PORTRAITS OF HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS: 
LESSONS FOR SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS 

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DISSERTATION 
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements 
for the degree of Doctor of Education in Educational Organization and Leadership 
in the Graduate College of the 
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2013 

Urbana, Illinois 

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Abstract

High school dropouts lose economically and personally as a result of not completing high school. Lost income in thousands of dollars each year and the human cost of not fulfilling their educational and personal potential exemplify the cost to dropouts and society. Many programs are designed and evaluated by school administrators to assist students to stay in school and complete their graduation. This study was designed to explore life stories of high school dropouts through developing detailed portraits of the students. The research studied eight high school dropouts who were currently students in a community college GED program. The eight student participants were each asked to participate in two in-depth interviews that resulted in the researcher’s creation of a portrait of each participant. Results from the two sessions provided emergent themes revealed through students’ stories about their lives and their school experience. The themes that emerge are: (a) living a satisfactory life for nearly 20 years yet having to obtain a GED; (b) extremely disturbing conditions at home, occurring even during elementary school years; (c) being sustained by religion; (d) parenthood causing a life change; (e) a talent or special interest that brightened the overall picture; (f) “I wish there would have been a Dr. Help,” and (g) resilience and hope through life.
This study is dedicated to
Antonio, Derrick, James, Katrina, Melissa, Rosa, Sharrlene, William,
Dr. Hunter, Dr. Witz, Dr. Alexander, Dr. Span,
my husband Leonard, our daughters, son, granddaughters and grandsons
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Many areas of concern have emerged in education that impact students and society. The ideal of public education in the United States is that of a high quality educational system that facilitates achievement and which provides opportunities for all of America’s students. Such a system would promote a positive learning environment that students should expect to complete successfully. This system of education would provide both excellence and equity; in such a system students would not drop out or be placed “at risk” as “potential dropouts.”

Statement of the Problem

Dropouts have been an area of concern in education and society for many years. Concerns include an economic loss because their productivity is less in the work place, a human cost because of the high percentage of dropouts in the criminal justice system, and an economic cost because dropouts often require costly social services. There were fewer concerns about dropouts in previous years when a high school diploma was not mandatory for employment. For example, a worker in the health care field could leave high school, get hired at a hospital or nursing home, and acquire on the job training as a nursing assistant. The same job now requires a training course generally taught through a community college or career center and state certification. Today, employment in a health care center usually requires a minimum of a high school diploma. Another example of education and employment is the military: previously youth could leave high school before completion and enter the military. Although they could later obtain a GED certificate in the military, a high school diploma was not needed to enter or
to be eligible for advancement. Now a high school diploma is necessary to enter the military and some college may be required as well.

Issues evidence the economic and human costs of dropping out of high school and the need for a high school education. Criminal justice system statistics provide a link between the lack of a high school diploma and incarceration. Seventy-five percent of persons incarcerated in state correctional systems lack a high school diploma (Brudevold-Newman, 2005). Recidivism, the return to prison of previously incarcerated individuals because of repeated offences, often occurs and increases the percentage rate of persons in this category who have not completed high school.

Lifetime earning potential for high school dropouts illustrates the economic costs of dropping out of high school for both individuals and society. Greenville County, South Carolina (Allianceforqualityed.org) reports that the lifetime earnings of high school graduates are $370,000 higher than high school dropouts. A 2005 symposium held at Teachers College, Columbia University, calculates the yearly income of dropouts as $9200 less than the yearly income of high school graduates (Young, L., 2005). This economic disparity between high school dropouts and high school graduates signals the critical need for high schools to retain students and make every possible effort to promote students’ graduation from high school.

Because dropout rates continue to remain high, many politicians realize a serious economic concern, and are reported to have become directly involved in a solution to the problem. Mayors of several cities, including Detroit, have gone out into their communities, knocking on doors of homes of dropouts in an attempt to convince the students to return to school (Levine, 2008).
Many researchers have identified a further cost as well. Although the economic consequences are high, another cost accompanies dropouts. By not completing high school, students and society incur a human cost. Students who did not finish high school are prevented from realizing their goal of completing a high school diploma and fulfilling their potential. A stigma to persons without a high school diploma is recognized not only by society but also by researchers (Fine, 1991).

The negative consequences that result from the lack of high school completion are not yet realized in high school students who are termed “potential dropouts,” or students who are constructed to be at-risk for not graduating from high school. Several elements are important to consider regarding potential dropouts. Factors that cause potential dropouts have been identified in the literature as elements similar to those of dropouts: low SES, limited involvement with academic and low academic skills, low parent involvement, employment, and limited connection to extra curricular activities. Important factors to consider regarding potential dropouts and the process of dropping out are academic achievement, including level of academic skills attained and high school credits earned, and engagement in school, including classroom engagement and daily attendance. What keeps students impacted by such factors in school: why are they potential dropouts?

**Rationale for the Study**

From my varied and lengthy experience as an educator, I am aware of many issues that confront dropouts and students constructed as potential dropouts. Because of my concern for my students and my desire to see them succeed, I am interested in studying the life stories of high school dropouts, and my study is viewed from the lens of an experienced educator. As a teacher
of public high school students, I have experienced students who have thrived in the school environment and those who rarely attended school. As a teacher of junior high school students, I experienced students who possessed varying levels of engagement with the school setting. As a substitute teacher in many different schools, I obtained a brief snapshot of a variety of school settings. As a teacher in an Australian state school system, I listened to stories of teachers and students within the context of a school system new to me. As a teacher in specially funded summer academic programs, I worked to assist students in remediating academic skills and listened to their hopes and dreams about the future. As a teacher of evening credit recovery classes for high school students, I assisted students in the completion of a course credit for graduation and helped them work toward for their futures. As a teacher in GED programs, I have listened to life stories of students, telling me why they left school and why they returned to school. As a teacher in a county detention center, I facilitated my students’ learning as they worked toward the completion of their GED certificates. As an administrator of a federally funded college preparation program, I have assisted students to become academically proficient to complete high school successfully as well as to become prepared for college.

My teaching experience began as a student teacher of art in an urban school district with scarce resources and cultural conflict because of diverse student demographics. Next, after serving as a substitute teacher for several months, I obtained a teaching position in a state education department in Australia. I taught high school art in two different schools, one rural and one large, provincial town, for a total for 5 years. When I returned to the United States I began to teach in a GED program administered by a community college. I then taught junior high school art for 3 years. My interest in high school dropouts continued and I continued to work in the GED program both at a community-based organization and in the county detention
center. After 9 years, I moved into a new position as assistant director of a federally funded college preparation program administered through a community college. In this position that I have held for nearly 20 years, I have supervised the academic area of the program as I hired, supervised and evaluated teachers, planned curriculum, monitored students’ academic progress in high school, and communicated with parents and high school teachers and administrators.

My varied experience affords me a unique insight as I conduct research on dropouts. I have seen students affected by many factors both inside and outside the classroom that have created barriers to their success. The numerous students and school settings I have encountered during my years as an educator enhance my insight regarding students’ statements and the expression of their feelings as I place them within the context of my experiences with students. These experiences include recognizing factors that relate to the individual student: not only students who have made positive changes in their lives in even a year’s time, but also students who didn’t work up to their potential; students who are said to have “authority problems” with teachers or school administrators, as well as students who got off track with no one to guide them back. Family factors I have recognized as affecting students include students who express too many family issues or family responsibilities to engage in school responsibilities, students who lack support, or students who possess low expectations of him/herself. I have also recognized factors that affect students that I attribute to the school: students who have been constructed to have “authority problems” with teachers or school administrators, students who need remediation in reading or math but have not had their academic needs met by the school, students placed in a classroom structure that is chaotic, students who feel lost in class during most periods of the day, students who say they have no one to connect with in the school and no teacher seems to care about them, students who became off track in school but who have no one
to guide them, students who just feel that no one hears them in the school, and students who are so often placed in an in-school or out-of school suspension in which they continually lose instructional time from class. I considered their statements through the context of their influences, their school settings and examined possible outcomes through my experience. Considering the feelings and experiences students express through portraiture as well as through critical theory, I examined how students view themselves in relation to school or if the students feel their voices are being heard.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to elicit insight directly from high school dropouts that school administrators can use to better plan or evaluate programs for high school dropouts. By providing additional information through the portraits of high school dropouts, the study attempts to provide a deeper expression of the students’ experiences and feelings. It is hoped that this deeper expression will allow administrators to better understand the dropout and to better plan and evaluate dropout prevention programs.

Several perspectives can frame the study of dropouts. The events perspective considers elements such as “timing and turning points” in life events as elements of study when investigating high school dropouts (Hammond et al., 2007). The numerous longitudinal studies that have been completed on events in lives of dropouts, such as events that impact the lives of dropouts, are designed to explore the stories of dropping out.

A process perspective (Audas & Willms, 2001) is exemplified by the life course model which considers life stories. The life course model sees dropping out as a process that starts in early childhood and continues into later life. Numerous factors are thought to facilitate the
process of dropping out of high school. This study, however, is designed to look at the issue of dropouts through a deeper level of inquiry using the methodology of portraiture.

A narrative perspective is provided by developing the study of dropouts through a written narrative format. Cordell (2005) studies dropouts using detailed narrative methodology that looks at dropouts from a “holistic” perspective. In his study, he analyzes a large amount of data obtained from questionnaires that quantify the responses. In addition to using the questionnaires, Cordell interviews the participants to more fully understand their stories. This methodology allows the researcher to study many aspects of each of the participants.

The portrait perspective used to investigate high school dropouts is exemplified by Bae’s (2008) study. Bae’s research looks at high school dropouts through the methodology of portraiture; the portraits that she creates evolve from layers of detail obtained from deep conversations she has held with former high school dropouts. Her research is based on the literature and her conversations with students, not through teaching or administrative experience, however.

The present study was designed to use the methodology of portraiture to learn about the feelings and experiences of high school dropouts. Using my experience as teacher and administrator, I viewed the portraits of students through the lens of an experienced educator.

The study of issues concerning dropouts in American society is challenging; the study of the process of dropping out is challenging as well. Numerous concerns and issues are evident. Critical scholars provide a theoretical basis from which to explore dropouts and the process of dropping out. Writers point out that the perpetuation of the school system occurs despite the needs of students and that the maintenance of the mainstream educational system is often at the expense of students.
Definition of Terms

When considering critical issues, it is useful to clearly define important terms. Using the definitions supplied by the Illinois State Board of Education as 2005 Report Card defines the dropout rate as “the number of dropouts divided by the fall enrollment less post-graduates multiplied by 100.” Dropouts include “students in grades 9-12 whose names have been removed from the district-housed roster for any reason other than death, extended illness, graduation/completion of a program of studies, transfer to another public/private school, or expulsion.” Graduation rate is the number of 2004-2005 high school graduates divided by the first-time ninth grade 2001 fall enrollment, less student transferred out plus students transferred in, multiplied by 100. Student attendance rate is “the aggregate days of student attendance divided by the sum of the aggregate days of students’ attendance and aggregate days of student absence multiplied by 100” (Illinois State Board of Education, 2005). A definition for a potential dropout student is: students who may be “truants and uninvolved, unmotivated, and disaffected students” (105 ILCS 5/2-3.66).

Dropping out has been seen as an event in the lives of students who leave school before graduation. A life course model considers dropping out as a process, a process that could begin in early childhood and continue throughout school years. This “life course model” maintains the interplay of complex factors throughout the students’ lives and scrutinizes “intermediary benchmarks to see if the student is on course for timely graduation” (Audas & Willms, 2001). This “life course model” that looks at process through a narrative examination of facts and information differs from that of portrait methodology that is used in this study which views experiences and feelings as well as information.
Portraiture is a qualitative methodology created by Lawrence-Lightfoot (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) to provide a “framework for her detailed expressions of life stories . . . portraiture allows the researcher to convey the details of the participant” while using the details to maintain a whole expression of the participant. To enhance this process, the participant and researcher form a collaboration that facilitates a deep level of communication. This format allows the participant to become an “ally” with the researcher in the process of illuminate the researcher question through a deeper level of communication (Witz, 2007) during a sequence of interview sessions. The methodology of portraiture is based on “grounded theory” which assumes the theory evolves as information is obtained (Merriam).

During the deep conversations held between interviewer and participant during interviews, important issues have been disclosed regarding dropping out of high school. These issues and concerns present an opportunity for research to study the following question: What lessons are learned from portraits of high school dropouts? Other important subsidiary questions of the study are:

1. Are elements in the school domain expressed in students’ life stories?

2. What feelings or experiences are expressed through the students’ portraits? What do they reveal about the students’ dropping out?

3. How did these students view themselves in relation to the school during their life stories?

The researcher hopes the information gleaned from this study will assist school administrators in the development of meaningful strategies and programs to better meet the needs of high school students. Also, the researcher hopes to provide information to aid in the design and evaluation of dropout prevention programs.
Chapter 2

Review of Literature

This review explores the process of dropping out and potential dropouts as the literature studies the primary question of this research: “What lessons are learned from portraits of high school dropouts?” Other important subsidiary questions of the study are:

1. Are elements in the school domain expressed in students’ life stories?
2. What feelings or experiences are expressed through the students’ portraits? What do they reveal about the students’ dropping out?
3. How did these students view themselves in relation to the school during their life stories?

The researcher hopes the information gleaned from this study will assist school administrators in the development of meaningful strategies and programs to better meet needs of high school students. Also, the researcher hopes to provide insight to aid in the design and evaluation of dropout prevention programs.

Because of the academic status of the students, the students are constructed as “at risk.” Looking at the stories of students’ lives provides insight into students who drop out of high school and important experiences and feelings that have impacted their lives. This information provides insight both for students who are potential dropouts but still in school, as well as for school administrators to use to design effective programs for potential dropouts.

My concern as researcher lies with the constructed concept of at-risk when applied to both high school students and schools. Through out my career in education, I have worked with numerous students who were considered to be at-risk. These students attended public schools, GED centers, or classes in the county jail. I have also worked in numerous schools that were considered to be at-risk or disadvantaged. My teaching experience in Milwaukee in an urban
public school, my teaching experience in Australia in a disadvantaged school, my present administering experience of a federally funded college preparation program, and my administrative internship experience all involve at-risk students or educational settings. I believe that educators and society must ensure the best possible educational opportunity for all students. Such educational opportunities may include non-traditional, alternative, or remedial services for students. Many elements in the school setting and the community must be addressed to provide a positive learning environment for students.

Students who have removed themselves from school or who have been removed from the school comprise the defined “at risk” category if they do not complete high school. Such students who drop out have been shown to do so over a long period of time—a process—not an event. What experience and feelings have been important to high school dropouts and how are these experiences and feelings expressed in students’ lives? This insight would be useful to school administrators through dropout prevention efforts to target meaningful intervention.

The literature in this review has been obtained from electronic journals such as Education Next and Education Policy Analysis Archives, and from library resources. I have also obtained resources from text books. I searched for resources on dropouts, the process of dropping out, and dropout prevention.

Limitations of the literature search includes time frame. I limited my search of resources on dropouts to resources written after Michelle Fine’s book Framing Dropouts. This book was written after the 1983 A Nation At Risk study and provides a detailed and critical interpretation of dropouts and an urban high school. I reviewed literature on potential dropouts, students defined as “at risk,” from 1995-2005. The Illinois Truant’s Optional Alternative Education
Program began at this time and was designed to provide meaningful intervention efforts in dropout prevention.

The literature is divided into three sections. First, critical theory is defined and discussed. Next, definitions and issues of dropouts and the methodology of portraiture are explored. Finally, literature focused on potential dropouts concludes the review.

Critical Theory

Critical theory is the theoretical framework used to analyze this study. This theoretical framework informs the study because it frames the analytical structure that allows important questions to be asked. Critical theory promotes analysis of power relationships including access to services and equity in programming, and demands an element of social consciousness to be embedded in the research study.

Questions asked by this study include: are feelings about school expressed in portraits of dropouts, and how what portraits reveal can assist school administrators as they design and evaluate meaningful strategies and programs to meet the needs of potential dropouts. Analyzed from the critical theory framework, does the school organization maintain itself despite the needs of students? Are the needs of students being addressed, and are the students’ access and equity to programs and services evident? How do students view themselves in relation to school during their life history? Are the student’s voices being heard?

Critical theory is a social theory that evolved from “several generations of German philosophers and social theorists” including the Frankfort School. Critical theory “distinguished (itself) from traditional theory that sought only to analyze or explain phenomena, because it ‘seeks a human emancipation,’” argues Horkheimer, “and seeks to liberate human beings from
the circumstances that enslave them . . . in circumstances of domination and oppression” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2005). The theory evolved from the idea that a difference in power based on social class results in a class struggle based on the inequity of power between owners and workers. This difference in power allows the dominant class to create a “‘social reproduction’ that ensures that . . . the (social) system retains its essential identity” (Morrow & Torres, 1995).

Morrow and Torres argue that education in the United States plays a dual role in the social process because “education not only increases productivity by increasing workers’ skills (but also) contributes to the reproduction of a given set of class relations by diffusing potential for class conflict” (Morrow & Torres, 1995). “This perpetuation of practices . . . [allows] a masking the underlying realities of power [in which] not only does the educational system serve to reinforce class advantage, it distorts the process of learning” (Morrow & Torres, 1995).

Critical theorists seek to analyze social phenomena from the perspective of social change and to eradicate oppression or inequitable relationships of power in education and in the larger society. In education, critical theorists analyze schools and schooling through the consideration of the elements of power and equity (Morrow & Torres, 1995). Looking at schooling through this critical view provides a context for studying student dropouts or pushouts and exemplifies the lost potential of dropouts to themselves and society. Thus, the process of dropping out can be affected by elements in the school environment or school organization.

Campbell (2003) argues that a large percentage of youth who drop out compared to those who graduate from high school in the U.S. represent a “disproportionate number” and illustrate a lack of equity in education. This inequity “creates and maintains a society that
engages in racial superiorities, stereotypes, division, categories and hierarchies.” To deconstruct this model of society and resulting lack of educational opportunity, one must engage in a “pedagogy of process . . . a continual reflection of practices embedded in hegemony” by asking questions regarding power, values, and their relationship to “programs and policies” that address high school programs, especially those designed for at-risk students (Campbell, 2003).

Such questions provide the opportunity to “reflect on practices . . . programs and policies” (Campbell, 2003) in schools as perceived by dropout students and provide the basis for this study. Questions asked dropouts include those regarding their schools’ educational systems, the needs of these students in the school environment, and important life events in the domain of school. Dropouts’ answers to these questions provide lessons for school administrators while they plan and evaluate programs for dropouts to increase opportunity for all students achieve high school graduation.

**Dropouts**

**Exploration of literature on dropouts.** High school dropouts are explored in the literature regarding the reasons they left school and the reasons they return to school. Characteristics of dropouts are investigated in the literature as well.

Entwisle, Alexander, and Olson (2004) recount that in much of the literature regarding students who return to school after dropping out, the literature usually focuses on qualities of students who return to school. Entwisle et al. (2004) explores the level of motivation that moves students to return to school. The authors find that students who complete later are more similar to students who completed high school; such students possess more positive motivation, and are
more often employed. The study asks if employment serves to help students to stay in school and if motivation helps students to work and stay in school.

In their study, the authors identify two groups of dropouts: those who complete before age 22, and those who complete after age 22. Using “life course” theory, the authors look at the process of dropping out instead of discrete events, and put the events into a continuum. The authors look at gender, SES, race, test scores, GPA, students’ expectations, grade of dropping out, and parenthood. The study also measured students’ “temperament” and assessed if they were employed. This research study of 719 students from Baltimore schools compiles data from student interviews at ages 13-18 years. Of the number of temporary dropouts among the students studied, 40% were African American who had their GED by the time they reached age 22. The permanent dropouts had both a lower SES and a lower educational expectation at age 14 that the temporary dropouts had.

Renzulli and Park (2002) studied giftedness and dropouts. They study factors that impacted gifted students and obtained information that created a profile of gifted dropouts. This profile comprised a long term study starting with eighth grade students. A collection of data obtained every 2 years was maintained from 25,000 students in a large sample. Two studies were completed: one for information regarding the dropouts and one regarding their behavior.

Results from the first study show that many gifted students dropped out of high school because they were “failing school, pregnant, or working.” Parent involvement with the school was shown to be low and students had a more positive self concept than the “non gifted” students. The second study’s findings showed a low SES, a low percentage of minorities, a low parent level of education, low student expectations, and drug use.
McNeal (1995) studies the relationship between extracurricular activities and high school dropouts. This study is based on the “social control theory” that McNeal relates to the social integration theory. The social integration theory says that students involved in activities usually remain enrolled in school: “the strength of social bonds decrease deviant acts.” The identity of a student is created through the extracurricular activity that she/he chooses for participation.

Using data from 1980 at 735 high schools, McNeal divided activities into categories with descriptive statistics: athletics, fine arts, and others, and assigned a status to each of the activities. From this data, McNeal investigated dropout data to determine who drops out. The data suggests that a high percentage of minority males leave high school. Among minorities, African Americans have a lower dropout rate than “language minorities.” The dropout rate increases if the students are older, if students worked, and especially if the student worked over 7 hours per week. The author identifies student employment as producing a “pulling out effect” from the school setting (McNeal, 1995).

McNeal found that participation in activities related to the perception of the status of the school activities. Activities vary in dropout prevention. Athletics is highest in status and culture within the school; fine arts activities were positive as well, while vocational and academic activities produce no change.

Griffin (2002) argues that the extent to which students “identify with academics” determines whether they complete high school. In his study of a sample of 133,000 high school students from Florida, he attempts to discover who will drop out and why. He investigates whether there was a difference in the level of “academic disidentification” between ethnicity of students. The study was based on several theories including the “cultural inversion” model, the
stereotype threat hypothesis, and the frustration self esteem model. The cultural inversion model theorizes that minorities may choose to act differently than the “mainstream” culture as a reaction against that culture and its values. The frustration self esteem model exemplifies students who do not experience success in school; over time, this lack of motivation decreases their self esteem. This decreased self esteem results in frustration with school and produces further negative behavior.

Results of Griffin’s study suggest that for minority students, identification with academics is such a part of the mainstream culture that a “disidentification” and lack of interest in success is prevalent. High school completion decreases because of this lack of academic identification.

Cordell (2005) provides a holistic look at high school dropouts through a compilation of factors that influence 42 dropouts in several educational settings. This study is comprised of the factors identified and analyzed statistically as well as interviews with students that tell their stories through narrative. This study is designed to determine what motivates dropouts to return to school. Cordell argues that motivation must come from within the student and not through reminders of increased wages and enhanced job opportunities.

Bae (2008) creates portraits of 17 students who had previously dropped out of high school and have now returned to complete their GED or high school diploma in alternative school or community college settings. Through deep conversations with students over two or more interviews, she develops a close rapport with students as they discuss details and feelings about their lives and school experiences. Bae takes the many details she gleans from the interviews and creates portraits of the students. These portraits are analyzed in terms of the
elements of the individual student and compared between students. She finally presents recommendations for policy in schools.

Dunn, Chambers, and Rabren (2004) studied high school dropouts in special education programs with learning disabilities (LD) or mental retardation (MR). Two hundred twenty-eight students with LD/MR who had not dropped out and 228 students with LD/MR who had dropped out of high school were interviewed to determine elements that affected their high school completion. This study is important because literature shows that drop out rates of students with “mild disabilities are over two times greater than other students.” Data was obtained from state initiatives and through a questionnaire survey that asked transitioned students about elements of high school and life from high school. The number of high school dropouts decreased when students felt school was relevant, was preparing them for life after high school, and for students who had a “helpful” relationship with a teacher. Teachers are seen to be an important variable factor regarding high school completion.

Reder and Strawn (n.d.) refute the general belief that high school dropouts had a negative previous experience in school and did not like attending school. This report shows that many students actually did like school but ultimately ended up dropping out. The authors discuss the study’s impact for Adult Basic Education instruction and for non-traditional classrooms.

Hauser, Simmons, and Pager (2000) compile a long term study of dropouts from 1978-1998. This study uses October CPS numbers and looks at 167,400 students who were ages 14-24 years old. The data shows that the lowest number of dropouts occurred among white students, the most among Hispanic students, especially males, and most from an urban area. Looking at the number of students who drop out after the period of compulsory school
attendance ends shows that most dropouts were a part of a family with a female head of household. The dropout rate decreased in a family with a higher SES and parent education. This study provides historical data regarding the dropouts before the 1983 *A Nation At Risk* report.

Lee and Burkam (2003) consider the role of the school organization as it relates to dropouts. Historically, literature has considered why students drop out and has looked at the students themselves. The students were considered to be at fault because of the characteristics of their SES, levels of academics, or their engagement in academics. This research looks at elements of the school as an organization, not the students’ personal factors, regarding dropout rates among 3,840 students from 190 high schools. Some students are defined as at risk, or have a high mobility from one school to another. Other students are termed “pushouts” because the school has not addressed their needs.

Factors that affect the students who drop out are: location of school, size of enrollment, and level of curriculum. The higher level of classes does not promote retention of students. However, a lack of social support for students is important. Results of the study indicate that elements of the school are important factors that influence dropouts. Size of the school is important, as small schools promote fewer dropouts. Curriculum is important, because the academic organization is enhanced by more challenging courses. The social organization is important as well: teacher-student relations are important. There is a school-student connection except in very large schools.

Wayman (2001) explored factors that influenced obtaining a GED or a high school diploma. He explored the issue of high school dropouts and time frames in which they return to school. There were a wide variety of reasons, periods of time, and barriers to returning to school that students faced. Some students were found to have actually dropped out of school as early as
seventh grade. Wayman’s study cautions readers to not consider dropouts as a “permanent condition.” Students’ academic capability, age, and SES impacted their eventual completion of secondary school. Other issues complicate the completion of high school. There are numerous complex issues but not specific reasons why dropouts return to school, Wayman argues, and not many studies have been done in this area.

Wayman concludes that 59% of high school dropouts eventually return to complete high school. He determined that completion is more likely for students who attained previous levels of higher achievement and had dropped out at a later age; often early dropouts do not return to school. The author includes a new definition of a dropout: “a student in grades 7-12 who had not attended or contacted school for more than 30 days.” This definition differs from the standard definition which is a student who has not attended for more than two weeks.

Wayman’s methodology involves the investigation of 1071 Mexican American students. The study looks at the numbers of students who graduate from high school, obtain a GED, or have no degree. Do age, grade at leaving school, GPA, and having children contribute to high school completion? Wayman asks. He performs a regression with statistics and determines that more students eventually complete high school if they are older, a better student, and have a higher SES. Students who have children more often obtain a GED instead of a diploma. Wayman argues that schools should continue to offer programs and strategies that try to keep students in school because the numerous factors that affect students who leave school are difficult to change.

This study provides a detailed look into not only factors that affect students when they leave high school but also at factors that cause them to return. The fact that the author separated GED data from high school completion data was interesting and the population of students in
the study was notable as well. Additional studies could determine if the results of the study would be different with a different population of students.

An article in *Black Issues in Higher Education* (2003) reveals a “hidden dropout crisis” in the United States. This crisis has emerged through a compilation of data from states showing dissimilar collection policies that leave some students not counted in dropout numbers. This discrepancy decreases the numbers of students who do not complete high school.

Illinois Governor Blagojevich (2006) communicates through the Office of the Governor to declare that the number of Illinois high school dropouts has decreased to an “all time low.” This article communicates information through a politician’s viewpoint of the high school graduation rate and the number of dropouts in the state of Illinois. Although the message of the article states that the number of dropouts has decreased, questions remain regarding the actual number of students. Who are the students who have dropped out? Have all the students been counted? More specific information about the students is needed to determine the meaning and demographics of the “all time low.”

Fine (1991) explores dropouts in an urban high school. The phenomenon that she thought she was addressing, what’s wrong with the students, evolved into what’s wrong with the school. She studied an urban high school and discovered a “benign” environment on the part of the teachers, but a problematic system when students who dropped out were found to be generally academically proficient and socially assertive. The book was written over 16 years ago, but offers a serious inquiry into “dropouts” and “pushouts” in high school. Fine presents the system of schooling as a benevolent system that maintains itself although numerous students leave. Over 60% of students leave before completing the urban high school that she studies.
Although the book provides descriptive statistics similar to other literature on dropouts, Fine also provides an exploration of students’ views and feelings on school, their hopes and their futures. Fine’s interviews with students provide a real insight into the depth of the students’ inner lives and thoughts.

Critical theory provides background regarding society and schooling through the individual interviews of the students. Fine provides a model of a careful and eloquent study but moves beyond the scientific view of the issue to the interpretation into the life world of the dropout. She identifies several elements that prevent student success in an otherwise benign environment. Among these elements are lack of access to education and misleading statistics regarding the actual numbers of dropouts.

Concerns about the impact of accountability mandates and the effect on dropouts are reflected in current research literature. Such issues explore the relationship between students who drop out of high school and the mandates of the 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation that reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

Dee (2003) offers “lessons from the first wave of accountability” that could impact the number of dropouts. This article delineates elements of NCLB including a state level “rating “ for schools and sanctions for low performing schools and students. Thus “output-based incentives” increase “motivation productivity” of schools. Many schools plan to use ACT scores to close the “gap of achievement,” says Dee, but this may not happen if the curriculum has been narrowed to promote standards-based reform. Dee argues that this conflict can promote an understanding of the early “first wave reforms of assessment performance standards and their consequences.”
Dee looks at the history of education preceding NCLB. During this time, Dee states, the public school system had initiated changes accompanied by a higher level of dropouts. These rates may increase to allow a better graduation rate from the general school population. Politicians and the public welcomed new curriculum standards of core subjects and more stringent graduation requirements in the early 1980s after the *A Nation at Risk* (ANAR) report, Dee argues. Concerns surfaced, however, that the higher standards may decrease the numbers of students who graduate from high school.

Dee establishes complex statistical equations that result in several tables of data. His measures include CGR (course graduation requirements) and MCT (minimum competency testing). These results suggest that in increasing high school graduation, the “policies” of CGR had “no significant effects” on high school graduation. An increased CGR decreased the “probability of graduating from high school by a significant percent” and thus yielded a “percent increase in the MCT mean probability of dropping out.” This dropout rate prediction looks at specific sub groups such as the probability of dropouts among black males. MCT also includes the economic effects of dropping out such as lower life time earnings.

Dee concludes that evidence on dropout issues promotes numerous questions about the kinds of standards that should be set. Differences in states’ responses to standards and the resulting numbers of dropouts are examples of such evidence.

This article presents an intricate investigation of statistical designs of dropouts and subgroups, and presents a view of dropouts and standards. Dee narrows the time frame in his study by looking at the movement of the first phase. The scope of the statistical basis presents a variety of measures that are compared. Dee explores measures of statistics and school
graduation rates revealed by dropouts’ numbers. The article allows interpretation of the three measures and provides a basis of comparison for a wider study.

A panel discussion comprised of academic experts in the area of dropouts (2003) considered the factors relative to dropout issues. They discussed the high percentage of all high school dropouts, the “social costs,” and the economic and human costs.

Looking at the federal and state standards and sanctions since 2001, the panel explored the changes that promoted increasingly rigorous high school graduation requirements. Some states have established exit exams, and through discussion, the panel investigated the pros and cons regarding such exit exams. Some experts are in favor of increased standards while others worry about an increase in the number of dropouts. The panel reviewed literature finding that exit exams promote a higher dropout rate, that low achieving students are primary affected by the exit exams, and that time frame was important regarding high school graduation. Other literature reviewed showed exit exams have little effect on high school graduates and dropout rates.

Thus only “moderately suggestive evidence” is available that exit interviews increase dropout rates, argues the panel. The topic is complex, and there are no good data collection systems. Definitions of dropouts, retention, and high school completion vary; up to four definitions create contradictory measures. Different policies to measure the graduation rate are used by various states and school districts. The structure of the exit exam is another important factor that must be considered, the panel asserts.

Reasons that high school students drop out must be studied and understood as well. Not only quantitative studies of “what” happens to cause students to drop out should be conducted, but also, qualitative studies must be developed to determine “why.” Better data systems are
needed to compile reported exit exam scores. Data systems must be comparable to each other in order to talk about variable data. The article summarizes the panel’s discussion of dropouts and their relation to exit exams; this narrow focus on one variable that affects dropouts shows that “moderate results indicate the complexity of the issue.” The text of the article provides a narrative and statistics regarding students who take exit exams. The expertise of the panel allows the participants to explore some ways that exit exams may affect student dropout rates.

Swanson (2003) outlines definitions regarding elements of “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB): accountability, graduation rate, and a short history of NCLB law. In question and answer format, the author provides a definition of differences in graduation rate and flexibility in measuring graduation rate. The variation between states in measuring graduation rate and “different methods for calculating produce different results” create confusion and discontinuity of data. Swanson lists 10 questions regarding specific elements of NCLB and graduation rate: for example, the differentiation between graduation rate and dropout rate and how graduation rate affects Annual Yearly Progress (AYP). This information is helpful in considering numerous aspects of the law and its impact on measurements, graduation rate, and dropouts. Swanson continues his discussion to illustrate the complexity, variability, and vagueness of the concepts regarding differences between states and measurements.

This article is not a research-based article, but it serves as a good resource regarding information and definitions of graduation rate and the accountability of No Child Left Behind. Swanson provides a further resource of information by listing points from the law and referenced statutes.

Warren (2005) examines the rate of students who complete high school and those who have completed high school “since the number of incoming ninth graders [who] have completed
high school has fallen in . . . most states . . . since the 1970s” from 1975-2002. He explores the measures used to obtain the graduation rates and describes a new measure of “common core data.” Warren discusses concerns for the need of an accurate measure of high school completion rate: economics, AYP progress measured for NCLB, and evaluation of state education policy.

The author first reviews existing measures of high school completion. He uses criteria that “suggest the measure must be valid,” so must “measure processes and population it should measure, and be statistically sound.” Two measures are presently used to discuss dropouts: the status dropout rate and the event dropout rate. The current dropout rate from the Bureau of the Census is difficult to determine because it is difficult to separate data, Warren argues. The Current Population Survey, from the Bureau of Census, is a monthly measure. It has been available since 1968 regarding school enrollment information. Another measure is the Common Core of Data (CCD) from the National Center of Education Statistics (NCES). This data is collected annually from a federal system of public elementary and secondary schools. A formula produces this complex data and gives an erroneous measure, Warren argues, because students are counted twice as dropouts. Also, the data is hard to analyze because of the period of time involved in the actual counting of students in a year.

Warren believes that there is a “systematic bias . . . [regarding freshmen] in the adjusted completion rate [that] doesn’t correspond with the definition.” Other factors prevent consistent measures and collection of dropout data. “The data collection process results in a systematic bias, and states vary in the way that they define the criteria for high school diplomas.”

