our kids have gone through. We've had 17- and 18-year olds here checking out dinner. They're hungry, or they haven't been in bed yet." If the microsystem of the family has dysfunction within the system, it can have dysfunctional transactional reciprocity with the microsystem of the school (Bronfenbrenner, 2004). Furthermore, low socio-economic status, single-parent families, family culture, and a parent or sibling dropping out have all been found to have a significant influence on a student's decision to drop out of school (Barrett & Turner, 2006; Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006; Chen, n.d.; Gordon, 2004; Karoly, Killburn, & Cannon, 2005; Kung & Farrell, 2000; Nowicki, Duke, Sisney, Stricker, and Tyler et al., 2004; Terry, 2008). An Attendance Director contemplated,

> AD: I mean, if I came to school and I didn't know if when
>
> I got home Mom was going to be strung out on
>
> drugs or drunk out of her mind, or we were going to
>
> be evicted from our house or our gas had been
>
> turned off or our heat had been turned off… would I
>
> be able to come to school and function as a student?
>
> I don't think so.

The Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors discussed how the influence of familial difficulties can spill over into the microsystem of the school having a direct effect on student achievement and ability to optimally perform in school. Situational

incidences of family violence, hunger or family health can prevent a student from

focusing on class work, homework, or from attending school altogether. A Guidance

Counselor described,

> GC: I've had kids say to me, "I'm hungry. There's no
>
> food." There are kids that come in here with such
>
> baggage that the last thing on their mind is x+y=z.
>
> It's that "mom and dad fought all night last night",
>
> or that "I had to go stay at my uncle's house" or
>
> "I'm living at my friend's house."

Family support for student's staying in school with success was seen as low effort

and poor parenting in the eyes of the Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors, due

to the family devaluing high school graduation for a variety of reasons. For example, one

Guidance Counselor said, "Parents never check homework. We get calls, 'Oh I see where

my son failed.' Parents never involved in encouragement because they don't see the value

of a good diploma. Many of them don't." Another Guidance Counselor elaborated,

> GC: In a lot of the issues with our kids, there is no adult
>
> there setting those rules; telling those rules. They're
>
> [the students] allowed to do whatever they
>
> want…the parents who aren't there act like they're
>
> friends with their children. They don't have that
>
> parent/child relationship.

Both the Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors discussed poor

parenting as a significant contributor to the high dropout rates Jenkins County is

experiencing, defining poor parenting as: laissez-faire parenting styles, lack of parent education, hopelessness, and parental substance abuse issues. Terry (2008) confirms this perspective in a qualitative study with adult dropouts who, all of whom attribute their dropping out to their parents. In addition, Hernandez Josefowcz-Simbeni (2008) supports this perspective as well, stating, "Parenting behaviors and styles are linked to academic achievement and school dropout. Students whose parents are more punitive or who are less involved in their children's lives are more likely to perform poorly in school and end up dropping out" (p.53).

The Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors discussed the impact of parents who place little value on education as a direct influence on a student's decision to drop out due to the lack of emphasis on continuing in school. A Guidance Counselor described a family from the Sims area:

> GC1: That generational thing happens a lot. I had a family I
> worked with for two years… Three siblings: an
> older boy who's probably 18 or 19, a 17-year-old,
> and a girl who's 16. The older boy dropped out at
> the end of his senior year because he wasn't going
> to graduate on time. So, instead of buckling down
> and figuring out what he needed to do (and he had
> time to buckle down), he chose not to. The younger
> sister never ever came to our school; never once
> stepped foot in our school. She stepped in one day
> with her mom to talk to me because they had

received multiple notices about going to court

because of truancy. I had a schedule put in place,

we reviewed her schedule, emailed her teachers

with instructions to try and get her caught up. I said

"We'll get you started today." "No, I'll come

tomorrow." Never showed up; dropped. The middle

boy graduated this year. I don't know how we did

that. Well, I do! We worked our butts off! It was a

generational thing - mom and dad were dropouts.

When exploring urban student transition from middle school to high school through a longitudinal study with 652 urban-based, minority adolescents, Frey, Ruchkin, Martin, and Schwab-Stone (2009), determined that parental control was necessary to prevent youth from turning to violent or problematic behaviors, as well as provide motivation and support for academic success. Frey, et al hypothesized that, without parental support and connectedness, "resilience in adolescents in areas including substance abuse, conduct problems, school misconduct, depression and anxiety" (p. 2) will be weak, and adolescents' will be vulnerable to school disengagement or dropping out. Terry's (2008) study with adult dropouts correlates with Frey, et al.'s perspective, stating that problematic behavior in school, as well as a lack of motivation to be engaged in school is directly related to a lack of parental interest or control. An Attendance Director provided insight into their perspective about why parents are allowing their students to leave school and not return:

AD: I believe they didn't have a good experience in school

so they didn't value it, so when they first meet with

you they'll try, "Well I didn't graduate from school,

and I'm fine…" Those people who feel that way

tend to not take their kids' education seriously. I

don't know why that is, you know, could just be

speculation, maybe…

INTERVIEWR: How do you think that affects a kid's

decision to leave school?

AD: I think it makes it acceptable to not value your

education. If mom or dad, you know, is just talking

about how bad the school is, and they're not making

you get up -- they don't care if you go. Why would

you? And when you're a teenager and you have that

kind of autonomy at that age, who isn't gonna skip

and cut? …I feel like parenting is everything.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me more about that. What do you

mean?

AD: Well, you're going to be a product of the way you're

brought up. If you have someone that is pushing

you to do your homework, even when you don't

want to, is sitting down with you and is trying to

help you, or if they can't help you is calling me or

calling the school and say, "Who's the tutor? My

child needs help with Algebra, or English. Who can

help me with this?" That child is going to learn, and

that child is going to value that because they've had

to spend time doing that. It might not be what they

want to do at that time, but they're going to learn it

and they're going to stay in school… But with that,

I believe that there's a lot of parents that, that's just

not the priority. I think it's lack of hope. I don't

want to…let me think of how I can say that a little

bit better. They've [students] grown up in an

environment where no one has held a job, many of

them. Not everyone, but many of them. They've

grown up in an environment where basically

they've cooked their own dinners, and they have

taken care of themselves. So, they don't see the

benefit of getting a high school diploma.

Parental substance abuse was also seen as a factor that contributes to poor

parenting, which can lead to a lack of support for students at-risk of dropping out.

According to one Guidance Counselor from the Sims area of Jenkins County, "There's a

lot of addiction. A lot. In the hollers, there's a lot of pill addiction, meth addiction, crack.

A lot of our parents are dealing with substance abuse issues." An Attendance Director

from the Park area of Jenkins County sees substance abuse as one of many factors that contribute to dropout. The Attendance Director explained:

> AD: A lot of factors can come in that, that can come into just a single mom that works several jobs, that can't really take care of their kids the way she would like, that can be parents on drugs, and when a person's on drugs, that becomes their best friend. It doesn't mean that they don't love people around them, they do, just not as much as that drug. Because when you're an addict you love that drug more than anything else. That's what becomes your best friend. We have so many children just in my area, not one particular school because we've got great…and it doesn't make the kids bad, and it doesn't make the people bad, it's just bad decisions that have led to addiction. There's just alcoholics -- I go on so many home visits and people are out of their mind. They don't even know I'm there.