Warren uses complex definitions and tables to illustrate a measure called the “Estimated Completion Rate” from 1975-2002. No systemic bias is evident, states Warren, nor are there changes with cohorts. This measure estimates the percentage of students at risk for not
completing high school. The Estimated Completion Rate provides another measure for high school completion. The measure can be used when gathering data and provides an alternative to present measures.

Orfield, Losen, Wald, and Swanson (2004) and the Civil Rights Project of Harvard compiled a study connecting NCLB and dropouts. This study considers who the dropouts are and what should be done to make the public and policy makers recognize that a problem exists. The measures generally used to count numbers or define percentages of dropouts produce an erroneous number, argue the authors. Nationwide, 68% of students who begin 9th grade fail to complete high school, say the authors. There is a serious racial and ethnic disparity in this number, because 74% of that 68% are white students, but less than 50% of Black, Hispanic and Native American students did so. The high percentage of minority students who drop out instead of completing high school present a crisis in American education and for society, say the authors.

Two problems are illuminated in this article. One is the issue of the high number of minority high school dropouts and resulting lack of opportunity afforded to them because of their dropout status. The other problem is the lack of awareness by the public and policy makers that this problem exists. Although NCLB accountability mandates disaggregation of academic achievement results to measure for academic yearly progress, disaggregation is not mandated for high school completion rates. As the dropout rate decreases, the public and policy makers are generally unaware of “how minority youth are being left behind.”

Tables are included that list the lowest states regarding high school completion numbers. These states are New York, Ohio, Michigan, Nevada, Florida, Mississippi, Nevada, and Georgia. States listed with the greatest gap between white and minority students regarding
graduation rates are listed as well. Illinois is listed as number nine, with a gap of 25.1 between white and Hispanic students, and a 35.1 gap between black and white students. Six recommendations are provided by the authors at the conclusion of the article. These include reporting accurate graduation rates so the public and policy makers are aware of the serious disparity, providing a rigorous but flexible accountability regarding schools with low graduation rates, mandating disaggregation of graduation data for AYP, rewarding districts for keeping students in school instead of promoting pushouts, and providing immediate programs and research regarding minority dropouts. This article presents issues that point to further investigation. The ideas presented in the study could be explored in the context of a research study of a specific school or district.

Yeh (2005) argues that “unintended consequences of high stakes testing” occurs although the goal to maintain AYP remains. Many consequences result from teachers having to “teach to the test” and narrowing the curriculum. They are not able to give the students breadth of curriculum or work through a variety of knowledge-based projects, for example. All class work must be directly connected to the test and skill development for the tests.

The author collected data from the responses of teachers and administrators through interviews of them. This was self report data from a variety of sizes of districts. Some teachers felt that the curriculum was not narrowed; many teachers said they “integrated things needed to be on test with every day instruction.”

How do tests narrow curriculum, asks Yeh? Different student levels have a different focus of instruction. For example, basic skills are focused on during 8th grade as well as critical thinking. It is possible to make sequential tests and to make state mandated curriculum high stakes but low pressure. The difference in teachers’ perceptions regarding the narrowed
curriculum is interesting to consider: some teachers thought the curriculum was narrowed and they were made to tailor the curriculum, other teachers said it did not matter.

Amrien and Berliner (2002) explored high stakes testing and student achievement in several states. Results indicate that despite high stakes tests, both the level of student learning and achievement may remain the same. However, “numerous reports of unintended consequences . . . increase in dropout rates . . . [may occur].” Look at the reasons to have tests, say Amrien and Berlinger. High school high stakes exams affect racial minorities the most; tests are used in low performing schools more often as an accountability device. “High stakes” is defined by the authors, as well as rates at which students did not graduate. Learning did not improve despite the high stakes testing, argue Amrein and Berliner.

Greene and Winters (2004) explore the effect of competency tests and high school graduation rates. The tests were initially developed to ensure that academic levels of students were high enough to be competent in subject areas. Concern surfaced among women educators and expressed that these exams would promote low graduation rates. Greene and Winters argue that there is no effect of high school exit exams on graduation rates. In addition, they determine that a decreased class size has no effect on graduation rate, and an increase in education spending has no effect on student academic achievement.

Green and Winters, and the Manhattan Institute, determined that 24 states require exit exams for high school completion, despite the research literature that opposes such exams. Among such literature is that of Amrein and Berliner regarding states’ graduation rates and exit exams. Greene and Winters agree that 24 states have been identified as states that use exit exams, but they refute Amrein and Berliner’s research. First, Amrein and Berliner compared graduation rates of exit exams schools to the national average but they should have compared
dropout rates of exit exam states with those of non exit exams, claim Greene and Winters. Next, the statistical methods to calculate graduation rate used by Amrein and Berliner result in the opposite conclusion—no change in graduation rate—as the findings of other researchers.

The statistical method Greene uses includes regression statistics that calculate the graduation rate from each state from 1991-2001. Using Greene’s method and the data from the census, results claim that there is no effect of exit exams on a state’s graduation rate.

Roy and Mishel (2008) investigate recent rates of high school graduation among students in the United States by looking at Common Core Data (CCD) from the U.S. Department of Education. In addition, the authors look at examples from the literature of formula for determining graduation rate (Roy & Mishel, 2008). Some authors espouse “averaging grade enrollments” while other studies compare cumulative promotion index by comparing 8th grade numbers to diploma rates.

Roy and Mishel argue that CCD data does not provide a valid calculation of the graduation rate because individual students are not tracked; only groupings of students are measured. The data collected of groups of students result in an erroneous number of students who have dropped out. The authors conclude that newer methods of calculation that include “adjustments . . . often impart significant downward bias to the estimates” (Roy & Mishel, 2008).

MacLaughlin (1990) refutes the importance of the dropout issue presented in much of the educational literature. He believes that the number of dropouts in the United States is continuing to decrease, and that the problem described by agencies such as the National Children’s Defense Fund and the National Education Association do not exist. “Expanded figures” plague the information and distort the actual decrease of dropouts, he argues. More
school choice and a “back to basics” curriculum would provide a better structure for education, MacLaughlin says. MacLaughlin does not believe that higher standards are the problem for dropouts. He points to the smaller number of dropouts from private schools.

An additional issue explored regarding dropouts is the process of dropping out. Study of this issue reveals articles that explore the factors of influence or the event or sequence of events that promotes high school students to drop out. This literature looks at the sequence of events in dropouts’ lives. Engagement of students in school and dropouts viewed through a “life course perspective” (Audas & Willms, 2001) explores the long term process of dropping out. This process, framed through a “life course model,” considers the interaction of numerous forces and elements through out the lives of dropouts. This research identifies four groupings of dropouts (Audas & Willms, 2001) and compiles literature that studies issues of dropouts, including “large scale studies” that often focus on smaller studies’ details. This literature can be longitudinal, statistical, or looking at particular characteristics.

The study “defines (A) complex interplay that influences the eventual outcome of leaving school” to assist educators and policy makers in serving students. The authors identify a “policy challenge” and “research challenge,” especially various research done in the domain of school. The important element in this study is the detail given to the concept of student engagement and dropouts. The approach using life course theory and assessment of engagement in education provides a meaningful study. Alexander, Entwisle, and Kabbani (2001) compile data from urban schools in Baltimore. This information documents students’ “long term disengagement” from school and illustrates the progression that students make during the sequence of events identified as “dropping out.” The authors argue that the students possess numerous dissimilarities because of the factors that impact their lives. Examples of such factors
include SES and family support. These differences “modified” the dropouts, and produced different outcomes. The article exemplifies the authors’ belief that dropping out of high school truly is a process rather than an event. Dropping out is a “long term disengagement.”

Catterall (1987) investigates a “process model” exemplifying a “path like model” taken by dropouts. This model considers the “academic and social systems of the school” in terms of longitudinal research. The author states that such a model allows new consideration of research from the perspective of a process.

**Summary.** The literature provides a broad spectrum of research regarding the issue of dropouts. Qualities and demographics of dropouts are explored by Entwisle et al. and Hauser et al. An extension of qualities is research by Renzulli and Park who studied socially constructed groups of “gifted” dropouts and Dunn et al. who studied “special education” categorized dropouts. Influences on dropouts such as employment or extracurricular activities were studied by McNeal and Lee and Burkham. The school organization and dropouts were studied by Griffin and by Fine. Reder and Strawn refute the profile of dropouts in their study, while Wayman and Entwisle et al. studied factors that relate to the time frame of students’ high school or GED completion. Cordell offers factors that influence students’ motivation for returning to school, while Bae presents detailed portraits of dropouts that provide not only information about their lives but also their feelings about their school experience and influences from their lives. The governor’s statement focuses on the numbers of dropouts, not who comprises the dropouts. This narrow parameter prevents a true understanding of the numbers in the article. Roy and Mishel describe an erroneous count in the number of dropouts, and argue that a different method of calculation is needed. MacLaughlin negates the concept of the dropout problem by arguing that there is no problem.
This research literature studied factors that influence high school dropouts. Throughout the varied studies, the importance of parent and teacher involvement, employment, and perception or identification with academics and the school comprise factors that influence dropout phenomena. The focus of dropout study appears to shift from internal qualities of students to external influences and the school organization.

This research also links the concept of dropouts or high school graduation rate with that of No Child Left Behind and accountability. In this research, several issues reoccurred. One was the vague and varied nature of the measures and definitions themselves. Four different measures were mentioned as varied ways to evaluate the dropout or high school completion rate. Among these rates are measures that researchers themselves have developed.

Data systems and criteria used to identify dropouts and the dropout rate are also varied. The systems have been developed using a variety of measures that allow information to be collected but makes comparison difficult from one measure to another. Definitions of dropout and high school completion rates also vary. This difference increases the variation between measures and the entities that are measured. The criterion used for high school completion differs from state to state. This difference promotes variation in the number of students who would be eligible to graduate.

Other measures of accountability such as exit exams or composition of high stakes tests or achievement scores from high vary from state to state as well. These differences promote variation between states when AYP is determined.

Because of the variation of measures and tests, it is difficult to determine generalized studies from state to state or nationally. Results are not accurate throughout the data that is available.
Other research concerns involve the equity of students. This concern involves looking closely at the numbers and percentage of students who drop out, and the accuracy of data obtained to determine these percentages. The large number of minority students who continue to leave high school before completion illuminates a serious disparity in educational equity. This disparity highlights an important need for further research.

The research also looks at the factors in and of dropouts’ lives as well as the time frame that encompasses the process of dropping out. The study of “long term disengagement” provides a definition of this process.

The literature encompasses a broad array of elements affecting dropouts, including internal factors such as qualities and characteristics, and external factors such as school organization and high stakes testing. Research that particularly addresses the questions of this study includes that of Fine, Audas and Willms, and Alexander, Entwisle and Kabbani. Fine provides insight to the complex relation between the students’ perceptions of themselves in relation to the school and the school organization’s ability to maintain itself, and frames her research in the critical theory. Audas and Willms provide a lengthy investigation into the life history of students who drop out of school. The authors’ use of the life course model to study engagement and factors that impact student dropouts provides further insight to the research questions in this study. Alexander, Entwisle and Kabbani’s study enriches the knowledge base of the research questions by studying the life course events resulting in “long term disengagement” of dropouts. This focus serves the questions of the research study by addressing factors and events that impact the lives of dropouts.
Potential Dropouts

Exploration of literature on potential dropouts. Literature regarding the constructed term “potential dropout” examines issues that relate to students who are believed to be at risk of not graduating from high school. This literature, similar to that of dropouts, explores what disengages students from school, identifies where the greatest number of dropouts are found, and examines what policy changes could be implemented. A segment of the literature also attempts to predict which student will graduate and who will leave before graduation.

The ability to predict which students are likely to drop out provides the opportunity to provide intervention and reverse the process. Allensworth and Easton (2005) design an “on-track indicator” for use in predicting students’ high school graduation. This indicator assumes a simple correlation between performance factors.

The authors outline the elements of the indicator that explore the performances of students at the conclusion of the ninth grade. The indicator looks at two elements: the number of grades of “F” students earned in coursework, and the number of credits students complete. The indicator is used for data interpretation and is used by the Chicago Public Schools as a measure of accountability (Allensworth & Easton, 2005). Allensworth and Easton further discuss what it means for a student to be on track, and how the numbers of on-track students per school differs with the city’s schools.

The authors provide an analysis of the indicator by looking at the students’ academic and demographic characteristics and argue that on-track works for both low achieving students and high achieving students. It allows a greater level of intervention through services for students and is not linked to specific achievement, they state.
The commentary at the conclusion of the article provides a further examination of how information obtained from use of the on-track indicator relates to the graduation rate, a component of NCLB’s accountability. Chaplin, author of the commentary, argues that “unintended negative consequences” of NCLB and its accountability measure of achievement tests is that schools could be forced to be more selective about “who they take and who they keep” (Allensworth & Easton, 2005). The use of the on-track indicator allows for greater equity, because it “works well for both prepared but some not academically prepared for high school” (Allensworth & Easton, 2005). Chaplin comments further that the indicator provides educators with information that moves beyond test scores to examine other factors.

Using the easily obtained on-track indicator as a prediction for high school graduation allows educators to obtain a measure early in the student’s high school career. With this information, early intervention can be implemented, and students can become on track. Also, this measure is actually an internal check on other elements within the school, providing feedback on the organization itself. Finally, the indicator uses internal information that can be corrected internally. Instead of externally based test scores, this measure is comprised of factors within the school.

Woods (1994) explores how the dropout rate can be decreased. The problem of dropouts, Woods views, is a “complex social problem.” Woods examines who the dropouts are and how the term is defined, and looks beyond the calculation of dropouts to their effect on society as a whole.

“Risk factors,” presented by Woods analyze potential dropouts. Several factors Woods lists include low SES, low parent involvement, academic achievement, and student employment.
Woods’ overview of dropout issues continues with an enumeration of dropout programs throughout the country. Elements of educational programs for dropouts are provided. Finally, Woods lists guidelines for successful dropout programs. These details denote important programmatic areas and serve as a model for program development and implementation. An extensive bibliography provides resources of further literature on dropout issues.

Woods provides a general list of factors and services that would provide general background information to address the issue of dropouts and potential factors. The information is simply presented and not critically analyzed.

Gaustand (1991) compiles dropout literature looking at various factors that promote students’ lack of high school completion. Such factors include academic achievement, attendance, and student demographics. Results from studies tell that low achievement, low income, and poor attendance impact dropout rate.

The difficulty in the accurate computation of dropouts accentuates the difficulty in studying the issues, argues Gaustand. A more uniform and accurate system of counting dropouts is needed.

Balfanz and Legters (2004) study dropouts by defining a quantity called “promoting power” and by examining the demographics and geographic location of high schools with varying amounts of this power. Promoting power is defined as the school’s ability to “promote 50% or fewer freshmen to senior status on time” (Balfanz & Legters, 2004) and is recorded in levels such as strong or weak. The authors find an inverse relationship between this promoting power and schools with high minority populations, as well as with the income level of the high school communities.
Geographic regions reflect promoting power as well, argue Balfanz and Legters. Weak promoting power is located in “northern and western cities and throughout the southern states.” Geography is not the only factor in promoting power, argue the authors. Time is a factor as well. The authors find that “between 1993 and 2002 . . . the number of high schools (with low promoting power) increased 75%.” Numerous tables of data further illustrate these findings.

The authors conclude with policy recommendations to the educational and the community at large. They make a plea for more resources to be made available and more adequate high school reform strategies for implementation. Additional suggestions for new policy measures include increasing the number of small schools, altering the structure of schools to enhance student-staff connections, and promoting academic growth of schools that feed into high schools.

Potential dropouts are assisted to remain in school by dropout prevention programs. Literature regarding these programs is numerous and encompasses topics such as at-risk student programs, after school programs, and dropout prevention programs. A study completed by Hammond et al. (2007) enumerates elements of successful dropout prevention programs and explores numerous programs throughout the country. The authors provide a lengthy exploration of the dropout process as they explore prevention. “Dropping out of school is a process not an event,” the study states. The research explores a wide range of literature that investigates programs designed to identify and prevent dropouts. A series of events and factors impact dropouts, argue the authors. They divide the factors into four domains that impact students: individual, school, family, and community. The study considers the domains of individual and family in this research.
Through the extensive research of programs and literature analyzed in this article, the authors argue that dropping out is a “cumulative process,” not an “isolated event” (Hammond et al., 2007).

**Summary.** Literature focused on potential dropouts looks at issues through the student, the school, and compiled research. Allensworth and Easton (2005) consider the student’s grades and cumulative credits as an indicator of being “on-track” toward graduation. Balfanz and Legters (2004) look at the promoting power of schools as the primary factor affecting students as potential dropouts. Finally, the research compiled by Woods (1994) and Gaustand illustrates the potential dropout defined and as a part of society, and programs that have been designed to assist potential dropouts to graduate from high school. Hammond et al. primarily studies disengaged students through areas in their life experience. The authors provide a look at four domains in the lives of dropouts, and details the experience in family and individual. School would have been a more useful domain for this study.

Findings in the literature that particularly address the questions of this research include Allensworth and Easton, Balfanz and Leggers, and Hammond et al. Allensworth and Easton offer a research model that determines who is likely to drop out of high school, and identify events that affect students’ lives. Balfanz and Leggers look to the school organization outside of the students themselves. The authors investigate the “promoting power” of the schools to show the schools’ impact in the lives of students who may drop out. Hammond et al. investigate the dropout process in her research of dropout prevention programs as well as “domains” and events that impact the lives of potential dropouts. They provide information regarding the research questions of this study by including the quotation: “dropping out is a ‘cumulative process’ not ‘an isolated event.’”
Discussion

Defining dropouts and high school completion rates and exploring the accountability mandated by the No Child Left Behind legislation (2001) can provide further information to the school and the community. Literature on dropouts explores who drops out, why, and why students return to complete their high school education. The literature looks for factors within the students, and found such factors to be vague. Rarely did the literature look beyond the “how many” to explore “who” or “how” the school system affected the students. Research rarely questioned the difference between looking at what’s wrong with the student to what’s wrong with the school. These questions were difficult to determine because the terminology itself was vague or variable.

Literature that considers a link between the issues of dropouts and NCLB legislation reveals two views. One view only considers the overall dropout rate. The other view considers who drops out. Literature asserts that the dropout rate is decreasing; if so, still another question of who is dropping out must be considered, because this question will address the equity of the issue of dropouts and accountability, and can provide a test regarding the equity of NCLB.

Literature regarding the dropout process and potential dropouts continued to parallel the literature of dropouts. Factors were similarly illustrated, and elements were similarly disclosed. Looking for literature that provided a sequence of events in the lives of dropouts that described the process of dropping out was scarce in the available literature. Such scarcity of research promotes opportunities for further research of this topic.
Conclusion

This literature review provides a background for further research in issues regarding the dropout process and events and factors that impact the process. Completing the review allowed me to begin to assess what others have studied. I have a long history of working with GED and high school students, and have interest and concern for their success.

Formulating a research question was difficult. I wanted to consider a meaningful question, and I wanted my research to move beyond a mere counting the numbers of dropouts. It was difficult to focus my interest on a particular area and remain clearly in that area. Looking through the variety of literature was helpful and considering the approach used by other researchers provided me with more information.

Locating research on dropouts was more difficult than I had imagined. Earlier research on the topic provided me with a good background from previous studies and served as a good starting point. I thought that the literature would be found mostly on deficit theory of dropouts, but in addition to elements of that theory, it has focused on vague reasons and conflicting definitions. Although resources provided some information, I am interested in obtaining more. There was less literature on the topic of the dropout process than I had thought I would find. When researching the dropout process, some literature was available, but literature was based on longitudinal studies or compilation of research programs and studies. I am interested in contacting the researchers directly regarding issues in their studies and obtaining additional information about methodology and theory.

I am particularly interested in researching the topic of dropouts because of my background in working with GED students and students considered by the school to be at risk. I believe that the literature demonstrates that there is much to be investigated in the topics and
many questions left to answer. Further exploration must be completed, especially regarding the impact of sequenced events in the dropout process.
Chapter 3
Research Methodology

Introduction

This study examines selected students who have dropped out of high school, by asking them several open questions designed to learn their life story and experience with school. The main question of the study is “What lessons are learned from portraits of high school dropouts?” Other important subsidiary questions of the study are:

1. Are elements in the school domain expressed in students’ life stories?
2. What feelings or experiences are expressed through the students’ portraits? What do they reveal about the students’ dropping out?
3. How did these students view themselves in relation to the school during their life stories?

The researcher hopes the information gleaned from this study will assist school administrators in the development of meaningful strategies and programs to better meet needs of high school students. Also, the researcher hopes to provide information to aid in the design and evaluation of dropout prevention programs.

Literature relevant to high school dropouts has been reviewed and findings that relate specifically to this research study have been identified. The life stories of dropouts told through portraiture and lessons drawn from these portraits that provide school administrators with information that will assist them in planning and evaluating dropout prevention programs promote compelling issues to investigate. This section of the study provides the structure of the study itself, the method of inquiry, and the research design of the study.
The study provides background for the investigation of the question. It provides an outline and discussion of the question, the method of inquiry and research design. The question is stated, the justification for the methods of research employed is outlined, the appropriateness of the methods of research is detailed, and the circumstances when the qualitative method could have been used are discussed. Brief references from research sources in the qualitative method used in this are included as well. A profile of the community is provided in addition to the demographics of the community college population. The participants in the study are described as well as methods and procedure of data collection.

Research practices and special precautions as well as the sensitivity necessary in the research of human subjects are included.

**Rationale for Research Approach**

This research study investigates the life history events occurring in the school experience of high school dropouts and explores the impact of these events. This study considers issues facing dropouts and looks critically at the process of dropping out. The research attempts to assist school administrators in evaluating and planning intervention programs for potential dropouts. These students possess elements constructed to be “at risk;” factors that may result in their dropping out and not completing high school.

The question that the study asks is “What lessons are learned from portraits of high school dropouts?” Other important subsidiary questions of the study are:

1. Are elements in the school domain expressed in students’ life stories?
2. What feelings or experiences are expressed through the students’ portraits? What do they reveal about the students’ dropping out?
3. How did these students view themselves in relation to the school during their life stories?
How will this information assist school administrators in the development of meaningful strategies and programs to better meet needs of high school students? The researcher hopes to provide information to aide in the design and evaluation of dropout prevention programs.

Many authors consider the issue of high school dropouts by exploring factors that relate to the dropout issue (Cordell, 2005; Fine, 1991; Griffin, 2002; Hammond et al., 2007; Hauser et al., McNeal, 1995, 2000). Such studies consider how dropping out actually occurs and ask important questions about both the process and events that influence dropping out. These studies may ask what factors impact dropping out? What events in the area of school occur in students’ lives and when do these events occur? Beyond the exploration of these events and factors that determine mere facts about dropping out, other studies use the methodology of portraiture, which looks at the whole student. This methodology considers not only the collection of information but also the exploration of the feelings that students have about their lives and school.

The study is designed as a qualitative study which uses Lawrence-Lightfoot’s qualitative method of portraiture. This methodology is designed to obtain a deep and meaningful communication between researcher and participant which focuses, in this study, on the area of school and events important in the life history of the participant. The use of this methodology allows the researcher to interview for feeling, not just for information as in other qualitative methods (Witz, 2007). It is hoped that the method will elicit layers upon layers of details from within the participant that are crafted into a whole that forms the portrait. The method of portraiture is based on a combination of the “empirical description” of science and the “aesthetic expression” of art (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).
Lightfoot to provide a “framework for her detailed expressions of the life stories, portraiture allows the researcher to convey the details of the participant” while using the details to maintain a whole expression of the participant. To enhance this process, the participant and researcher form a collaboration that facilitates a deep level of communication. This format allows the participant to become an “ally” with the researcher in the process of illuminating the research question through a deeper level of communication (Witz, 2007). The methodology of portraiture is based on “grounded theory” which assumes the theory evolves as information is obtained (Merriam, 2002).

Portraiture seems especially appropriate for a study on high school dropouts regarding their life history and events that impacted their dropping out. The details of the events and their meaning to the dropouts are provided by the participant during conversation with the researcher; the depth of this engagement provides authentic insight into the world of the participant and allows the researcher to more fully connect the participant’s detailed elements and create a portrait of the whole student (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

The use of the qualitative method of research allows the study of “how” and “what” (Creswell, 1998). This method provides the opportunity for the researcher to look at the study.

The use of qualitative research can be explored using Creswell’s criteria regarding when to use of qualitative method. Creswell lists eight criteria for the use of qualitative method for inquiry. The first is asks the researcher to “consider the nature of the question.” If the question asks “how or what,” Creswell identifies the qualitative method as appropriate.

Creswell states that what is an appropriate question for qualitative inquiry to consider because of the correlation between elements such as time, such as the time line utilized in the second interview of the methodology of portraiture, and school related elements disclosed in the
interview. This correlation provides background information through which to analyze the study.

Although Creswell argues that there are specific differences between qualitative and quantitative methods of research, Paul (2005) states that the importance in research is not a difference between the qualitative and quantitative research methods. He argues that the important difference is in the philosophy “ascribed by the researcher” that guides the perspective of the research. He divides such philosophies into eight perspectives, including post positivism, in which a scientific view of “knowledge as absolute”; pragmatism, emphasizes “effects and consequences”; constructionism, “meaning-making activities . . . for physical and temporal data”; interpretism, “reality mediated by language”; arts-based, “research (honoring) principles of the arts”; race, ethnicity and gender, research based on “aspects of identity which signal status and power”; critical, research based elements of power and whose interests are being served; ethics, and poststructuralism.

Creswell’s second criterion states the “topic must be explored.” Previous research of dropouts looks at who and why students drop out of high school. Numerous studies in the literature analyze what characteristics dropouts possess. Other studies investigate why dropouts leave school. Longitudinal studies explore dropouts, but none are found that explore the topic using retrospective data to look at students’ life events and feelings that have impacted their dropping out. Many questions are not investigated such as: what keeps students in school? What life events contribute to engagement of students and when do they occur? What determines if a student leaves school or completes? Theories must be developed to explain the dynamics of what is actually occurring. Delineating the details of each participant’s life history and feelings
that comprise the portraits, may help in achieving a greater understanding of the process of the participants dropping out.

Third, Creswell states that there is a “need to present a detailed view . . . [through a] wide angle lens” (Creswell, 1998). Both details and the big picture are considered in such a view. Research considers how both views relate, how questions are asked, and how answers relate to the numerical information that communicates the large picture.

An example of such an analysis is Fine’s study of dropouts from a comprehensive public high school (1991). This study is situated in the history of high school and the expectation of opportunity in the portrait of the school. The next section includes the details of statements of the student, teacher, and staff interviews. The study concludes with analysis of the interviews of students and school staff along with their expectations of themselves and each other. The interaction between the background view of the “big picture” and the detailed substance offered by the interviews provides a rich interplay of details in context.

The fourth criterion is that of “study individuals in natural setting as opposed to laboratory.” This criterion is met by conducting interviews of dropouts in their classroom environment. Conducting research within the school allows the questionnaire to be completed in the “natural setting” of the academic milieu.

Creswell’s fifth criterion is that of “writing in literary style . . . bringing self, ‘I,’ into the study . . . writing in narrative style.” Bringing self into the classic scientific study differs from the traditional format of objectivity as the primary guiding principle. In the classic, objective study, all factors are controlled outside of the phenomena, and the observer is not a part of the experience. Qualitative methods allow the involvement of the researcher in the study, and he/she becomes a part of the study. The researcher is not completely on the outside and is not
considered to be the “other.” Fine and Weis consider the concept of the difference in views between the “insider/outsider” as the researcher asks “in whose voice shall I write?” (Fine & Weiss, 2000). Fine argues that the relationship between researcher and the subjects of research that maintain distance between them as if any connection between them would “contaminate the research.” This problem may initiate additional problems depending on the subject and the researcher: how much of your own voice do you include? Does it legitimize your research if you include yourself as an insider? Can you really become an insider?

The method of portraiture addresses the concept of relationship between researcher and participant. Lawrence-Lightfoot argues that “relationship” is a critical element in developing empathy with the participant, and that empathy is crucial to the ability to create a relationship that allows the participant to deep communication. Witz’ concept of “participant as ally” in the process of researching the question exemplifies the deep and close relationship between researcher and participant as well.

Creswell’s sixth criterion is “sufficient time and resources to spend on extensive data collection.” Time and resources are expensive investments. What is sufficient time? What are sufficient resources? The researcher must be mindful of the time frame expected for responses and for the calendar of timeline of the project. For example, meetings with participants in sequentially scheduled appointments may have to be rescheduled because of time constraints. Concern about the method of response is important as well. Krathwohl argues that “resource allocation is the hidden decision making that determines the relative strength of the various parts of a study; the researchers’ task is to optimize the resources to fit the problem, goal, audience.”
Creswell’s seventh criterion states “audiences are receptive to qualitative research recently.” Research has become more accepting to qualitative research in the last few years in the area of social science research. Fine and Weiss state that “qualitative work has gained popularity since the 1970s” (Fine & Weiss, 2000).

The eighth criterion Creswell identifies is the emphasis on “the researchers’ role as active learner . . . to tell (the) story from participants’ view other than expert who passes judgment.” For this criterion, the researcher must often consider both role and distance (Fine & Weiss). Fine and Weiss describe collecting narratives as the “triple representational problem” which asks “how can we present ourselves as researcher . . . the narrators of the stories and interviews (either as social critics or social narratives) . . . and the others who pass judgment on the stories and whose stories are being told.”

This criterion presents challenges to the researcher, as dropouts are interviewed who possess different ages, genders, and stories are interviewed. These qualities make it easier for the researcher to identify with some participants than others, and can make the distance between participant and researcher sometimes more difficult to maintain.

Fine and Weiss caution researchers to “keep an ‘open mind’” regarding the study and results, and not to expect anticipated results in the investigation. Another caution is the importance of telling the story in the words of the participants. Telling the “stories . . . being told” necessitates using the authentic language of the subjects of the study.

Additional literature complies with the criteria as well. Krathwohl (1998) states that the use of the qualitative method is used for “complex phenomena about which there is little certain knowledge . . . for exploration.”
There are several important methods of qualitative research: among them is the study of life history. Atkinson (n.d.) illustrates the importance of life history in research by arguing that “telling stories of our lives is . . . basic to our nature” and “brings meaning to our lives.” Life stories, Atkinson states, are important because they serve a “classic function” of realizing a harmony within ourselves, others and with the universe. The life story as an important form of academic study has a long history. Early life story research was conducted by Sigmund Freud who established the importance of the life story through the use of long-term case studies. Other researchers included Gordon Allport and Erik Erikson, who built narratives of life history regarding the study of personality and human development. Atkinson argues that the life history has been accepted today by many academic disciplines. As psychologists use personal narrative to understand personality and human development, anthropologists use the life history narratives to study culture and cultural elements; sociologists study groups, interaction, and relationships through life stories; educational research employs life stories that “have been used as a new ways of knowing and teaching”; literary research uses autobiography “through which to explore questions of design, style, content, literary themes, and personal truth”; and historians use oral history to provide an understanding of historical events and their era (Atkinson).

Life stories are also explored through critical theory. Munro (1998) uses life stories to investigate the life stories of women, and to give “voice to women as teachers.” These detailed narratives are interpreted through a detailed critical analysis. Munro illustrates power as an element in the relationships and life stories through the narrative to reveal women’s life stories. The author expressed concern regarding her relationship with the subjects, and wanted to maintain a “collaborative” relationship with them.
Goodson and Sykes (2001) trace the history of life history research interview methodology and argue that this history “provides a voice from a culture” that allows us to “put ourselves in [a participant’s] skin and allows the researcher to design research from the participant’s point of view.” This method “gives voice” to previously voiceless, marginalized groups. The authors quote Michelle Fine as she expresses concerns regarding the relationship between the “self and other.” In such a relationship the definition of the self is “white(d) out” and as a result is not heard.

The qualitative methodology of life history or life story research conveys information about the elements or issues in the research subjects’ lives through the interview process between researcher and subject. Researchers such as Atkinson, for example, outline the method used to gain knowledge about the subject’s life story and how to interview for information.

The investigational tool used in this research study is the methodology of portraiture created by Lawrence-Lightfoot. This methodology differs from that of life story or life history research methods. Lawrence-Lightfoot developed this research design in 1997 after creating books of life stories with themes. This “method of inquiry and documentation” seeks to combine elements of art and science. The portraits she initially created are those of participants she documents in her life stories.

Three elements of portraiture are particularly compelling to Lawrence-Lightfoot’s methodology. These elements are voice, relationships, and empathy. Voice of both participant and portraitist is important to the portraiture methodology. “Voice is the research instrument . . . portraits reflect more about the artist than about the subject” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Relationships are a second important element in the methodology. The relationship between researcher and participant is critical to the interview methodology process and creation
of the portrait. It states, “portraits are constructed, shaped and drawn through the development of relationships” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Through the relationship between researcher and participant during the in depth interview, “access is sought and given, connections made . . . [and the relationship between researcher and participant is] . . . negotiated and renegotiated, week by week, day by day, even minute by minute” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Empathy is a third important element of portraiture methodology. Empathy is “central to relationship building.” In forming relationships, the researcher and participant must “listen and connect.” An important fact for the researcher is “the more knowledgeable you are about the actor’s reality and the more self-analytic you are about your own, the more you’ll be able to empathize” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

These elements relate to the creation of the portraiture of the part and the resulting whole. As a visual portrait drawn or painted uses the elements of line, color and shape to create the whole portrait, the research portrait uses layer upon layer of detail gleaned from deep communication during several interviews to build the creation of the whole person, as a portrait.

Witz (2006, 2007) defines portraiture methodology as a method that is based on the relationship of “participant as ally” and the deep communication of interviewing for feeling not information. To engage in portraiture, the researcher evokes an empathetic communication with the participant. In this communication “like a friend,” the researcher conveys an understanding and concern for the participant and his/her story. The participant becomes an “ally” of the researcher in the process to investigate the research topic. Interviewing for feeling, not interviewing for information (Witz, 2007) differs from other methodologies that include communication through interviews to obtain life stories or histories. As a researcher interviews
for feeling, he/she surpasses mere description and listens for nuances of participants’ feelings during the research interview. The process evokes a depth of communication and empathy.

Witz outlines three elements of portraiture. “Sequential interviews” is the first important element in the methodology of portraiture (Witz, 2007). The initial interview allows the participant to learn about the research topic and aids in engaging the participant as ally. Development of the relationship between participant and researcher continues during successive interview sessions.

Creation of the portrait is the second element in the methodology. The details of the “parts” that emerge during sequential interviews are meticulously crafted into a “whole” portrait of the participant. Such a portrait brings elements of the participants’ “feeling, consciousness, state . . . which constitutes the distinct structuring of the participant” (Witz, 2007).