Family health related to issues of lack of health care and poverty is a prominent issue in the Sims area of Jenkins County, and the professionals working in the Sims area interact with student grief that can manifest in truancy and discipline issues that are antecedents to dropping out and school failure. An Attendance Director discussed an incident with a student:

145

AD: …This other girl, she's not an attendance issue, but, this little girl a week before last, her, she was living with her grandmother. I didn't know her mother was dead. I thought her mother was on drugs and had left, but, her mother was, has been dead for five years; she's been living with her grandmother. Well, she's been, she's sort of loud and not really, doesn't have good manners, and she'll just come up and yell at me. Like, (mimics yelling) "I need some new shoes!" And that's what she had yelled at me one Wednesday, and so I go in Thursday, and the counselor, says to me, "You know you really need to get K_____ some shoes." And, I said, "Well, she yelled at me yesterday!" And he said, "Her grandmother died last night." I mean, her grandmother, the one keeping her after her mom, died the night before. But, it's not unusual. I mean, it's just not unusual for these people to lose a parent during the school year.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think is causing this, this sickness? It just sounds like there's a lot of sickness.

AD: (Laughs incredulously) There's a lot of sickness! There really is! I don't know. I don't know if it's,

maybe it's poor health, because of the area they're

poor, you know? A lot of them are Medicaid

recipients, so I don't know if that's a lot of it.

Poverty, maybe it's just due to poverty, and they

have bad health? But there's a lot of death in that

area. There really is.

Finally, the Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors discussed extended

family parenting or de facto foster parenting as a reason students choose to leave. Living

with extended family such as aunts, uncles, grandparents, or stepparents, or with de facto

foster parents such as a boyfriend or girlfriend's parents or family friend, is a common

occurrence in Jenkins County, and the participants in this study feel that this type of

parenting creates the illusion of family, but oftentimes does not provide a supportive

environment that promotes staying in school. A Guidance Counselor described:

GC: In my first or second year here, I had a kid come in

one day and tell me that he wanted to enroll in

school. And I said "Where's your mom?" "Well I

think she's at work." I said, "What do you mean

you think? She didn't bring you?" He said "No I

stayed all night with my buddy in [Pine Forest]. I

want to enroll in the school year." I said "Where do

you live?" And he said "[Landau] County". I called

his mom and said, "Are you willing to sign his

guardianship over to these people?" She said, "Well

147

no." and I pointed out that we couldn't enroll him

over here without somebody legally responsible for

him. But that has not been unusual. Grandparents,

aunts, uncles, cousins, older siblings have all come

in here and enrolled kids; I have a student in here

now to talk about his older sister. In enrolling their

kids in school and stuff, there's a lot of outside

baggage that disrupts the learning process for our

kids.

The Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors attribute this phenomenon of

extended family parenting and de facto foster parenting to parents losing custody of the

child due to abuse or neglect, abandonment of the child, or kicking the child out of the

family home. The Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors describe this as

"dysfunction" and "chaos," with one Guidance Counselor stating, "I just think the

families are dysfunctional - just somebody's missing in that family and that relationship

is not there. The caring… the caring relationship is just not there." The participants all

expressed beliefs that there is some correlation between students not being in the

microsystem of their natural family and dropping out. A Guidance Counselor provided a

description of this population of student:

GC: Because they're from so many areas, they just come

from every direction, but we've got kids here that

live alone, that are taken out of their home in

another county, we've got the shelter down here,

those kids are in and out of our school. They'll be

taken out in the middle of the night. It's just every

child; that's why you have to sit and listen. Every

child has their own story.

Drama

A second theme that emerged from the data collected was Drama. In the case of

the Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors of Jenkins County Schools, these

professionals often find themselves working with students who experience various forms

of drama that contribute to the decision to drop out of school. Drama, as defined by the

Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors as acceptance issues of a lack of positive

adult role model or influence, issues of sexual identity confusion and peer acceptance,

intimacy issues, and fighting.

Acceptance. All of the Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors talked

about the counseling perspective of their jobs, a piece of which consists of providing a

supportive shoulder for the students who are struggling and/or at-risk of dropping out due

to personal crises. Oftentimes the Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors find

themselves as the only positive adult role model the student has in their life who

encourages them to stay in school. Agresta (2006) found this perspective to be accurate in

a study of 183 school social workers, where it was determined that the majority of school

social workers indicated that the most important tasks of their jobs were individual

counseling and group counseling.

All of the participants were adamant that systemic transaction of adult acceptance

and positive role modeling can positively influence and quell a student's decision to leave

school and not return. Hernandez Josefowcz-Simbeni (2008) supports this shared

perspective of the Jenkins County Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors,

stating, "Students who have experienced difficulties with adults outside the school need

the support and understanding of adults within schools" (p. 59). The Attendance

Directors and Guidance Counselors all discussed how their interaction with students is

oftentimes the only positive adult interaction a student has, and can be a reason why a

student comes to school rather than dropping out:

> GC1: A lot of time the only positive reinforcement they
>
> get is here. So it's very important for us to be
>
> visible, to be available, for our doors to be open.
>
> That has made a huge difference, when we can get
>
> out in the hallways where kids can see who we are.
>
> Because there's so many students, but the faster we
>
> can learn them and know who they are, know their
>
> stories.

The Guidance Counselors described the types of students who seek out positive

adult interaction with them, sometimes on a daily basis:

> GC1: And I think that so many of our kids who have
>
> drama, who have problems, that come in here and
>
> hang out with us because we're friendly and loving
>
> and caring, and they don't have a caring person in
>
> their life. They don't have somebody they can sit
>
> down and have dinner with, or just sit down and

say, "I don't know what to do." I mean, we've got

kids who just come and hang out with us and that…

every day… they don't have an adult in their life

that they're able to just sit and talk to and look at

them and care for them.

GC3: I have one kid who would come down here to eat

something every day. To get a cup of coffee

because we had coffee made. Every day, just so he

could talk to us. And his Mom had died a couple of

years ago, and I know he just needs an adult female

in his life. So we would just laugh and talk and just

be nice.

Another subcategory of drama that both the Attendance Directors and Guidance

Counselors spoke to were how intimate relationships and sexual identity were two major

barriers to students succeeding in school and having a direct influence on a student

choosing to leave. Adolescent peers with intimate relationships can have what Hernandez

Josefowcz-Simbeni (2008) calls a "push-pull effect" on students, with the push taking

students out of school because of bullying, being ostracized, or harassed because of

looking or acting differently or having a differing sexual orientation than the communal

norm, and the pull being peer pressure to participate in delinquent or conformist

behaviors "that stand in contrast to conventional school norms and that involve rejection

of such norms and conventions" (p. 54). Hernandez Josefowcz-Simbeni goes further to

hypothesize that early sexual activity or serious romantic commitment can also contribute

151

to student distraction, poor academic performance, and eventual dropout. An Attendance

Director experienced this phenomenon last year, stating,

> GC: Two young students, they were both 16 years old. And
>
> their parents consented to them getting married... So
>
> they got married and they were still here at school,
>
> and then neither of them was coming, and it was
>
> always something… They would get in an argument
>
> or something was going wrong… There wasn't a
>
> day that went by that there was not some drama
>
> brought into my office as to why they couldn't stay
>
> in this class…

Student issues of sexual identity were discussed in both the individual and focus

group settings as possible reasons why students choose to drop out, and in Jenkins

County, GLBTQ (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or questioning) students face issues

of acceptance and bullying by their peers, including homophobic teasing. Batelaan (2000)

discusses how school systems have some responsibility to support students who are

experiencing the realization and acceptance that they are homosexual, but oftentimes the

GLBTQ student does not have the support he/she needs because sexuality is seen as

private and should not play a part in a student's academic performance. Batelann argues:

> One could argue that sexual orientation is a non-issue in the school
>
> system. In fact, that seems to be the prevalent opinion of the
>
> administrators that I have encountered. This is understandable: after all,
>
> school is there for academic purposes. One's sexual orientation is a private

152

issue. However, school is an integral part of a teenager's life. Unlike adult gays and lesbians, who can move to environments that welcome diversity, teenagers are obligated to attend school and most have little choice over which one to go to. And most schools are hostile places for self-identified or perceived lesbian or gay teens. (p. 158)

Espelage, Aragon, Birkett, and Koenig (2008) surveyed 13,921 high school students to determine that students who identify as questioning their sexuality experience some homophobic teasing, but students who identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual experience high rates of homophobic teasing, which can have a direct link to school disengagement, truancy, depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and suicide attempt. The Guidance Counselors at Sims discuss the acceptance issues GLBTQ students face in their school:

> GC2: …When we first opened, we had a male student in particular, and truth be told, he dropped out of school because he was bullied. And we did everything possible to fix that. But he came in dressed flamboyantly. Your life is your life, son, but when you come into an area where it's not understood, where it's not expected... The only way they know how to accept is to do the things they're doing to you…When you come into a setting like this where they just don't get it or have been taught that it's wrong, they're gonna do the things they're

gonna do. I want to help you be safe in any way I

can…but it just didn't happen.