Finally, cross case analysis allows the researcher to look beyond each individual participant to elements or themes that occur among all participants (Witz, 2007). Such themes can be analyzed across the study’s participants using coding to facilitate analysis. Because of the use of grounded theory methodology, a system of coding would not be able to be determined before the interviews are conducted. Coding will be possible only after the open interviews are conducted and the themes and details emerge. Charmaz argues that during the “coding process, (the researcher) listens to reoccurring themes . . . that are . . . brought out in the interview” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001).

Literature on the methodology of portraiture is compelling to consider. In addition to reading the literature on this methodology, I view the method using my experience in portraiture as an art teacher and an art student. As an artist and art teacher, I have experienced the power of visual portraiture. My interest in art education was impacted by viewing an exhibit at a gallery
in an urban gallery of self portraits of public school high school students. The strength and immediacy of the portraits compelled me to change my undergraduate major to art education: I felt that the portraits exemplified the empowerment of the students. Through these portraits I experienced both inner qualities and outward expressions; I felt the affirming statements made by the students’ self portraits. As an art teacher of junior high and high school students, I have guided many students through the experience of looking, perceiving details, and portraying the whole through the detailed parts of the visual piece. Because of my experience with the intensity of visual portraits, I believe that written portraits, created through Lawrence-Lightfoot’s methodology of portraiture, can comprise a powerful impact as well.

**Procedures**

The study began as the researcher conducted several periods of observation in the classroom research setting designed to facilitate the researcher’s familiarity with the environment and with the people in the surroundings. After these sessions, the researcher introduced the topic of investigation to the group of people in the research setting. This introduction engaged participants so they understood the research question and felt as though they were an ally to the research project. An initial interview was held with participants and open interview questions used in this initial interview to guide the inquiry. Participants were encouraged to move beyond the questions and elaborate on them in the initial and subsequent interviews. Interview sessions were audio recorded and the researcher took notes. Data sources collected during interview sessions were details expressed during the interviews that comprised the portraits. These details and the emergent themes that they provided comprised the data that was collected about the dropouts who were interviewed.
**Research Design and Setting**

Students in adult education/GED preparation program in Green Valley Community College (A pseudonym for the community college) were the participants of this study. Students attended three-hour classes held in the morning, afternoon, or evening. Classes are structured to begin every month, so new students can enter classes at the first of each month. Classes are scheduled from September through July each year.

Students can enroll in GED classes at age 18 and older, unless they possess special circumstances. Studying math/reading/ reading subjects/English, students are administered placement tests as they begin instruction to facilitate their correct placement in instruction level for classroom studies.

Students proceed in individualized instruction until they are ready to test. When students enroll in classes, some students may have already tested in one of the five academically defined GED tests, while some students are still building their skills as they are becoming ready to test.

Students may come to the GED classes having previously attended eight local public county high schools or private schools, or they may have moved from another location. Green Valley Community College where the GED classes are held is located in a small city in the mid west. The college serves approximately 3,500 students, 1,000 who are registered in adult education classes. The county high schools vary in size from 350 students to over 1,500 students: six schools are small, rural schools while two schools are urban.

**Process**
Who will be interviewed. Students currently attending community college GED classes on campus will be given the opportunity to participate in the research study. Approximately 25 students attend each class.

Design collection procedure. This study is a qualitative study in which qualitative methods and stratified random samples were used. Several steps in the investigation were employed.

1. Met with GED teachers of morning, afternoon, or evening classes: I met or telephoned GED teachers at Green Valley Community College to make an appointment for a 30-minute meeting after their respective morning, afternoon, or evening GED classes. The meetings occurred in the Green Valley Community College third floor GED classroom. During this meeting, I explained the goal of the study, the questions asked by the study, and the procedure of the study. I gave the teacher a recruitment flyer (Appendix B), and set a date and time for a class presentation about the study.

2. Initial classroom introduction to project: On the date of the first classroom visit, I attended the GED class held in the third floor GED classroom. I observed the classroom on two occasions. I was introduced to the class as a visitor who was observing the class. During the third visit, during the 50-minutes before the end of the two-hour class, I introduced myself to the students in the classroom and explained the project to the students using this narrative:

   I am Chris Young, a graduate student at the University of Illinois. I am interested in studying high school dropouts’ experiences and feelings about school before graduation. I need your help and your insight to investigate this topic.

   I hope that this study will help school administrators to plan better services and dropout prevention programs that meet the needs of high school students. The study will take place here at Green Valley Community College in a classroom on the third floor. It has two parts; each requires a one-hour individual session. The first hour session will involve an interview involving ten questions about your school experience. The first session will be audio recorded and I will also take some notes. After this first session, I will make a timeline of events important to the participant during this initial session. I, the researcher, will schedule an appointment for the participant to return the next week for session two. The second hour-long session will involve me, the researcher, asking participants to talk more about events from their lives and earlier school experience from the previous session. The participant will be asked to tell more about the events or add more information and answer some additional questions. This final session will allow the participant to talk about his/her earlier school experiences and how he/she felt about these events, in addition to completing an interview involving additional questions. I will audio tape this interview. At the end of this session, the participant will be given a gift card for $10.
Risks might include risks to privacy because the questions in the questionnaire ask about events in the students’ life history; risks to dignity and self respect because of possible painful memories of negative experiences; risks to emotions and psyche, because of the possibility of students reliving painful events and difficult memories, and legal risks if confidentiality of data is breached.

Benefits include adding to knowledge about high school dropouts, helping administrators plan better services and dropout prevention programs, and reflecting on the benefit of retuning to school to complete a high school credential.

The information collected by this study, data and responses, will be kept in a locked file in a secure location. It will be confidential and only the researcher and researcher’s professors, who are supervising the study, will have access to it. Also, a code will be created so responses will not be connected to a name. The information will be kept for three years, and then destroyed. A participant can leave the study at any time and does not have to answer any particular question if he/she doesn’t want to.

I will answer any questions about the study that you may have. I will be out in the hall on the couch area to answer questions, if they have any further questions.

All participants must sign a consent form if they are interested in participating, and because of the design of the study, must be at least 18 years of age. Today I will hand out flyers about the study with contact cards for you to complete if you are interested in taking part in the study. I will collect these cards in a manila envelope, and will randomly choose four of them from this group. There will be a total of at least 8 to 12 students in the study. Students will be chosen from morning, afternoon and evening classes.

Does anyone have any questions?

If not, I will go out to the hall way couch, and anyone who has further questions can come out to ask me any additional questions.

I, the researcher passed out flyer and interest cards to students (Appendix C).

Now I will pass an envelope. If you are interested in participating, please put your card in the envelope. I will randomly select them and call you to inform you if you have been chosen for the study.

Thank you for letting me present this information to you.

3. Researcher randomly selected four cards from the envelope. If less than four cards were in the envelope, the researcher again approached students in the GED classroom to see if additional students were interested in participating.

4. Researcher telephoned four selected participants. The telephone message states:

Hello, is ______________ there? (If yes) Hello,______________. This is Chris Young from Green Valley / University of Illinois study. I have called to let you know that you have been selected for the study on portraits. We need to make an appointment for the first one-hour session. The session will be held in Room ____ at Green Valley Community College. Would ____(time)_______ work with your schedule for
the first appointment? (If no) This is Chris Young calling from Green Valley Community College. I will call again later in the day. Or, please have ________call me at __________. Thank you.

5. Participant completed first interview. The participant met the researcher in the third floor classroom during the scheduled appointment to take part in the first interview. The researcher reviewed that the subject of the study involved portraits of high school dropouts that have affected their dropping out of high school, and asked if the student had any questions. The researcher gave two forms to the student: the letter of consent form (Appendix D) and agency help list (Appendix E), if students wanted a list of agency referrals in case they feel that they need counseling assistance after the interview process. I, the researcher, asked the student if he/she would like to complete the consent form; if the student did complete the form, the researcher continued with the interview. I then read the script from the cover sheet as the participant looked on:

This interview was designed to study the importance of events that occurred in his/her school experience and how they affected his/her feeling and relationship with school.

I, the researcher, began by asking several open interview questions from Appendix A. The interview was audio-taped.

I scheduled a next appointment with the student for the following week in Room ____ at Green Valley Community College

6. Researcher transcribed audio tape of first interview and makes time line of important events that the participant has highlighted by the expression of feelings during communication.

7. Participant completed the second and final interview. During the final one-hour session, the participants met with the researcher in Room ____. The participant was seated at a table, and the researcher sat at a neighboring table. I, the researcher, introduced the interview process:

“This session involves a review of some events you mentioned during the first session, just to clarify your statements and to allow you to expand or to give me a further understanding of what you said. Then, we will continue with an interview based on questions about your experience during your years with school. The questions are designed to gain more understanding about your experience in school and the events that affected your progress in school. I will ask you some questions (Appendix B) and will audio record your answers.”

8. Themes emerged from research data.

9. Evaluated interview details by coding each response and compiled a narrative for each coded response. The compilation of results were evaluated for similarities or themes that emerged from the coded responses. This compilation allowed the consideration of events
that impacted the participants’ school experience through each instrument. Any events or time frames that presented similar patterns among subjects and instruments suggested themes that will be discussed through narrative.

10. Compiled information and wrote detailed portrait of each participant.

11. Completed cross case analysis by comparing details between each participant’s portrait.

12. Completed critical analysis by comparing details of cross case analysis.

**Protection of human subjects.** The study’s design was reviewed and evaluated by the IRB. In addition, the human subjects who participated in this study obtained a sheet of information requiring their signatures. The questions in the initial interview questions and follow-up responses were structured in a sensitive manner.
Chapter 4

Portraits

This chapter contains the results of two interviews, of each of the participants in this study, compiled using the methodology of portraiture. Each of the portraits is comprised after our deep conversations, and after my reflection on the transcriptions of each interview. The portraits express the participants’ voices regarding the research questions: What lessons are learned from portraits of high school dropouts? Other important subsidiary questions of the study are: The main question of the study is “What lessons are learned from portraits of high school dropouts?” Other important subsidiary questions of the study are:

1. Are elements in the school domain expressed in students’ life stories?
2. What feelings or experiences are expressed through the students’ portraits? What do they reveal about the students’ dropping out?
3. How did these students view themselves in relation to the school during their life stories?

The first two portraits presented are the stories of William and Sharrlene. Their stories are each different, but tell of their seriously disturbing environments, even as young children. William lived in a large city for most of his life, and was 19 years old when he took part in this study. He lived in austere conditions, including drugs, gang activity, and school bullying. Sharrlene was approximately 51 years old when she participated in this study and had moved several times in her life from a mid western country area to cities near large cities. As a child she was abused and neglected, and was placed in multiple developmental centers.

The portraits detail the deep conversations between each participant and me, as researcher. Selections of each interview transcript are included, documented by letters (A,
indicates first interview; B, indicates second interview) and numbers (each interview’s respective page number).

**Portrait of William**

William moved slowly and quietly into the room for our first interview. His thin, angular frame initially balanced on the edge of the chair, and although his head was down, his dark eyes looked directly at me as he sat down at the table across from me. His thick, dark hair covered his head. He wore a white oxford shirt with small blue stripes, with the long sleeves unbuttoned at his wrists. He spoke quietly, thoughtfully, but used few words throughout on our conversations. Often speaking in phrases instead of sentences, he conveyed his evolution from hopeless early life to his hope for the future. As he disclosed his past and moved toward his future as we began to talk, I initially sensed an intensity underlying both a caution and anticipation. Yet, as our conversations continued, I felt a resilience emerge in William.

**Early years: Elementary school.**

*Early years.* I carefully listened as William shared his story about his early life. Speaking in a quiet voice and in short phrases or sentences, William told how the early years of his life were spent in a large city with his family. His family, which included his mother, brother, and 2 sisters, was forced to move in with an aunt and her son when William was around the age of 8 (“when I was eight, from 1999 until 2009,” William, A, p. 1). As William quietly shared in a clear voice, his head down but his eyes looking directly at mine, he sat forward and expressed the reason for their move (B, p. 3).

William also shared the darkness of the home environment at his auntie’s house and his feelings about living there. He looked down as he shared:
William described the dynamics of relations in the home environment with the auntie and her children. This was home that he left in the morning for school and returned at the end of the day; the home where he, his brothers, sisters and mother came to live after his mother became mentally ill. This was the auntie who was the adult in the home that William shared with his brother and sisters and mentally ill mother. He mentioned no other adult who provided supervision, nurturance, or guidance to him as a young person.

Early elementary school. The family lived with the auntie for 10 years. However, despite the austerity of the conditions, the auntie did require William to attend school. “Um, when I was younger she used to take me there” (A, p. 3) In the beginning, around age 8, things went relatively well. He shared his feeling as his face relaxed, and he smiled slightly as he shared that as a young child in elementary school, he loved school.
I: Okay.
W: But as I got older, um, I just couldn’t keep my mind on the work. (A, p. 4)

**Sixth grade.** In fact, sixth grade was a turning point for William. This is how our whole first interview started as William disclosed how his classmates treated him in class.

W: (In a clear voice, looking directly at I) First it started out, uh, when I was younger and in grammar school. I used to get picked on all the time because I was quiet.
I: Okay.
W: Then I got into a fight at least twice, once a week. People thought because I was quiet, they thought there was something wrong with me.
I: In grade school, grammar school?
W: Yes, yeah
I: Okay.
W: Yes—people thought because I was quiet, they thought there was something wrong with me—but as I got older, my brother... [talks about following his brother who was a very bad example of gang activity and truancy]. (A, p. 1)

The bullying led to fights and disciplinary action from the school. Because of the number of days and the amount of work missed, he had to repeat sixth grade. On tape A, I asked him in what grade did he think things changed from “when it was fun and you felt good about it” and he “could not keep his mind on his work” (his words).

W: 6th grade.
W: I was barely doing any work at all in 6th grade—that’s probably about the time I started ditching school—it wasn’t good—I was getting into all types of fights. I failed the 6th grade.
I: Okay.
W: The next year, I was doing the same thing, I wasn’t doing that much work, getting suspended for a fight that I got in but didn’t start—detention or whatever, but (face lights up:) I passed that—I had the highest test scores at the end of the year—in my second grade—6th grade, my second year.
I: Wow, like your achievement test scores?
W: Yes.
I: The highest in the class?
W: Um um. (A, p. 4)

I felt the pride that he showed in this accomplishment as his face glowed and he slightly nodded his head to reinforce his accomplishment. We continued talking about his academic
accomplishment—he disclosed that he still has his copy of the test paper that have his test scores!

**Seventh and eighth grade.** The data in this time of William’s life becomes somewhat unclear. While he states that he continued to attend school during seventh and eighth, he also states that the school he attends is a junior high that comprised 7th grade through 12th grade. (This structure is unusual for a junior high, especially since the system in the city he attended divided schools from grades K-8 and 9-12.)

I: Now, how did that school go to the end of 8th grade? Or did you go to a different school for 7th and 8th grade—you know what I mean, because some schools have different levels in them.

W: Uh, well, I went, I stayed to 8th grade—well the last year.

I: Um him.

W: And I was going to high school—they sent me to Cornelli, the school I went to was called Denitonville Junior High.

I: Junior high, so that’s probably.

W: Yeah, junior high, kind of like a high school, went up to 12th grade.

I: Okay, okay, so after the 6th grade—you did well in 6th grade, you did really good on your test scores.

W: I did.

I: You went to 7th grade then at that school, though?

W: Yeah.

I: And then 8th grade was at the same school?

W: Yeah. (A, p. 5)

But during this period, other elements of William’s life change, as his attendance became worse,

I: Grade? Okay, um, and then I remember you were in 7th grade, um you started there. Although you got into some hot water, fights, and so on with some other students at school.

W: Yes.

I: And um that sort of seemed to continue on from 6th grade.

W: Through the 8th grade.

and he starts to sell drugs.

I: (Asks him whether there was anybody influencing to leave school either way, pro or con.)
Well, this cousin, the three of them, they say I got the best—name—most likely but that’s when I used to sell drugs.

And I well, I started, probably in 04-05 and that was just because, really.

And the guy that I was selling for, he really encouraged me to go to school, and make money with him, so. (A, p. 2).

Eighth grade diploma. After 6th grade, William shared that he progressed to 7th grade at the same school, and then to the 8th grade. Another area of unclear data is William’s completion of eighth grade, and his acquisition of an eighth grade diploma.

Before that I graduated 8th grade, I had to get my 8th grade diploma.

Okay, so how did that happen—you were in grammar school.

Yeah.

Up in the city?

Yup. (A, p. 1)

While he states a compelling reason for him to stay in school as an elementary student, I wondered about his attendance, and after William shared quietly that it decreased. I confirmed that he didn’t actually get a diploma from the 8th grade.

Well, you got through the 7th grade and maybe your attendance went down a little bit in 8th grade, so you actually didn’t get a diploma from the 8th grade.

Right.

Then you went back and they put you into high school anyway.

Um hum. (B, p. 2)

Middle years: High school. William was allowed to progress to high school, and I observed that he would have been starting high school at age 15. William continued to disclose his pattern of attendance during this time.

I stayed to the 8th grade, they sent me to Cornellius [high school], but I stopped going but, um, even after my freshman year. (A, p. 1)

William shared his recollection of his teachers. Despite his irregular attendance, he remembered that they enjoyed having him in class because he worked well and liked school. I explored several questions with him regarding this period of his life.
I: Okay, so you viewed school pretty well, pretty positively as a younger student, um, and then you got to high school and sort of at the beginning you attended not too much, but as time went on, you years, you’ve come back again. So how would you say it went for you subject wise—did you have any subjects that you like? Or any, um you know, favorite teachers or anything that you think back—just that affected you in school in those days?

W: Um, I can say probably some favorites, reading, writing—language arts.

I: Okay.

W: But I have trouble in math, it was hard for me to understand math, I, and favorite teacher, I can’t remember—I can’t always remember none of them.

I: None of them stood out as being too positive, encouraged you along the way—something like that?

W: Um hum.

I: Oh? You had one or two?

W: Um, I think.

I: You don’t have to tell me their names.

W: There were some.

I: That’s pretty cool.

W: These—well, all of my teachers liked me, cause everybody else in the class was, uh, class clowns, and the teachers knew how smart I was. So I just focused on my work with people messing with me in class or trying to fight me. (A, p. 5)

Providing more background to his difficulty in attending school, William shared the neighborhood environment where he lived. He expressed both the number and power of street gangs and their pervasive presence in William’s daily life. Even getting to school was difficult, as he described the daily gauntlet that he had to navigate to get to school.

W: The neighborhood I was raised in, there was a lot of gangs around, and like you would have to worry about going off to school, there was a gang on each corner.

I: Different gangs?

W: Yeah, the same gang, but like a different offset.

I: Okay, I see what you’re saying.

W: Yeah, and to be cool with it, you would have to join them, like all of them stick together, like all the gangs around the house where I used to stay at—but they will fight each other. But you’re not insane when you join a gang, but my brother was part of a gang and what—that’s what I wanted to do. And that’s probably one of the biggest mistakes—you started in a gang or selling drugs or get a girlfriend at that age that I was. (A, p. 7)

In high school, William continued to find it difficult to attend school

W: I got kicked out of Cornellius cause my grades, missing all those days. (A, p. 1)
I asked him when was the first time he thought of dropping out.

W: In my freshman year
I: When you got to the new school?
W: Yeah, I stopped going um even after my freshman year at Cornellius High School, I started going but I wasn’t going. I probably once every week or twice, once or twice every week. (A, p. 1)

As William continued to reflect on his early high school experience, he looked down and frowned slightly. As he looked up at me again, he then continued.

W: When I used to be on the streets, um, one of my friends got killed, and they blamed me because the guy that did it, one of the guys that I hanged out with, like my friend when he got killed, this guy, this guy blamed me for it, one guy told me he found out I did it, he goin to get on me. But all along, I didn’t have nothing to do with it, the guy that killed my friend was his cousin, and that’s why I really stopped going to Cornellius because Cornellius, that’s a rough, that’s a rough school, and I really didn’t know anybody there. (A, p. 2)

I felt a swirling intensity of William’s account of his friend’s death and threat by the person who blamed him, as he described another reason he stopped attending school.

I reflected that he had he actually sort of been edging away from school. He mentioned that during this time, he was placed in a different school. This new environment seemed to offer its own complexities as William shared this new setting and how he got there. The new school was near Cornellius, and allowed him a second chance to attend.

W: Well, there was a program I was going through after I got kicked out of Cornellius—cause my grades had no, missing all those days and not doing work, that’s what I was supposed to do. So they put me in this program at a different school—which was connected to Cornellius, and they gave me another chance and I stayed, I started going. (A, p. 2)

Although William was at the program at the new school and was attending, as a junior (age wise, not credit wise), he met a girl and was involved in using and dealing drugs, and drinking. He again found it hard to attend school, and left when he was between 16 and 17.

W: Drinking, selling drugs, with my girlfriend, having fun (A, p. 2). And started staying out, drinking, everything, almost every night and that’s another reason
why I didn’t go to school, cause I was in the streets more then. Because I don’t know, I guess she at least during her life, I guess she, I like to have fun, and be with my girlfriend all the time, and that’s how it is when you wake up in the morning and don’t feel like getting up, going to school, nothing, I’d be drinking all night, until 3-4 in the morning, I wasn’t a morning person at first, yeah, the attendance, mine was the worst probably. (A, p. 3)

William stayed out of school until almost 18, but returned to same school (“To get my education,” William, B, p. 2). Also, he was still living at his auntie’s house, and she demanded that he go to school.

W: That’s what my auntie lectured me about every day.
I: This same auntie would lecture you about going to school every day?
W: Yes.
I: Okay, like, like how you needed to be there?
W: Um hum.
I: Okay, did she, did anybody actually walk you down to school or take you down there or they just told you, you should be doing it?
W: Um, when I was younger she used to take me there—but around.
I: Okay.
W: That age [high school], she’d take me to school, but she told, she used to be, she was pretty mean. I had no choice but had to go anyway, even if I didn’t want to, and I know I wouldn’t want to be out in the cold, just walking around, leaving, just walking around after school, so I started going back to school. (A, p. 3)

William was doing fine when he returned to school (“It was good, and then, uh, I started going,” William, B, p. 3)

Later years: After high school. William continued to attend high school, until he met his second girlfriend (“and then after a while, I met my second girlfriend.” [Smiles] She was out of school, she was 5 years older than me, she was 24,” William, A, p. 6). He frowned as he disclosed this new relationship and how he had planned to leave the city.

W: I ended up, caught a case . . . although before I um left, a month before I left . . . that’s when I was locked up for 25, like days. I almost, um well, a felony case, I was with a friend. I was going home from another friend’s house, I seen a friend, I started talking to him and I didn’t know that he was selling drugs right there, but he was. He had his stuff right on the ground on the grass. Police stopped us, started searching us and they found it. Cause I was over in the area, um Newport
cigarette butts—they put it on me. I beat the case. I went to court, I went to jail for 25 days. (B, p. 3)

Soon after his release and “beating” the case, he left for a trip out of state with his girlfriend (“27 days later I went to another state with my girlfriend and well, I didn’t do so good up there,” A, p. 6). While out of state with the girlfriend, he became involved in additional issues resulting from problems with actions with his girlfriend (“things were not good there . . . my girlfriend liked to play games, fight me,” A, p. 7). While out of state, he started thinking about school, and what he missed while not completing it and asked himself why he dropped out of high school (A, p. 6).

W: Since I dropped out, I’ve thought about “why did I drop out of high school,” and I knew that if I didn’t go to school and get, I need the grades for a diploma, probably wouldn’t go nowhere. So I ended coming back in February, but up there, that’s when I started to think to myself “why did I drop out?” (A, p. 6)

Recent years: Return to school. After returning from out of state and initially returning to the city, William moved down to Green Valley where his mother and sister reside. He began attending GED classes at Green Valley Community College, and since he entered school, expressed that he feels that school has been going well. I could see a radiance in his face as he talked about his progress in school and I shared with him how his face changes as he talks about school and his future. His face lights up even more as he shares his specific goals. (“What I want to do, find a job, um, while going to school, I want to go for business. Probably, well, I want to own a motel one day,” William, A, p. 7.) Now, as he attends GED classes at the community college, he lives in Green Valley with sister and her children. His mother lives there as well.

W: Being in school here, um, I’m okay, it’s good to be back in school again, knowing that I can try and do something with my life, maybe go to college, and I’d rather get it done now, before I’m 35-40 years old. And I look at other people who live in the city, away, those people might be just miserable or a lot of
homeless people, they situation and I , I just say to myself, that could be me. (A, p. 6)

As William reflected on his past and his future, he disclosed firmly but quietly how his ideas have changed since he left school.

W: Well, not doing anything that will get me locked up, like selling drugs, selling drugs or not-especially not putting hands on girls, whatever. Me, my girlfriend, she thought it was fun, uh, to get me like—to get me to sort of fight her, on purpose for little stuff. (A, p. 7)

I asked William if he had any lessons that he had learned about himself.

W: Maybe I know that um if I say I’m going to do something, do it right then, get it done. Because if I stall too long, I might not want to do it. I might say I’ll do it, but I don’t do it, so if there’s a project um like do it right when it comes, get it done, what I start, get it done. Try to keep stress from my head, like right now, I know I’m not ready for a, no girlfriend now or basically the city either, because that’s where my friends are when I’m in the city, I like to have fun. So it’s a good thing that I’m up here not down there, that’s a lesson that I’ve learned. I get focused more on what I want to do to try to continue it. (B, p. 4)

I: Your life events and—it looks sort of—to me—it looks sort of nice. Because of, you started out talking about how you loved school and how you loved the work, and how you sort of dived right into the work of school. And back here (on the timeline) maybe despite ups and downs along the way, like at one end and at the other end over here- you know, here you are back at school—you know, talking pretty well—good—about how is school, you know. So that’s sort of cool, sort of two anchor points here, the middle, well, ups and downs, but. (B, p. 4)

W: No, well, my auntie tell me—and my brother and my sister, that we were never gonn be nothing. And, like I said, I am going through to go right now, to get my education. I feel like I would and I could be anything I want. Cause what she [Auntie] did, she went to college, she went to college and got a degree or a few, and then didn’t do anything with it. But I don’t know what she meant when she said I wasn’t going to be nothing. I thought they didn’t want us to be nothing, just like she, like she . . . it was like she was giving us a “nomination” or something. Then I felt even, but those words don’t well, I tried my best to ignore them and that helped me a lot—I don’t just ignore them when anybody say negative about. (B, p. 5)

As William and I continued to talk, I reflected on his disclosure. At times during our interviews, William displays a contradiction as he speaks. The words above illustrate this
element in his communication (“I tried my best to ignore them” followed by “I don’t just ignore them”).

**Discussion.** A theme of resilience and hope emerged in William’s story. Despite William’s lack of positive mentoring, role models, and direction in his early youth, William survived to set goals and to work beyond the barriers he experienced. Resilience and hope balance within him and allow William to overcome his earlier barriers.

Through elements of resilience, William showed that despite initially feeling hopeless in his auntie’s house as a young person, he continued to live, go to school, and achieve in his early grades. Although he experienced conflict and bullying, William’s resilience is further illustrated as he looked to the street, through drugs, drinking, gangs, and “having fun” for survival during his 10 years with his auntie. He described the street life and his connections with gangs and his neighborhood. Perhaps he looked to the gangs as a family, perhaps he saw them as necessary elements for survival. He survived the streets, and learned from his experiences. He maintained a 10-year residence with his auntie, who, despite being “mean,” demanded that William attend school each day. And, even as a young student, he “focused on his work” in school despite his classmates bullying him. I felt sadness for William as I imagined him as a young student, sitting at his desk in class, focused on his work but alienated from the rest of the class, not even connected enough to the teachers to remember their names. But, even stronger, I felt pride in the strength of his ability to focus on his work as he transcended the bullying behavior from his classmates and worked seemingly independently of his teachers. And, as a former teacher myself, I wondered about the teachers who taught his classes. Were they well prepared teachers who provided an engaging curriculum to students? Or did they facilitate their own anonymity as they maintained a distance from the students they taught?
Elements of hope are evident in William as well. He illustrates hope as he declares that he “loves school . . . the work.” He felt that he could do the work. He had his auntie in his life, who provided a role model for him regarding education. Even though William said she “didn’t do anything with her degree,” she still possessed a college degree. This model provided a visible existence of an educated person in William’s life. Perhaps his auntie’s insistence in attending school provided William with the initiative to return to school because felt needed an “education, a diploma was necessary.” Also, after leaving the city for out of state, and later returning, he wondered “why I left school.” He reflected on his education, what it meant to him, and how he lacked completing it. Now, as he has returned to school and stays with his sister and her child, he wants to “make me do better” as he works and plans for a better future. William’s hope to own a motel one day also shows hope. While William was earlier displaced with mother and brother and sisters as a young child, he now wants to own a motel, providing housing for many other people.

William has faced many barriers in his life. The barriers converge to paint a seemingly insurmountable lack of supportive, nurturing relationships in which to grow and develop into a mature, caring, responsible adult who could set and attain goals toward a positive future. Many barriers were present in William’s life, including conflict and violence. Despite the barriers, William survived through his elementary and high school years, he chose to separate himself from negative relationships and environment. He also chose to resume, to continue, his education. His survival and his success are testaments to his strength.

William summed his feeling about his past as he moves toward his future. Feeling that he is now in a positive place, he reflects on his auntie’s earlier prediction about his and his
brother and sister’s future. “My auntie said ‘we were not going to be nothing.’” But the strength shown in William’s face exemplifies the resolve, hope and success he felt.

**Portrait of Sharrlene**

Sharrlene entered the room for our first interview with her head down, shoulders slumped slightly, with short, styled hair, and wearing a brightly colored shirt. She carried a large fabric, floral print book bag that appeared to be heavy from the way she walked with it. When she got seated and ready to talk with me, I felt the energy of her sharp, intense dark eyes. Sharrlene began the interview by smiling, and introducing herself to me, and then began to tell me her story.

**Early life.**

*Difficult life at home and difficult, early school placements.* Sharrlene grew up in the rural Midwest, in a country house. She lived with her mother and father, brother and sisters. Her father worked each day, and her mother stayed at home. As the children reached school age, they left home each day to attend school nearby. Only Sharrlene was not allowed to go as a young girl. Her mother felt that Sharrlene was too developmentally delayed for school. Each day she kept her home from school, and Sharrlene was often abused by her mother. Her abuse was somewhat relieved by her father each night when he returned from work.

**No school.**

S: I wanted to go to school with my brothers and sisters. And my mother said I couldn’t—I couldn’t even go to school, and so I told my mother I wanted to go to school—I wanted to go out the door with them.

I: Um hum.

S: And then she pushed me down and tell me then—“you cannot go to school with them” and so I just cried every night, every day. I just would go to my room, crying, cause they go to school every day and then I’d be there by myself, and so
I just wanted to like, to be on going to school and wanted to see what it felt like to go, be to school. (A, p. 1)

Sharrlene shared the anguish of being left out of attending school, when every day her brother and sisters prepared and left for school. She wondered what the world of school was like, and why she could not join them. Then, alone at home, she was in a seemingly endless void of interaction with other children and whatever the mystery of “school” involved. Her crying continued beyond the school day and into the night, because of her sadness of separation during the day, and in anticipation for the next day of isolation.

*Attending first “schools.”* Finally, her mother allowed Sharrlene to attend an elementary school, but she was soon removed from the school and placed in schools for “handicapped kids.”

S: So when I was little, I see, I couldn’t even going—want to go—so then she put me in some kind of place, she—first I went to Blackknife Elementary School. So I stayed there a while and then she took me out of that school because she thought.

I: Oh, I see.

S: She claimed I could not keep up with the other kids and then she placed me in—somewhere in Melville—some kind of school she placed me in, but it wasn’t—it wasn’t no school—it was some kind of place for like handicapped kids.

I: Uh huh.

S: And then so, so, then so, one day, the nurse had, she was looking at me one day, had asked me, so she asked me “Why are you here? What are you doing here? You don’t even belong here because nothing ain’t wrong with you.” And she, and she seen me—the things I be doin and she seen me drawing and everything and doing math and stuff like that.

I: Wow.

S: And she told me, she said “Why are you here?” and she asked me “Tell me what you doin in here.” I said “My mother—she put me in here, she said, she claims she put me here for a reason.” “Why she put me in here” (she asked) and I just said, “I just tryin,” said “why,” umm, but I told her, I told the nurse “She said I couldn’t go to school with my brothers and sisters cause I could not keep up with the other kids.” I cause, she thought, I’ll, me bein the oldest [she is the oldest of 5 children, 4 sisters and 1 brother]. And then so, and then, it got so the nurse, I mean, she just looked at me, and the way I described it to her, and I told her, once my mother abused me just about every day when my father went to work. And soon as he go to work—he go to work every day—in the morning, she’d get
the kids up—get the kids up for school and then every morning, I just gets up with them. Like I want to go out the door with them, every, every morning. And then she just get mad at me because I could not go, and say “You can’t go to school—you’ve got to stay here.” [Sharrlene continues to tell the nurse specific details about her abuse.]

I: So what happened regarding the school—the place where you went where the nurse was working—did they find another school for you?

S: Well, they had put me and then from there they transferred me to another place. They transferred me to Crowle school—but it wasn’t no school—it was like the same thing—like the same thing—like a handicapped place, all that yellin and screamin and stuff like that, and I’ll be lookin, and I’d be scared, and I be lookin at myself and sayin “Why I be here, what I’m doing here?” So I know I don’t belongs here myself, and I be lookin at these kids. They be screamin, climbing walls and I said—and then another nurse asked me the same thing. She asked me, she said “What you be doin here?” I said “Do you belongs here too? I said “I don’t know my name” [the environment is so loud and chaotic in this place] I said “go ask my mother, she put me here.”

I: Yeah, okay, okay.

Sharrlene shared that she was age 9 when she started attending the second school in Melville, and about age 12 when she started attending Crowle, the third school (A2).

I: How did you, did they, as far as teaching you reading or anything to you like that, were you involved in anything like that?

S: At Crowle, they had teachers like math, spelling, and umm ironing and cooking and stuff like that.