GC3: Culturally, it's harder to be gay or bisexual in this

area.

GC2: They're really vicious.

Students coming out and being open to their peers about their homosexuality has

become more socially accepted at Park High School, but is still seen as one of the reasons

why a student might choose to leave school. One of the Guidance Counselors discussed:

GC4: I think for some students, sexual identity is a real

issue. Every child's problems are multifaceted,

there's not one thing you can do that's gonna make

the difference. But I've worked pretty closely with

students who have sexual identity issues and

students that support those students. I see that as a

problem, but it's not just that issue. There are other

issues.

Another issue that contributes to dropping out is the drama that is caused by

peer/peer fighting and bullying. All of the participants felt that fighting with peers is a

significant antecedent to students leaving school. The Attendance Directors and Guidance

Counselors all discussed student fighting, and indicated that bullying and victimization

through cyber bullying or stalking behaviors is the most prevalent reason students choose

to leave school. The Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors view fighting from a

gender-based perspective, stating that girls and boys fight differently, with girls being the

primary gender group that instigates and perpetuates drama in the school environment,

typically over intimate relationships breaking apart or being threatened by another girl.

An Attendance Director described the difference:

> AD: Girls are very cruel. Boys, I mean they get angry it's
> like they duke it out and then they move on. You
> know, or it might come back and revisit it a couple
> weeks down the… it's not a constant thing. Girls
> will, I mean, they bully. They gang up. Group of
> girls will gang up on one girl, make her life
> miserable, threaten, they fight…

Two of the Former Jenkins County students left Sims High School and Park High

School respectively because of bullying from other girls. This issue is one that

Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors agree is a significant problem that can

provoke a student to quit. Describing this behavior as "gang-like," another Attendance

Director described how a group of girls banded together to harass another female

classmate over a boy:

> AD: Boy it is drama, too. It starts out with one person, now
> we even deal with cyber! "Such and such emailed
> me", "So and so texted me". I see kids in class
> picking it up typing, or they're getting messages.
> How do you focus on the subject if you're getting
> this IM [instant message] that such-and-so is calling
> you a name? We had an issue at the middle school

last week I got involved in, where we had a student from [Hall] who had texted a student at [Pine Forest] and had called them a derogatory name. Then two or three from [Hall] got involved and started texting, during class, and the principal at [Hall] called me in and we talked to some of the students. We soon began to find out what had happened -- it started with one person, interestingly enough, who did not like the girl at [Pine Forest] because she had dated her boyfriend, so she didn't do it, she put another student up to texting that student, and when that kid did it several other students got involved with the texting. Threatening her, and so on; you can see how it snowballed. But somebody had to be sitting in class getting all the messages and sending them. Kids these days can put it in their lap and don't even have to look to type it out. It's become a real problem.

INTERVIEWER: Do you see that typically happening with girls more than boys? Is there a breakdown?

AD: My feeling is that the girls can be even more vicious. They can tend to want peer support when they're trying to trash somebody, and they tend to be more

156

emotional and they'll jump in quicker. Boys are

quicker to fight, although we've had girls fist fight,

but they're quicker to fight and it's over with and

they move on. I've seen boys make up the same

day, and it appears they move past it and they don't

tend to band together as much. Kids will sort of

gather round and do that a little bit, but in my mind

girls tend to want that support, that group activity.

The problem, of course, is you take one child in this

case who is being targeted, and now look at it --

they're being targeted from another school. Sort of

gang-style, really, when you think about it. Maybe

not in the truest sense in the way we use gangs, but

it was a gang. They had a common purpose to get

that girl, over a boy.

The Guidance Counselors also attributed girl fighting to intimacy issues, and state

that sexual intimacy is a trigger for girl fighting. The Guidance Counselors discussed:

GC1: Girls hold a grudge and find a way of getting

someone back…And towards the end of the year, I

had three different fights to do interventions for in

one day, and this girl was in my room each of the

three times. So I said to her, "You're the problem.

At this point you are so involved in everyone's

157

business and stirring things up, you're causing disruption in our academic day." Something an 8th grade counselor found out and shared with me, which was really interesting and a huge discovery, is that every time there was an aggressive girl or girl fight, that girl had just lost her virginity. She had lost her virginity, true love in her mind, and now this boy's talking to somebody else. Every time she had a physical altercation it was because she found out during the course of the conversation that that girl had just lost her virginity. It has to do with that intimacy -- I think girls for the most part tend to feel a bond when there's that sort of intimacy, and when it's not there it's very frustrating for them. They set up other girls, sabotage a lot of girls; lot of bullying, on the Internet, through texting - a lot of threatening like that…We have a lot of girls fighting with each other because the other girl is their girlfriend. I think it would be a factor if it was a boy, too. These kids that are practicing, experiencing this bisexuality, a lot of these kids are very insecure, looking for love anywhere, and are maybe emotionally higher-strung than a lot of kids, or at

higher risk of being emotionally unstable. Because

they don't have that kind of stability at home,

they're looking anywhere for it. So I do think

they're more likely to get into fights or have

aggression or things like that.

Research Question 2: Recommendations

What perceptions do Jenkins County Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors have about proactive and reactive strategies that could be implemented to effectively prevent students who are at-risk from choosing to leave school?

Based on the individual interviews and focus groups, all of the Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors had proactive recommendations to help students who are at risk of retention or dropping out by providing preventive strategies methods that can help support and encourage students to stay in school. Several ideas were offered such as: Parenting education, more vocational slots for students, later school start times and/or night school availability, reduction of graduation credits, increasing the compulsory age for school to 21, increasing the available age for the Graduation Equivalency Degree to 18 instead of 16, creating clerical positions to assist with the significant amounts of paperwork required for both Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors, and reinstituting career tracks for students at the middle school level.

Some recommendations that were brought to light are already being considered or addressed by Jenkins County School administrators and/or by the Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors in their respective schools. One recommendation made by the participants was to have more help and support to help decrease stress, lighten workload,

and provide the opportunity to offer more individualized support. One Attendance Director described this as "doing social work." Jenkins County Schools is considering developing a Credit Recovery Specialist position that can assist students in the credit recovery process. The recommended use for the position by the participants was to utilize this position in a social work- or counseling-based way, perhaps as a way to help lessen heavy caseloads and provide specialized dropout preventions. An Attendance Director described:

> AD: You pick somebody who can do the credits, they're
>
> easy to do, and then you have someone who has the
>
> ability to say, "What's going on in your life?" But
>
> be sure you have the right person for it. Naturally
>
> I'm biased. I think a social worker or counselor is
>
> the best person for the job.