I: Life skills) It wasn’t no real school, though . . . it was like a war zone . . . it was like a prison. (A, p. 2)

After Sharrlene’s interest in attending school, and her removal from the elementary school after apparent difficulty “behind the others” in a double jeopardy of wanting to go to school like the others, being allowed to go and then removed, and being taken to a horrible setting, then a second horrible setting, her desire to attend was tarnished by the experiences and environment in the schools where she was placed. Her life, which started in abusive isolation at home was compounded by her profoundly negative environment where she was placed. What hope for her future could she have felt?
I was concerned that professional staff members were aware of abuse and asked if she had told the nurse about her abusive home life. What intervention was placed on the family and safety of Sharrlene? Even as a young child, Sharrlene shows an enormous amount of strength and self awareness. She initially wanted to go to school with her younger brothers and sisters, to accompany them and to see, with curiosity, what “school” was about. Her strong self awareness that she was treated differently at home by her mother, abused, not disciplined, and searched for a reason that she was “oldest” child. She also searched for a reason that she was not allowed to attend school: “her mother thought she could not keep up [academically with her classmates].” But she also searched for advocates: her father when he came home from work and the nurses at schools where she was placed. Also, she was aware of her level of functioning, that she could do math, and art. She even assertively asked the second nurse if “she [the nurse] belongs here too [in the school], thus siding herself with the professional staff member and separating herself from the disabled clients in the school. Since she was between 9 and 15 years old, she had remarkable self awareness to draw these conclusions and to refuse to accept her placement in this environment, and to not identify herself as one of the disabled children in the school.

**Positive school experiences.** Sharrlene shared two positive experiences from school: her participation in the Special Olympics and camping. She shares that these occur when she was 12-13 years old, which would be during the time she attended Crowle school. Although the location of the school is unclear, her delight in experiencing the activities and her pride in taking part in them is clear and unmistakable.

S: And then, that’s what I’m trying to do. And then from there, when I work out, when I turn by 12 or 13 years old, and I tried to basically get my mother to sign a sheet for me, right, to sign a slip for the [O]lympics but she didn’t want to gonna sign it. So I went to my father to sign it for me. So he signed the sheet for me and I went to the [O]lympics. The Special Olympics and [she shares her achievement in the Special Olympics earning medals in 4 events]. (A, p. 5)
She also shares a second trip that she took with the school, camping.

I: Okay. How did you like camping?
S: Oh it was pretty nice, it was pretty good.
I: Uh huh, peaceful.
S: It was so peaceful, and with the other kids, it went real, real nice. We camped out and everything. And we went to, called it, them little campin houses. Whatever you call them little.
I: Cabins?
S: Yeah, cabins. It was really nice. (A, p. 6)

Sharrlene shows her interest in the world around her and her capacity to take in all she can out of her opportunities. She also shows her ability to get what she wants: since her mother didn’t sign her permission slip, she went to her father. She didn’t just let the issue go, and give up on an opportunity. She shows her strength and determination to avail herself of an opportunity and that she sees herself as someone who is a part of a larger world beyond her.

*Early love of drawing and painting.* Sharrlene shares the love she has throughout her life for drawing and painting. As a young girl, she spent time drawing and painting. Her father recognized her skill in drawing, and later, staff members of the school center where she attended recognized her talent as well. Her drawing and painting continued throughout her life. She remembers a time with her father when she was young, in which her father discovered her gift of drawing.

S: Oh yeah—cause he—we were livin on a farm-right-and um and [I ]was just only 12 year old.
I: Um hum.
S: And he never did know I could draw—I was sitting at the table, right.
I: Um hum.
S: I’d drawed this lady—her name was Farrah Fawcett Majors.
I: Oh, right.
S: And I had drawed her—and then so he looked at her—and he asked me—“who is this lady I had drawed”? And I said, “Farrah Fawcett Majors.”
I: Uh hum.
S: And then, and then he said “You did a good job on that lady.” And then so. (B, p. 9)
This sweet, quiet moment of her father’s realization of Sharrlene’s talent in art is beautiful to consider. Her family advocate, her father, shares Sharrlene’s recent drawing and validates her love of drawing. It is beautiful to imagine the two of them sitting together as they looked over Sharrlene’s drawing, visualizing Farrah Fawcett Major’s hair and smile in her work of art. Her skill in drawing is unmistakable, as her father asks who she is. But a greater closeness between father and daughter emerges, as he compliments her work, confirming her ability and worth. Sharrlene’s special talent has been made public. It is a delicate moment when an artist first shares his/her work with others. Part of an artist looks forward to sharing, yet part of an artist may hesitate to share with others in making their art public, because of fear of rejection or to keep their work their own private creation.

In another instance, at Crowle School, Sharrlene’s art work becomes a prominent feature at the school. Sharrlene was asked to produce art work for an upcoming art fair for the school. She creates many drawings that were displayed, and Sharrlene was able to sell some of them. She created them, displayed them, and sold some of them. What a great feeling for an artist!!
S: Umm hum.
I: That is very nice.
S: I never want to forget that day though—she had me drawing all those pictures.
I: Uh huh. How long did it take you to do all those pictures? Weeks?
S: It took me about 2-3 weeks to do all of them. (B, p. 10).

Sharrlene must have exhibited her love and talent in drawing to be asked to provide works of art for the school art fair, and by so doing, she shared her art in a public setting. That is a great feeling for an artist, to open his/her work to public viewing and scrutiny. Sharrlene industriously created a volume of drawings, and the school displayed them. Sharrlene’s additional triumph was that she actually sold some of the paintings. What a great accomplishment for a young artist. Then, the school turned the accomplishment into a further opportunity for Sharrlene, as she was allowed to spend the money on herself, taken shopping to spend her money. What a great validation of her talent and hard work.

*Attending Catholic school.* Sharrlene shared her next school placement, a Catholic school that her brother attended. She felt a sense of peace at the school, and gave definitive details about the school and her experience. (She describes her learning experience in the school following her discussion of Crowle school.)

I: And then did you go to another school?
S: My father put me in a Catholic school.
I: Okay.
S: So I was wearing like a plaid and white dress
I: Yes.
S: And red shoes and white socks. That’s the only school that I went to that was like a private school.
I: How was that for you?
S: It was like that was kind of pretty good, with the kids I did like it a little better with the kids. It was a catholic school, so they did like math and reading and spelling and stuff like that.
I: So how was that for you learning those subjects?
S: Oh, it was good. In that Catholic school my brother, we went together to the Catholic school. (A, p. 3)
Sharrlene felt positive about her experience in the Catholic school. She described her 
school uniform, that the school was private, and her brother attended. Her comfort in the setting 
and with the school children shows through her sharing. Her voice was calm and light in tone, 
and she stressed “good” as she told that the school was “kind of pretty good.” Her interest in 
learning subject matter was fulfilled in the school, too. Not just a place where the students were 
taught life skills, she was actually taught content area material. She proudly described the 
details of the uniform, and takes pride in learning and takes pride in her appearance. She also 
was part of the group, saw herself as one of the students, instead of an outsider, and part of the 
family, as she and her brother went together to the school.

**High school age.** When Sharrlene’s brother graduated from the Catholic elementary 
school, she was not allowed to continue at the school. Her mother did not allow her to continue, 
despite her father’s wishes. This time she had more advocates than just her father. Child 
services came into her life.

S:  My brother graduated from the Catholic school and went on to high school, but I 
didn’t even graduate. When I came home, then I couldn’t go no more because 
my mother kept me at home.
I:  She kept you home.
S:  And I couldn’t go to the Catholic school no more, cause my father be asking her 
why I can’t go, why you keeping her home and the other go to school . . . you 
need to put her in school and so one day my auntie, that my father’s sister . . . 
human services . . . them child people . . . she came out to the house . . . they 
wonder why I’m not going to school. (A, p. 4)

After her early life of abuse, child protective services finally appear in her life. Her 
delight and comfort in the Catholic school ended, only to return home because her mother again 
makes the decision to keep her there. After a taste of attending several schools, she finally 
experienced the Catholic school actually teaching her academic subject matter. Sharrlene does 
not disclose what actually happened regarding her school attendance. After the Catholic school,
and the entry of child services into her family, she does not share any interventions regarding her home life or sanctions placed on her parents.

**After high school age.**

**Carle Place and volunteer experience.** The next period of Sharrlene’s life is comprised of varied events, at times in an unclear sequence. She participated in a facility for developmentally disabled children as a volunteer for a short period of time. This was the only employment experience she shared during our interviews.

S: I was in Carle Place, that place they kind of call it a school. This lady gave me a job by taking care of kids, little kids, little handicapped kids in wheel chairs and stuff. She gave me a job with kids feeding them and changing them and stuff.
I: how did you like doing that?
S: It was okay, but I didn’t get paid.
I: You didn’t get paid?
S: No, I volunteered, so I just helped out, so I just helped out children. [Sharrlene shared that another girl worked with her as well taking care of the children. The job lasted about 3 weeks.] (A, p. 5)

This was the only job or employment situation that Sharrlene shared during our interviews. Sharrlene liked the experience of working with the children who “couldn’t do for themselves.” This was a new experience for her to help other children rather than being the child who was placed in a facility. It was a reminder that she did not mention helping with her brothers or sisters at home, even though she was the oldest. She was the one who was accompanied by brothers or sisters (her brother who attended the Catholic school, and she was not able to go after he graduated). This is the first time she was allowed to work independently.

I asked Sharrlene what she did after she left that facility.

I: So, what about after you got out of that school? What did you do then? Did you work or what did you do? Between the time—or how long have you been coming to this school here?
S: Here? I’ve been coming here since 2005. And this is 2010. So what’s that, about 7 years? Okay, a couple of years.
I: Well, good.
S: Okay, and well, I’m just been trying to get my life together. (A, p. 5)

It appeared to be difficult for Sharrlene to answer the question of the next step in her life after the volunteer experience at Carle Place, because she offered few details about that time in her life. She shared events in the period of time years later.

**Birth of son.** From our interviews, the next event in her life is that of the birth of her son, in 1982. She said that her son was born while she lived in North City. “I took care of him,” she shared. That is all she shared about her son’s birth and this time in her life. Although an exceptionally important time of life, she says little about it. In fact, she actually only shared that she had a son during our second interview (B, p. 5).

**Later love of drawing and painting.** An important aspect of Sharrlene’s life, seen before in her early years, is her love of drawing and painting. Sharrlene had experienced a connection with her father and public accolade from her drawings at an early age. Now, during her later life, she shares her pride in her drawing and painting, the process and materials she uses to create her art, and the description of her work in a room in her home.

I: What type of drawings do you do?  
S: I do people, flowers, plants, and things and houses, stuff like that.  
I: What do you like to use to do the drawings?  
S: Huh?  
I: Pencil, colored pencils . . . .  
S: I do it with colored pencils, chalk.  
I: Oh chalk, uh huh.  
S: Black pencils, you know, them black—.  
I: Ebony pencils?  
S: Uh huh  
I: With dark lead?  
S: Uh huh, I do that with them, and paint, oil paint, that’s what I do. So, uh, I do that what I like, when I get bored, something like that, like when I be bored around the house, I don’t have nothing else to do—that’s when I start drawing—stuff like that—just to have stuff to do.  
I: Uh huh—do you have drawings from things that you see—like plants—that are in a you know you on the table—like in a little vase or something—or do you just draw from your imagination?
S: No—oh no—I draw from real things, Like humans—sometimes I be thinking how to draw peoples and stuff and I when I have imagination[imaginary] people and like that, And I be imagination [imagining] things and I said—and sometimes I just looks on the walls and sometimes I be picturing things and just start drawing them. And then while I was living in South City, I had painted, I had this great big old wall in my room, right, I had drawn all cartoon characters on the wall, right, so I draw Peter Pan on one side of the wall—and 101 Dalmatians on the other side of the wall.

I: Wow.

S: And then I draw—what’s that mermaid?

I: The Little Mermaid? With the orange hair?

S: Sitting on a rock.

I: No kidding . . .

S: Yeah.

I: In one room?

S: Um hum.

I: How cool is that—that is so cool. Now, was that your bedroom?

S: Yeah.

I: No kidding—that is pretty cool.

S: Everybody just went upstairs and just looked at it and everybody thought “what’s that, what’s that—what you got in your room? Disneyland??” (B, p. 7)

Sharrlene’s commitment to her drawing and the importance it plays in her life and spirit is shown again as she shares the media and process she uses to draw and paint. As a former art teacher, I was interested in the materials she used to do her art. Her delight in making her art public to others is evident as well. Her need to create is evident, as if her talent in art will not let her rest. She goes beyond mere random sketches and small doodling, since she had filled a large wall space in her room with layers and layers of characters. These characters are not easy to draw and paint, especially at a large scale, and since the characters were easily recognized by others shows that she painted them precisely. Beyond just finding something to do, her imagination, and longing to fill spaces with art, shows her creative spirit.

Son graduates from high school, nursing home placement. The next period of Sharrlene’s life that is attached to specific dates is her son’s high school graduation. While the
event was a time for celebration, soon after that, Sharrlene shares that she had a nervous breakdown, and entered a nursing home. Her stay in the nursing home lasted 5 years.

S: And that was in 1998—when he graduated—that was 1998.
I: Okay, uh huh.
S: That was good—that very good, so then, in 1998—so that’s when I went to the nursing home.
I: Okay, after he finished high school.
S: So that’s when I had the nervous breakdown and then so I stayed in the nursing home for 5 year.
I: Did you do your drawings while you were in the nursing home?
S: Huh—in the nursing home?
I: Off and on?
S: Yeah. (B, p. 6)

This period of time was a transition for Sharrlene, from whatever her life of caretaking was with her son. Why her nervous breakdown occurred now, and what the issues were, and what level of care and therapy she received are unclear. Her sharing that it was “very good” that her son graduated, showed her pride in his accomplishment. Her lack of details about her nursing home experience feels like this was a defined experience during a specific period of time. And, the art that she did during this period allowed her an escape or provided a refuge for her as she stayed in the nursing home.

Resolution of early years, recent success in school, success in life.

Resolution of early years. Sharrlene critically analyses her past as she plans and moves toward her future. (She shares some of her plans for school and tries to resolve her feelings about her early home life and her mother’s abuse; B, p. 3-4.)

S: And I just said to myself and I just said “why,” it’s got to happen to the others—and I just said—sometimes I talk to myself—and the reason I talk to myself—I always talk to God about it and why I got to suffer from this and I go to go through this hard pain all the time—go through the hard pain—go through the hard labor day in—back then going through the hard labor and stayin at home—not doin nothing. (B, p. 3)
Her talks with God help her resolve her early abuse and her inability to attend school, and show her close relationship with Him. Because she says she “always” talks to God, she shows her regular communication with Him. She draws upon her faith and her strength comes from her faith. She also uses the strength she feels to resolve her negative early years.

Moved to Green Valley for GED classes. Sharrlene shares her move to Green Valley and her start to attend GED classes. She tenaciously attends classes and seriously tries to increase her academic skills. She exudes a real pride in her accomplishments in her attendance and in her skill development. She shares her delight in learning math and writing and reading.

   I: Well, it looks like despite your early days, like you’ve—seems like you’ve made some positive—my last question we’re just talked about—you know—steps in your feelings despite this pain from before.
   S: Um hum.
   I: And sadness, it looks like you’re doing some good things and feeling okay about your life right now.
   S: Yeah, I am, I’ve been much, much better that I did back then. Cause I feel much better cause it seems like it brought my spirit up.
   I: Yeah. When you talk about school—when you talk about, you know, when talk about coming to your classes and learning, your face just takes a—you have light in your . . . .
   S: Yeah.
   I: Face, it just . . . glows. [She shares her commitment to attend school each day.] (A, p. 8)

After Sharrlene’s experience with school, she has waited for a setting in which she would actually have the ability to learn subject matter, at her own pace. (Her GED classes fit into this model, since students progress through subject matter at their own pace.) She mentions spirit, after speaking about God, and that now her spirit is “up.” The radiance in her face does glow when she talks about her progress in school and her ability to attend. Through her own navigation, she has achieved her lifelong goal of going to school.
Success in life and her future. Sharrlene shared that she wanted to get her life together by coming to Green Valley. She compares her life, then and now, and proudly points to her growth. She also plans for her future, which includes drawing and design, and a small business.

S: Yeah, in my life, back then, really it wasn’t nothing, cause I didn’t, couldn’t do nothing, cause I didn’t have no life. I didn’t have no career, I didn’t have nothin to look up to . . .
I: Uh huh.
S: I didn’t have nothin to show for.
I: Uh huh.
S: And plus, I didn’t have no job, no diploma, and no GED.
I: Uh huh.
S: Plus no history, I didn’t have none of that.
I: Uh huh.
S: The only thing I had is drawing.
I: Uh huh.
S: The only thing I did in my life is drawing.
I: Do you still do drawing?) Yeah, um hum, I still do drawing. I still do that and pretty soon I be getting my own business—when I graduate here.
I: Okay, uh huh—and what kind of business is that going to be?
S: My design.
I: What are you interested in designing?
S: Clothes.
I: Really!
S: Um hum. And have my own store . . . Um hum, when I graduate here, when I graduate here and get my grant—and go to Californina—and get my place.
I: Really—warmer weather than here [Sharrlene continues to talk about her interest in California and in building her new life there.] (A, p. 6)

Sharrlene next talked about how she felt about her life now, in comparison with her life when she was younger.

S: Well, tell you the truth, I feel really great about it and I feel really fine—and I feel great and happy about it.
I: Wonderful.
S: And wonderful, and I feel like something that’s there for me now, and back then—cause back then, I didn’t have nothin. And had nothin to show, and I have everything to show now.
I: That’s wonderful.
S: So now, all these years, like my mother just pushing me back from school and then now—now, up to these years now, til 2010, from all the ways—til all the way, til cause I was born in 1959—so all the way from when I was born. . . .
I: Uh huh.
S: Up to 2010, I show myself from really, I say like really, from when I was from 9 year old to something 1979-2010—matter of fact, from way back then to this day, now I feel much better than I felt way back then, cause I feel much happier.

I: Wonderful.

S: And I thank God that He gave me this—what He gave me—me in a school where I can go to everyday. In a school where I can learn. I could not learn nothin' at home. Yes, so I’m doin' real fine, I say, I’m doin' real good. [Sharrlene shares that she has invited her family to come and visit her to see how well she’s doing.] (A, p. 7)

Sharrlene’s hope is shown as she plans for her future and resolves her past. Based on her love of drawing and her love of fashion (displayed by her carefully chosen clothes and styled hair she wore during our interviews), her dream of opening her own fashion business is set in California, far from the Midwest. She resolves her early life, especially her feelings about her abusive mother, through the success she feels now, and her connection to God.

Discussion. Sharrlene is a tenacious woman who has worked through the years to be allowed the opportunity of other children. Despite her separation from school she experiences in her early life because her mother’s decision to keep her home, she never lost her desire to experience the childhood experiences in school along with her brothers and sisters. She developed her creative strength of painting and drawing, and always held on, despite outrageous circumstances in her early life. Despite the agony of her mother’s abuse, her father appeared as an advocate for her, although with limitations, since her abuse continued.

Hope provided strength in her life which allowed her to survive the abusive and isolated childhood and emerge ready to succeed in her school settings. She maintained her own identity during those years, to believe she could set her own goals and be capable of achieving them. Sharrlene was self aware enough to view herself apart from the profoundly disabled children in her “schools” and to search for an advocate in the schools’ professional staffs. She negotiated her possibly overwhelming circumstances in her home life and school. Hope and strength is
found in her art, as her drawing and painting allows her power through notoriety and financial reward, through selling her drawings. Sharrlene’s hope and strength was nurtured through her relationship with God. She talks with Him often, and draws strength from her relationship with Him.

Sharrlene’s unique strengths provide her hope for her future. She contradicts her objective reality through her own resilience and determination. Despite her mother’s abuse, Sharrlene resolves her feelings toward her. Despite her early placement in “handicapped school[s],” she implored to attend an academically based school to continue to learn math, writing, and reading. Despite being told she was too academically challenged to attend school, she developed and maintained an intensive connection to art throughout her life. Sharrlene’s hope moves her beyond her difficult early life to her successful future.

The next group of portraits is comprised of participants who were older when they participated in the study. James, who worked in landscaping for many years and moved to Green Valley from a large city; Katrina, who had a long work history as a paramedic/EMT; Derrick, who was diagnosed with a learning disability and returned to GED classes; and Antonio, who moved to Green Valley from his native Mexico, were all over age 25 when they participated in this study.

**Portrait of James**

James walked briskly into the classroom where we met for our first interview and immediately sat down in a chair across the table from me. He looked directly at me, his head forward, initially with the palms of his hands in front of him, on the table. He smiled, his short but tousled dark auburn hair, and glasses with large, round black frames with thick lenses. His
eyes focused intensely at me, and even during our interviews, he quietly drummed his fingers on the table top. He wore a dark blue parka with a red and black flannel shirt and carried a yellow paper legal tablet with additional papers tucked inside. He moved quickly and spoke openly, in lengthy, almost like stream of conscious, lyrical discourse. As he spoke, he often connected a stream of ideas and feelings that occurred in a series of different time periods of his life. He also created his own words to better define the meaning of an idea as he spoke.

**Early life and elementary school: early 1970s.**

**Early life and mother’s death.** James’ early life was spent in the neighborhood of a large city. He lived with his parents, two brothers and two sisters. James attended elementary school and shared that he “liked school” (A, p. 1). When he was 11 years old, his mother died. James was profoundly saddened with her loss, and he missed her very much. After her death, James tried to fill her void in the family by taking on her tasks in the household.

J: [Began story of his life and how he dropped out of high school.] I lost my mother at the age of 11 years old, and taking up the maternal instincts, with 7 people in the family, doing laundry, cleaning house. My brothers and sisters weren’t very helpful so I did not have any, uh, anger of anything. I guess I felt it was my responsibility to that. I took the place of my mother—God bless her—and that kept the home going. As for us, I thought grammar school was the best there was, and my first couple of years, it was wonderful . . . [Continues with story of later years in his life.] (A, p. 1)

Although James’ father remarried approximately a year after his mother’s death, James appointed himself as caretaker for the family. Since “no one would do the tasks,” he felt compelled to see that they were completed and that the household ran smoothly. He shared that he felt a “maternal instinct” to take on home responsibilities.

“**Action J.**” James shared that ever since he was young, he had the nickname “Action J,” given to him by family members. This nickname follows him throughout his childhood and at times, he uses the name to build an identity for himself as an active, task oriented person.
I:  You call yourself “Action J?”
J:  I, yeah, ever since I was a child. Okay, yeah, that was my okay, ever since I was a child, they called me that.
I:  Because you were on the move?
J:  Yeah, I was constantly, James, a weasel, almost, cause they didn’t know where I was. They knew I was doing something right, they knew I was taking care of business. “Action J” was my name. (B, p. 2-3)

I could see how family and friends could call him this name. From the moment I met James, and when he entered the interview room, he was constantly moving. His fingers drummed on the table. His hands moved as he talked. His head moved forward to emphasize a point of conversation. With the quick movements he had at this time in his adult life, I could imagine his rapid movements as a young child. He engaged in a series of constant, quick movements that seemed to come naturally to him.

**A time of happiness vs. a time of little support.** James seemed settled into his life with his brothers, sisters, father, and stepmother. When he speaks of this early period in his life, he does so from two different perspectives. During one account, he shares that he found happiness during his grammar school years, and that he was successful in all of his endeavors. But he counters this view of his life by sharing his story of his father’s lack of support regarding the purchase of school supplies.

J:  Well, uh, when I was in sports, I was first place in everything—I mean in grammar school, from 5th grade all the way to 8th grade, and science fairs. I didn’t know second place—I was always “Action J” like I said. Uh huh. I did my work. I did my homework. I did my work at home, and I played sports, and I went to work with my dad over the summer, and had time to, you know, I was very busy.
I:  Um hum.
J:  So as far as anything standing out, it was just being happy.
I:  Um, okay.
J:  It was—just happiness stands out.
I:  Um, that’s very good, yeah, okay.
J:  Happiness stands out—yeah, that’s about it. (B, p. 5).
In this account of his childhood, James shares his happiness as an active, successful young person. His success in both athletics and academics is noteworthy in his communication because it parallels his earlier statement that he loved school. Since this time period is soon after his mother’s death, I am glad that he remembers it so fondly. Further, since he “went to work with [his] my dad, he shares the happiness during this period, this is a positive type of relationship with his father. He played baseball and got good grades. This period seems like a sweet, positive time in his life.

**Little support, no recognition.** On the other hand, James shares another story, one in which he felt he had little support for the things he needed and little recognition for his success. This support includes school supplies for which he had to work long and hard, and for supportive recognition for good work and good grades, which James shares that he didn’t really hear positive support.

J: [He describes assistance he thought would be needed for a student’s success in school.] [I would] be able to, as far as affording, like I couldn’t afford to buy my drafting stuff. I had to work on the side. I stripped woodwork—13 years old—I was making $100 a day.

I: Wow.

J: Just to get my, just to get my stuff, because my father wasn’t interested in it. (A, p. 5)

J: I was my whole—being included or actually someone trying to include themselves in my, uh, uh, I’d do really good in school, and I didn’t get a “hey James, good job” and that felt.

I: Okay, okay, okay.

J: I thought, well, that’s what I’m supposed to do anyways, but you know, I’d, it would have been cool.

I: Okay, okay. (B, p. 2)

In contrast to his earlier sharing of his period of happiness, in this account, James shares his feeling of little support or recognition. James is on his own to obtain expensive school supplies which he does by hard work yet high payment. His father’s idea of education was reflected in his reluctance to purchase supplies. James says that he was doing what he was
supposed to do, reflected by his role as Action J, in which his work ethic, instilled by father and his business, is evident. James shares that he feels like he learned to do without the recognition, although he would have appreciated it, and “it would have been cool.” This incident in James’ life shows his preparation for not asking or expecting approval or assistance. (We will see how this assistance is important to James later in his life.)

Middle years: High school—1980s.

High school: Freshman and sophomore years.

Loss of baby. James began attending high school in a large city school. He was impressed with the school and shares that he had no reason not to attend. He was a good student as a freshman, played sports, and held leadership positions in school activities. School deteriorated for him each year, however. As a sophomore, his grades decreased, and his participation in sports declined. He “got in with the wrong crowd.” He had a girlfriend who became pregnant, although the baby did not survive.

J: Yeah, I was an A-B student, an A-B student, and it just—just sophomore year—was a little not as good [continues to problems in the junior year.] (B2)
I: And you had a girlfriend along the way, and lost the baby with this girlfriend.
J: I started with my girlfriend when I was about uh 13, 14 years old, a freshman in high school.
I: Okay, your younger years, so she was pregnant and in high school.
J: All in all, she can’t, we can’t, and we made a wrong decision, you know, I asked the Lord for forgiveness constantly, and uh, I am forgiven, but it’s, you know, backed into a little depression.
I: Uh huh.
J: And I actually um brought myself, uh, my own little turmoil, you know, because I didn’t want to share uh, my inner feelings and stuff, but like that, that’s what I was saying.
I: A lot of people feel like that. (B, p. 3)

James enters high school and works to achieve good grades as a freshman. His life becomes more complex, as his relationship with his girlfriend at a young age results in her pregnancy and her loss of the baby. Both James and his girlfriend are at such a young age to be
dealing with such a profound issue. James shares that “we made a wrong decision,” and that he asked the Lord for forgiveness. He does not share if he had any adult that he could talk to as well. The depression that James feels seems to result from complex issues of first love, and decision making on serious life and moral issues.

*Dr. Help.* As James describes a profile of his large high school, he identifies a vehicle for assistance for students who need help at the school, Dr. Help. James creates Dr. Help to assist students to navigate through the school and in their personal lives. (A, p. 2)

**J:** My high school was very large. Can you imagine a freshman class of 1300? Oh my, Lilden Tech was the largest and best high school in the country.

**I:** Wow.

**J:** Lilden Tech—the best high school—and I was #1100, and I was chosen, my mother, my mother never saw me graduate in 8th grade and uh so it really didn’t hit me til about my late teens. I missed her, so that was a big deal. A close family, how much I missed her if she would have been there. So I was rebelling. So there was a type of rebelling. You need counsel, if you don’t know, you need it. So there should be the establishment of someone who can identify a student’s situation, background, open up like a social worker, or one of the staff where you change your classes, I forgot their name

**I:** Just like a counselor?

**J:** A counselor. You need a counselor, I don’t care how good you are, if you don’t feel too good, there’s something you need, a foundation . . . and if you need help and it gets too difficult, there should be someone. There should be Dr. Help.

**I:** Dr. Help?

**J:** Dr. Help, right on the door.

**I:** Okay.

**J:** You need Dr. Help.

**I:** That’s a great idea.

**J:** Its real clear, its real clear then. Yeah, if you got a counselor, that’s one thing. But this is Dr. Help—that covers all bases. [James continues to refine roles of Dr. Help that include a Dr. Reference Help, Dr. Goal Setting, Dr. Comfortability, and Dr. Let’s Put It Together.] (A, 4)

In James’ idea of assistance for students at his huge urban high school personified by Dr. Help, he provides a remarkable beacon of assistance for students. James feels students need this help, as he calls himself #1100 out of 1300, not the top or the bottom of a vast student body. But James’ personal issues identify his need for Dr. Help’s assistance: his feelings of grief and loss
because of his mother’s death and his feeling of rebellion. I attended a huge high school so I know the environment of such a school. How difficult it must have been for James to juggle his feelings of his past losses and daily responsibilities. The additional roles of Dr. Help provide the refined assistance in academic and life skills.

He continues during a second interview to further enhance the services of Dr. Help.

J: Even students need to notice other students and help—you know—like have an extra principal that notices students that were helpful. Like instead of a print shop, a class when they print the newspaper, or an existential chess club, have a “Help Club” where, you know, the children are helping Dr.Help.

I: Like a peer group.

J: Yeah—hang out with them—or just not like pushy, but show them that it’s okay.

I: Like mentors.

J: Yeah, to show them it’s okay, “Well listen, I’m having . . .”

I: Peer mentoring.

James moves the assistance of Dr. Help to a different level, that of a peer group. At this level, James recognizes the importance and power of peer relationships as well as visibility in the school of the assistance group. The assistance would be expanded to a grass roots approach. James recognizes the power a group when he attended school—the assistance that he missed.

I asked James to further share the concept of a Dr. Help in his life, and as he did so, he looked back in time to examine relationships he had had. Who has been Dr. Help for him, and is feelings toward his father shared. After his lengthy recollection, James identified another role of Dr. Help, Dr. Self Help, self motivation, whom he felt he had evolved into, to help himself (B, p. 4).

I: Who could Dr. Help—are there people in your life that, that were Dr. Help for you? Did you have Dr. Help back in those days and, sort of, through other people?

J: That cared about me? Friends of my father—yeah, friends of my father that, you know—back in the hey-days of the 70s, you know.

I: I was back there.

J: Yeah, it was strange—I was there.

I: Yeah, yeah, yup.
J: Anyway, they saw something that I didn’t see in myself, so that put me back to where, I was—that they saw knowledge.
I: Okay.
J: You know, they saw, you know, uh, me like sort of backsliding on my potential.
I: Okay—did they share that with you?
J: Yeah.
I: So like did your dad . . .
J: No, my father, all he would want me, he’d like want me along, every time I’d get better, he’d, he’d never say “Good job” which is okay, but I know he’d appreciate it—he, uh, um, know, he appreciated what I’d done, but what I’m saying is he wouldn’t, how you say it—say as soon as he saw that I was doing better, he would sort of, let’s just say—put you down—in an off hand way.
I: Uh huh.
J: It wasn’t like he would really put you down, he wouldn’t want anybody to increase him—on his level or something.
I: I get what you’re saying.
J: So it was just like that. I’d have to battle with, so I’m just: “Okay I’m going to go with the flow.” (B, p. 6)

Friends of his father saw potential and knowledge in him that James didn’t see in himself. His father’s friends saw positive strengths and built up James, in the role of Dr. Help, while his father seemed to tear him down. While his relationship with these friends of his father is significant for him to mention, James does not mention if he sees these friends on a regular basis to provide him with support. (We will see that this relationship relates to the lack of support in James’ life later.)

**High school: Junior years as student and landscaper.** As a junior, James failed many subjects. This failure caused him to enter a second junior year of high school. School was beginning to lose its importance for him, and he became more and more removed from the school environment. Instead of the enthusiasm for the school he felt earlier, he felt no relevance in the classes he took. He saw the knowledge he would gain from each academic subject as obtainable through his father’s landscaping business where he worked (“I’d been a landscaper since I was a lot younger, my father was a landscaper”; A, p. 1). In addition, many of the landscaping customers remembered his mother, which was comforting to him.
“I feel like a desert island.”

J: I got involved with the wrong crowd (if I knew then what I knew now . . . ). So, I almost lost my childhood because of my mother’s passing—and I just like “Okay, it’s time to be a youngster again.” So I neglected class and started doing drugs—I thought I was cooler. It was the early 80s (. . . not a big deal . . .). I just did what um the crowds, the people did that I knew. And I could have changed that, but I didn’t. I was very good—I played on the basketball team, I was the starting pitcher, but that wore off and I started smoking cigarettes (he shares his father’s later business purchase and how his father doesn’t communicate well with him, although his aunts and uncles do). I see I was just like, I felt I was on my own, and I felt like I was on a desert island. (A, p. 1)

J: And after a second junior year, in 1987, I, the only thing I wanted, that I did was, I only went to my shop classes [he lists names of several tech classes]. I’m really good with my hands and stuff like that, and my father had a business with machinery in landscape maintenance. Which, you know, my nickname was Action J, you know. It’s like living up to that, and I didn’t think I needed school. (A, p. 1)

J: As far as school, there it was, just a place where I could come in and hang out, for my shop, my shop teacher would say “Hey James.” He didn’t care about it, if I was going to other classes, he’d have me all day in shop classes and I thought it was cool. He allowed me to smoke in the balcony. (B, p. 2)

James shares that school was continuing to be difficult for him, hanging out with the wrong crowd. Classes are not interesting to him. James continues to share the loneliness he feels and inability to communicate with his father yet feels other family members more approachable. James moves away from the positive fun activities he was successful in earlier and from his connection to academics he had earlier, and just “hangs out,” not attending school except for hanging out with the shop teacher who apparently sanctions his presence. Being Action J now leads him away from taking care of business and puts him in a negative direction regarding school.

*Landscaper.* James continues his work as landscaper with his father’s business. He shares that many elements of this work highlight his strengths and illustrate his nickname, Action J. He also feels that his connection to school is deteriorating while he sees his learning
connected to landscaping. He sees his academic learning at school actually being replaced by
the knowledge he develops and uses in landscaping.

J: I’m really good with my hands and stuff like that, and my father had a business
with machinery in landscape maintenance. Which, you know, my nickname was
always Action J, you know. It’s like I was living up to that—and I didn’t think I
needed school. I had a landscape business, I didn’t think I needed social studies,
I didn’t think I needed drafting, I didn’t think I needed physical education
because I was out doing physical labor. (A, p. 2)

The lawn care business meant more to James than school, however. Since he was getting
paid for his work, he had money to spend. And, his connection to long-time customers seemed
to perpetuate his memory of his mother.