Moreover, providing additional support could help prevent work overload and possible burnout, which "is described as having three primary components: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishments" (Wachter, Clemens, & Lewis, 2008, p. 434), and is a common occurrence in both social work and counseling. Wachter, Clemens and Lewis surveyed 160 school counselors using The Burnout Measure Assessment that asks questions related to physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion, and determined that 53 out of 160 met the criteria for burnout, seven were in "very serious" (p. 440) jeopardy of burnout, and 99 were "in danger" (p. 440) of burnout. Conversely, Lambie (2007) conducted a similar study with professional school counselors assessing ego development and burnout, and determined that

counselors feeling emotionally exhausted, which is described as depersonalization, are more likely to feel strain in the area of personal achievement, which in turn causes higher levels of burnout, and "concluded that helping professionals at higher levels of ego development depersonalize less and maintain positive feelings toward their work" (p. 85); thus resulting in the participating counselors having low levels of burnout due to high levels of ego development. The Guidance Counselors at Sims High School did not discuss feeling burned out, but did discuss a need for additional support in order to be able to complete all of the tasks they need to accomplish.

In a study of school social workers, Leyba (2009) posited that task overload can be an antecedent to burnout, stating, "These social workers have so many tasks that it is challenging for them to fulfill mandates, pursue new initiatives, or complete certain activities at a professional level. If this is the case, they may feel frustrated or burned out" (p. 219). An Attendance Director described this feeling:

> AD: Not enough hours in the day, not enough time in the
>
> school year… In that sense, sometimes you get to a
>
> point where you just get burned out, too, and you
>
> just don't know what other rock to turn over. You
>
> feel like you've turned them all over and there's just
>
> nothing there. I wish there were more things out
>
> there, more people willing to try and find them.

Another Attendance Director discussed the enormity of the paperwork involved, "I've done a lot of family preservation where I am in the home, working with the parents intensively. So I feel like if I could…, I mean, I feel very confident that I know how to do

that. I have the skills to do that. Time wise, I can't do that. Time wise with this job it ends up enormously, mostly paperwork. It does." Descriptors such as the previous indicate that task overload is common amongst the Attendance Directors in Jenkins County, and although the Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors did not indicate symptoms of burnout, their descriptions of the services they provide in a typical day could indicate a need to address burnout as a possibility.

A second recommendation that has already begun to see results is implementing support groups and mentors in the school for students at risk of dropping out. Sims High School Guidance Counselors provide two groups that have been successful:

> GC3: We just meet once a month. We deal with life issues,
>
> and how they make decisions, and what's behind
>
> the decisions. They're very supportive and very
>
> understanding of one another, and we all understand
>
> that anything they talk about stays in that group.
>
> They honor that. But it's a place where they can say
>
> anything and know that it's safe. And talk about the
>
> reasons they want to smoke pot all the time. Talk
>
> about the reasons they end up with crappy boys in
>
> their life who want to abuse them. And we talk a lot
>
> about life; it's a very open area for them to do that.
>
> They are kids who, if they're not at-risk now, they
>
> were at-risk when they were younger. We also talk
>
> a lot about being able to take care of yourself and

what that means; whether it's having healthy relationships with a partner, or having the best relationship you can with your parents even though your situation isn't great - doing the best you can there. We also talk about what's gonna happen in life once they leave school; things they might face.

INTERVIEWER: Is that for all girls, or the specific grade?

GC3: It's open for anybody. I've loved it, I really do. I think the girls who are in it, they'll show up every time. They'll come to club.

GC1: There's other programs we have. A mentoring program we work. It works with 9th graders and follows them, but it's on a grant so it only has a four year life. So this year it'll follow this group from 9th to 12th grade, next year 9th to 11th, and so on. It's a very interesting program. The curriculum is based on two books, one is *Talks My Mother Never Had with Me*, and the other is *Talks My Father Never Had with Me.* It's community members that work with five children, come in one hour a week, spend time with the kids going over the curriculum, talking about whatever the kids want to talk about.

Park High School also has a 34 member group for GLBTQ students t that supports students coming out during adolescence, and helps ensure that GLBTQ students are safe and feel supported during such a critical time in their lives. This type of support for GLTBQ teens is also being addressed on a national scale. Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) (2009) has entered into legislation two bill amendments: The Safe Schools (Anti-bullying) Improvement Act, which calls for an amendment of the Safe and Drug Free Schools and Communities Act to include GLTBQ and gender expression, and an amendment to the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act to incorporate the language of gender expression as bill amendments to legislation. PFLAG has also entered into congress the Real Life Education Act (REAL), which includes pregnancy protection and GLBTQ safe sex practice curriculum instead of the traditional abstinence curriculum that is currently approved.

One recommended group for at-risk students was to implement a loss group for students in the Sims area of Jenkins County who have experienced the loss of a loved one through death, abandonment or corrections. An Attendance Director described:

> AD: We're dealing with loss, and so it's not just all the kids
>
> whose parents have died; that they've all had some
>
> type of loss. And, it's a lot when you think about it;
>
> I mean for a kid that age to have to deal with all that
>
> stuff. I mean adults don't deal well with the stuff
>
> these kids are having and talk about it. So, it's
>
> gonna be a struggle for an adult. I think it's hard. I
>
> think that's one thing I really wanna do.

Finally, the participants recommended involving the macrosystem of the community to create a system of care that shows students that staying in school is valuable. An Attendance Director described:

> AD: I believe the only way that we're going to improve the dropout rate is if we get communities involved and we get that pride back in the community the way it was when I was a kid. I grew up in a smaller town, but the way I understand it, on the _____ there used to be a lot of community pride, and their schools were proud of the education. And I believe that's the way you get them back. You have to show them what they have to gain and you have to somehow get the instant gratification thing out of their minds. We live in a society now where everything's so instant. They can't see a couple years down the road. They want it right now. It's an evolving thing, trying to figure it out. I learn more each year from it; feel like I'll learn more about it. I don't think I'll ever have the answer, but I know that it's not a quick fix. It seems to me that…we need to start thinking long-term. You should never give up on the high or middle school, but you start with the elementary school, with a community

program and all that. It takes a little more effort, but

it's a 20-year program.

In a similar perspective as the At-Risk and Former Jenkins County Students participating in the study, Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors felt that changes needed to be made in the micro- and macrosystems with which the students interact in order to achieve optimum functionality, which could be characterized as success in school. In addition to micro and macro systemic change, Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors also felt that ecosystemic influences can have a direct effect on the students' ability to maintain success in the school environment; thus creating a shared perspective by Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors that systemic dysfunction in the microsystems of the classroom, family, and student peer groups. Moreover, macrosystemic dysfunction in the student's community, along with ecosystemic dysfunction of parental unemployment (i.e., poverty) and parental substance or domestic abuse relationships also have a direct influence on student functionality and the students' proximal processing with the concentric environmental systems with which students interact. Moreover, the Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors strongly felt that the influence of the family's belief systems and dysfunction within the family unit has a significant impact on how Jenkins County students develop their perceptions of acceptable school behavior, relational transaction with other microsystems, and overall development of personality, which all directly influences the student's proximal processing with their environmental systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). In sum, the Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors felt that the student in environment is

affected and consequently damaged by the dysfunctional reciprocity of the microsystems of family, teachers, and peers.

CHAPTER 6: CROSS CASE ANALYSIS AND THEORETICAL APPLICATION

Introduction

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 consisted of case studies conducted with Jenkins County[8] students identified as At-Risk, Former Jenkins County Students, and Jenkins County Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors, respectively. All participants in the case studies have specific relationships with the four Jenkins County Schools experiencing an increase in dropout rates: Park High School, Sims High School, Matthews Middle School, and Campbell Middle School. The purpose of this research was to ethnographically examine the following research questions:

3. What perceptions do students identified as at-risk of dropping out, students who have dropped out of school, and Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors of high dropout ranked schools have about the reasons why kids choose to leave school?

4. What perceptions do students identified as at-risk of dropping out, students who have dropped out of school, and Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors of high dropout ranked schools, have about proactive and reactive strategies that could be implemented to effectively prevent students who are at-risk from choosing to leave school?

This chapter revisits the theoretical framework of ecological systems theory and how it can be applied to the emergent themes of the case studies, and contains a cross-case analysis of the three case studies that synthesizes the data collected to "extrapolate lessons learned" (Patton, 2002, p. 500) about the reasons Jenkins County students are

---

[8] To protect confidentiality, the names of counties, people, and places have been changed

dropping out of school at an alarming rate. Lastly, this chapter identifies

recommendations for change and recommendations for further research.

Theoretical Application

The research conducted was ethnographic exploration of perceptions using

qualitative methods of focus groups and individual interviews with three targeted cases:

At-Risk Students, Former Jenkins County Students, and Attendance Directors and

Guidance Counselors. Table 4 provides a holistic perspective of the two major themes

defined by subcategories that all participants felt significantly influenced the students'

decision to drop out of school.

Table 4: Emergent Themes and Prevalent Subcategories: All Participants

Attitude about School	Drama
Teacher attitude (includes classroom climate and teacher support)	Fighting (includes physical and verbal altercations, harassment, bullying, and/or victimization)
Academic Attitude (includes academic credit expectation, 9th grade transition, truancy and/or juvenile court involvement, disciplinary action, and alternative education)	Peer Pressure (includes sexual intimacy, peer status, and sexual identity)
Family Attitude (includes influence in students' decision to drop out)	

In each case study, two themes emerged from the data collection and remained

consistent throughout the ethnographic exploration of why students in Jenkins County are

choosing to leave school and not return. The two major themes, Attitude about School

and Drama, contained subcategories that define them and were seen across the board as

having significant impact on a student's decision to drop out. Application of ecological

systems theory, the theoretical framework for this study, to the emergent themes posits

that each respective subcategory subsequently represents the micro and macrosystems

that directly influence the student's reciprocal transactional dysfunction within the mesosystem of the school and in the microsystem of self. The ecological perspective is one of affect and affected, and the students' responses to the influences of their environment in turn influence the responses of other humans and/or the environmental system in which the person is interacting; thus the phrase "person in environment" (Miley, O'Melia, & Dubois, 2009).

Person in environment symbolizes the mutual relationship of a person interacting with his/her environment, consequently resulting in transactions that shape the development of self by the interaction; meaning humans take part in interactions everyday and are also part of larger systems which engage in transactions (Miley, O'Melia, and Dubois, 2009). For the purposes of this study, the concept of student in environment was proposed as a way to categorize the At-Risk and Former Jenkins County Students who participated in the study, and according to the emergent themes that manifested in the three case studies, the transactional relationship between the students in environment and the systems with which they interact has a direct influence on a student's decision to drop out of school.

Described by Iverson (2002), the student and school environments serve as microsystems, mesosystems, and macrosystems, with the school, classroom, home, and playgroup as microsystems and the relationships between microsystems serving as the student's mesosystem (i.e., learning environment), with the values, beliefs, and cultures that can affect a student's behavior comprising macrosystems with which the students interact.. For the purpose of this study, Iverson's perspective of systems can apply to the emergent themes in this study in that microsystems include the classroom teacher, the

student's family, and the student's peers. The macrosystems include the academic expectations of Jenkins County Schools for successful school completion, familial cultural beliefs about academic achievement, and the lack of available alternative educational environments.

Research Question 1: Lessons Learned

Attitude about School

All participants felt that negative attitudes about school have a significant impact on students' decision to drop out, and when asked to discuss their thoughts about what influences a student to leave and not return, participants identified teacher and family attitude as two microsystems that did not provide adequate support that would enable school success. According to Bronfenbrenner (2005), when there is irregularity in a system, the proximal processes between the system and the other systems with which it interacts becomes dysfunctional or disturbed and can radiate dysfunction and disturbance across other systems. In essence, a classroom teacher is considered to be a microsystem, as is a student. When the microsystem of the teacher and the microsystem of the student have dysfunction, the reciprocal transactions between the two become tainted and disseminate dysfunction across the microsystem of the classroom. This radiating dysfunction can ripple across the mesosystem of the school, and macrosystem of the school district or community, and create concentric systemic transactions fraught with chaos and failure.

At-risk Students and Former Jenkins County Students provided ample examples of teacher attitude toward students who are not academically successful or are identified as discipline problems, and felt that a lack of teacher interest in the external influences of

171

family and friends, including ecosystemic influences of poverty (i.e., parental unemployment), grief, substance abuse, mental health, and/or a general lack of understanding of learning styles contributed to the dysfunctional reciprocal transactions between themselves and the teacher, and consequently contributed to the ultimate decision to drop out of school. In addition to this shared perspective of the students that teachers are a problem, Jenkins County Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors believed that an additional factor of the lack of a positive adult role model influenced students' decisions to drop out.

The same can be said about the student's familial influence. All participants felt that if a student's family did not exhibit advocacy, involvement, support, and care about the student's academic success, attendance, and/or social relationships, the student would not exhibit any of these qualities either. All participants discussed the microsystem of the family having a direct impact on students' decisions to drop out, and strongly believed that a lack of care (or as one student described "loss of care") about the students' academic achievements and attendance were significant influences on dropping out. In the literature reviewed to support the emergent themes from the data, much research (Barrett & Turner, 2006; Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006; Chen, n.d.; Englund, Egeland, & Collins, 2008; Gordon, 2004; Karoly, Killburn, & Cannon, 2005; Kung & Farrell, 2000; Nowicki, Duke, Sisney, Stricker, and Tyler, 2004; Terry, 2008) was found to corroborate the participants' beliefs that family can have a direct influence on a young person's success in school. Factors such as poverty, single parent families, and parental dropout were the most powerful influences. When familial influence is combined with teacher disinterest and academic failure, the chances of a student leaving school and not

172

returning were predicted to be highly probable both in the literature and in the emergent themes of this study.

Two macrosystemic influences on the students' decision to drop out were the academic credit accumulation expectations determined by Jenkins County Schools and supported by the West Virginia Department of Education (WVDE) and minimal alternative educational environments. Students in Jenkins County are required to accumulate 25 credits to graduate high school. All participants felt this expectation was too high, and the system set the students up for failure. Tough transition to ninth grade, pushing students through to the next grade level of coursework regardless of failure, and truancy were discussed by all participants as reasons students were failing academically and dropping out due to being too far behind in credits to graduate in the time frame determined by WVDE. Students in West Virginia can remain in the school environment until they are 21 years old; however, the legal age to drop out of school with parental consent, as well as the age to obtain a Graduate Equivalency Degree, is 16 years old. Both the At-Risk Students and Former Jenkins County Students discussed being older than their peers as embarrassing and awkward, and when combined with being chronologically a senior, but systemically a freshman, students felt backed into a corner of hopelessness of ever being able to make up lost credit.

Feelings of hopelessness and failure were prevalent in the focus groups and interviews with At-Risk Students and Former Jenkins County Students, and while many took personal responsibility for their academic failure and/or subsequent decision to leave, others believed that with different circumstances they would have been successful in school. All of the 27 students from Jenkins County who consented to participate in the

173

study expressed having dreams and plans for their future regardless of their low self-esteem and minimal confidence in their academic abilities. Even though many of the students expressed not knowing how they could pull themselves out of the pit of dropping out or failure, many of the older students from Park and Sims discussed future careers of social work, law enforcement, military, forestry, and corrections for youth offenders; hope was not lost, and many believed that their dreams were still achievable.