I: Cause your dad had the lawn care business and the mechanical job.
J: Right. I figured why do I need school? I’ve got this, you know, work here,
money’s in my pocket, customers love us.
I: Yeah, yup.
J: They remember my mother, when my mother was pregnant with me—at least
they remember my mother—and they remember me when I was a child, so it was
a real embrace to me from the initiative to, and motivation to continue education.
So I figured I was smart enough, I figured. Extra classes? What am I going to use
history for, you know? What am I going to use English for? What do I need to
use a gym class for? I’m already doing landscaping that keeps me, I’m already
doing physical activity. What do I need a science class for? I’m already learning
by doing and planting. I’m already learning from the customer already. (B, p. 2)

James continues working as a landscaper until he is virtually 40 years old (B, p. 2).

James reasons that his education is more relevant if it continues through landscaping. He relates
each subject to an aspect of landscaping work. He further connects his mother’s memory to
landscaping through the connection to the customers he serves. His connection to school is
decreasing and his connection to landscaping is increasing. He continues as he works as a
landscaper for over 20 years.

Second junior year: Father’s ultimatum and decision to quit high school. After James
completed his second junior year, he still had to complete his senior year in order to graduate
from high school. He weighed the decision regarding completing his senior year. He reflected on the process and result of the decision he made to leave school before graduation. His father’s ultimatum influenced his decision to leave school.

J: Yes, it was in my second junior year, my father had given me a choice. It was not, it was not a good thing to do. He should have said I—“you’re going to stay in school,” but he said “C’mon—you’re going to make a bunch of money,” you have to be worried and sit back and battle that, battle that decision—really concentrate, get some help, get some—don’t just rely on one person to make that decision—don’t you just make that decision for you—get some help, talk to other people.

I: Okay.

J: Get some input about your decision.

I: Okay.

J: Because there’s always a way to work out that one extra year that you have to wallow around in school.

I: Laugh.

J: If you’ve going to be embarrassed not to graduate on time.

I: Uh huh, that was one thing. I see, I see.

J: Oh yeah, I have to stay here—I’m going to look like a dork, feel like a dork.

I: Uh huh, uh huh.

J: So that was one thing, that I just got out of it—I was escaping embarrassment.

I: Uh huh.

J: I was escaping—Okay, if I graduate an extra 1 year after I should have, after I was supposed to graduate, um—they’re going to call me a 5-year man or whatever, but if I drop out, I just can make a million in landscaping then I do better—see? That doesn’t matter. (A, p. 3)

James continues to describe the influences and steps he used when deciding to drop out of high school, as well as to reflect on the motivation behind his decision.

J: Bam, you’ve made the decision. You’ve already signed out—what are you going to do? So once that’s done—it’s fractured and we can’t put it together—unless you know what? Bear down, don’t be embarrassed—you’re being something better and better with yourself—better that better itself. Don’t let nobody look down at you, don’t get embarrassed in class. If you have a problem, raise your hand, there’s a teacher there to help you, not to look down at you, to give you a test, a question that you weren’t studying to begin with. The test is something like another lesson. (A, p. 3)

James breaks down the reasoning he used in decision making process he used to arrive at the decision to drop out: his embarrassment, his avoidance of being a “5-year man “who
continued with high school vs. a “million dollar man” who worked in his father’s landscaping business, and the questionable judgment he used, influenced by drugs and alcohol as well as the advice he got through his father’s ultimatum—go to school or quit and work with me, I’ll pay you. But James’ remarkably detailed thoughts that result in “boom, once it’s done and you sign out, it’s done” to recount this detailed and intensely must still have stayed with him over these years.


Life in chaos but continues as landscaper. Life for James after he left high school became more chaotic for him. Under the influence of drugs and alcohol, he continued to search for the childhood he felt he lost. He also continued to work as landscaper and in his father’s bar as well.

I: Um hum.
J: So I’m in my 20s, my early 20s, I started playing darts, my father bought a bar, so he gave me the keys for it. So I was the porter, 4 o’clock in the morning I’d go in, drinking, you know. I was I was young, I thought I could, know what I mean, and I did, you know.
I: Um hum.
J: And, uh, it wasn’t like every morning, like someone that really needed it, but I did because I was up all night. Those days—you could stay up for 3 days when I was that age, you know what I mean? I’ve done it, we’ve all done it, no doubt.
I: Laugh. (B, p. 7)

James shares the chaos in his life during this time, as well as the common denominator throughout his life, as he continues to work in landscaping (B, p. 2). He describes periods of wakefulness for days, and working at the bar, working in landscaping, and his irregular hours. He drinks, and shares that he continues to want his childhood as he swirls through all of his jobs activities. He seems to feel both lost and invincible.
Daughters motivate toward education after “retirement.” Years continue to pass in James’ adult life. He continues to work as landscaper. After almost 10 years, he shares the birth of two daughters, 2 years apart. His pride in his daughters clearly shows. As the years continue, James health declines because of a back problem. As he considers a decision to retire from landscaping, and makes a decision on what next to do with his life, he bases decision on his daughters’ successes.

J: Just year after year after year, and all of a sudden it just came to be, I finally had 2 beautiful girls. And now they’re of age 13 and 11, and they’re wonderful. They’re straight-A students in school—that is so, right then and there. They’re going towards education so that put me toward—as much as I retired myself at 40 years old because of my lower lumbar disease now. I can’t be doing physical labor—so now it’s really . . . I’ve gotten hit in the head with what I should have done back in the days when I should have got my diploma, instead of having to take the GED, which a lot of time, people don’t think the GED is worth anything, but you know what it is: a goal. And once you go beyond that barrier, that hurdle, it sort of, just, it just opens up your mind from your mind set. Now you know you can do well in English—wow—like a little preview—wow—cause once you start the learning process, learning was automatic. But when you drop out, you feel you’re worth nothing—cause you didn’t do it. Once you’ve dropped out—then once you’ve dropped out, you feel “I can’t really push it” like I should. Then you realize that education is necessary to climb that hill and look over to the other side—to see the country of knowledge—and you can actually grab. (A, p. 2)

Now James is motivating himself to make the life changes necessary to move from where he’s been to where he wants to go. He is starting to try to make it possible to propel himself back into school by reliving his drop out experience, and by changing parts of his life to make it possible to actually be successful in school. He lyrically speaks of moving himself into the “country of knowledge” (A, p. 2).

Return to school for GED and sobriety 2010. James is involved in many life changes during the 9 months of his life he shares. He leaves the city and moves to Green Valley. He
becomes sober. He becomes a Christian. He returns to school at GVCC to study for his GED.

He shares his transition into school and the impact of these recent changes in his life.

I: How long have you been here?
J: About 9 months—since August.
I: [Discusses school started . . . ]
J: Yeah—the teachers here are wonderful.
I: Okay.
J: Ever since then, I’ve become a Christian and that—the scripture—the truth—not just going on in the street, Bible bending, saying Jesus is this, He lived and died for you . . . . (A, p. 7)
I: [Stresses his recent return to school.]
J: Because I was coming from darkness, coming out of the city—downfall.
I: Okay.
J: Nine months ago—I’m totally sober now. The sobriety has been a key. I don’t care if you drink a lot of pop—if you over do it, it’s not good—so you have to watch your health.
I: Okay—I hear what you’re saying.
J: You have to watch it—what you absorb in your body—cause that creates what you’re thinking straight.
I: Was there a turning point for you? What happened that made you change from back then to where you are now?
J: Uh.
I: You just felt it was time?
J: Yeah, I just, uh, instead of taking two steps forward and 10 steps back . . . .
I: Uh huh.
J: I want to take 10 steps forward today and then twenty tomorrow.
I: Okay.
J: And be comfortable with it—not unorganized and confused.
I: Uh huh.
J: Do not be confused, be direct. Whatever confronts you, be prepared.
I: Okay.
J: And do not let your boat tip. You have the oars, the floatness, and the tools, uh. And if you don’t, slow down, ask somebody. You need help, you can’t do it on your own, this is the whole thing I’m trying to say. (A, p. 7)

James shares his feelings about his recent sobriety as well as religion in his life. With philosophical phrases, he describes his feelings about reentering school and how sobriety has changed his life. After his previous life of stagnant disorganization, he shares his delight in feeling more in control of his life and in progressing in life “10 steps forward.” He also reflects on working hard to achieve but needing others and asking for help. He expresses remarkable
changes in his life from his earlier periods. James shares that he had moved to connection instead of isolation, and to organization rather than disorganization.

**Future.** James looks at where he’s been in his life and where he wants to go. He shares the knowledge and skills he’s brought to his GED study to build toward his decision to his new program of study after he completes his GED.

**J:** And it’s just so wonderful that today—I’m 41, 20 years experience in landscaping, and GVCC. I’m going into the horticulture [program at GVCC], and I know I’ll guarantee I’ll be going—I will be going because I will be getting that degree for the rest of my life. Yes, I will, this is such an opportunity God has given me, to uh, a door way is just going to open—already. I don’t have to open—it just—nobody will steal my joy. I smile because it’s free—doesn’t charge. And, uh, the people in this college are wonderful and they’re giving me a mood of want-ness that gives me the motivation. And just this is when I’m at—one day at a time.

James shares his remarkable life’s journey to get to his present state. He not only is close to completing his GED certificate, but he is using his life and work experience to study one of the newly developed curricular programs at GVCC. Feeling the strength he’s developed through his recent life changes, James shares his optimism and enthusiasm for his future.

**Discussion.** James’ unique energy and intensity is shown throughout his life. He shares the responsibility he feels as a young person when he takes his mother’s place at home to relieve his grief and another responsibility as he works as a landscaper for his father. The theme of resilience and hope pervades his story. But, despite his large family and his father’s remarriage, he remains isolated and alienated from the family. Contrasts in James’ life are shown by several elements: happiness yet isolation, responsibility toward family yet loss of baby as teenager, landscaper worker yet high school student, use of alcohol and drugs yet later sobriety. He maintains a long work history, yet recently becomes injured, and chooses to return to school. James navigates through these paradoxes with his strength and resilience, and
energizes his story with strong suggestions for educators. His plea for “Dr. Help” personifies his need for assistance but his complexity and strength fuel his hope for his future.

**Portrait of Katrina**

Katrina slowly, almost solemnly, moved into the room for our first interview. Her head and shoulders were down as she slumped into the chair at the table, seated across from me. She looked up, and then down, as we started to talk. She wore jeans and a pale beige knitted sweater which blended into her sallow, pale skin. Her dark brown eyes were visible, and long, straight dark brown hair was pulled back from her face. She shared her story through methodical and organized details, but I felt her quiet, steely strength, yet a caring sensitivity. She seemed to be responsible and self aware.

I first saw Katrina as I made observations of the GED class she attended. She sat by the door in the classroom, silently working, wearing a gray hooded sweatshirt, hood pulled over her head. Because of her slouched posture at the table, it was difficult to distinguish any details about her face.

**Early years and high school.**

*Early years.* Katrina grew up in a home with her parents and her twin brother. She shared little about her early years except that she liked school as a young girl (K: Uh, at first I liked school, I liked it, I enjoyed it, uh, I enjoyed learning) (A, p. 13), and her academic success in the eighth grade. She also shared the high standards that she felt her parents had for her, and their instilling a responsibility and work ethic in her.

K: I was actually salutatorian when I graduated 8th grade.
I: Really.
K: Yes and, uh, my brother and I, uh, went to parochial, private school.
I: Uh huh.
J: And I was salutatorian, um, uh, my parents were, I know they were as proud that I was salutatorian but I think they were also, that I could have worked harder to get to valedictorian.
I: Okay. (A, p. 13)

High school. As she transitioned to high school, however, school became more difficult for her, and peer pressure became more compelling to her.

K: Um, when I went into high school, my goal was to, uh, work on valedictorian, um but high school, some of the classes that I’d taken, I guess, they were probably a little too, too far over my head, um, they were a little bit more advanced than what I had what I had perceived and, uh, so I wound up dropping, uh, dropping a couple of those classes and taking, uh, the lower class so I could keep my grades up
I: Uh huh.
K: And, uh, then, uh, probably peer pressure with, you know, that “oh that’s a tough class, you’ll never make it”—listened more of the peer pressure shit which I shouldn’t have and, uh.
I: From the kids, huh?
K: Right, not my parents, which I shouldn’t have, and then, uh, I think my junior and senior year, my junior and senior year, I was, I was at the point where my freshman and sophomore year I’d worked hard on the classes that I’d chosen and worked hard at doing those, and junior and senior year, I was probably like—I’m in high school, it’s time for me to have fun.
I: Okay. (A, p. 13)

As Katrina continued in high school, a combination of work, family problems, and peer pressure continued to distract her from her school work (A, p. 4). And, as she continued through high school, she shared that she became deficient in completing the number of credit hours required for graduation.

I: I’m interested in the fact that you said you were behind in credits. So what do you think caused you to be behind in credits back in the day?
K: Uh.
I: Was it just like all of a sudden?
K: Um.
I: Over time, or, uh.
K: It was probably more towards the end, not, it may have not been towards the end of my senior year. Uh, I probably, um, rebellious wanting to have fun, not wanting to, um, work in school, so I had failed a couple of classes, I had, uh, failed a couple of classes, so I thought, um, I wanted, no, it wasn’t toward the
end of senior year, I, there, um, were some family problems, so there was the stress with family.

I: Um hum.

K: And, um, I failed some classes and I told myself I’d make it up next semester and it wound up becoming rebellious, like you know, there was a family issue that, uh, brought my, the stress of that brought my grades down, and I thought well, I’ll make it up the next semester and, uh, instead of making it up the next semester, I became rebellious and decided like part trying to put the blame on my parents as to why I failed—and they were on me about my grades.

I: Um hum.

K: And, um, nowadays there’s Sylvan, Sylvan learning commercials—you know back then you didn’t have the Sylvan Learning Centers, so my parents probably didn’t know how to handle the rebellious nature or handle the teenaged daughter. (A, p. 4)

Later, our conversation returned to the same period of time.

I: When, if at all, did you first experience the idea of dropping out?

K: Uh, that was probably, that was wow—um—um—probably, probably junior or late senior year, when I had the stress at home, between with my parents and me, and when I couldn’t get my grade back up on the next semester, and that was, I think I just thought no, I’m not going to drop out, I’m just going to, I’m going to finish out the year, finish out my senior year, but if I don’t have enough credits, hours, oh well, I’ll just deal with it and that’s pretty much, it, that’s pretty much when I, my mind, was made up—I just went through the emotions [i.e., “motions”], I didn’t really apply myself, or really, really apply myself, you know, I really didn’t apply to work harder. (A, p. 5-6)

It seems she is repeating the same things over and over again. But actually she is giving a very good picture of her state of mind at that time. There are many indications that these quotes express a considerable capability of realistic self understanding that allows her to independently take charge of her own life and begin to make her own choices of her own life’s structure. This self awareness takes place about a year later in her life. She faces several of the usual factors found in literature regarding dropouts, including stress at home, rebellion, wanting to have fun, “not wanting to, um, work in school,” “failed a couple of classes,” “wanting to blame my parents,” and listening to her peers’ advice. She also displays the thought “well, I’ll make it up the next semester.” The next semester, however, she becomes even more distracted.
In addition, when she “could not get my grades back” up the next semester, she expressed her commitment to completing high school “No, I’m not going to drop out, I’m just going to, I’m going to finish out the year.” She continues her commitment to completing high school by also stating “but if I don’t have enough credits, hours, oh well, I’ll just deal with it” later, during the next year. So, although she actually does not finish high school, and she admits that she blames her parents during this time for her lack of completion, as she talked with me during her first interview, she sees all of that and can admit it. In the next section, at a later time of Katrina’s life, we will see that she has moved beyond her thinking in this period. Despite this future revelation, during this chaotic and difficult part of her life, Katrina already reveals an inner strength and self awareness. So, although Katrina found school more and more difficult, and she blamed her parents and a family issue as well as her peers for her lack of success in her classes, she did construct a methodical plan for her completion of high school. And, although she did not implement the plan, she now reflects back on the part she played in her high school.

Despite her difficulty with the completion of high school, Katrina had already a career interest and was also thinking about college during that time.

K: You know, uh, I just didn’t know which medical, you know, if I was going to go into nursing, doctor.
I: Um.
K: Veterinary, I, uh, um, cause I, uh, was like, um, you know, be a veterinarian. (A, p. 6)

We will see that this interest in a medical career supports and foreshadows her entry into her future career choice. As she channels this interest into a career, she also narrows her options in high school curriculum from college bound to high school graduation.

K: Uh, so a lot of the classes I took, it was just instead of freshman/sophomore year, I was focusing on classes for college, um, junior and senior year it was more my parents aren’t going to be able to pay for me to go to the college, that I want to.
I: Where, what college was that?
K: I was trying to get into at uh, Southern Illinois University.
I: Okay.
K: Or it was either Southern Illinois University or . . . [names several other schools she was thinking about at the time] . . . And when my parents said they can’t afford to pay for college, then I was like, well, I’m going to change my curriculum to where I just need enough credits, or just enough credits and the right courses for graduation, and that was probably, I would say, that would be my, that was my decision. (A, p. 14)

This was an important change in direction for Katrina: She changed her goal from that of a college bound student in her freshman and sophomore year to mere high school graduation al in her junior and senior year. This change seemed to reflect her conflict with her parents and their lack of both financial and emotional support during this time, as Katrina shares that “they can’t pay for college.” She asserts her self sufficiency and strength as she states she would “change my curriculum . . . [for] just enough credits for graduation,” and “that was my decision.” She seems to assess her life situation at that time and tries to move forward, full speed ahead. However, when it came time for her to graduate from high school, Katrina could not walk across the stage because she lacked two credits.

**After high school: Settling down to a long-term life, 1985-87.**

*Transition to becoming a fire fighter and EMT.* During the first two or three months after her graduation date, Katrina was focused on making up the missing credits in the 1985/86 school year. She had a part-time job in a restaurant, but her parents now demanded that she accept the financial responsibility for her own expenses.

K: Well, actually, um, I completed the 4 years, the problem was, I didn’t have enough credit hours to graduate—to, uh, walk across the stage.
I: Hum.
K: And, um, I obtained a job—started working, um, hours picked up so I picked up extra hours, I did go back to, uh, get the rest of the credit hours in the 85-86 school year, but because the work hours were picking up and my parents kind of pressuring me about, uh, you know, paying them rent, then picked up more hours then so I could pay them rent and, uh.
I: Was that cause you, uh, were like over 18 by that time?
K: Yes.
I: And they wanted you to—“if you stay you pay?”
K: Right. (A, p. 1)

Katrina had a spirit of independence but she experienced limitations on her options to complete the credits she needed. The courses she needed to graduate were not offered in summer school and she did not have enough money for a home study course (A, p. 9). At that point she learned of a cadet program in the local fire department (A, p. 10).

I: [Talks about K entering the cadet program.] I mean how did you decide it?
K: Um, gosh, I don’t remember how, I just decided, I know, I think I heard, I heard that the department that I joined, you know, they had a cadet program.
I: Uh huh.
K: And I was like well, I’ll try the cadet program out and if I do well, I’ll continue on and, um, that’s, uh, I did very well with schooling, and the, the schooling aspect as well, as the physical, uh, the physical requirements, um, and, uh, that’s when, I also learned, um, about the EMS aspect, Emergency Medical Services. (A, p. 10)

“Showing her dad” she could do it—“entering a man’s world.” Actually there were several reasons for “trying out the cadet program.” Recall that already in high school she was interested in the medical field, and becoming a firefighter could lead to some kind of EMS activity. But in addition, becoming a firefighter would be “entering a man’s world,” and this way she would “show her father.” While still in high school, she had tried to get her father to get her a union card so she could do construction work, like he had done for her brother, but he refused because “she could not do this kind of work.”

K: Yes and, um, I’ve uh, I had always felt that, um, my brother got more, uh, he got more attention, more help from my parents than I did.
I: Oh, because he was a boy, male?
K: That and, uh, he was when he was the same age as me, in high school, in the summertime, like my dad had paid for, paid for, his union card, so he could do construction work.
I: Um hum.
K: So he would go to work with my dad and.
I: In the summer when he was a young guy?
K: Right.
I: In high school or whatever?
K: Right, and I said to my dad, I come out one day and said “Dad—why can’t, why won’t you get me a union card so I can go to work with you?”
I: Um.
K: And make money, and make the same money, the same amount of money that Kenny’s making? Well, my dad was like “you can’t do that kind of work”—and I think that was what really pushed me into going to be a fire fighter.
I: Oh really?
K: Yeah.
I: Hum.
K: I was like “well, if you’re not going to help me then, fine, I’ll help myself,” and, um, I went into the fire aspect, then into the man’s world and I literally had to prove to myself, because I made, I literally made the second female on the department and I had to go through what they put the first female through, you know, so yeah, I, a woman, enters in a man’s world. I had to prove myself.

[Elaborates, mostly repeats, for a paragraph, then summarizes] . . . and I’d like to, uh, make money then he said, “you can’t do it you can’t do that type of work.” He won’t even give me a chance, stop being a male chauvinist pig, dad.
I: Um hum. (A, p. 6)

Her self sufficiency shines (A, p. 4)! She had the objectivity to try this opportunity, and to see that she “had to prove herself.” Her father was not giving her a chance, so she went on to grasp this chance and she had the inner strength and endurance to see it through. She had “to prove herself.” Who was she proving herself for? Several levels of proof seem evident: her father, who would not give her the chance; herself, since fire fighting was her idea to pursue; the fire fighting department, to see if she would actually be admitted to the department; to the first woman in the department, to see if she measured up to her experience and expectations.

**EMT: Self sufficiency and caring.**

The 2 years of 85-87 set the pattern and career direction for the next 20 years. Katrina enrolled in and soon successfully completed the fire fighter’s cadet program in the fall of 85, and from then she was on call for the fire department. She started working for a medcar service, and at the same time took EMT training classes to get an EMT license.

K: Got on uh, the POC (“Paid on call”) aspect of, uh, the fire department, uh, um, then I started working at VanderPlug, um VanderPlug Medical Service, where I
drove, I would pick up, um ill patients, take them to either dialysis or, uh, transfer, then to nursing homes or doctors visits . . . [elaborates, mostly repeats; then:] the medcar service was . . . what we called “dialysis shuffle”—what we, uh, cancer patients were going for radiation “burn and returns,” yeah, take um to radiation, that was our humor.

I: [Was that your] Survival humor?
K: Survival humor, [for example] you take cancer patient to radiation, uh’ it wasn’t even 5 minutes, you would wait and take them back home.
I: Hum.
K: It would, the burn and return, the dialysis shuffle, it was, they’re survival jokes, survivor humor for the type of field I went into.
I: Did that help people to survive, I mean, not the patients, did that help the workers?
K: Yes, I mean, yes, I mean no, don’t get me wrong, we didn’t make these comments in front of our patients, and we actually got very close to well, I did, I got very close to all my patients, so.
I: Consistent, um, patients, that you would take back and forth for appointments?
K: Right, right, and when they did pass away, I would attend their, I would attend their wake, so I could say at least I could say good by and be respectful to them and their family, cause I got very close to all my patients as well as their family members. (A, p. 11)

As Katrina shares her story of transporting patients in medcar, she shares her technical expertise, transporting patients to and from appointments. She also shares a deep caring for patients as she works with them, that reaches deeper than the mere transportation of ill patients. And, although she shares workplace “survival humor,” a coded term sometimes used to protect health care workers from the emotional pain of dealing with the illness and distress of patients, she shares that for her, patients were persons she felt close to and respected. That she can provide both technical care during a very short sliver of time and her deeper caring for patients as she “attends [a patient’s] wake to show respect for them and their families, says a lot for her, that she can work in both arenas, seems unusual for EMTs who usually provide only short term care to patients.
In ‘87, Katrina went to paramedic classes for paramedic training. She enjoyed both the training and the camaraderie during her EMT training and paramedic training. Her training, held at a hospital, provided her with:

K: the network of friends that you make and even, uh, paramedic school and the experiences that you would get when you had to do your ER clinical time, where I went to the paramedic program, Christos hospital, is a Level I trauma center, so not only did we get sick people in but we got, it was stabilizing them in the ER and they went right to, uh, surgery right away. (B, p. 9)

Her technical expertise continues to grow as she experiences this training, as well as her professionalism and camaraderie. Her capability as EMT/paramedic in the “man’s world” appears sound as she makes “a network of friends” (B, p. 9).

A life of raising a family and multiple employment 1988-2011. For the next 20 years or so, Katrina’s life was busy filled with a raising a family with her husband and three children and at the same time constantly juggling several jobs to make ends meet. I could not understand how she could keep track of all of so many different things, and she explained to me how she kept a calendar.

A complex life. After the transition period after high school in the last section, Katrina settled down to decades of employment and family interconnection, including in the beginning more technical training.

K: From there, um, my life, I met my soon-to-be-ex husband, um, got married, had kids, started having kids—I’m sorry—before we got married, I was on the Hazelton Fire Department—I obtained my, uh, fire fighter state certification for fire fighter II, continued on, uh, continued my education by getting my EMTA [EMT level A], uh, certification and then, uh, I went to paramedic school and uh.

I: Where was that?
K: I went through, I took it through Christos Hospital.
I: Oh, through a hospital.
K: [Talks about in spite of not having a high school diploma, getting credit hours for her EMTA and paramedic training at two local community colleges] . . . And, uh, then I met my husband, uh—we started, uh, we got married, started having kids, and then, uh, between being married raising kids and working, I, um, I
always had a, because of me being a fire fighter, a paramedic, always had, uh, would work 3 or 4 jobs at a time, where if one job—if they were cutting back hours, I have something to fall back on.

I: Umm.

K: And then, uh, when I started working at St. John’s in Chilton Heights, my last department that I was with, the Milton Fire Protection District—I was on their “paid on call.” Which is, uh, a POC program, paid on call, you get paid, you get paid, uh, per call, per hour, every time the “tones” go out, you arrive at the station. I also worked on their part time program where when I wasn’t working at the hospital, I’d, I would work a shift at Milton Fire, um, and they were 24 on, 48 off. . . . [continues giving dates for her employment and progression of training from cadet, fire fighter, and paramedic.] (A, p. 2)

Thinking about her multiple jobs and family responsibilities, I became amazed how she was able to organize and juggle all that she had to do, and on the second interview I asked her.

I: I was just wondering how you managed that, because that would be something very phenomenal, that somebody would be able to—and not only juggling the one job, but from 3 difference places, all those on-off plus family time, that’s very phenomenal, I’m serious, that you were able to do that and you did it, so that’s something else.

K: Yeah.

I: How did you manage to organize all that? You must be very organized.

K: (Laugh) Yeah, uh, well actually I for 20, 27 years, I always carried a big calendar with me. And not just a pocket one, it had to be one big enough to write in and, uh, I had different colored pens, red, uh, green, uh, blue ink, black ink, purple.

I: Uh hum.

K: And uh like, uh, for like doctor’s appointments, uh, not only for myself but for my kids, they were all in red, uh, and then, uh, and extracurricular activities, depending on what child it was, which extracurricular activity—cause 2 of them—2 of them did the same thing—like with, uh, wrestling, um, karate, um, that would be a color, um, my, um, uh, paramedic, uh, refresher class hours or, uh, my recertifying for advanced cardiac life support, pediatric advanced life support, uh, pre hospital trauma life support, they were written in blue, uh, and then, uh, my work would be in black, um, uh, work would be in black, but if I was working, well, when I was working three jobs, then I had to pick I had to get 3 colors, one was for Star Ambulance, one was for Medic car, one was for Martinne’s Ambulance, um, and then Milton Fire, so yeah, I had multiple colored pens. Then, that I would write in my book, my calendar, and then, uh, if I needed to just to have get a couple hours off, um, I’d have to switch with somebody, I’d ask somebody to come in—work so many hours for me, and I would have to make up so many hours for them, so that there wasn’t too much over time in a week—so I had a lot of juggling to do.

I: [Expresses amazement how K could manage such a complex life; I had this kind of a problem too in her life but not to the same extent as K. Then starts new
I was also going to ask you, um, I don’t know, if in—the paramedic—you know, how that sort of felt as for, as when you’re going through all the day to day stuff, it’s pretty hectic type of thing, you know, plus it’s a hectic schedule, plus carrying that all home, how did you handle that? I mean you—it just seems like you handle this most extraordinary stuff and, you know, I don’t know if you give yourself credit for that, because that’s something that.

K: I don’t think I do give myself credit for it—um—because I have been doing it for so long, I, you know, I’ve learned how to keep things that happen at work, at work.

I: Um hum.

K: And, I try to keep the stressful stuff at home, at home, not bring it to work with me [she tells a long story of her husband and children calling her at work and the boundaries she set for their communication while she worked]. (B, pp. 7-8)

An extraordinary account which gives a vivid picture of constant education, a life of multiple part-time jobs (with often having to switch hours with a co-worker), and meticulously taking care of many different kinds of needs of the members of her family, we see the fabric of her life woven together. And this represents a general picture of her life over a period over more than two decades. One gets the picture of a completely independent person, automatically taking charge and dealing with whatever needs happen to arise at the moment, an independent intelligence who constantly develops her own solutions to immediate problems (different color of pens for different types of activity on calendar, asking coworkers to cover her for a couple hours because of immediate family needs).

Katrina attempts to structure her employment to include many jobs to ensure that she always “have a job.” She illustrates her self sufficiency through the numerous jobs she holds at the same time, “so if they were cutting back hours, I would have something to fall back on.” She took charge of her having a consistent income, with all the jobs in her area of professional training and licensure.

Once again, her self sufficiency shines, as she pieces together complex schedules for her five family members while she maintains her crisis orientated paramedic position. And, she does not “give (her) myself credit for it” because her highly organized process has been a part of
her for a very long time. I reflected on my own work and family responsibilities through Katrina’s life: I told her “that’s amazing how you were able to pull it off.”

Her employment as EMT/paramedic puts her in a position of facing life and death situations, possibly on a daily basis. Katrina taught herself to set boundaries between work and home to protect each important environment and herself in each role. “Keeping work at work and home at home” meant that she had to limit her own communication as she worked so she accepted brief messages and requests from home. It also meant that the carryover of thoughts from her day’s EMT/paramedic calls had to be kept confidential as she left the job for the day. Although she set boundaries between both home and work, the intense nature of the EMT/paramedic profession and the intensity of family life seem that it would be very difficult for her to separate the two when she met serious crisis.

**Continuing paramedic: Strength and guidance.** Katrina continued sharing stories about her work responsibilities, and as she did so, restated instances when she provided leadership through her strength and judgment. She possessed the ability to serve as a beacon of strength to those she worked with.

I: [Summarizes that she [interviewer] realized that Katrina in her path all these years has shown all kinds of strengths. Then surmises another example of strength.] . . . I’m guessing that your coworkers, I mean, I’m betting that, in the stress of the moment when you were out on a call, I bet you were the one that people said, uhh, now what—Plan A isn’t working, Katrina, now what?? I bet that there were people there that.
K: They did.
I: That looked to you for your knowledge, guidance, strength, nurturing, “Okay, we’re supposed to do this but ‘this’ isn’t working, now what?” And I bet, I bet, I bet, they called on you—right in that moment.
K: Yeah, they did. I was, uh, the one that they always went to.
I: Looked to for help, was what I meant.
K: Yeah, they would look at me and if I wasn’t panicking, they knew to calm down. If I looked like I was starting to panic, then they would start to panic, so I had to, I really had to be sure I structured myself, um, you know, they were—several times when, uh, especially when it came to patient, uh, patient care I made—if
I—one of the nurses was like—she—I—cause I was calling for a doctor—I said “I need help in here”—it was in a room and one of the ER rooms, and I’m yelling “I need help” and she, finally, like, wait a minute—after the third time I yelled “I need help in here,” she said, “Katrina never calls for help because she never needs it because she’s that good.” [Katrina finishes the account of the nurse calling in a doctor, who verified patient’s crisis, “his exact words (when he first saw the patient’s condition) were ‘Holy hell.’” The patient later came back to the hospital after recovery and thanked Katrina.] (B, p. 13)

Katrina, although she is organized, methodical, and taking care of business, shows the strength that makes her the coworker who others were grateful to work with under crisis conditions. I could feel that she was the one, when eye to eye with a fellow co worker as they worked over a patient in unexpected distress, who took over during such difficult and unexpected crises. I could feel that strength in her. Katrina showed her self sufficiency through her technical expertise and capability to deal with a critical incident.

**Painful changes in her world and a need for high school credentials.**

**Divorce and job loss: 2011.** Katrina’s years of intertwined employment and family did not last forever, however. The year 2011 was a difficult one for her. In January of that year, she lost her job as paramedic, and in August, she was served with divorce papers. Her carefully crafted world of employment and family schedules fell apart (B, p. 5). Her pain was evident as she shared more of her story.

K: Yeah, October 7 was, uh, when him and my youngest son moved out and, uh, it’s (cry) still been very hard.
I: Yes, yeah, yeah, I know, we talked about that, but look at what you, so that will . . . time, okay (pat arm).
K: I know, . . . I think what hurts more is what—he’s turned all 3 of my kids—against, against me after everything I’ve done for them . . . .
I: Well . . . .
K: None of them will call me, none of them will talk to me, none of them will come visit me (cry), so, and I’ve, I’ve almost, I’m almost at the point of you know being bitter—okay, fine—you guys knew that what your father was doing to me was wrong, and you still chose to abandon me as well at a time when I needed you the most (cry). [She continues to share decisions she’s made regarding her life’s changes.] (B, p. 5)
Despite Katrina’s long years of employment and the economic safety net of multiple jobs she created for herself and the interconnection between job and family, she lost both her jobs and family during this year. Although her husband was no longer in her life, she was particularly saddened by the estrangement from her children. Katrina now found herself to be in a painful and empty place in her life. Her self sufficiency and organization suddenly crashed, and she is bowled over by sadness over the loss of connection with her children.

**Return to school: 2011.** After Katrina lost her job in January, she began to look for other employment. She was offered a position with a local hospital as paramedic, but when she was asked to provide a transcript of her high school diploma, she had to refuse the position “I had to turn the position down because they wanted my high school transcript.” She lamented on her not having completed her high school diploma or GED earlier, and that “that’s why I’m here in this class working on getting my GED” (B, p. 11). Katrina returned to a school to complete her high school through the GED program at Green Valley Community College in August, 2011. She was almost 45 years old.

Katrina’s return to school promoted a warm communication with her father. When she told her father she was going back to school, he was worried about her age and resuming school.

**K:** So you know, and [he said] “you’ve been out of school for over 20—at least got to be over 20 years” and I was like “dad, you’re never too old to go back to school.”

**I:** I believe that, I believe that, we really believe that.

**K:** But I know I can do this and I accept my challenge” and my dad, he kind of like backed off a little, actually, he said: “I am proud of you, K.” I said “dad, you know, I need to hear that you’re proud of me” (cry) so (pause).