Drama

A second major theme to emerge from the data was Drama. All of the participants in the study identified drama as fighting that is comprised of physical altercations, harassment, and/or victimization, and peer pressure that manifests in intimacy and peer status. Again, the implications of dysfunctional reciprocal transactions between the microsystems of the students and the microsystems of their peers can be attributed to the influence of drama on a student's decision to leave school and not return. The negative interactions with peers either through fighting, harassment, or victimization can create pressure on the student to react in a way that can create disciplinary action and/or referral to alternative placement. The At-Risk Students and Former Jenkins County Students all discussed drama as a major issue in their day-to-day lives. Students at Sims High School discussed multiple incidences of physical fighting happening on a daily basis. Park students discussed physical fighting as well, but also indicated that harassing and bullying was very prevalent, as was territorial fighting related to residential geography. In conjunction with the student perspectives, the Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors felt that fighting, harassment, and or/victimization could prompt a student to drop out.

174

Issues of sexual identity were a major source of drama. Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors believed that students experiencing angst and rejection over coming out as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (GLBTQ), along with incidences of homophobic teasing, were also drama-based influences on a student's decision to drop out. Many of the students discussed boy-girl relationships as a catalyst for fighting, meaning that fights are often caused because of rumors of cheating or break-ups following declarations of love. The Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors spoke to this issue as well, and went further to state that sexual intimacy was also a factor for part of the drama in the mesosystem of the school. Several of the students in the study were involved in long-term intimate relationships, and four out of five of the Former Jenkins County Students were engaged to be married and/or living with a girlfriend or boyfriend at the time of their individual interviews. Hernandez Josefowcz-Simbeni (2008) posited that students who develop early intimate relationships tend to focus more on the relationship than school and are more likely to eventually drop out with hopes of marrying their significant other, which substantiates the perspectives of the participants in this study.

Research Question 2: Proactive and Reactive Strategies

All participants in the study had recommendations to prevent dropout and ensure that students are successful in school. Recommendations of fun in the classroom, more lenient breaks, increases in vocational or career courses, parenting education, later school start times and/or night school availability, reduction of graduation credits, increasing the compulsory age for school to 21, and increasing the available age for the Graduation

175

Equivalency Degree to 18 instead of 16 were all mentioned as ways Jenkins County could help prevent students from dropping out.

The most significant change that was recommended by the At-Risk Students and the Former Jenkins County Students was that teachers communicate more effectively and exhibit more empathy to some of the out-of-school issues that students face. All of the students felt under-supported in the classroom, and felt that teachers were not interested and insensitive to ecosystemic issues of hunger, learning difficulties, and familial stressors that students bring into the classroom. One way to change this perspective is through professional development that teaches educators about the ecological systems perspective and how a student's other systems can directly influence the student's performance in school. Included in the professional development course could be educational modules that help teachers learn to be more empathetic, learn non-violent, motivational communication, obtain information about improving classroom climate, as well as mentoring and role modeling protocol. Literature has shown that students who have positive adult role models are more likely to remain in school (Bowers, 2010; Englund, Egeland, & Collins, 2008; Gregory & Ripski, 2008; Hernandez Josefowcz-Simbeni, 2008), and providing teachers with the opportunity to learn how to become better role models can possibly help decrease the number of student dropouts. Another way to implement change is to identify lead teachers in the school who connect with struggling students to serve as role models for their colleagues.

Another recommendation that could be beneficial to students struggling with dysfunctional self, family, and/or peer microsystems was the suggestion of implementing support groups in the schools. Both Park and Sims have support groups in place. Park has

176

a gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (GLBTQ) student group and Sims has a self-esteem group respectively, and the Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors spoke highly of the success of these supportive groups. Allowing Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors to create additional support groups in the feeder middle schools, as well as at the high school level could benefit students who do not feel they have a trustworthy adult role model, students struggling with grief, and/or students who are experiencing stress and anxiety.

Moreover, allowing Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors to fulfill more traditional roles related to their educational expertise of social work, direct practice, or counseling could provide students with a positive adult role model that is seen as a mentor and/or source of support. One recommendation made by Attendance Directors was to have more help and support to help decrease stress, lighten workload, and provide the opportunity to offer more individualized support to students. Providing clerical support in the schools to assist with paperwork, and/or adding additional career slots to decrease caseloads would help prevent burnout and allow Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors to be more student focused.

In addition to administratively driven support groups, Jenkins County Schools could begin to incorporate peer mentoring for incoming freshman. Due to the difficulties students face with ninth grade transition, having an established peer mentor to help navigate the high school system, as well as provide an additional layer of support would be beneficial to proactively preventing dropout. Moreover, peer mentoring can help students understand the concept of service and compassion, a concept promoted through programs like Rachel's Challenge (2010) and Get Schooled (Viacom, 2010).

A final recommendation is to increase alternative educational opportunities for students struggling in the traditional school environment. Students in the study who attended alternative schooling expressed having more individualized attention and had a better understanding of what was expected of them. Furthermore, the students expressed feeling like they fit in better at the alternative educational environments both socially and educationally. One way to help prevent dropout in Jenkins County would be the development of an alternative high school. Modeling curriculum similar to Reynolds Middle School, which incorporates educators that have special education coursework or certification in behavioral disorders and employs classroom aides with behavioral health experience could be advantageous for those students struggling in the traditional school environment. In addition to having a behaviorally based curriculum, having alternative (i.e., later or staggered) start times for students, incorporating and/or replacing the required credits with career or vocational courses, and county-wide transportation would strengthen the alternative environment and help decrease dropout rates.

Recommendations for Further Research

Due to the limitations of this study, there are several recommendations for further research:

- Repeating this study in other counties in West Virginia could provide alternative perspectives about dropping out.

- Conducting research with families of at-risk students to determine proactive and reactive strategies that school systems could employ to prevent dropout could help researchers discover early predictors of dropping out, develop policy that can proactively prevent dropping out, and determine what supports

178

at the school, county, and state level can ensure at-risk students and their families success in school.

- Conduct research to explore the effectiveness of stimulus programming in West Virginia counties that receive funding to determine if programmatic or curricular changes increase, decrease, or maintain levels of student achievement as a result of the stimulus award.

- Due to the emergent theme of Drama, with subcategories of fighting, victimization, and peer acceptance, it is recommended that research be conducted to explore student violence and externalizing behaviors.

- Stipulations of certain available stimulus funding allotted for assisting schools that do not obtain Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) state that the principal must step down in order to receive the funding. Research could be conducted with schools that receive stimulus funding in the event of the school principal resigning to determine if the new principal in place has an influence on student achievement.

- Research is needed to explore the levels of burnout and job performance of Attendance Directors and Guidance Counselors. Both populations discussed high caseloads, minimal clerical support, and excessive paperwork (i.e., Legal Notices, testing materials, and scheduling) as barriers to job performance, and make recommendations for improving job morale. Both groups discussed the desire to be able to counsel students and work with families, and felt that these barriers prevented them from the true essence of their jobs

- Ethnographically explore teachers' perceptions of why students choose to dropout, as well as determine their levels of empathy and knowledge of environmental stressors on student success.

- In this study, it was determined that a difficult ninth grade transition can be an early predictor of dropout, especially when students transition from a rural school environment to an urban (i.e., larger) school environment . Conducting a longitudinal study with middle school students to explore ninth grade transition, as well as transition from rural to urban school settings could assist in determining the effectiveness of K-8 or 5-8 middle school models, as well as assist in determining if the indicators of difficult ninth grade transition, such as social and academic failure, are being exhibited by the students.