**I:** Did he say it in words, I could see.

**K:** Yeah, he did

**I:** Sometimes it’s hard for people to actually speak, yeah, that’s very cool, that’s very cool, very cool. I should have brought Kleenex, I’m sorry.

**K:** That’s all right.
I: I’m sorry.
K: I’ve got Kleenex in my pocket.
I: You’re a medical person, you probably have everything.
K: Next question. (A, p. 12)

Katrina’s self sufficiency is momentarily suspended as she asks her father if he felt pride in her efforts to return to school. Although she is the one who has made the decision to return to school, she has independently lived her life for decades, and she “entered a man’s world” “to do it herself”; in this condition, she seeks her father’s approval. She was touched by his approval and his concern for her returning to school at 45.

Katrina entered school just weeks after she was served with divorce papers. Although this was a painful and difficult time for her, she already was moving ahead toward her goal of completing her GED.

**Future plans.** As Katrina attends GED classes, she continues to make plans for her future beyond her completion of the GED program, and she reflects on her growth and life changes since high school.

K: The positive changes in my life since then, emotionally I’ve grown stronger, um, and it’s the feeling of I’ve made it, I’ve set goals for myself and I’ve checked out and I’ve been able to check off those goals. [She awaits the final results of her GED test scores.]—I’m working on my next goal and that is to get into—getting into GVCC and starting taking college credit courses that I need for, uh, to earn my paramedic associate degree—and I found out that the pre requisites for the paramedic associate degree are also the same pre reqs for the nursing degree so I can actually work on 2 goals at one time—But my long term goal is that I would I want to continue my education and become a physician’s assistant. (A, p. 16)

K: I’ve grown wiser, I wish I knew what I know now. [She reflects on her strengths since high school and laments what she did not do.] Um, my strengths are that, um, I’ve continued to be optimistic, not pessimistic, um, and that, uh, you know that things are always brighter on the other side, and when you set your goals you can accomplish them—you do become emotionally stronger, emotionally stronger as a person, but, um, you know, physically as well. I mean you get that, you feel you have that right to hold your head up high, pat yourself on the back, and say I did it, um and that I um whatever life whatever life has thrown at me, and especially what was thrown at me back in August of 2011, um, I’ve, uh, I’ve really grown and, um, become a stronger, um, a stronger person that, um, I will
Katrina’s strength and wisdom is apparent as she shares her feelings about school and about her decisions for her future. The word strength almost seems to be over used, but truly she possesses a resolve to do what has to be done in the circumstances she finds herself and to set goals and move toward them for her future. As she talks about her goals, her strengths, and her connection with students and patients, her whole face changes, showing her beautiful smile. This smile projects a vastly different aspect of Katrina than the person she appeared to be when I first saw her as I observed her in her GED class. Her smile is radiant, and lights up her whole face. As she smiles, she holds her head up and leans back in her chair. She seems to want to share her delight with me as she tells me her future plans.

**Discussion.** Katrina shares a story with a theme of self reliance and self determination that pervades her life from her early years to the present. As a young girl, she possessed the determination to be a good student, and graduated second in her eighth grade class. As a self-willed teenager, she became rebellious and confrontational with her parents. She envied her brother’s status with her parents (“they gave Kenny more”). Her determination to have an equal opportunity to earn the same wages as her brother, through summer employment arranged by her father, provoked her anger at her father, who said she could not do “that kind of work.”

Katrina moved ahead in her life through making and following through with her own decisions. She possessed the ability to devise her own plan to complete high school with lost credits. After her high school years, she became economically independent; through her own decision making: She found, entered and successfully completed the local fire fighter cadet program. Self reliance and self determination are evident in her life as Katrina progressed in levels of employment and maintained multiple jobs for economic security. Her family
responsibilities and jobs created a complex pattern that she managed through detailed organization. Her detailed organization exhibits her level of control, and her ability to set and maintain the direction of her own life. Her life was built on purposeful and goal directed decisions. She always had a plan, even in high school, that moved toward specific goals. She maintained these specific goals, particularly regarding employment and caring for her children, throughout her life, with no period in her life when she was “off track” or engaged in self reflection. Employment to Katrina meant economic security. Any self actualization she felt regarding her employment was to fulfill her expectation of her own self reliance or her ability to “enter a man’s world.”

Suddenly, her life direction changes because of her job loss and divorce, and she enters a painful part of her life. Her strong sense of purpose propels her through this difficult time in her life and her initial pain, and helps her to set new goals. Although she was still experiencing her initial pain due to her sudden loss, she sets goals toward a new era in her life and begins to move toward these goals.

Over the period of our two interviews, I observe a change in Katrina, from initial quiet student, who was almost invisible in class as an anonymous person in a hooded gray sweatshirt, to a woman with a radiant smile as she shares her optimism and plans for her future.

**Portrait of Derrick**

Derrick sat at the table in the classroom we used for our first interview. He is a large, young man with a square face, medium sandy-red hair, and a slow grin. He wore a checkered shirt with his sleeves rolled up. As he sat with his arms folded, he filled the small chair. He chose his words carefully, but spoke pleasantly, quietly, and politely throughout our initial
conversation; he expressed anger and disbelief when telling events later in the interview. I sensed a quiet resolve in Derrick as he spoke when he told of his experience and life changes through the years.

**Elementary school and dyslexia diagnosis.**

**Elementary school.** Derrick’s life story unfolded as he told me about his early years. He spent his early life in a small city living with his family “I don’t have a lot of memories that stand out in my childhood, I don’t know why this is, just don’t remember a lot of details about stuff, about (A, p. 3). He felt that his early years in school were comfortable and “easy,” although in sixth grade, school became difficult (A, p. 3).

D: Well, when I was younger, I never thought I disliked school until I got to 6-7th grade. Things started to get harder. For me to stay with the classroom, let me start over again, for me the second time in 2nd grade, I repeated the second grade, they actually, I went to a psychologist and they actually diagnosed me as dyslexic, so I mean, through the years, school was pretty easy up until 5-6th grade. Then I started not liking school. (A, p. 3).

Derrick discussed how school had felt to him at an early age, as a young child. He found school at this early age to be comfortable but his comfort level with school is contradicted, however, with his promotion in school, since he was retained in second grade (A, p. 3). It was difficult for him to complete the work and keep up with the classroom pace of instruction. Since he was diagnosed as “dyslexic,” his mother had taken him to a “therapist” to get help, and he had met with this doctor for twice a week for 2 years.

D: I believe mom did 2 years of therapy—taking me to a doctor up north somewhere, we went back and forth. The first doctor we seen was twice a week. The second doctor was three times a week. (A, p. 3)

He didn’t feel his treatment was helpful in completely helping him to keep up with the pace of classroom, and became the “class clown” as learning became more difficult.
D: I can’t say whether it helped or not. I was young, I didn’t know the difference if something, yeah, basically up until 5th or 6th grade when I couldn’t keep up with the rest of the class. From there I turned into the class clown, which is what got me into behavior disorder classes. [Derrick further describes his inattention in class] . . . . that’s when I started to lose attention, school was harder, I wasn’t able to keep up with the rest of the kids, I found other things to keep me entertained while I was sitting in class; basically I became disruptive in school. (A, p. 3-4)

Derrick continued to attend school, but he was not able to complete the daily classwork because he was not able to work well in the classroom. Trying to focus on his work and work at the same pace as the class was becoming more and more difficult for him.

**Move to a new school.** Around the seventh grade, Derrick’s brother died. His family moved, and Derrick felt that the move was to help him in school. The new school was located in a small rural community, but there the problems became worse. “Actually, I was getting into a lot of trouble, and they moved to get me into a different environment,” to avoid him being “shoved in an alternative school.” His parents “had seen other students” placed in the alternative school like that, and were worried about Derrick’s success (B, p. 1).

D: That’s what they do with you until you’re 16. Then most of the kids quit . . . because nobody’s showing an interest in them anymore . . . because they’re trouble . . . so that’s why they were going to change my environment, put me in a different school (B, p. 1)

One hears Derrick’s resignation in a familiar scenario. Derrick and his family seem to have dealt with his learning issues for a long period of time. He appeared to have received professional services at a young age, but with seemingly little results. His family consistently advocated for him and sacrificed for him, but he seems to be going in circles, in a long a downward spiral.

**High school.** Elementary school blurred into high school because of Derrick’s academic placement in the school. He attended school in a behavior disorder classroom and was taught by
a teacher who “worked with him,” although his attendance became poor and then further
decreased. Derrick shared that “I don’t think I ever really went to high school. I ended up in
behavior disorder classes, so I don’t think I ever really went to high school” (A, p. 2).

Kevin, a memorable teacher. Derrick shared his story of his entry into the behavior
disorder class and his first teacher. He shared his feeling of connection to this teacher and the
feeling of academic success that he had during his classroom instruction under this teacher. His
positive reaction to this teacher facilitated him staying in school and not dropping out at age 16.

D: When I first started in the behavior disorder class—umm the first teacher we had
was a gentlemen, a teacher, who was actually, he was really cool. He was actually
pretty straight up with me . . . someone who, as long as you were cool with him,
he was cool with you, actually. I thought he was actually teaching me something,
every once in a while, you know. Well, I was then . . . they . . . he eventually
moved on to a different job and they, umm, got another teacher. [Derrick looks
to the future with his new teacher, who we will see, he found difficult to get
along with] . . . and like I said, I was 19 years old and this lady was 3 years older
than I was” (A, p. 1). Well, the first teacher, I’ll say I’ll call him Kevin, he was
actually, I’ll say I liked him. I’ll say, that’s actually, and why, I’ll say, when I
turned 16, I didn’t quit. Okay, because he was my teacher, okay, actually him
and I had a thing going. He said “you have a thing about you . . . the class kind of
follows you” and he says “if you keep my class cool, you and I are cool. You can
pretty much” he says, “do what you want and study at your own pace, you know.
I have to keep the class under control and as long as you help me do that, you
and I are cool.”” That’s it, and he was actually a good teacher. . . . I liked him, and
he is actually probably why I didn’t quit. [Derrick continued to say that Kevin
left the school for another position.] (A, p. 2)

Derrick stayed in school until he was 16, although he had planned to drop out of high
school at that time. But because the teacher who “worked with him” was his teacher, he stayed
in school. In the learning environment created by this teacher, Derrick first felt his ability to
learn. Derrick further shared that in addition to recognizing leadership in him, the teacher “made
me feel like I could know something. I really wasn’t stupid, and I wasn’t just wasting my time,
you know.” (B, p. 2). Despite his rapport with Kevin, Derrick stopped going to school for part
of the year. Under the advice of his mother, he returned to school. His attendance had been poor
and he was behind in credits, and was told by the school that it would take him an extra three years to complete his high school diploma (A, p. 2).

**Interest in reading: Reading the Bible.** During his high school years, although he struggled with school, Derrick shares his love for reading. This love for reading involved his discovery of the King James Version of the Bible. Derrick shares his love for reading and analyzing the King James Version of the Bible during our second interview and that he began reading it when he was 17 years old.

D: I don’t think I read a book from cover to cover until I was 17... I picked up a book, it was actually the Bible... It really caught me. The more I read, the more I understood what I was reading. (A, p. 4)

In our next interview, I asked Derrick more about his interest in reading the Bible, and his ability to understand it. He shared that he loved reading the Bible; to him, the words were clear and motivational, and that each time he read it, he learned something new (B, p. 4). I asked him if he had read the entire Bible, and he shared that he had.

D: From Genesis to Revelations, I told my buddy that it’s like watching a Pink Floyd movie, each time you see it, you see something you hadn’t seen before. (B, p. 4)

With Derrick’s early diagnosis of dyslexia and his difficulty in school from the sixth grade on, I was surprised that he found the Bible compelling literature to read. I was very surprised that he particularly loved reading and interpreting the King James Version. Many people find the Bible difficult to read, and many people find the King James Version, with its lyrical English, particularly difficult.

**Young “lady” teacher and leaving high school.** After Derrick’s first behavior disorder class teacher, “Kevin,” left, he was replaced by a new teacher. This new teacher was a young woman, who Derrick felt, lacked credibility as a teacher. Derrick had a final conflict with the
teacher over his leaving class to use the restroom. Derrick left the class, and left the school, but didn’t return. After a confrontation with the teacher over this issue, Derrick left school, in anger, for good.

D: It was kind of silly. I asked to use the bathroom—the lady wouldn’t let me use the bathroom, so I just left and didn’t come back. I was 19 years old and I figured that my time to ask to use the bathroom was over with, so that’s pretty much the last thing that happened . . . and just never went back. As far as I understand, I could have gone [remained in school] to the point where I was 21 years old. I understand that, but they [the school officials] were still telling me the day I turned 19, that I had 3 years to go. I was working a job and trying to do that, and staying in school—basically that was it (A, p. 1). . . . [Derrick further describes his difficulty having a teacher who was so young and inexperienced. Derrick continues to share his story of his rapport with his previous teacher, and then returned to his reflection of his confrontation with his new teacher regarding going to the bathroom during class time.] I think I kind of made a comment to her “BS, I’m an adult and I have to go to the bathroom,” so, I said probably, asked her, in fact, I started to walk out of the classroom. She stopped me and said where I was going. I said “I’m going to the bathroom.” She explained to me the consequence of going to the bathroom, which is something they had to do with an intervention team of something that they have, I don’t know if they do restraining or whatever. So she was going to have the intervention team come and get me and put me in the seclusion room, or whatever, because I was acting out. So I’m on my way back to the bathroom and there are all these people. A big guy was going to put his hands on me. . . . I said “look, don’t put your hands on me, I’m [over]18 and I have no court order that says I have to be here.” And I told him I was walking out the door, and I did. [Derrick continued the story stating that he left the building, confirming that he did not have to be in school with a state police man who happened to be across the street He did not return to school after that.] (A, p. 2)

As Derrick told me the story that he left school and walked out, I imagined him as a football player going through lines of opposing players on the field.

*Work confirms decision to drop out of school.* During this time, Derrick earned money with his job as a pizza delivery driver. The job provided him with money he needed, and when it was possible for him to get more hours and make more money at his job, he gladly worked more hours. This was the same period of time that he dropped out of school.
D: It was that kind of thing . . . it was that kind of thing where I had a job at that time and later job . . . I was going to go to school or I wasn’t going to be able to do both . . . I was delivering pizza at the time, after school hours, I think 4:30-9. Truly, at the time the guys said I could get some more hours. All things, all things came together and I made the decision, about the biggest one, that I had other things to do than the other 3 years [that he would need to complete high school]. (A, pp. 2-3)

He felt secure in the money he was making as pizza driver, and wanted to “run around with his buddies” (A, p. 3). He had money to be with friends because of his pizza delivery job and the opportunity to work more and longer hours. His confrontation with his teacher occurred at a time when he felt he had to choose between work and school. He chose work, and he dropped out of school.

After high school: Life as bartender, becoming a dad, return to school for GED.

For years after his pizza delivery days, Derrick worked as bartender at a bar, working late hours and dealing with chaos and a “bad” work environment. This style of work suited him for quite some time, with long hours and an intense work environment of the bar.

D: I was a bartender for 15 years. Much of my life, when you’re in the bar at 7:30 at night getting home at 4-5 a.m., then getting up to go to work . . . then I started getting tired of it, things at work. Strangely, shortly after that, I found out I was going to be a dad. I got out of that . . . lots of bad things happen in bars. You don’t really know how many bad things happen in bars. You don’t really know . . . it’s not a good environment. I didn’t want to make a career out of it, basically, when I found out I was going to be a dad, it changed my life. (A, p. 4)

He worked late hours and got home early in the morning. Derrick started thinking about changing his style of life, particularly his employment. “I used to be drinking and doing illegal drugs . . . which once I found out I was going to be a dad, that things are not as important anymore . . . quit drinking, quit smoking, gained a lot of weight, made decisions” (A, p. 4). At the same time, he found out he was going to be a father. After his son was born, he looked for different job in a different environment that was less chaotic than the bar. Such a job required a
high school credential, Derrick discovered. He returned to school to the GED program at Green Valley Community College to complete GED (B, p. 5).

Now, in addition to coming to school to study for the GED, he cares for his son who lives with him and his parents. In addition, he has other interests: he reads the Bible on a daily basis and interprets scripture, and works as a sounds system technician for a music group. He is working to complete his GED so he can get a job which his friend tells him is waiting. When he completes his GED he will be qualified for the job (B, p. 6).

Derrick sums his feelings about the GED as he discloses his deep feelings about being a dad:

D: I’m really, umm, actually, that’s one of the things I have strong feelings about getting done—there’s been so many things I’ve started but not finished, this is important to me as a dad, it’s important to me, that type of thing, it’s just a piece of paper but it’s much more, its more than just for a job, its more than that, it’s something—to be proud of. (B, p. 6)

**Discussion.** Derrick wants to be there for his son, to take care of him well and to set a good example for him, since he feels that he will be the only parent active in his life. I felt that Derrick felt not only the pride of having a child, but also accepted the responsibility for the child. It seemed that this feeling of responsibility was motivating him toward making positive changes in his life. The depth of Derrick’s feeling about “being a dad” was evident. He shared further about his life changes: “Be a dad, that’s what I need to be doing.” He strongly feels the significance of fatherhood in his life. He also feels his resolve to get his GED.

**Portrait of Antonio**

Antonio walked briskly into the classroom where we held our interview. He smiled pleasantly as he sat down at the table, directly across from me, and shook hands. His dark
brown hair was cut short; he wore a narrow, medium brown suit, white shirt and tie, and carried a light tan trench coat and brown brief case. I sensed Antonio was interested in beginning our interview and had curiosity about the nature of the interview. As we talked, I felt a resilience and a quiet intensity in him.

**Life in Mexico 1979 -2001.**

_Early years: Elementary school._ Antonio was born in Mexico, and spent his childhood in Mexico City with his parents and brothers and sisters. As the oldest child, his parents gave him time and attention when he initially started school. He enjoyed school as a young child. As time progressed, and his brothers and sisters grew up, Antonio’s parents focused less on him and more on his younger brothers and sisters. This lack of attention saddened Antonio, and decreased his own interest in school. Other problems in the home decreased his desire to attend and achieve in school.

A:  It was nice and easy in the beginning.
I:  Okay.
A:  Because I am the older [oldest] in the family.
I:  Okay.
A:  So all the attention was on me—so my mother was very, um, focused on helping me to get into the school—but as the time went by, um, my brothers and sisters grow up. I’m the older [oldest] of 5 [children] and then, through their life situations of my mother and father working a lot, I lost that attention. You know, I think that’s important for parents to give sharing or showing interest on the education of children. So I lost that interest and I was able to not go to school and not get in trouble.
I:  Okay.
A:  So my mother was focused on different things and I know now that she had, back then, alcoholism problems.
I:  Okay, all right.
A:  So also I, um, domestic violence. (A, p. 1)

Antonio not only shared his feelings about his enjoyment of school at an early age, but also the important effect that his family had on his feeling of school. He also shared family issues regarding his father’s work and his mother’s alcoholism and domestic violence, and his
parents’ concern regarding raising a family of five children. Antonio shares his need for parents’ attention and interest in his schooling for his success. He does not share that his school staff provided a nurturing setting that gave him some of the attention he sought from his parents. His home life seemed to be comprised with a complex intensity of family issues. Later, during our first interview, Antonio shared details regarding his experience in school at a young age, his parents’ support, and what that support involved.

I: Now, you mentioned just a minute ago, that your parents were very supportive of you when you were younger.
A: Oh yes.
I: Was that because you were in a younger age at a different school and then you left that school level and came to the next one?
A: Yes, it was a nice transaction [relationship].
I: Okay, okay.
A: Cause. Um, they would get a uniform, they [his parents] would get supplies, different school transportation.
I: Um hum.
A: That was a different routine and that was kind of exciting for them and for me.
I: [For Antonio’s and his parents as he began school as a young student.]
A: Yeah, yeah.
I: Okay.
A: But, um, time went by and, uh, they couldn’t, uh, make up that attention any more cause now your [my] sister is at that level too, and then your [my] other sister, and then your [my] other brother, and then your [my] sister, and soon, so I couldn’t get that attention any more. (A, p. 6)

Antonio expresses the limitation of his parents’ support on his participation in school, support which was needed to extend to other siblings as they reached school age. Family resources were then shared by all children in the family who were attending school. The “attention” [resources] was shifted, or diluted, as more children went to school. This shift affected Antonio deeply, and his connection seemed to be to his parents’ attention and his family rather than to his school and his learning environment.
Early years: High school.

Late entry to high school creates barriers for success. High school was different for Antonio than elementary school. When it came time for him to attend high school, his mother did not find a school in the town they resided for him early enough for a space to be available for him to attend. So he had to attend a school in the neighboring town. This created complication regarding transportation and other expenses.

A: Okay, you know what? Something that’s happened differently to me than my relatives is that my mom, we were not on time finding the school for me—they were not sure if they were sending me, so we were late in finding a school near home.

I: Okay, okay. [Antonio and his parents looked for a high school for him to attend but the only one that was available to him was in the next town. To attend this school, Antonio was required to arrange and pay for his own transportation of 1 or 2 buses each day. This was challenging to him and his family.]

A: And then sometimes they [Antonio’s parents] had a, no money for the transportation—you know, uh, but they were up and down collecting money.

I: Um hum.

A: For transportation, and then sometimes they didn’t have money to go get me, you know, so.

I: What do you think caused the lateness?

A: My mother never worked, my father was the only income.

I: Yes.

A: And we were 5 [children] in the family.

I: Yes.

A: And I was the first on moving into the next level of education.

I: Right, right.

A: So that was a challenge to them.

I: Okay.

A: And to me, too. I, I, it was totally different to what I’d seen while working [as a younger student] but I had to take the bus [to get to school]. (A, p. 3)

To a family already stressed with issues of lack of money in the family and younger children who shared resources, Antonio attending high school created an even greater burden for the family. Antonio’s parents felt a desire to help him succeed. Antonio shares that “we” were engaged in finding a school. He feels that his school pursuit is a family issue, not solely his alone. His parents’ further invest in his success by collecting money for his transportation.
Despite his parents’ support, it appears that Antonio attended high school on an inconsistent, almost day to day, basis, due to the financial limitations for transportation and distance from home. Like a first generation college student who leaves for school, Antonio faced barriers as he attempted to attend high school.

*Uniform.* Antonio reflects on another painful aspect of his high school experience, his lack of a proper school uniform. Because of his family’s lack of money, he had to wear the same pair of pants throughout high school. Other students teased him about his worn attire.

A: I remembered a sad, very sad thing. For the 3 years of high school that I was supposed to take, uh—I used the same [pair of] pants that had trim on it, was extreme, cause it was ripped off, and my mom tried to sew it, amazing, my friends made fun of me.

I: Did you have to wear uniforms?

A: Yeah, it had to be the same pants, color, it was sad.

I: Wow, okay/

A: But I value very much that experience. So, uh, my friends made fun—“what’s up with the pants? You look like you were in a war and you came back,” I didn’t say it was fun.

I: You valued that? Why was that?

A: I value it now.

I: Because you overcame it?

A: Because I needed it, you know.

I: Okay.

A: It was sad, but I learned the need, the need of the uniform, supplies, um, another situation in the way to finish school, and what else, the financial need, in general, is what changed the argument for education. (B, p. 12)

When Antonio shares the specific words that his classmates used during this incident, it is as though he has remembered the words for years. I could imagine the students and Antonio as he wore the same pants, day after day, year after year. His feeling as “sad” rather than frustrated or angry is visible, and perhaps surprising. His mother does what she can to assist him and provide him with a suitable uniform by mending his pants over and over again. But his strength and resilience shine as he reflects on his pain, as he saw it as vehicle toward a greater issue, the need of education and the necessary supplies. Antonio recognized the uniform issue as
another initial barrier that made school difficult for him, but later in his life, he used it toward a greater understanding of success.

_Academics._ Antonio felt that when he came to high school, he was not prepared for school because of his home environment. He had failed a class in the first of 3 years of high school. He describes the system of education in Mexico.

A: Um, maybe when the last year of high school, cause it takes 3 years, and then, on the third year, I, I noticed [realized the cumulative effect] that I had failed subjects, from the first year that I, you know, what that I won’t be able to go back and redo all those.
I: Okay.
A: Cause I wasn’t getting good grades.
I: Okay.
A: And if you don’t get a, the first year, the manual, or the subjects passed, you won’t be able to pass the subjects the second or the third [year] subjects not approved from the first year, so obviously, I didn’t have it from the first year schooling until I finish the first year.
I: Okay, so did they have you go back to the first year and re do—could you have done that?
A: No, that’s an extraordinary test to cover that specific subject.
I: Oh, okay.
A: And if you didn’t cover it on the first year, you would carry into the second and the third year until you.
I: So they would give you a test, you could sit and take a test that would give you that credential, basically, and then you could go to the next year?
A: And I didn’t do it. [Antonio repeats that he didn’t take the test.] I said “no, forget it.” (A, p. 3)

Antonio shared the ages of students when they finish high school in Mexico, ages 12-14 or 15. He also looked ahead, as he shared that he did not tell his mother about graduation dates, he just wanted her to forget the graduation ceremony that he would not be eligible to participate. Antonio shared that she was unaware of the ceremony because of her preoccupation with her own issues (A, p. 4). He also discloses that his father would attend parent conferences at the end of the year and when hearing that his son had failed a class, would say “good thing you only failed one class,” rather than “how could we fix the failed class?”
The complexity of Antonio’s life is evident when his academic failure results and prevents him from graduation. His mother, whom he referred to as “we” when he registered for school, even is unaware of the graduation date and year. However, his father provides a limited support for him by congratulating him on failing only one class, and the visit of the father to the school for the conference implies his interest and concern as well.

*Truancy.* Antonio was less and less engaged with school and began to miss many days of school. During the second of his 3 years of school, he became friends with other students who were often truant from school. These students and Antonio spent more time away from school than they spent attending school. Antonio talked about influences he felt to attend vs. to drop out of school:

A: I left the house, I, time went by, like in second grade [the second year of high school] I got to know more friends. We didn’t go into the classes. We would go somewhere else, maybe to the park, maybe somewhere else, spend our day doing nothing, then went back to our homes [although Antonio took the bus to school]. So it was more friends from the school.

I: Hum.

A: That encouraged [me], we would talk “We’re not going to school, we should go somewhere else” and then, um, I’m trying to think, if I had somebody, um, who would say “You’ve got school, you should finish.” I didn’t, I could not come up with anybody.

I: Okay.

A: Yeah

He describes that no one from the school reached out to tell them to stay in school. He also disclosed what days he would usually attend school.

A: Friday I would be in school once, occasionally, it wasn’t permanently, for one whole week, no . . . it was occasionally, yeah. (A, p. 4)

Antonio and his school friends, who were regularly absent from school with no intervention from the school, target various locations to spend the day away from school. Since Antonio is traveling to school from another town, he would still have to pay for and take the
bus. His limited resources are depleting. With his irregular attendance, Antonio seems to move farther away from a goal of high school completion. Yet interestingly, he did not just stop going to school altogether. The students in his little group seemed to form a support system for each other. Did this group fill a void left by their parents or school or did this group develop just through the power of peer pressure?

*Decision to work while at school: Family financial problems.* Antonio’s parents were immersed in issues of daily life. His father worked all during the day and his mother was home faced with family issues. Antonio was concerned and tried to assist the family with the financial problems that occurred. He was the oldest of five children, and felt he needed to help the family. And, he had not done well in school.

A: You know, what it was clear in the family that the income was necessary. So between not passing the grades that I was supposed to, and not attending the school, and seeing the necessity, so that was my major decision... The major point, I’ve got to work. I’ve got to work to help. However, I remember I wasn’t asked to work. My parents, hum, didn’t say “you have to work, we have bills to pay.” Seeing that I couldn’t make it at school, I can’t blame anybody. That was my decision, all the time, coming to the school, or, um hum, um, not asking help to get current on the test.

I: Oh.

A: I didn’t encourage even myself to say “get this done, have the courage to go out, seek help.” I didn’t find, I didn’t have this, um, person that I could approach and say “do you think I can find help somewhere? Somewhere is proof that I can pass it,” um hum. I didn’t have that. I think it was my mistake not asking for help, I feel embarrassed to ask. (A, p. 5)

Antonio felt a conflict between his role as a student, and his need to help his family with needed financial resources. But his role as student had already become difficult for him, and compromised by his first year failure. He reflected on his difficulty in school and his search for validation that he could be successful with his studies. He weighed his options between school and work. Since he felt a responsibility to help at home, he was the oldest of five children and male, and a responsible young man, and since the financial need was immediate, he felt
compelled to work. But his conflict regarding school is evident, since he shares that “he couldn’t make it at school.”

“Experimenting with work” while in school. During our second interview, Antonio shared his decision to “experiment with work, while still in school.” He seems to reach a compromise in his decision making, which he defines as an “experiment.”

A: Yes, so instead of going to school, I decided to go to work, you know, experimenting with my first job.
I: Um hum.
A: And then, seeing that it was not too difficult to make money without education, I did drop out of school. [Further describes his decision.] Yeah, and then I started to experiment that I could work.
I: Okay.
A: And I liked it, money, okay, So I lost interest in school, and I saw the benefit [of my money helping] at home, so things were improving and family so, I said, okay, I’ll continue working and I didn’t go back to school. (B, pp. 1, 2)

Antonio shares his story, as the oldest of five children, of his perception of family needs. He shares that he “experiments with work” to see if he could find a job and make money without an education. He was able to accomplish that, his work paid him enough money to help his family and allowed him to avoid school. Working gave him a goal to help and a role as responsible helper. This decision to work showed his thoughtful, methodical process of “experiment[ation],” and showed responsibility and honor in helping the family. School didn’t seem as immediate and perhaps not as fulfilling as did work.

After high school: Work and family. For several years, Antonio maintained both school and work, as he contributed to the family income and resources and maintained his responsibility to the family. After experimenting with work since age 14, Antonio shares that he dropped out of school completely at age 18. It was then that he bought first car (B, p. 2). He continued working, was married, and had a child (A, p. 6).

_A dream becomes real: Transition to life in the U.S._ Antonio shared a dream that he had about coming to the United States. This dream highlights his many difficulties and pain about the transition to the new country. After he shared the dream, he also talked about the reality of his early life soon after he arrived in the country. His resilience and his optimism, as well as his loneliness, are evident as he shares his story.

A: I dreamt that I came to the states and I dreamed that it was not easy that it was painful, coming to the states. It was in the beginning.

I: Oh okay.

A: Changing, becoming used to the culture, language, the people, the costumes.

I: The winter.

A: The weather, all of it.

I: Yeah.

A: I was like crying, every time I got off from work

I: Wow.

A: Why am I here? I asked myself. I didn’t have a car back then and I was almost begging for a ride.

I: Um hum.

A: I had a bicycle, I was working, walking on my way back home and from working at both jobs, and have to walk back home, uh, it was not fun at all—I was crying myself. I’m not embarrassed now to say it. I’m not, but I was crying, asking myself, why am I here, I have a good job, my family is there [still in Mexico], everything, no? And then, uh, now I can use that to encourage myself. [Antonio recalls the dream he had that brought him here as well as his initial difficulties during our second interview. He reflects on his growth from that early time until now, and his desire to help others.] (B, pp. 8, 9)

Antonio attempts a new life in a new country, but although he works hard at multiple jobs, he feels the pain of transition, and loneliness. He reflects on his indecision of making the change to come to this new country and feels the depth of despair, but his strength to pursue his new life is evident as he continues to transition into life in the U.S. One remembers how connected he was to his family in Mexico during his years in school and in his choice to work to support the family financially. For someone such as he who knows this connection to family, being alone in a new country would have been especially painful.
Work, school and family life. Antonio shares more of his transition from his life in Mexico to his life in the United States. He came to the United States, by himself, when he was 21 years old. When he came to the U.S., he realized that developing his language skills in English was important, and he attended ESL [English as a Second Language] classes at GVCC to enhance his communication skills as well as participating in a pilot program as interpreter in general medical and legal areas (A, p. 8).

A: That was in 2001 [that Antonio came to the U.S.].
I: Okay, and did you have an idea about where you were going to work?
A: No, no.
I: I do remember you had some people in the area—did you have some?
A: Yeah, some friend—the same place of employment where I used to work in Mexico and we went together, we were planning to stay for a year.
I: Oh, and then go back?
A: Yeah
I: Uh huh.
A: But it didn’t happen, he came himself first, then he called and said you know, there’s spaces available, you should come. And I did take that chance for adventure and only cause I then had my first child.
I: Oh, okay.
A: And I said “Well, let me give it a try.” Um hum, I’ll try what I can and I’m supposed to work for 1 year, and I saw it was easier to get a job without education, and I started to work in restaurants. And they didn’t ask for any certification back then, and then I said I’ll bring my wife and child. We could stay together—I bring them and then we have a second child, and third one and I’m still here. [As he looks ahead in his life, he names all three of his children and lists their birthdates.]
I: And, as I also remember, you were at the time, you were here
A: In the beginning, I started to work for different restaurants, and so, I saw that I was able to work 2 full times a day [two full shifts]—working in the morning at one restaurant and working in the evening at the other restaurant [names restaurants where he worked]. And those restaurants are so close.
I: Yeah, they’re really close, across the street from each other.
A: So I was able to jump from one to the other for years. (B, p. 3, 4)

Working a sequence of jobs.

I: Did you get tired?
A: You know, I was so hopeful and encouraged by good people to buy your own home, you know. I guess that was the provider of energy to reach the goal to buy your own home, and I didn’t get tired, and in the town, finally we got approved
for a loan—and we bought our first home, then time went by and a co worker from one of the restaurants where I worked told me: “why don’t, you speak both languages, why don’t you try to work where I work [and only work part time at the other restaurant]. And she work[s] at a store selling—to work as delivery person. I did [mentions lab tests that were given to hire him for the job]. They hire me as a delivery guy, so I see that delivery is a good job, and I change my two [jobs for one full time, and a part time job]. So I was working for a while, time went by and the store, I reached [became] sales manager.

I: Um hum.
A: And the store got sold from franchise to corporate, and the new owner let us go and didn’t keep employees, and I got to find another job—which wasn’t easy back then. And I started to work for McDonalds for a while until I could find something better. And finally I found the collection agency that’s where I’m working now. That’s where I still work, and then, through this time that I’m talking to you. (B, p. 4)

This powerful statement by Antonio shares his strength, resilience and capacity for success. He not only came to a new country with initial communication limitations because he didn’t know the language, but also he resiliently held two full time jobs, working around the clock. His strength was evident to coworkers who recommended him for other jobs. And as he climbed up a ladder of jobs, his human relationship skills grew as well. He methodically transitions from coming to the United States “to try” life for a year, then stays, and brings his wife and their child. He frames his hard work at two full time jobs as an opportunity instead of a difficult drudgery, saying he is “so lucky.” His resilience and endurance, optimism and hope, energized him, and propelled him toward future goals and through difficult situations. Instead of feeling tired, he was “hopeful and encouraged” for the future goal of buying a house for his family. His resilience allows him to continue through a sequence of multiple jobs, each building on each other, from restaurant labor to difficult and delicate communication skills required of a collection agent. Antonio works throughout his life, even at McDonalds, when his other job ended, bolstered even by coworkers.
Recent: School, family and religious life. Antonio continues to share his story and he tells his quest for increased language skills through community college classes and for his high school equivalency certificate, through the community college’s GED program. He continues to work, and to raise his family, and also becomes a leader in his church’s religious life and instruction. His value of education, for employment and for life, is evident as he talks of changes in the job market.

A.: And then, um, time went by and the situation changed. The work, it’s more, um, difficult to get or to keep.
I: Okay.
A: So uh education is more demanding. So I want to improve that status on my person.
I: Okay.
A: I’m not, I would like to get a better job. (A, p. 8)

Family. Antonio tries to instill the expectation of his children as educated professionals as he plays with them and talks with them.

A: And then I’m always saying “why do I love you so much?” You know, and they’re like “because I’m so professional, I’m your child, I’m so handsome”
I: And.
A: Hahaha (laugh). [As he continues sharing his pleasant conversation with his children) . . . “you are going to be cute and you are going to be professionals” and that sort of thing—trying to instill them.
I: Um hum.
A” In their brains, this not an option , this is something that have to be done—and then hopefully they’ll get the priority, that way I’m going to be there to motivate them. (B, p. 14)

Antonio speaks of his children in the most loving and caring way, and shows his responsibility for their futures as well educated young people. His playful communication with them contains a serious message: that of high achievement and his expectation for their success. He shares the urgency of his intent as he states “this is not an option.”

School. Antonio’s value of education is clear as he shares his concern for his success through classes and learning, and his concern for his children’s success. Because of his concern
for education and his past experience in school, during our interviews, he offers suggestions for schools.

A: I think it would be nice to have somebody in the school that especially to lead, to find out who needs help.

I: Uh huh.

A: What student could take the opportunity to, uh, programs we have available—somebody—they’re looking for somebody to help, cause normally I, as far as I know, the school have programs to help but they’re, they have the programs—they’re waiting for the students to come to say “here I need help with this,” you know, but they’re embarrassed, or they’re not fully interested, or they don’t have the view yet to say I need help, I don’t. (A, p. 10)

Antonio also urges educators to look beyond the limitations of the school environment to the student’s home. He feels that a connection between the home and school must be made to provide comprehensive services for students.

A: And if you don’t have a stable family, you won’t be able to succeed in school work. You, as an educator, and you find out that’s why they don’t finish school, why they don’t just go, I think it begins at home. Like there is no stability at home, there won’t be a stability in school or work, life, so on—there is a break in something not right. You as an educator won’t be able to fix what is at home, but will have the extra attention that will allow them to focus on your materials, your subjects, your grades, you are going along on this grades. Let’s focus on that one, this is the help you can use. You know, there has to be some connection. Not only when you’re in school here, so, I think there has to be some connection from what’s home to these students. [He continues to remind educators that students might be embarrassed to talk about difficulties in their family life, but that it is necessary to know the setting of their homes]. (B, p. 6)

Antonio feels a responsibility to share his ideas about elements that would help a school be a better place for students. To do so, he looks into his own past and reflects on issues and solutions.

Religious life. Antonio has a great feeling of responsibility to his church, to questions of faith, and to faith education. Religious education is an important part of his life.

A: A tribute to my education is that, that on the side of the faith, when I was teaching at the Linneux Hall, this is a Catholic Center. [He shares his recent years of study in his faith, sent to the regional faith center, the Diocese, for
further instruction. Now he has teaching responsibilities at his local church for fifth graders, his “catechists,” children who will make a commitment to the church.] (B, p. 15)

**Future: A dream of the future.** Antonio shares another dream that he has recently had about being in a modern office building. He feels that his dream offers a direction for his future.

**A:** [He shares that he wants to continue with school and prepare for his future]. . . . I got a beautiful dream at night, you know, I find myself in a business building, very modern, high technology, and I said, I could just not come to this place, this type of place, without the proper education, So I said maybe there is something in the future there.

**I:** I could see you there, I mean, I can see you now. You know, in that type of a dream, I could very well visualize you in that type of position [and his ability to be a good supervisor]. And I think you’d be very good to supervise people, if you were to be in the office in the corner.

**A:** Ha ha ha (laugh).

**I:** With the window and everything, I could see you being a very good supervisor to your employees, I bet you would be a fair and, you know, demanding but fair.

**A:** I hear you.

**I:** And that’s the best boss.

**A:** I hear you. Um, then I was walking into the college one night, I said, okay, so what is that dream telling me, I think I’m going to focus on computers, cause the future, technology, is based on computers, so I might take some classes after the GED about computers, Being able to manipulate these computers and getting to—I don’t know—I really don’t know, but I feel it’s getting to the best option—to get computer knowledge.

**I:** Okay, I do, too, yeah, that sounds wonderful.

**A:** I’m excited about it. (B, p. 7)

Once again, Antonio shares a dream which could be life changing. He visualized himself in a new employment position, one that requires more education, yet one that has a very professional setting. He shares a variety of details about the new environment and connects the dream to the reality of college that he is currently attending. One thought leads to another, and soon he has a whole plan for his future put together.

Antonio shares his work ethic, his concern for doing well at his job.

**A:** [As] an employee, and then, um, until today, if I’m going to do a job, I’m going to do it completely and finish it to the best of my ability. Otherwise I will express to you I don’t feel comfortable doing it, I don’t think I can do it, or I need more
training, so I was able to notice what it means to become an employee, you know, what it takes. And that was what I learned when I left school. (B, p. 7)

Antonio’s statement regarding his philosophy of work sums up his strength. Combining his work ethic and his dream, Antonio moves toward his future of success.

**Discussion.** Antonio shared elements of his life from the earliest years until the present. His story has a theme of responsibility and self determination, and also hope. As a child who was the focus of his family support and found school easy while he was young, he also partnered with parents to make decisions (for example, referred to “we” when sharing his and his mother’s choice of a high school for him). He moved away from responsibility during his high school years as he became truant from school. As his interest in school diminished, his feeling of responsibility for assisting his family financially grew, and he began working to contribute to the family income.

Antonio’s sense of responsibility continues throughout his life time. He enters the U.S. to work, soon bringing his family from Mexico. Fueled by his dream and his relentless hard work, he acquires job after job, working two jobs, and climbing higher economically and in skill. Hope is reflected by his driving force to overcome barriers and adversities. Hope promotes his love of religion and his generosity in sharing his knowledge of religion with young children in his church.

Antonio reflects on his feeling that school must provide help for children who come from chaotic homes to deal with family issues that prevent them from learning at school. He remembers his early home life, and wishes that the school had provided an intervention for his success.
Antonio possesses a unique sense of responsibility in which he focuses on the task he puts before himself and determination in which he focuses on his own inner resources to complete the task. He is fueled by hope as he moves toward his dream and his future.

The final two portraits are participants who were younger than age 25 when they took part in the study. Both are young women, and both are mothers. Melissa left school when she was 16, and became a mother at 18. Rosa left high school, and after a short work experience, became a mother at 18 as well.

**Portrait of Melissa**

Melissa entered the classroom for our interview quietly and cautiously. Her head was bowed, her movement slow. She was thin, with a slim, pale thin face. Her brown straight, limp hair was pulled to the side in a dark cherry red colored ponytail. She wore a dark red jacket, with black t-shirt and jeans. Melissa spoke with a sweet, soft voice as we began to talk. She hesitated in conversation at first, but continued our interview because she said she wanted to share her story with me.

**Early life.**

*Elementary school and junior high blur into high school.* Melissa shares her early life as an elementary school student. Although she only speaks briefly about these younger years, she states that she thinks of herself as a teacher’s pet. She shares more about her middle years as she had many changes in her life during junior high and high school.

M: Um, all the way up until—from kindergarten to 7th grade, I went to Brenton schools and I was a very good student, all my teachers liked me; I was quiet, I did my work um, I got, I didn’t get good grades but I was like a “C” student. I passed the class, at least, my parents were glad I at least passed the class but, um,
my parents got divorced in 7th grade, and that’s when, uh, I kind of went rebellious. I guess, um, I went, I transferred to Brandeis schools, and in 8th grade I graduated from BUGC [Brandeis Upper Grade Center, grades 6-8], so that’s where I met all my friends that I stayed friends with through high school and, uh, I just found myself in a completely different world and different friends and, uh, it was, I liked, um—I didn’t like it—I was more comfortable in their lifestyle than I was being a teacher’s pet, but I was, all throughout my school years, I transferred schools and met people and I, well, these people are REBELLIOUS—oh, my bad, they’re so much fun, and they do, say, do wild things, and I’m looking back, like, why are you so retarded that you think that’s cool. (A, p. 8)

Melissa focuses on areas of her life that seem to be of high importance during this time, her friends, her rebelliousness, and her parents’ divorce. In this turbulent time of her life, she seems to gravitate to friends who fill her desire to rebel, yet she speaks of a conflict between the “bad” and the “fun” elements. It is as though she is in conflict with her direction as well. As she looks back on this period of her life, she has a new self awareness about her decisions during this time. As she met new friends and loved the excitement of them, after graduating from 8th grade, she started to decline in school achievement and behavior.

Parents’ divorce. An important part of Melissa’s early life was the divorce of her parents. Although she does not describe her home life before their divorce, she does share the difficulties of her life, meeting her parents’ respective expectations, after their divorce.

M: [After sharing that she started high school] I, um, I always lived with my mom after my parents got divorced, but my brother wanted to stay with my dad.
I: Okay.
M: [Shared that her brother lived with the father, but eventually moved in with her and the mother. Melissa’s school attendance declined during this time as well.] (B, p. 2)
M: Umm, me and my mom would get into fights, she would tell me that I was wrong and I shouldn’t listen to my dad and, um, my parents were split up. So it’s like when I was at dad’s house everything I was doing was right, when I was at my mom’s house everything I was doing was wrong [she was torn between her parents and their expectations]. (A, p. 2)
Melissa shared her feelings of turbulence as she navigated between the two households of her divorced parents. Since her parents’ expectations differed, she always felt she was doing the wrong thing, even when in the home of her father (because she was going against her mother at that time). Such differences created a level of anxiety in her.

**Middle years.**

**Truancy from high school.** Melissa’s home life and disinterest in school continued in her early high school years. During this time, she attended school less and less and shares that she was “on truancy” as a sophomore (A, p. 3), and with her parents’ okay, was allowed to be absent as well.

M: No, I was never really a school goer anyway. I was on truancy always getting in trouble at school and so it was, I didn’t really go much anyway, so, and being told that you don’t have to go, that was perfectly fine by me.

I: So, did the thought of actually leaving or dropping out of school occur to you during the times when you were, you know, in truancy programs and things like that, did it creep into your mind—in that you wanted to just not go back or—how did that sort of go into your decision?

M: Yeah, a lot of my friends at the time were telling me to go ahead and drop out and my dad was telling me to go ahead and drop out, uh, so it was kind, I was of getting told by many people it would be okay to dropout—nothing would change, um, so I just thought, it just kept going over in my head to me it would be perfectly okay, that I just would drop out.

I: So how old [were you during] was the truancy? Was it at quite a young age?

M: Truancy started, I think, in my sophomore year. I would, it was, I kind of played like cat and mouse with the school, that sounds really bad, um, I would, I would like not show up for 2 weeks, and then I would show up one day after 2 weeks, and a lot of my teachers didn’t like me. I didn’t do my work, I just didn’t show up for a while, and then I showed up like nothing ever happened. [Although Melissa missed school, she was often able to complete her work well on the limited times she did attend. Melissa talks about her interest and skill in writing that we will see she becomes very involved in later after she drops out of high school.] (A, p. 1)

Melissa shares that her poor attendance did not always hinder her ability to complete her work well. But what little connection she had with school was decreasing. Since she was making a game out of her school connection, she showed that she viewed school as frivolous
and not necessary. Yet she was still attending school at least part of the time, and continued to do some of the academic work when she attended.

**Father’s influence.** Melissa shared that her father was her most influential person, and was not supportive of her participation in school. While he always supported her decisions, she felt he was not a real parent.

M: Um, I would say the person that influenced me the most would be probably be my dad, was one of the people who was on me about “go ahead and just, yeah, it doesn’t matter, a high school education doesn’t matter, you can still pay the bills, you can live your life without it.”

I: Was that advice that he’d given you sort of all through the years? Or just pretty much toward your—as you became a teenager, an older teenager?

M: Yeah, well as I never really looked at my dad as a parent, because he was, as me and my, um, brother, my brother is 2 years older than me, as me and him got to teenagers, um, my dad was the first one—“Do you want pot? Oh, yeah, of course you can drop out of high school, of course you can just not go,” so he was, he was, um, not really, he was a parent trying to be a friend. And he was, any decision I wanted to make, whether it was good or bad, he was there telling me I was doing the right thing even though I wasn’t. (A, p. 2)

Melissa looks with self awareness on her father’s role in her life as a parent, even as a young girl. She reflects on his advice, and realizes that he was not giving her advice with her interest in mind. He was advising her from his own life’s perspective.

She also shares her mother’s role in her dropping out.

M: Um, well, it was, I was never really pushed to go to high school, um, my dad always told me it was okay if I dropped out. He did it, his sisters did it, and I moved from Brenton to Green Valley in my junior year high school and, uh, after that my mom told me either to go back to Green Valley schools or I just didn’t have to go back to school at all, and, me being a 16-year-old, of course, I’m not going to go back. (A, p. 1)

After her father’s advice to drop out and her move to a new school district with her mother, even her mother leaves Melissa’s decision to attend school up to her. Her will to attend school was already weakened despite truancy intervention, and the pieces of her dropping out were beginning to fit together.
**Dropping out of high school.** Melissa found it easy to drop out from high school by not registering to attend in her new school when she and her mother moved to a new school district.

M: When I dropped out? [How did it feel to me?] Uh, I thought it was amazing, I didn’t have anything to do, I could wake up when I wanted to, I came and went the house when I wanted to. I didn’t have anywhere to be. I liked it that way. (A, pp. 1-2)

**After high school.**

**Drugs and isolation.** Melissa acquired the lack of accountability that she desired, but the free time and isolation allowed her the ability to spend her time in isolation with drugs. She filled her time with music, drugs, and sometimes writing. Her surprising talent and interest in writing developed during this time, but her use of drugs continued when she was 15 and 16 years old (A, p. 3).

**Writing.** Melissa shares that writing has been an important part of her life. During high school, she was often able to write a paper well for a class she had not attended. But writing also played an important part of her life as she expressed her feelings through characters and through her—as an author (she describes that she keeps a daily journal). She shares her love of writing, but also her secrecy about being known as the author.

M: I do write short stories, you would say.
I: Oh really? Kind of like—do you put characters in them?
M: Yeah, actually.
I: No way, what stories?
M: They’re, uh, I just kind of they’re, um, they’re, uh, they’re kind of like, uh, kind of like dark stories. Stories like my, the one that I like the most is a girl named Violet and she, um, is a pretty girl, very popular at school, very good at school, then she got into drugs and she dropped out, she became, she started using her body for money and she ended up having a baby and she hated her baby and she named—what did she name her baby? I wrote this probably about 2 years ago, oh. [Melissa describes the number and type of stories she creates.]
I: Just on your own? You just wrote it? At home, on—like, on paper?
M: Yeah, I have a little notebook of, like stories, not a lot. I only have 5 or 10 stories, but I would just sit there and, um, use my imagination and I would write,
um, they would be funny stories, but they were really, they would be like sad, twisted stories. [She continues . . .] I keep my stuff, but nobody knows I have it. I have it in my shoeboxes in my closet. I don’t tell anybody, whenever I tell anyone I like poetry, Emily Dickinson is my favorite poet. I like to write, people sort of look at me and say “yeah, I’m sure you do.” But in my head, I’m thinking of all, like my little short stories, and I can write, whatever, to heck with you.

I: Oh that’s wonderful, that’s beautiful. Well, that’s a part of you that, you know, you probably don’t share with other people; perhaps people don’t appreciate that about you . . . , a whole part of you that I didn’t know about.

M: Yes, that’s kind of like my, uh, little, like, uh, I guess, little secret I like to, uh, write. I love poetry. Nobody ever guesses looking at me. [She shares that there is this whole other part of her as a writer that she doesn’t show, and that she does not write as much now as she once did.] I always wanted to be one of those, like, closet authors that just put, like, fake names on books.

I: Pseudonym.

M: Yeah. I just wanted one day, like, publish all my stuff but not put my name on it so some random girl out there could read a story and be, like, “oh, my God!”

I: Now, why couldn’t you want to put your name on it—that’s interesting.

M: I don’t, I don’t know, it’s just, um, I don’t know. I never thought that much into it, I just, uh, one of my favorite books that I have at home is Go Ask Alice and its written by Anonymous.

I: Okay, right.

M: And so, like, I’ve just like the book says, by Anonymous, it’s such an amazing story, and I think I want to do that. That’s what I could do, I could just publish all my stuff but just keep it by a, some, Jane Doe and.

I: Jane Doe?

M: I don’t have to get all the fame, I’m not a big person. I’m like a private person, so if my stuff ever does go anywhere, I don’t have to be bombarded by a billion and one people. But just so maybe one person out in the world, I don’t know, could like “Oh my God, someone else understands, yeah, that’s what I thought too.” (A, pp. 4-6)

Melissa delights in sharing her love of writing and in her surprise when people find out about her interest in it. She also shares her desire to write a book that is meaningful to others, yet not to take the credit for her writing. In this way, she shows a desire to connect with others and empathize with feelings, yet still stand outside of the connection of feelings. This expression provides safety for her while still allowing her to express her feelings.

Much of her writing was done while she was isolated. She felt that although this period was a “dark time,” that this was a deeply introspective time for her.
M: When I would, um, lock myself in my room for days when my drug of choice was air dust ride, I huffed, um, I would lock myself in my room for days I would be writing and I would be listening to heavy metal music that I used to like so much and, I can’t stand anymore—um. It was kind of a creative time. That’s when I learned that I liked poetry—that I—how much I actually learned that I liked—that’s when I learned about myself. (A, p. 7)

In her isolated experience of uninterrupted drugs, music, and writing, Melissa feels that she connects with herself. With no one else to communicate with, she creates characters in stories and dreams of writing ideas that other girls feel too.

**Rehab.** Melissa’s world of drugs continues until a critical incident occurs at her home. She was placed in a hospital setting for treatment, and through this treatment, she says that she gained sobriety.

I: Okay. You just mentioned that you were sober here at 17—how did you do that? On your own? Or did you go to some kind of a program?

M: Um.

I: How did that go for you?

M: I got caught a few times by my mom and then, uh, there was one time that I got—she caught me passed out on the floor. I was huffing and, uh, she took me and she made me go to the [psychiatric unit] and after that I had to go to like outpatient counseling. They have drug classes. It was there that’s when, when I got sober for the final time. (B, p. 4)

Melissa’s path to sobriety was one in which her mother played a part in taking her to treatment. She shares only a brief statement about her critical incident, but it provoked a life changing resolution to her drug addiction. She shares that the treatment program allowed her to “[get] sober for the final time.” “Final time” appears to be the result of more than one attempt at sobriety, but this attempt allowed her to be sober. She gives no other statement regarding other activities or programs in which she participated, or other connections to rehabilitation centers.

**Daughter’s birth and a new future.** Melissa shares that she became pregnant at 17, and that she had her daughter at 18 (A, p. 6). At this age, she had already she dropped out of high school, and after her rehab program treatment. Her daughter’s birth presents her with a
challenge but an opportunity. Through her daughter, she looks forward to a new future for herself and her child. When I asked Melissa how she felt she had grown since she left school, she shared some of her strengths:

M: Uh, I think that I’ve become a much stronger person, um, I’ve learned how to take care of myself and my daughter. She has taught me joys that could be there and the happiness, so I think, uh, I don’t want to say my dropping out was a good thing but, um, I think dropping out was a maybe meant to be in my life because, um, it gave me sobriety and gave me my daughter. I like both of these a lot. (B, p. 6)

She shared further insight regarding her hope for her daughter’s future:

M: [Asked what positive changes in her life since she dropped out of high school.] Um, I would, I guess that would have to be my daughter. Um, I definitely don’t want her to be in the position that I’m at, um, by the time she’s 20—I want her to be in college [not be a high school drop out] and whatever people do at 20, I don’t know what a lot of people do at 20.

I: What do you do?

M: Uh, I’m a stay at home mom, trying to get my GED right now and, uh, I don’t.

I: Okay—tell me what caused you to come back to school then.

M: It’s definitely my daughter, you know—(proud of her mother when she goes to school for her GED). I see school differently cause I don’t want my daughter to mess up in school—I want her to go to school and become somebody—and see dropping out is never going to get her anywhere. So, uh, trying to get my GED and get started college and get a career, so I want to do things right for my daughter.

I: What kind of a career?

M: Ultra sound tech. Well, I haven’t really looked into it, when I was pregnant I had to get a lot of ultra sounds because I had a lot of complications and I just loved staring at the screen because, uh, the fact that I loved staring at something inside of me—I just—it’s so awesome—(exciting to see ultrasound, even in other areas of body) . . . how you could literally see what’s inside of you—I thought it was really cool and, um, so it kind of stuck with me since then. (A, p. 10)

Melissa offers wisdom and other strengths she has developed since she left school. Her character is developing and she is fulfilling her responsibilities.

M: Alright, I have learned patience a lot. It took patience. I got my daughter counting and spelling, I don’t see, it’s still young for me to have a 2-year-old, but, um, everybody, I don’t really view myself as, um, as like all of my, uh, all of my troubles, or how, uh, if I’m set back, if I’m not, I don’t really try not to look
at what the people my age are doing [because Melissa feels she is trying to set her own life path]. (B, p. 7)

M: Um, I’ve, hum, I’ve learned, uh how, I never really thought I was book smart, but then after I dropped out, I kind of realized how much school did teach me, and then, um, kind of realized that the choices I was making, I was a better person than that, and I didn’t fit in the lifestyle that I was chasing. (A, p. 9)

M: Yeah, I, I didn’t, uh, try to put myself where I am today, I just kind of let things happen—I kept myself in some control, but I, um, I just, the opportunity came and, uh, if it sounded right, sounded good, uh, I pimped it. (B, p. 8)

Melissa shows her self awareness and growth as she accepts her responsibilities and works for a positive future for her daughter. She also reflects on her past, and realizes the changes in her thinking that she has developed. Now, instead of feeling that she is not able to make decisions about her life, she realizes the control she does have. She feels positive about this control, and uses it to move toward her positive future.

Discussion. Melissa shares her story and in so doing, a theme of hope for her future emerges. In her story, this theme has evolved later in her life, but especially after the birth of her daughter. She feels this hope for her life despite her early life of chaos living between two households of divorced parents, her alliance with friends who delighted her with negative influences and her use of drugs.

Creative writing was an important element of the time she spent using drugs, she shared. But as she immersed herself in her writing as she escaped life into her drug experience, the paradox of this experience for her is that she felt that she had discovered herself during this time.

Her life changes continue to occur after her sobriety and the birth of her baby. Her hope is now reflected by her sobriety and her care for her child. This acceptance of responsibility is new for Melissa, and she seems to embrace it. Hope is reflected by her dream for her future, as she returns to school for her GED.
Portrait of Rosa

Rosa was young at 21 but appeared somewhat older as she moved cautiously into her seat in the class for our interview. Her long, dark hair framed her round face, with translucent olive skin and dark eyes. She had a quiet manner and spoke in a soft voice. But although she spoke softly, her presence at the interview indicated her willingness to tell her story, and I sensed her quiet strength and independence.

Elementary and high school.

*Elementary school, family life and value of education.* Rosa’s early life was spent surrounded by family as she lived in the same house in a large Midwest urban neighborhood until her late teens. In addition to her parents and brother and two sisters, her grandmother, her mother’s mother, from Mexico, lived in the home. As a young girl, Rosa attended elementary school at a nearby school. Spanish was the language spoken at home, but through playing with neighborhood children and attending elementary school, Rosa learned English (A, p. 2). She attended the same elementary school throughout her early years, but school was difficult for her and she repeated the third grade. She moved on to high school at the neighborhood high school. Some girls from her neighborhood attended the high school, but for the most part, she was a new student in a new school (A, p. 1).

*Grandmother vs. father’s ideas about school, with mother in the middle.* Early in the interview, we have an extended conversation about how she felt about school when she was in high school.

R: I really didn’t like school . . . felt school was “not for me” . . . I didn’t like the subjects . . . I really didn’t like the school, I didn’t like the subjects, but they try explaining a little more for me, to focus on my homework and my work . . . I repeated the third grade. (A, p. 2)
A little earlier we had talked about elementary school. Rosa felt that there the teachers:

Care[d] a little bit more . . . I really didn’t like school—I didn’t like the subjects—but they try explaining a little more for me to focus on my homework and my work so when I left the elementary school and I graduated . . . I went to high school, I had the same problems . . . I didn’t get it.

A little later, still talking her high school days, I asked her again to describe how she felt.

R: I thought it was boring, it um like it was boring—I didn’t see the point of going to school if I’m not going to learn nothing—I didn’t really like school back then.
I: Okay—even as a younger student? Like um—in the elementary school? As a younger student? How was that for you?
R: I thought it was mostly the same thing, Um, I’m not sure because when I was young, my grandma always used to tell me—she’s Mexican from Mexico—she said that school—now these days—they’re not good for us—that were not going to learn nothing.
I: Okay.
R: So, I think that’s what I kept in my mind.
I: Okay, why do you think she said that? What caused her to feel that way?
R: I guess cause she never went to school—her dad—never—they believed before us—like school wasn’t really important.
I: Okay.
R: Especially for girls. [Rosa shared that her grandmother lived at home with her and her family, in the same house throughout her childhood.] She used to say girls are meant to be, to be for a housewife and the guys go out to look for a job.
I: Okay.
R: So that’s when my dad came in—he said that is a “grand vacation,” and I won’t be there with my husband all my life [having a husband is an unstable relationship that might not last very long].
I: Okay.
R: So if I’m not treated well, so, so he gave me good advice.
I: Okay.
R: But then my grandma was there and she said the schools were too advanced for us girls.
I: And how about your mother? Was your mother in the picture as far as what was—did she have an opinion on this—was this her mother?
R: Yes. She said that it was up to me—school or get a job. (A, p. 3-4)

This shows vividly the conflicting view points of the three main family members (grandfather, father, and mother) regarding her education. She seems to be mostly going on the basis of how she experienced her situation in middle and high school. At that time she felt elementary school was mostly the same as now. She understood each family member’s
viewpoint to some extent and saw all of them as in some ways reasonable. Rosa had learned English in her neighborhood and in school “I was in kindergarten, I learned English, so I was comfortable with it . . . my friends, I used to live in a white neighborhood, so I used to speak English with friends.”

**In high school and dropping out.**

“**Not getting it**” in high school. Actually, the beginning of the interview gives a more specific picture of how she felt n high school. Virtually my first question was “Tell me how you came to drop out of high school.” She responded:

R: Um, I didn’t really see that school was for me, so I decided to go look for a job.
I: Okay, and when was that? How old were you when that happened?
R: Sixteen. [Living in the city.]
I: And what made you think that school wasn’t for you? What kinds of feelings did you have about school?
R: Well, I didn’t really get the school, and teachers really didn’t seem to care cause I went to Tilden High School and teachers didn’t really care, so I didn’t believe it wasn’t really for me—so I decided to go and look for a job—but then I quit my job and then go back to school and then I felt the same way again.

When I asked her “when would you say you fist experienced the thought of idea of dropping out” she responded “At the age of 16—the first day of high school.” She is coming to high school with an awareness that her family members have different ideas about the importance and role that high school should play in her life, but looking at her experience there, she makes her own decision. A couple exchanges later she repeats.

Cause I didn’t get the work [in class]. So the teachers weren’t explaining—you were on your own. Well, I didn’t think I was going to learn, I didn’t see, what’s the point of learning if I was going to be there and not learn something?

She stayed in highs school for one year and finally left to get a job. During this time she lived a quiet life while she lived at home, not going out much or staying out late out on the streets
“hanging out with friends . . . I didn’t really go out like to the movies or stuff like that, just hang around the house with friends” (A, p. 7).

**Dropping out of high school, work and returning to high school.** When she dropped out, she soon began a job at a fast food restaurant. The world of work at the fast food restaurant was difficult for her then, since she was still shy and did not feel comfortable in the work setting. Rosa shares her first work experience.

- R: My first job was at McDonalds.
- I: Okay—that’s good—well, there’s.
- R: I was really shy, that’s why I wasn’t comfortable—cause I was a really shy girl before—well and I liked school a little bit but not that much. So I went back to school to give it another chance.
- I: . . . Did anybody influence you?
- R: My dad, he was the one that told me to go back . . . I went back to school when I was 17. (A, p. 2)

Working at Macdonald’s, she started to have second thoughts: “I liked school a little bit” (A, p. 2). She decided to return to school based on both her own decision and the advice of her father.

**Dropping out of high school for good, and working.** But after returning to school a second time, Rosa again found the school work difficult and teachers not helpful or caring. Although she attended classes but teachers would write work on the board and with little further explanation “the students, teachers would give kids the work but then not explain it” (A, p. 3). Soon Rosa’s desire to try school again dissipated, and again she dropped out of school.

The second time Rosa dropped out of school, she again found a job after she left school. This job was at the work place of her father.

- R: Yes, I started to work in a different place where, with my dad.
- I: Oh, with your dad? Okay, okay—and how was that? A little better than McDonald’s? And where was it, exactly?
- R: At the Hilltop Oak Brook. It was comfortable, it was fun.
- I: So you got to do something a little different.
R: Yeah. I worked there for 6 months and then I got married.

Rosa expresses being comfortable in her job at her father’s workplace. Her age, her previous experience at McDonald’s, her job description, and the fact that her father was there, perhaps providing transportation to and from work, as well, could be important factors to her comfort. The job did not last long for her, however. Although Rosa enjoyed her work, another part of her life was beginning to unfold. After working for 6 months at the hotel, she shares that she was soon married.

**Marriage and family, move to Green Valley.** Soon after her marriage at age 18, Rosa looked forward to starting a family.

R: And then I wanted to have my children.
I: Yeah? And then you came down here [to Green Valley].
R: Yeah, we came here, um—it seems nice in Green Valley instead of the city and we wanted our kids to have a better life.
I: Yeah, it’s pretty quiet here instead of the city, sometimes, sometimes not [restates that Rosa came to Green Valley].
R: I came to Green Valley pregnant, at 19.
I: Nineteen? Okay—all right—I came to Green Valley when I was pregnant too—and then—then you had your son after that—were you still 19 at that point?

For Rosa to leave home and her family in the city and come to a new town at a vulnerable part of her life as an expectant mother, meant that she was very strong and independent. It might have been easier to move after the birth of the baby, but she moved before his birth. It seems that she and her husband set an independent course for their family.

**Decision to return to school for her GED.** A year later, at age 20, she had her second son. Following the birth of her second son, she started working as a cashier at a Mexican grocery store. Also, after the birth of her children, she made the decision to return to school “well, I’ve come to school to get a better career and job . . . I’d like a better education for my son . . . I need my own education.” She returned to school at GV to earn her GED as well as
worked, but she only held that job for 6 months, because she was fired. It was difficult to attend school and work, and care for the children. “It was kind of difficult being at work and studying” (B, p. 3). Rosa felt that her children were motivation for her to return to school.

R: And then I became a mother; I’d like [for my son to have] a better education for my son. But before I do that, I need to get my own education. Okay, and so I don’t want him to be like well, you’re a drop out—why are you coming to school. That’s what I told my mom before.

I: Okay.
R: And so I want to get—I want to be someone, so they can be someone.

She expressed hope for her children’s future, yet related this hope to her own educational decisions. She predicted that her children could be affected, angry, or disappointed by her decisions, “and so I don’t want him to be like, well ‘you’re a drop out—why are you coming to school,’ that’s what I told my mom before . . . and I want to get—I want to be someone, so they can be someone.” Rosa also illustrated her feeling of motivation to go beyond where she is at this time in her life. She reaffirms that she “wants to be somebody” as a mantra for success that replaces “school is not for me.” This affirmation is a commitment, both to herself and to her children.

**Looking toward her future.** Now Rosa continues to attend school for her GED class as well as care for her children. She feels her GED teacher “cares and . . . he’ll be there until we get whatever question it is.” Attending class is “comfortable.” Finding a teacher that cares and who continues to teach the concepts until students “get whatever question it is” promote the “comfortable” educational environment Rosa had not experienced in her earlier school years.

**Discussion.** Many students, after dropping out in high school get a surprise “reality shock” when they start working in entry level employment such as fast food restaurants, and some students decide to return to school. At that point the school has a good chance to work
with them and steer them into a better direction. But Rosa merely returned to her previous problems when she returned to school, and this led her to drop out again, this time permanently.

Now, Rosa became focused on a better life, “I thought . . . what can I do with my life, I wanted to be somebody, I want to come to work, to be somebody, get a good job. . . . I was thinking about being a nurse, but my dad’s family, they’ve taken classes to be a nurse and I want to be something different.” Rosa has become independent in thinking and planning; she knows that family members before her have become nurses but she is making her own way. I sense that Rosa has grown beyond merely adopting the identical model of her family, has begun to move beyond the model to search and create her own path and real identity.

Motherhood has impacted Rosa’s life regarding her education as a mother as well “cause every day I learn to be a better mom and everyday—he’s the first grandson—I don’t have like older nephews, so I’m not sure of what to do . . . but I learn from him.” I feel like a reciprocal pattern or circle of life is realized by Rosa in which she returned to school because she wants to “be somebody” for her son and model education for him, yet her son “teaches me [her]” to be a mother.

A theme of hope is felt in her success, as Rosa continues her education and moves to realize her educational and career goals, and her goals to be a good mother as well. Rosa’s life moves through her early years in elementary school, through high school, work, and motherhood. As she reflects on her family’s conflicting values on education, and experiences a turning point in her life as she enters motherhood, Rosa’s hope for her future moved her from her earlier belief that “school is not for me” to wanting and working toward to “be somebody.”
Chapter 5

Findings and Discussion

In the previous chapter, through individual interviews with eight GED students, I created a portrait of each student. Each portrait attempts to capture essential elements of the student to help the reader understand their paths to dropping out of high school, in relation to the following research questions asked in this study: The main question of the study is “What lessons are learned from portraits of high school dropouts?” Other important subsidiary questions of the study are:

1. Are elements in the school domain expressed in students’ life stories?

2. What feelings or experiences are expressed through the students’ portraits? What do they reveal about the students’ dropping out?