REFERENCES

Abdul-Haqq, I. (1998). C*onstructivism in teacher education: Considerations for those who would link practice to theory.* Retrieved March 4, 2006, from http://www.ericdigests.org/1999-3/theory.htm

Aceves, M. J., Hinshaw, S. P., Mendoza-Denton, R., & Page-Gould, E. (2010). Seek help from teachers or fight back? Student perceptions of teachers' actions during conflicts and responses to peer victimization. *Journal of Youth Adolescence, 39*, 658–669.

Agresta, J. (2006). Job satisfaction among school social workers: The role of interprofessional relationships and professional role discrepancy. *Journal of Social Service Research, 33*(1), 47-52.

Barrett, A. E., & Turner, R. J. (2006). Family structure and substance use in adolescence and early adulthood: Examining explanations for the relationship." *Addiction,* 101, 109-120.

Batelaan S. (2000). School social work with gay, lesbian, and bisexual students: The case of Fairfax county. *Intercultural Education, 20*(2), 156-164.

Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (2003). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theories and methods.* Boston, MA: Pearson Education Group, Inc.

Bowers, A. (2010). Grades and graduation: A longitudinal risk perspective to identify student dropouts. *Journal of Educational Research*, *103*(3), 191-207.

Bridgeland, J. M., DiIulio, J. J., & Morison, K. B. (2006). *The silent epidemic: Perspectives of high school dropouts*. Washington D.C.: Author.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1994). Ecological models of human development. *International encyclopedia of education* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Elsevier.

Bronfrenbrenner, U. (2005). *Making human beings human: Bioecological perspectives on human development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Cangemi, J. P., & Khan, K. H. (2001). The psychology of punishment and the potential school dropout. *Education, 94*(2), 117-119.

Chen, I. (n.d.). *Social constructivist theories.* Retrieved March 4, 2006, from http://viking.coe.uh.edu/~ichen/ebook/et-it/social.htm

Christle, C., Jolivette, K., & Nelson, C. (2007). School characteristics related to high school dropout rates. *Remedial & Special Education*, *28*(6), 325-339.

Dewey, J. (1897). My pedagogic creed. *School Journal, 54*, 77-80.

Ellickson, P., Saner, H., & McGuigan, K. (1997, June). Profiles of violent youth: Substance use and other concurrent problems. *American Journal of Public Health*, *87*(6), 985-991.

Englund, M., Egeland, B., & Collins, W. (2008). Exceptions to high school dropout predictions in a low-income sample: Do adults make a difference? *Journal of Social Issues*, *64*(1), 77-94.

Espelage, D. L., & Swearer, S. M. (Eds.). (2004). *Bullying in American schools: A social-ecological perspective on prevention and intervention*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Espelage, D. L., Aragon, S.R., Birkett, M., & Koenig, B.W. (2008). Homophobic teasing, psychological outcomes, and sexual orientation among high school students:

What influences do parents and schools have? *School Psychology Review, 37*(2), 202-216.

Fortin, L., Marcotte, D., Potvin, P., Royer, É., & Joly, J. (2006). Typology of students at risk of dropping out of school: Description by personal, family and school factors. *European Journal of Psychology of Education - EJPE*, *21*(4), 363-383.

Frey, A., Ruchkin, V., Martin, A., & Schwab-Stone, M. (2009). Adolescents in transition: School and family characteristics in the development of violent behaviors entering high school. *Child Psychiatry & Human Development*, *40*(1), 1-13.

Glesne, C. (2005). *Becoming a qualitative researcher* (3rd ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Gordon, J. M. (2004). Looking at high school dropout problems from students' perspectives: Finding a solution. Ph.D. dissertation, McGill University (Canada), Canada. Retrieved September 10, 2009, from Dissertations & Theses: Full Text. (Publication No. AAT NQ98260).

Grant, A. M. (1999). Student perception and school responsibility: Young women's voices on dropping out of school. Ed.D. dissertation. Retrieved September 10, 2009, from Dissertations & Theses: Full Text. (Publication No. AAT 3014134).

Gregory, A., & Ripski, M. B. (2008). Adolescent trust in teachers: Implications for behavior in the high school classroom. *School Psychology Review, 37*(3), 337+

Haley, S. A. (2006). Dropping out of high school: A focus group approach to examining why student leave school and not return. Ph.D. Dissertation. Retrieved September 10, 2009, from Dissertations & Theses: Full Text. (Publication No. AAT 3285870).

Helker, W. P., Schottelkorb, A.A., & Ray, D. (2007). Helping students and teachers

    CONNECT: An intervention model for school counselors. *Journal of*

    Professional Counseling Practice, Theory, and Research, 35(2) 31-45.

Henry, K. (2007, January). Who's skipping school: Characteristics of truants in 8th and

    10th Grade. *Journal of School Health*, *77*(1), 29-35.

Hepworth, D. H., Rooney, R. H., Rooney, G. D., Strom-Gottfriend, K., & Larson, J. A.

    (2009). *Direct social work practice: Theory and practice* (8th ed.). Pacific Grove,

    CA: Brooks Cole.

Hernandez Josefowcz-Simbeni, D. M. (2008). An ecological and developmental

    perspective on dropout risk factors in early adolescents: Role of school social

    workers in dropout prevention efforts. *Children & Schools, 30*(1), 9-62.

Huitt, W. (1996). A systems model of human behavior. *Educational Psychology*

    Interactive. Valdosta, GA: Valdosta State University. Retrieved July 5, 2009,

    from http://chiron.valdosta.edu/whuitt/materials/sysmdlo.html

Huitt, W. (2003). A systems model of human behavior. *Educational Psychology*

    Interactive. Valdosta, GA: Valdosta State University. Retrieved July 5, 2009,

    from http://chiron.valdosta.edu/whuitt/materials/sysmdlo.html

Iverson, A. (2002) Building competence in classroom management and discipline (3rd

    ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Jenson, W. R., Olympia, D., Farley, M., & Clark, E. (2004). Positive psychology and

    externalizing students: Awash in a sea of negativity. *Psychology in the Schools,*

    41, 67–79.

Johnson, L. C., & Yanca, S. J. (2007). *Social work practice* (9th ed.). Boston: Pearson

    Education, Inc.

Karoly, L. A., Killburn, M. R., & Cannon, J. S. (2005). *Early childhood interventions:*

    proven results, future promise. Retrieved February 8, 2010, from

    http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2005/RAND_MG341.pdf.

Knesting, K. (2008). Students at risk for school dropout: supporting their persistence.

    Preventing School Failure, *52*(4), 3-10.

Kung, E. M., & Farrell, A. D. (2000). The role of parents and peers in early adolescent

    substance use: An examination of mediating and moderating effects. *Journal of*

    Child and Family Studies, *9*, 509-528.

Lambie, G. W. (2007). The contribution of ego development level to burnout in school

    counselors: Implications for professional school counseling. *Journal of*

    Counseling & Development, *85*(1), 82-88.

Lerner, R. M. (1997). *Concepts and theories of human development* (2nd ed.). Mahwah,

    NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Lan, W., & Lantheir, R. (2003). Changes in students academic performance and

    perceptions of school and self before dropping out of schools. *Journal of*

    Education for Students Placed At-Risk, 8(3),309-332.

Leyba, E. (2009). Tools to reduce overload in the school social worker role. *Children &*

    Schools, *31*(4), 219-228.

Longres, J. F. (2000). *Human behavior in the social environment* (3[rd.] ed.). Belmont, CA:

    Thompson Brooks/Cole.

McCall, H. (2003). When successful alternative students "disengage" from regular school. *Reclaiming Children & Youth*, *12*(2), 113-118.

McCallumore, K., & Sparapani, E. (2010). The Importance of ninth grade on high school graduation rates and student success in high school. *Education*, *130*(3), 447-456.