3. How did these students view themselves in relation to the school during their life stories?

In this chapter, I will address questions by describing the themes that emerged from the study. Before discussing the themes in detail, the first section gives a summary of demographics and which participants exemplified which theme.

The following page contains a table that illustrates the demographics of the study and a note that further explains the elements of the table (see Table 1).
Table 1

Summary Demographics and Themes

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<th>Subject</th>
<th>DO/age</th>
<th>Gen R/GED class</th>
<th>Mult DO/abs</th>
<th>Likes elem.</th>
<th>Sub/ab</th>
<th>Work</th>
<th>Home</th>
<th>Rel</th>
<th>Par</th>
<th>Tal</th>
<th>Dr.H</th>
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<tr>
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Note. DO/age = age participant dropped out of high school/age of participant when he/she took part in study. Gen R/GED class = gender of participant/ethnicity or race of participant; GED class session attended: E=evening, F=afternoon, A=morning. Mult DO/abs = participant dropped out more than once/ maintained frequent absences from school. Likes elem. = participant stated that elementary school was a positive experience for him/her. Sub/ab = substance abuse was a significant problem for participant or close family member. Work = participant maintained a significant work history. Home = participant’s home life was seriously disturbing. Rel = participant was sustained by religion. Par = parenthood was a significant factor in participant’s life. Tal = participant possessed a talent or special interest. Dr.H = participant plead for assistance from the school. Res = participant possessed a strong resilience despite adverse conditions or circumstances.

Demographics of the participants are shown in the above table. All eight students attended GED classes in Green Valley Community College. The first five of the eight participants were older when they participated in the study (Antonio, age 32, Derrick, age 38, James, age 41, Sharrlene, age 51, and Katrina, age 45), and the remaining three were younger (Melissa, age 20, Rosa, age 21, and William, age 19). Students’ gender and race/ethnicity is shown, as well as the GED class session each student attended. Students attended morning, afternoon, or evening classes at the college.

Other demographics, shown on the above table, are considered as well. Six of the student participants, including three of the five older ones, either dropped out more than one
time, or maintained absences over a long term before they actually left school: Rosa (as a freshman and a junior), Derrick (at age 16 and then 19), and William at age 17 and age 18.

Three students maintained absences over a long term (more than 3 or 4 days a week for several weeks or months): Antonio (who “experimented with work”), Melissa (who “played cat and mouse with the school”), and William (“attendance, mine was the worst, probably”). The literature supports this aspect in participants’ behavior. Alexander, Entwisle, and Kabbani (2001) document a “long term disengagement” between students who dropped out and school. Thus, dropping out is more of a process, rather than an event (Hammond et al. 2007).

Students’ feelings about school were important: seven participants remembered elementary school in a positive way. Antonio remembered elementary school as “nice and easy.” Derrick found elementary school “easy” and enjoyed going. James shared that “I thought grammar school was the best there was,” and Katrina was the eighth grade salutatorian of her school. Rosa shared that her “teachers cared” [more than her teachers in high school]. Melissa shared that she was thought of as a “teacher’s pet” in school before sixth grade, and William “loved elementary school.” Sharrlene did not attend school on a regular basis as a young girl.

The literature recognizes that although students have dropped out, they may have actually enjoyed school (Reder & Strawn, n.d.).

Substance abuse was another important variable among the students. Alcohol and drug use were mentioned in the stories of four students (three of the five older students, and two of the three younger ones): Derrick (“I used to be drinking and doing illegal drugs”), James (“I neglected class, started doing drugs”), Melissa (“we [friends from high school] all went different ways, really hard into drugs”), and William (“drinking and doing drugs”). Antonio
shared that a parent’s alcoholism was a factor in his home life as a child (“back then [there were] alcoholism problems.”)

Looking at the students’ individual elements through their voices allowed me to create their portraits. Yet looking beyond each individual to consider across the portraits, several themes emerge, with each theme exemplified in two or more participants. These themes include: (a) Living a satisfactory life for nearly 20 years yet having to obtain a GED; (b) extremely disturbing conditions at home, occurring even during elementary school years; (c) being sustained by religion; (d) parenthood causing a life change; (e) a talent or special interest that brightened the overall picture; (f) “I wish there would have been a Dr. Help,” and (g) resilience and hope through out life. In what follows I discuss these in more detail.

**Living a Satisfactory Life for Nearly 20 Years Yet Having to Obtain a GED**

One theme that emerged from the older participants’ stories was that several of them (four of the five older students) were living satisfactory lives for nearly 20 years despite their lack of a high school credential. Only recently did the necessity arise to get a GED so they could either maintain their level of employment or to move to another job. For 20 years these participants had maintained a long history of successful employment, earned promotions or completed specialized job training, and were positively recognized by their coworkers. When they became unemployed recently, the prospective new employers checked whether they had a GED. In some cases they needed a GED because they aspired to a better level of employment.

Two students (Katrina and Antonio) exemplify the essence of this theme. Katrina, who was trained as a firefighter and paramedic soon after her projected date of high school graduation, later became an EMT and worked in the field for over 20 years. She was especially
valued by her coworkers, who looked to her expertise as they assessed emergency situations ("I was the one they [coworkers] always went to [in an emergency]"). In addition to her 20 years on the job, she raised a family of three children. Due to budget cuts, she lost her job. Despite her skill and experience, when she tried to get new employment in her field, she was not eligible because of her lack of a high school credential. Job opportunity after job opportunity would not hire her ("I had to turn the position down because they wanted my high school transcript."). She returned to school to obtain her GED, with pride in finally completing. Antonio, who worked in a variety of jobs during high school in Mexico and came to the US, first working as a kitchen laborer, worked 2 full time restaurant jobs for years ("I saw that I was able to work 2 full times a day"). Through the advice of a coworker, he obtained fulltime employment in a series of positions, until he became a sales manager and then a collection agent. During these years, despite his lack of a GED or high school credential, he became a proud homeowner ("we bought our first home"), and provided for his family of wife and 3 children. To fulfill his dream of working with computers in an office setting, he needs further education; he must first obtain his GED ("I could just not come to this place, this type of place without the proper education").

Two other students (James and Derrick) have elements of this theme in their stories. James, who maintains over 20 years of work history in landscaping, returned to school for his GED after an injury prevented him from continuing his previous work ("I retired myself at 40 years old because of my lower lumbar disease—I can’t do any physical labor"). Although he had over 20 years of successful work experience, his life was chaotic because of his life style with drugs and alcohol ("I was coming out of darkness, coming out of the city—downfall . . . . nine months—I’m totally sober now. The sobriety has been the key"). After he gained sobriety, he decided to return to school for a horticulture degree. He needed a GED as a first step toward
his goal (“I’m going into the horticulture [program at GVCC]”). Derrick also has elements of
the theme in his story. He had a lengthy work history as well. After his high school pizza
delivery job, he was a bartender, which provided him with job security in a chaotic
environment, for over 15 years. His desire to get a different job and work environment,
requiring a high school credential, moved him to return to get his GED.

The literature often defines high school dropouts through a deficit model that includes
lower SES; the long term economic security and mastery of their life situations for the
participants who exemplified this theme refutes this depiction. However, Entwisle, Alexander,
and Olson (2004), who discuss students who complete the GED at a later age, also find that
older completers also have a more substantial work history than do younger students who
complete the GED. McNeal (1995) and Cordell (2005) find that students leave school because
they start work. The same is true in this study for Antonio, James, and Derrick.

**Extremely Disturbing Conditions at Home Starting During Elementary School Years**

In this study, some participants experienced extremely disturbing conditions in their
homes, starting during elementary school years. Elements such as verbal and physical abuse,
adverse living conditions, criminal activity, and seclusion or isolation are examples of these
disturbing conditions.

Two students (William and Sharrlene) are participants who exemplify this theme.
William, from age 9, began living in his auntie’s basement with his mother, brother and sister
because his mother was mentally ill and only left this environment when he was 18. In this
environment, he was subjected to daily life in the darkness of the basement, verbal abuse from
his auntie, and gang activity from his brother. Sharrlene experienced regular physical and verbal
abuse from her mother and isolation from school and other children during the school day, imposed by her mother, throughout her early life. It wasn’t until age 9 that her mother placed Sharrlene in a school. Despite the fact that her father seemed to be her advocate, the abuse continued. Child services finally visited the home when Sharrlene was high school age.

The literature addresses home life and the family as a factor of students dropping out of high school. Woods (1994) and Hammond et al., (2007) identify and categorize risk factors for potential dropouts that include social and family domains. Woods explores who the dropouts are and factors such as low SES and low family involvement that are present in potential dropouts. Hammond divides domains that affect potential student dropouts: family, individual, school, and community.

Although the literature cites risk factors regarding GED students, the literature has not often reported severe cases of disturbing conditions such as William and Sharrlene (an exception is Bae, 2007, who documents a portrait of a formerly incarcerated female GED student). Perhaps the stories of these students are not usually captured in earlier studies. Possible explanations for the severity of the disclosure by these participants are that the research in this study is being conducted in close geographical proximity to a large city, so the intensity of the urban area may enhance the severity of participants’ lives; or, through the deep conversations promoted by the methodology of portraiture, a deeper level of communication and disclosure take place.

**Sustained by Religion**

A third theme that emerges from the participants’ stories is that of sustainment by religion. Two of the participants (Antonio and Sharrlene) exemplify the essence of this theme,
as they share their deep commitment to God and religion, and the importance of it in their life. They speak of elements of prayer and communication with God as well as teaching and learning denominational education, and of reading the Bible. Antonio shares his love of the church and his hunger for learning more about his denomination. He was sent for special training through the regional religious center, and as he learned more himself, he gave back to his local church by teaching children. Sharrlene shares conversations that she has had with God, and talks through issues toward resolution in these conversations. For example, she shared that she resolved her feelings about her mother as she talked to God. She also shares that she attends a weekly Bible study at a local church, and reads her Bible each evening.

Derrick also shares an interest in reading the Bible. Despite his learning disability he read it every day, and says that he has read the whole Bible, from cover to cover. In addition, Derrick loved the lyrical quality of the King James Version of the Bible. Very few individuals have this kind of appreciation. Other literature mentions students sustained by religion, for example, Bae (2007), expresses the story of a GED student who was sustained by her faith.

Parenthood as a Life Changing Experience

Both male and female participants share that parenthood motivated them to make positive changes in their lives, and that these changes include coming back to school to achieve a GED. Four participants’ stories reflected this theme, 2 older students and 2 younger ones (Rosa, Derrick, James, Melissa). Rosa shares that she wants to “be somebody” for her children, and wants to complete her GED so that they will see her as a positive role model. Derrick loves being a dad, and wants to provide a positive environment for him. He feels getting his GED will help him to get a job better suited to care for his son. James shares that he has returned to school...
because of his daughters, who are good students themselves. He wants them to see him as doing positive things with his life. Melissa also wants her daughter to see her in a positive way, and to see her learning each day in school. She wants to make a good life for her daughter, and sees school as the path to get her there.

The literature often speaks to parenthood in high school as a risk factor for potential dropouts. Woods (2004) and Hammond et al., (2007) both identify the importance of the family as an important element affecting potential dropouts. This study finds that it provides a motivation for students to return to school. Bae (2007) expresses such a story of a student who was motivated to return to school because of motherhood.

**Talent or Special Interest**

Having a talent or special interest is another theme that emerged through participants’ stories. The talent brightened the lives of the participants and may be connected with them having the spirit to come and attempt to obtain a GED.

Two students (Sharrlene and Melissa) share their love for art or writing in their stories. Sharrlene discovered her love for art as a young girl. With this love of drawing and painting, soon discovered by others such as her father and staff members at her school, she negotiated a place in a school art fair. She sold some of her drawings and was recognized by her father as a talented artist. But more meaningful for Sharrlene was that drawing was something that she “always have [had],” and during her difficult early life, was a strength she could hold on to. In her later life, her art played a part as well. She said she was always imagining: when she saw a blank wall, she thought about what she could draw on it. When she painted Disney characters on her bedroom walls as an older person, she made a statement of control in her own
environment, as she shared her world with those who saw her work. (I used to tell my art students as they started with a blank canvas: maybe we can’t control the world out there, but you can control this space on canvas.)

Melissa initially found her love for writing when she used drugs for days at a time as a teenager. She shared that her writing was a source of self discovery, but through it she created stories, “sad, twisted stories” that allowed her to create identities, work through issues or examine her world view. But interestingly, she wanted to be known as an “Anonymous” author of her work instead being known by name. She wanted to preserve her identity, but allow the stories to connect with readers, other young girls like herself, who saw themselves in her writing.

The literature often uses a deficit theory to define dropouts. Such a theory does not focus on the depth of talent or expression that students may possess despite their lack of a high school credential, and does not recognize that art has this extraordinary power of sustaining—this is often overlooked in thinking about a person and in education. Ignoring this diminishes the integrity of the student.

“I Wish There Would Have Been a Dr. Help”

A sixth theme that emerged from participants’ stories is that of wishing for assistance from the school. Participants expressed that they long for a person in the school who could help them navigate the school setting by helping students to identify their needs or identify resolutions to personal problems, family problems, or academic referrals. Ideally this would be a person who would be available and easily approachable to students. Three participants (James, Antonio, and Rosa) exemplify this theme. James personifies his wish for assistance at school as
a “Dr. Help,” who would be available to all students. Dr. Help’s office at school would be clearly marked, and students would have access to him/her at all times. He/she would even help students to identify their problems. Since James expressed his feeling of being a desert island as a young student, it is clear that Dr. Help would have been especially meaningful for him. James even identified additional, specialized roles for Dr. Help, such as Dr. Reference Help, to help students in a broad range of areas, and peer student assistance such as Dr. Help peer group helpers who would work directly with students. Antonio, who was in Mexico during his high school years, shares his wish for assistance at school as well. He knows that students often bring serious family problems to school and are unable to work because they are overwhelmed by these problems. He also knows that these problems are often hidden from educators because children do not share them at school. Antonio wishes for a way that educators can help troubled students, because he was one of these students and his learning was impacted. Rosa, who felt that school was not for her because of her grandmother’s advice, and felt teachers at her school didn’t care about her or her learning, also felt the need for assistance. But she dropped out of school during her freshman year because school was so uncomfortable for her.

The literature is filled with identifying risk factors and factors that connect students to school. Fine (1991) argues the importance of students’ connection to their learning environments but the reality is of a “pushout” effect by the schools that disenfranchises students so that they drop out. This pushout effect occurs even in schools where it is not recognized, Fine states, even in schools with a “benign environment” that appear superficially to operate smoothly. Systematic corrective efforts to assist schools to facilitate connection to students are offered through dropout prevention programs, Woods, suggests. Such programs offer additional services and opportunities for students that attempt to continue their engagement in school.
Resilience and Hope

Finally there is something that I felt in all the participants: a certain resilience, a certain spirit, a certain courage to come back to the community college and to talk to me about their stories of surviving overwhelming life events, and their expression of a beautiful sense of hope for their futures. All eight students expressed both a resilience through a belief in themselves deep within them and hope for their futures in their stories. William survived a youth filled with the chaos and despair of living in a damp, dark basement with his siblings and ill mother, to attend school and be bullied by his classmates. His travel to school was filled with a gauntlet of gang activity. But he survives, and now attends GED classes in preparation for a future business career and motel ownership. Katrina survived the loss of a 20-year paramedic career and an over 20-year marriage, and has completed her GED in preparation for a degree in nursing. Derrick, who left his special education classes to become a pizza delivery person and bartender, now completes his GED so he can get a better job and raise his young son. James, who mourned the loss of his mother, then the loss of his childhood, completes his GED so he can enter a horticulture program and manage a landscaping business instead of labor in one. Rosa, who felt that school was not for her and learning was not comfortable, has moved away from her childhood neighborhood and now attends GED classes so she can provide her sons with a good example and a better future. Antonio, who survived family chaos as a young person, works to complete his GED so he can move even beyond the job he has risen to over many years of hard work. Sharrlene, who held on to her art and her God as she survived overwhelming abuse and neglect as a child, works to complete her GED so she can build a small fashion design business. Melissa, who played a game of cat and mouse with school attendance before she became swept...
into drugs yet wrote mysterious stories anonymously, and completes her GED so she can become a radiologist and provide for her daughter.

The pervasiveness of the feeling of resilience from all of the participants comes from strengths and hope that they maintained despite their daily lives and circumstances. They determined their own self direction as they set and moved toward their own life paths.

**Discussion**

The initial question posed by this study asks what lessons can be learned by school administrators through this study. Several lessons can be learned. First, participants in this study comprised a variety of demographics: there is no “average” GED student, no clearly identified profile of their demographics. Participants’ ranged in gender (male, female), ethnicity/race (Black, Hispanic, White), age (young, less than age 25; older, older than 25), and class session (morning, afternoon, or evening) in this study.

Second, most of the participants either dropped out more than one time, or experienced a high level of absenteeism from school during an extended period. These students did not complete school work on a daily basis, but might do so upon their brief returns to school. Substance abuse was identified as an issue with either the participant or a close family member in her/his family. A variety of factors influenced students to return to school to obtain their GEDs. These factors include: the need for a GED for work, desire to build a better life for their families or to become a positive role model for their children. Students also felt an acute need for some relevant assistance while attending their school that the school did not offer. Participants who expressed this need felt help was needed to address either academic areas or with family or home life issues.
Despite students’ disengagement from school, several student dropouts in this study display unique talent or interest in special issues. These participants possess talent in areas of art, creative writing, Bible study, or religion, for example. The strength that these students possess actually lies beyond the talent or interest, however, in the meaning, and the sustaining quality of the talent or interest in the participants’ lives. The presence of resilience in all of the participants’ lives is results in their capabilities of continuing get through the day to day, and to work toward their future goals.
Chapter 6

Conclusion, Lessons Learned, and Recommendations

The previous chapter presents the findings of this study regarding demographics of the participants and themes that emerged through deep conversations with participants during interviews. After compiling these findings, this chapter presents conclusions and recommendations based on this information regarding the following questions asked in this study: The main question of the study is “What lessons are learned from portraits of high school dropouts?” Other important subsidiary questions of the study are:

1. Are elements in the school domain expressed in students’ life stories?
2. What feelings or experiences are expressed through the students’ portraits? What do they reveal about the students’ dropping out?
3. How did these students view themselves in relation to the school during their life stories?

Conclusions

Much of the research of the literature exploring high school dropouts presupposes a deficit perspective regarding dropouts, the deficit being external factors outside of the student (low SES, for example) or internal factors within the student (such as motivation). The results of this study challenge the tendency of defining dropouts in terms of deficits. Participants in this study possess strengths in several areas, such as a long employment history that allows them to live satisfactory lives, a talent or special interest, and strong resilience that empowers them to move toward realizing their future goals. The possession of these strengths by the participants in this study challenges the tendency to define dropouts in terms of elements or factors that they lack.
This study also shows the importance of the acquisition of a high school credential in today’s world. Even participants who have had a satisfactory employment history for many years needed to return to school to obtain a high school level credential to compete in the job market of today. The importance of the high school credential today heightens the responsibility of schools and of school administrators to identify potential dropouts within their schools and make sure these students graduate. It is imperative for school administrators to provide an appropriate spectrum of programs and services to assist such students.

**Themes.** Several themes emerge from this study. They are: (a) living a satisfactory life for nearly 20 years yet having to obtain a GED; (b) extremely disturbing conditions at home, occurring even during elementary school years; (c) being sustained by religion; (d) parenthood causing a life change; (e) a talent or special interest that brightened the overall picture; (f) “I wish there would have been a Dr. Help,” and (g) resilience and hope through life.

Among these themes, the most important of them are: extremely disturbing conditions at home, occurring even during elementary school; “I wish there would have been a Dr. Help,” students’ pleas for assistance while they attended high school; and students’ resilience and hope throughout life. The first theme, extremely disturbing conditions at home, even during young students’ years in elementary school, is troubling for several reasons. First, the young student is at serious risk for safety and developmental concerns as well as limitations placed on the students’ academic development. Next, the school’s lack of knowledge or recognition of the students’ plight and non recognition of the students’ daily home environment limits the school’s understanding of the student and how to reach him/her. Finally, this lack of knowledge illustrates a true disconnect between the student and the school, again limiting a true understanding of the student and his/her life experience. The second important theme, “I wish
there would have been a Dr. Help,” actually shows the students’ pleas for assistance while they attended school. Students who had difficulty navigating through the school day, who needed extra support to achieve academically or needed assistance socially, realized their needs yet felt they had nowhere to turn for help. It is noteworthy that they realized they needed assistance and have actually asked for assistance through a Dr. Help. The third important theme is the profound resilience and sense of hope that all of the students share about their lives. This is the strength that has accompanied them during difficult and adverse situations, and has promoted their self directed movement toward their futures.

**Surprising elements in research.** What surprised me as I engaged in the research of this study were primarily three things. First, my difficulty in initially obtaining participants and then in obtaining two interviews with the respective participants, in many cases, was more difficult than I had anticipated. Several participants were difficult to contact, either by phone or even in class, and several left the GED program before the second interview was completed. My second surprise was the power of the portraiture methodology and how much I loved engaging in the process. During our deep conversations, participants’ shared strong feelings of joy, fear, and hope for their futures, as well as relived their past experiences of regret, anger, happiness or resolution. I felt the power of these communications as I transcribed the interview tapes. As I heard their voices, I could visualize each participant, and experience the intensity of his/her feelings. The methodology provided a systematic approach to communicate my and the participant’s experience authentically to the reader. My third surprise was that only one participant [Melissa, who shared that she was “on truancy”] was identified by the schools for special interventional services. All other students attended school, feeling the need of assistance, yet marginalized by a lack of connection or acknowledgment. Looking critically at
the school environment through the voices of the participants, I could see that their voices were not being heard, that they were not even recognized. Are the needs of the students being met? The students’ needs are not even known by the school.

**How this journey through research has changed my life.** What I learned as I experienced this journey into research was that I relived a part of my past during the process, just as the participants had done. My experience in art made the methodology of portraiture in this research come alive and enabled me to get a much larger clearer understanding of these students’ lives. Often when writing a portrait, I imagined how each line, shape, or brush stroke would be done if the work was visual instead of written. I looked at the detailed parts in each portrait, yet considered the whole composition, as I would have if I were completing a painting. Slowly, each portrait came together. My background as a GED teacher and Upward Bound Program administrator assisted me in looking further and deeper as well. As a former GED teacher, I was aware of students’ struggles in academics, challenges with transportation or other issues, and difficulty in returning to school after leaving high school. As an Upward Bound Program administrator, I work to increase students’ opportunity and access to education through college preparation while in high school. I regularly monitor students’ progress and plan and implement strategies and services to assist them in areas of academic and personal growth. In both roles my experience listening to the students and writing the portraits gave me new inner tools.

**Limitations and Delimitations of the Study**

Several limitations regarding this study are evident. The study is comprised of a small sample that is limited geographically to the one community college. The study focused on only
one community college GED program with morning, afternoon, and evening classes to better understand students’ feelings and experiences at this particular geographic location. The sample during each class session is limited as well, and there is a time constraint placed on the research due to the length of my degree study. Because of the limitations of the study, a generalization from this small sample cannot be made.

A delimitation of the study was that it did not study dropouts who had not returned to school in a GED program. That population of high school dropouts was too difficult to locate.

Lessons Learned: Recommendations From the Study

Based on the study’s findings and conclusions, recommendations are comprised of lessons for school administrators that come directly from the voices of the participants through their portraits. These participants, as high school students, were neither expelled nor recognized by their schools as students with high risk factors for special dropout prevention interventions. However, they were marginalized by their schools, and felt invisible in their school environments. Despite the marginalization they felt during their school experience, they were anxious to share their voices with me in this study. Their voices, shared in their portraits, provide the basis for lessons for school administrators who currently serve in high schools.

1. **Lesson One: There is a real need for a high school credential in the world of work today.** Although some participants in this study lived satisfactory lives for many years without a high school diploma, they recently needed to obtain a GED/high school credential to obtain employment.

   Recommendation: The creation of a 4-year career exploration program for students who are presently in high school, would engage them in exploring careers and education for their futures, while reinforcing the necessity of a high school credential in today’s world of work. The program would be sequential, and older students would participate in career interviews and job shadowing. Students would research the post secondary education needed for their chosen career paths as well.
My experience as an Upward Bound Program administrator has demonstrated the value in such a career exploration program for students. When engaging in exploration over an extended period of time, during which each year of exploration builds on the next, students have not only gained knowledge about several career interests but have also learned about a chosen major for college or training that supports their career paths.

2. **Lesson Two: Students’ varied backgrounds may be comprised of complex conditions or special circumstances.** The student must feel that he /she is valued at school when he/she attends.

Recommendation: To provide a school culture that allows students to feel known and valued, a school must create and maintain a positive school climate. Regular two-way communication must be structured between administrators, teachers, and students, as well as parents and the community. Students must feel individually recognized by classroom teachers and staff. In-service training for teachers and staff to enhance communication strategies and to develop and implement a system of communication would promote a positive environment throughout the school.

As a teacher and Upward Bound administrator, I know the value of regular communication with students and parents, and the necessity of a vehicle to maintain such communication (A regular newsletter, postcards, or phone calls, and a meaningful structure of communication within the school, for example). In-service training in verbal communication can provide valuable insight as well, as teachers and staff strive to enhance their communication with students.

3. **Lesson Three: Parenthood may provide motivation for students to continue their education.**

Recommendation: To promote students’ efforts to continue in school after becoming parents, the school must provide avenues to address students’ needs. Resources such as transportation, child care, and connection to other resources must be available to parents. Efforts to continue to connect students with regular instruction must be made (such as homebound instruction), as well as career exploration activities. Referral to post secondary education programs must be made, to connect the student with opportunities once he/she completes high school.

As a former GED teacher, many of my students became more engaged with school after the birth of a child. Issues such as transportation and childcare must be resolved for the student to facilitate his/her success.

4. **Lesson Four: “I wish there was a Dr. Help.”**

Recommendation: For students who identified a need for more assistance at the school, an aggressive process in the school should be created to identify students who need assistance yet aren’t identified through existing systems and structure. This process would identify students through academic and other indicators, or “risk factors,” to create a dropout prevention program within the school. This recommendation may be
accomplished through in-service training for school administrators, teachers, and support staff which focuses on identification and communication, and a peer mentoring program within the school. Utilization of programs and agencies outside the school to enhance assistance, and communication with students and families would provide additional resources as well.

As an administrator of a TRIO Upward Bound Program, I know the strong partnership that TRIO programs maintain with each high school they serve. These programs serve as a “Dr. Help” to the students they assist. Staff from these programs communicate on a regular basis with the high schools that they serve, and students benefit greatly from program resources.

5. **Lesson Five: Some students may only need a small number of credits in order to graduate from high school, while other students may benefit from an academically accelerated program.**

   Recommendation: A flexible structure within the school should be created to allow students to accelerate in academic areas they excel or remediate in areas they struggle. Such a structure would allow students to enroll in honors or AP level classes for college credit while still in high school, remediate academic areas they need to develop skill, or complete a credit recovery process in order to graduate.

   As a former GED teacher, students often told me that they had only one or two credits to complete high school, yet dropped out of school completely because there was no mechanism to facilitate their completion of the credits they lacked. Some students are ready for more advanced work while in high school. A flexible school structure would serve both groups of students’ needs.

6. **Future research:** This study promotes future research in several areas: Additional research could be completed to explore the meaning of the arts and resilience, the creation of additional portraits of GED students in different geographic areas could be considered, and linking “Lessons to School Administrators” with school reform initiatives could be explored.
References


Levine, R. (2008, October 21). Wall Street Journal: The high School dropout’s economic ripple effect. Message posted to trio@listserv mailing list, archived at http://www.trio@listserv.nodak.edu


Appendix A

Interview Questions: First Interview

1. Tell me how you came to drop out of high school.

2. When, if at all, did you first experience the thought or idea of dropping out?

3. What was it like? What did you think then? Who, if anyone influenced your actions? Tell me how he/she influenced your actions?

4. Could you describe the events that led up to your dropping out of school?

5. What contributed to you dropping out?

6. What was going on in your life at the time that caused you to drop out?

7. How would you describe how you viewed school before your dropping out?

8. How, if at all, has your view about school changed since you dropped out?

9. How, if any, have your thoughts and feelings about school changed since you dropped out?

10. What positive changes in your life have occurred since then?

The questions above are designed to guide the life stories of the 12 high school dropouts, participants in this research study, who are presently enrolled in a GED program. A more complete explanation of the questions can be found on page 62 of the proposal in Chapter 3.

Appendix B

Interview Questions: Second Interview

1. As you look back on the time you spent in school, are there any other events that stand out in your mind? Could you describe each one?

2. Could you describe the most important lessons you learned about yourself through experiencing school/dropping out of school?

3. Tell me about how your views or actions may have changed since you have dropped out?

4. How have you grown as a person since you left school? Tell me about your strengths that you discovered or developed through this time.

5. Is there anything that you might not have thought about before that occurred to you during the interview?

The questions above are designed to guide the life stories of the 12 high school dropouts, participants in this research study, who are presently enrolled in a GED program. A more complete explanation of the questions can be found on page 62 of the proposal in Chapter 3.

Appendix C

Informational Flyer

BE A PART OF A RESEARCH STUDY

Conducted through the University of Illinois Urbana/Champaign at “Green Valley Community College”

WHAT:
This researcher wants to include your voice. She will ask people who have dropped out of high school to tell their life stories.

Participants will be randomly chosen from a group of people interested in doing the study. They will complete an interview and then a second in-depth interview.

$10 Gift card given to participants after completion of the two sessions

WHERE:
“Green Valley Community College”

WHEN:
Two sessions. Each session will be approximately one hour scheduled at a convenient time.

WHY:
The study is designed to provide information to school administrators to plan and provide better dropout prevention programs and services.

QUESTIONS?

Contact: Chris Young, Researcher
University of Illinois: Urbana/Champaign
815-954-4057
Dr. Richard Hunter, Responsible Project Investigator
University of Illinois: Urbana/Champaign
Educational Organizational Leadership
217-333-1261
Further questions about your rights as a research participant please contact—

University of Illinois Institutional Review Board, 217-333-2670
If you would like to participate in the study being conducted by Chris Zunke-Classen please complete the following and place in the box provided.

Name _________________________________________________________________

Best phone number and time to reach you. _________________________________

E-mail _______________________________________________________________

This information will be kept secure by the researcher and used only to contact you for possible participation in this study.
Appendix D

Consent Form

University of Illinois Urbana/Champaign

CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

“Portraits of high school dropouts: Lessons for School Administrators”

Why you are being asked to take part in this study
You are being asked to participate in a research study about the life stories of high school dropouts conducted by Dr. Richard Hunter, Responsible Project Investigator/Christine Young, doctoral student in Educational Organizational Leadership at the University of Illinois at Urbana/Champaign. You have been asked to be a participant in the research because you left high school before graduation and are presently enrolled in a GED program.

You are requested to read this form and ask questions, if any, before agreeing to participate in the research.

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may refuse to participate or may withdraw from participation at any time during the project without any penalty. The decision to participate, decline, or withdraw from participation will have no effect on the subject’s grades, status as a student, or future relations with the University of Illinois.

If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time.

The purpose of this research
The purpose of this research is to allow you to share your story so that we can better understand the importance of events related to school that happened in the lives of GED students who left high school before graduation. We hope that the results of this study will be used to provide information that school administrators can use to plan and make decisions for dropout prevention programs.

Procedures involved in this study
The study will be held in two (2) interview sessions at “Green Valley Community College.” Each session will be approximately one hour long. Participants in this study will take part in an in-depth interview that will involve talking about life stories. In the second session, a participant will follow-up with another interview expanding on the previous interview. Both interviews will be audio-recorded, with your permission, to insure accuracy of transcriptions. After completing sessions one and two, a participant will receive a $10 gift card.
**Results of this study**
Results of this study will be shared with university personnel, school administrators, a dissertation, and possibly in educational journals.

**Potential risks of taking part in this research**
Possible risks to participating in this study may include emotional stress as events are remembered and perhaps loss of privacy as events are discussed. However, your name will never be associated with any dissemination of the research. You also have the right to refuse to answer any question that makes you feel uncomfortable or stop participating. Another risk might be that even though the researcher will not use names, she will possibly use vignettes or small stories about participants’ lives which could be identifiable to you or possibly people who know you. Every effort will be made to minimize this risk by using codes and masking identifiable elements that could impact your risk.

**Possible benefits from participating in this research study**
Possible benefits to participating in this study include adding to knowledge about the process of dropping out and helping school administrators provide better dropout prevention programs and services. Also it may be rewarding to think about how you have positively overcome challenges in your life.

**Privacy and confidentiality**
Confidentiality and privacy of records and storage of information will be maintained. Information identifying participants will be removed and any dissemination will not include names or identifying information. The one exception to confidentiality would be in the unlikely event that the researcher became concerned that as a result of the research participation you might hurt yourself or someone else. If this should happen she will contact student services to help you obtain the appropriate support.

**You can withdraw from this study**
You can stop participating in this study at any time. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to answer and still be in the study.

**Questions about the study**
If you have questions about this study you may contact:

Christine Young, Researcher
University of Illinois: Urbana/Champaign
815-954-4057

Dr. Richard Hunter: Responsible Project Investigator
Professor, College of Education
University of Illinois
217-333-1261
Rights as a research subject
If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the University of Illinois Institutional Review Board at 217-333-2670 (collect calls accepted if you identify yourself as a research participant) or via email at irb@uiuc.edu

Signature of Subject or Legally Authorized Representative
I have read and understand the above consent form and voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

I have been given a copy of this form.

I am 18 years of age or older.

____yes ____no I agree to be audio-recorded for purposes of transcription only.

____yes ____no I agree to allow the researcher to disseminate in journal articles or other educational publications or presentations, small stories (vignettes) from my life history as long as identifying information is removed.

_______________________________DATE:__________

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT

______________________________

PRINTED NAME
Appendix E

Agency Referrals

**Kankakee County:**
Helen Wheeler Center for Community Mental Health
275 E. Court
815-939-3543

Duane Dean Prevention and Treatment Center
700 E. Court
815-939-0125

**Iroquois County:**
Iroquois County Mental Health Center
908 E. Cherry
815-432-5241
815-432-5241 HOTLINE

**Champaign County:**
Mental Health Center of Champaign County
1801 Fox Drive
Champaign, Illinois 61820
217-398-8080
217-359-4141 CRISIS LINE