McIntosh, K., Flannery, K., Sugai, G., Braun, D., & Cochrane, K. (2008). Relationships between academics and problem behavior in the transition from middle school to high school. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, *10*(4), 243-255.

Miley, K. K., O'Melia, M., & DuBois, B. (2009). *Generalist social work practice: An empowering approach* (5th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Monette, D. R., Sullivan, T. J., & DeJong, C. R. (2008). *Applied social research: A tool for human services*. Belmont, CA: Thompson Brooks/Cole.

Morgan, D. L. (1997). *Focus groups as qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Mountaineer Challenge Academy. (n.d.). Retrieved May 24, 2010, from http://www.ngycp.org/site/state/wv/node/2262

Nash, M., Munford, R., & O'Donoghue, K. (Eds.). (2005). *Social work theories in action*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

Neild, R. C., Stoner-Eby, S., & Furstenberg, F. (2008). Connecting entrance and departure: The transition to ninth grade and high school dropout. *Education and Urban Society, 40*(5), 543-569.

Nowicki Jr., S., Duke, M., Sisney, S., Stricker, B., & Tyler, M. (2004, August). Reducing the drop-out rates of at-risk high school students: The effective learning program (ELP). *Genetic, Social & General Psychology Monographs*, *130*(3), 225-239.

Okun, B.F. (2005). Human diversity. In Coombs, R. (Ed.). *Family therapy review: Preparing for comprehensive and licensing examinations*. Mahwah, NJ: Ehrlbaum. 231-256.

Partridge, E. D. (1938). *Social Psychology of Adolescence*. New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Patton, M. Q. (2002). Qualitative evaluation and research methods (3rd ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

PFLAG. (2009). *Education & programs: Federal legislation*. Retrieved March 12, 2010, from http://community.pflag.org/Page.aspx?pid=1012

Rachel's Challenge. (2010). Retrieved July 3, 2010, from http://www.rachelschallenge.org/

Roderick, M. (1993). The path to dropping out: Evidence for intervention. Westport, CT: Auburn House.

Rubin, A., & Babbie, E. R. (2008). *Research methods for social work* (6th ed.). Belmont, CA: Thompson Brooks/Cole.

Seidman, E., Allen, L., Aber, J. L., Mitchell, C. & Feinman, J. (1994). The impact of school transitions in early adolescence on the self-system and perceived social context of poor urban youth. *Child Development*, *65*(2), 507-522.

Seidman, I. (2006). Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences. New York, NY: Teacher's College Press.

Srebnik, D., & Elias, M. (1993). An ecological, interpersonal skills approach to drop-out prevention. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, *63*(4), 526-535.

Staff, J., & Kraeger, D. (2008). Too cool for school? Violence, peer status and high school dropout. *Social Forces*, *87*(1), 445-471.

Terry, M. (2008). The effects that family members and peers have on students' decisions
to drop out of school. *Educational Research Quarterly*, *31*(3), 25-38.

U.S. Census Bureau. (2006). *2006-2008 American community survey 3-year estimates:*
West Virginia fact sheet. Retrieved February 8, 2010, from
http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/ACSSAFFFacts?_event=Search&_lang=en&_
sse=on&geo_id=04000US54&_state=04000US54.

Vetere, R., & Carley, G. (2006). Creating a new model of help in school social work.
Children & Schools, *28*(3), 175-179.

Viacom. (2010). Get schooled. Retrieved July 3, 2010, from:
http://www.getschooled.com/

Vitaro, F., Larocque, D., Janosz, M., & Tremblay, R. (2001). Negative social experiences
and dropping out of school. *Educational Psychology*, *21*(4), 401-415.

Wachter, C., Clemens, E., & Lewis, T. (2008). Exploring school counselor burnout and
school counselor involvement of parents and administrators through an adlerian
theoretical framework. *Journal of Individual Psychology*, *64*(4), 432-449.
Retrieved from Academic Search Premier database.

West Virginia Department of Education. (n.d.). *County graduation requirements*.
Retrieved March 8, 2010, from
http://wvde.state.wv.us/institutional/CountyGradRequire.html

West Virginia Department of Education. (2009). *Educational Statistical Summary. 2007 -*
2008.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL FOR PILOT STUDY

Office of Research Integrity

Tuesday, June 03, 2008

Lisa A. Heaton, Ph.D.
Education and Professional Development
100 Angus E. Peyton Dr.
South Charleston, WV. 25303

RE: IRB Study # 9260   At: Marshall IRB 2

Dear Dr. Heaton:

Protocol Title:
Dropping Out: A Pilot Study Exploring Why Students Choose to Leave School

Expiration Date:	6/2/2009
Our Internal #:	4891
Type of Change:	(Other) Expedited
Expedited ?:	⌐
Date of Change:	6/3/2008
Date Received:	6/3/2008
On Meeting Date:	6/18/2008

Description: In accordance with 45CFR46.110(a)(6)(7), the above study, informed consent, and assent form were granted expedited approval today by the IRB #2 Interim Chair for the period of 12 months. The approval will expire 06/02/09. Continuing review materials must be submitted no later than 30 days prior to the expiration date.

The purpose of the study is to explore student's perceptions of Kanawha County Schools and to explore the reasons why students choose to drop out of school.

The is a study for Debra Young.

Respectfully yours,

Christopher W. LeGrow

Christopher LeGrow, Ph.D.
Marshall University IRB #2 Interim Chairperson

401 11th Street, Suite 1300 • Huntington, West Virginia 25701 • Tel 304/696-7320
A State University of West Virginia • An Affirmative Action/Equal Opportunity Employer

191

APPENDIX B: IRB APPROVAL

MARSHALL UNIVERSITY

www.marshall.edu

Office of Research Integrity
Institutional Review Board
401 11th St., Suite 1300
Huntington, WV 25701

FWA 00002704

IRB1 #00002205
IRB2 #00003206

May 22, 2009

Lisa A. Heaton, Ph.D.
School of Education and Professional Development, MUGC

RE: IRBNet ID# 117957-1
At: Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral)

Dear Dr. Heaton:

Protocol Title:	[117957-1] Dropping Out: Exploring Perceptions of Why Students Choose to Leave School
Expiration Date:	May 21, 2010
Site Location:	MUGC
Type of Change:	New Project APPROVED
Review Type:	Expedited Review

In accordance with 45CFR46.110(a)(7), the above study and informed consent were granted Expedited approval today by the Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral) Chair for the period of 12 months. The approval will expire May 21, 2010. A continuing review request for this study must be submitted no later than 30 days prior to the expiration date.

This study is for student Debra Young.

If you have any questions, please contact the Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/ Behavioral) Coordinator Bruce Day, CIP at (304) 696-4303 or day50@marshall.edu. Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.

- 1 -

Generated on IRBNet

<div align="center">

CURRICULUM VITA
Debra Hunt Young

</div>

EDUCATION
Marshall University
> **Doctor of Education in Curriculum and Instruction, 2010**
> **Education Specialist degree, 2010**

West Virginia University
> **Master of Social Work, 2000**

West Virginia State University
> **Bachelor of Science in Education, 1994**

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

1994 – 1996   Weekend Activities Coordinator, Turning Point, Charleston, WV

1996 – 1999   Case Manager/Family Resource Coordinator, Shawnee Hills, Inc., Charleston, WV

1999 – 2001   Director – Intensive Outpatient Crisis Stabilization Program (IOCSP), Shawnee Hills, Inc, Charleston, WV

2001 – 2005   Positive Behavior Support Specialist, CEDWVU, Charleston, WV

2005 – 2008   Service Support Facilitator, APS Healthcare, Inc., Charleston, WV

2008 – Present Teaching Faculty, West Virginia University, Charleston WV